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To Live Like John Quincy Adams

Gwen Fries 00:00

[Music fades in] We were five months into lockdown, and I live in one room and it's essentially a bed and a bookcase and I was really desperate for some structure, and some stability and to know what was going to happen the next day and nobody does stability better than John Quincy Adams. [Music fades out]

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:28

[Intro music begins] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 00:43

This is Cassie Cloutier and this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:17

On this episode of The Object of History, we find out what it takes to live like a historical figure, and how collections like the Adams Papers can help us rethink daily life in both the past and the present. We sit down with Gwen Fries, the Production Editor of the Adams Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society to learn about an experiment she conducted during the lockdown of 2020. Gwen spent a week of her life living like John Quincy Adams. We discuss what daily life was like for the sixth President of the United States, and what it was like to emulate him. In addition, we hear more about the Adams Papers project from Neal Millikan, the Series Editor for Digital Editions with the Adams Papers at the MHS. And we asked actor, writer and Historical Interpreter Laura Rocklyn to speak with us about the process of portraying historical figures.

Cassie Cloutier 02:09

The Massachusetts Historical Society houses the diary of John Quincy Adams, the sixth President of the United States, which includes all 15,000 pages dedicated to a daily record of his life, from age 12 to his death at the age of 81. Known by historians as JQA [John Quincy Adams], his diary is only a part of the larger Adams Papers project. We began by asking Gwen Fries, the Production Editor of the Adams Papers, how she became involved with the project.

Gwen Fries 02:44

The John Adams HBO series came out in 2008, when I was in eighth grade. Once I saw the John Quincy Adams character, there's a particular scene there in France. And he's sitting in this very ornate room, and he's sitting at a desk translating Latin, and his little feet don't touch the floor. And I was like, 'Is this true as a little kid, sent on a diplomatic mission with his father to watch and learn and could he really translate Latin at this age?' So, then I bought the David McCullough book, John Adams. And I fell in love with the whole family, but I was particularly flipping through, hoping that John Quincy's name was going to be on every page. And that book led to another book led to another book like to another book. And now I'm here.

Cassie Cloutier 03:31

Before we discussed how Gwen lived like John Quincy Adams, we first wanted to learn more about the Adams Papers project, an ongoing effort that began nearly 70 years ago. We asked Neal Millikan, the Series Editor for Digital Editions with the Adams Papers to tell us about the origins of the project.

Neal Millikan 03:51

The Adams Papers editorial project was established back in 1954. And from the beginning, our mission has been to publish the papers of three generations of the extended Adams Family of Massachusetts. So, we started with John and Abigail and now we're also including papers of their son John Quincy and his wife, Louisa Catherine. And then we will end up with the papers of John and Abigail's grandson and John Quincy's son, Charles Francis Adams and his wife, Abigail Brown Brooks Adams, and it's been housed at the Massachusetts Historical Society since its inception. And we're able to do this work because the Adams Family back in 1956, through a deed of gift gave the papers to the Massachusetts Historical Society with the proviso that the society would help support the publication of the papers of the various family members. There's been a long relationship between the Adams Family and the Historical Society. So, it made perfect sense for the MHS to be the place where the editorial project was housed and headquartered. Currently, we know of over 110,000 documents related to the Adams Family. The bulk of the documents are correspondence to letters either between family members or to and from other people. But we also have diaries, financial records. There's also some literary manuscripts, speeches, and we have some legal and business papers as well. So right now, we have three series being edited. We have the papers of John Adams, the Adams Family correspondence, and the John Quincy Adams digital diary. And this has been the first-born digital publication. So, unlike the papers of John Adams, and Adams Family correspondence that start out as books, everything is rolled out online on the MHS website. John Quincy Adams kept his diary for 68 years, and it's over 15,000 pages and 51 diary volumes. So, it's a massive collection. As far as we know, it's the longest continuously kept diary of any American of that time period. So, making it accessible to the public is really important goal for the Historical Society. And we always wanted to make sure that was freely accessible, not behind a paywall. And

we also have an innovative way that we are analyzing the diary text. So, for every diary entry, the first time an individual is mentioned, we have been determining who they are and encoding those names. And we also have a set list of topics that for every diary entry, any of the topics that are clickable will be encoded in our files that are going online. So, this editing and analysis and encoding has been going on for years. Within the next year. Hopefully, we'll have two new search tools available to enable users to find these individuals and these topics.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:47

So, what impressions does one get about JQA from reading his diary entries?

Neal Millikan 06:54

The thing I like to say about him after reading most of his diary now is that I truly think he was our most interesting former president. And I say this not because of what he achieved as a one term president but because if you taken into account the totality of his life, everything that he did, he just had a fascinating life. He was a diplomat, as a young man, he served in the Netherlands and Prussia. Then he came back to the United States, he was a U.S. senator, he was a professor at Harvard, then he served as a diplomat, again to Russia and Great Britain. Then he was Secretary of State under James Monroe. He became president. But then after his presidency, he didn't just retire, he went back and served in the U.S. House of Representatives for the last 18 years of his life. For a long entry, or a main entry, as we call them, you'd have at least a paragraph and sometimes an entire page of a diary would be devoted to a day. And so, if it's an entire page, usually you get at least a couple of paragraphs of text. At any time, he might have been keeping three different entries for a date. So, he might have done a draft entry that he went back a few days later, maybe and wrote out the main entry. And then for many years of his life, he kept his line a day version. He's got a lot of diaries going on. Not only did he keep this diary for 68 years, but he had multiple versions going. So, I think that gives you a little bit of a window into what his personality was like and how methodical he was. I've often wondered at what point did he realize this was for public consumption. He starts as a child, a 12-year-old. He's keeping a diary because this is something his father told him to do. But at some point, we get this switch where he'll say things like if my children ever read this, so we know that he's thinking about the fact that this is going to be preserved past him, and at least his own family's going to read it. I don't know if he ever thought about the entire world could have access to it. So, he doesn't start doing these draft entries, obviously. It's really when he's Secretary of State that he starts this when he gets really busy and during his presidency. Sometimes the draft entries are just names of places or names of people and then he goes back in later and does a longer entry. A general day, usually what we get is he's taking us through his day with him.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:16

Gwen told us more about what information Adams kept in his diary.

Gwen Fries 09:22

He wrote about pretty much everything that was going on. What's interesting is how much time he devotes to what. You kind of get a sense of what's important to him. He had dinner with Charles Dickens once at height of Dickens' career. And all that merited in the diary was dinner with Mr. C Dickens. But you get daily reports about his garden, and what's growing. So, his diary will start every time with what time he woke up, how he slept, what exercise he got in, what he's reading, how his wife is feeling that day, how his children are feeling that day. What they did. And in the margin, he has a running list of everybody who came to visit him that day. And the people that he interacted with whether he went to visit them. What's fascinating about that is there's nobody too small or inconsequential for him to note. He was a really decent person, everything he ever did was for the good of someone else. He was very selfless.

Cassie Cloutier 10:26

Do you have any favorite passages or selections from the diaries?

Neal Millikan 10:31

There are several that stand out to me. And I don't think most people know this about him is how much he loved writing poetry. He wrote in his diary back in 1816, 'Could I have chosen my own genius and condition. I should have made myself a great poet, as it is, I have wasted much of my life writing versus spellbound in the circle of mediocrity.' So, he loved to write poetry. I think he realized it was not great poetry. And one of the longest ones he wrote was a 2,000-line poem, when he had been elected to Congress. But he hadn't started his service yet. So, he sort of had a lot of time on his hands. And as he would walk around Washington, D.C. in the mornings, he would compose these standards in his mind, and then it became Dermot MacMorrogh or The conquest of Ireland that was published in 1832, to lukewarm reception, but the fact that he loved poetry, you wouldn't think that about John Quincy Adams. And I think another one that really humanizes him is a quote about his children. So, he wrote this when he was serving as Secretary of State under James Monroe. John Quincy Adams had an extraordinary life. But in many ways, he was just like everybody else. And one of his biggest concerns was how he was doing as a parent. So, he wrote, 'Among the desires of my heart, the most deeply anxious is that for the good conduct and welfare of my children. In them, my hopes and fears are most deeply involved. None of my children will probably ever answer to my hopes. May none of them ever realized my fears.' So, I think probably a lot of parents feel that way. But he actually wrote down his thoughts in his diary.

Gwen Fries 12:11

One of my favorite diary entries is his middle son, John Adams, the second, John Quincy took him to church one week, and he hadn't been allowed to go to church for a couple months because he

kept flirting with the old ladies. So, he was given another shot to go back to church. And during the sermon, he was really paying attention. He was focusing he was hanging on every word that the pastor was speaking. And John Quincy felt really proud and felt like they had a breakthrough. And then they went to visit John and Abigail Adams, and John Adams, the second one running into Abigail, and said, 'Grandmama, they spoke the whole time about me.' And John Quincy realized every time the pastor said, John the Baptist, John Adams, the second assumed that they were talking about him. So just anytime that John Quincy records something that made him laugh, really stands out to me because I mean, you get such a sense of the true person by what makes a person laugh. And he just absolutely adored his boys. You could see what a source of joy they were in his life through his diary.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 13:24

Now that we've gotten a sense of the material that Gwen based her experiment on. We asked her to walk us through how it all began.

Gwen Fries 13:35

So, at the end of every month, like instead of putting 28th, 29th, 30th, he puts day, and then he gives you a synopsis of what his schedule was like, for that month. I decided I would pick a time in his life. And I would try to recreate that for a week as a little experiment and see what it was like to be in his shoes. And was he exhausted by the end of the day? Did he take enough time to eat? And the answer is no. It's absolutely mind blowing to me because he does more in a week than I do in the year. I went to July 1803. He was 36 years old, and he was the United States Senator. But he got a summer break. So suddenly, he had summertime. He was with his kids, and he could kind of do what he wanted with his time. And what he wrote for his day entry then was rise between five and six, bathe and walk about two hours, read or amuse myself with George that's his eldest son, who would have been two at the time until nine, breakfast, read or write until 2pm. Dine, read again until sunset, walk an hour, lounge away the time until 10. He has so much time blocked out to reading. I was going to get an authentic experience. I needed to read what he was reading. They're very easily found online. He was reading John Tillotson's sermons. He was reading the Bible. And he was reading William Winterbotham's View of The United States. I enjoyed two of those three things. The View of the United States was physically painful to read. It was the driest thing I have ever read in my life. And that was probably the most difficult part of the experiment. The only thing I couldn't do was I didn't have a toddler, which may have been a blessing during lockdown. And the other thing was, when he says bathe, he doesn't mean take a bath, he means go swimming. And they frown upon skinny dipping in the Charles now. So, I had to find a different way to do that. And he said it was for circulation. It was really healthy to immerse yourself in the cold water. So, I decided that to complete that part of the experiment, I would just take an ice cold shower, and it would kind of have the same effect.

Cassie Cloutier 16:02

To gain a better understanding of what it takes to portray a notable figure from the past. We sat down with Laura Rocklyn, an actor, writer, and Historical Interpreter.

Laura Rocklyn 16:13

One of the things I love is finding women whose names are recognized, but about whom not much is actually known, sort of in the public consciousness. I think a lovely thing about portraying these figures is that you bring the human interest story. And that's what really got me engaged in history when I was younger. I loved learning about the individuals and the stories behind the wars and the battles, especially as a young woman, where you're not seeing yourself and a lot of the big historical events to learn about the wives and the other women who were supporting the men who were involved in front and center is really exciting, and to realize that the women actually were often a lot more front and center than we think now. For example, you know, behind John Quincy Adams, being at the Treaty of Ghent is Louisa traveling alone with young Charles Francis from St. Petersburg to Paris. And that's an incredible human-interest story that often gets sort of pushed down. Although now that we have Michael O'Brien's wonderful book, *Mrs. Adams in Winter*, that story is very much available. I started developing living history programs on these women and even writing full theater plays about them because there is to certain extent, some extrapolation and imagination that has to come into play in telling their stories because we don't necessarily know what they were doing every moment of every day. They aren't necessarily documented as well as the men around them. So once in a while there is a gap in the record that has to be filled in. And in something like a play, you do have this certain level of artistic license because it is acknowledged that this is inherently fiction because it's not all quotations. So, there are some moments where even if we don't know exactly what happened, from the knowledge that we have, from reading what's available, we can try to fill in those gaps. And I think that's an interesting way to tell the stories of women for whom we might not have enough to write a full biography. But I am always very careful in any of these that I take very careful notes on exactly what is factual. Everything is footnoted. And anything that is an extrapolation by Laura is made very clear. Because it also I feel like it's an incredible responsibility to tell these women's stories, because I do want it to be as historically accurate and truthful as possible, because that's why we're telling these stories. It's not just to educate or to entertain, but it is to maintain the legacies of these women. And so doing that, truthfully, is something that's very important to me.

Cassie Cloutier 18:34

How do you get to know a historical figure that you're portraying?

Laura Rocklyn 18:38

I'm not a reenactor, for whom everything is from the ground up. I am an actress and a historian. So, I am studying these women and I'm slightly removed. But I will say that if I'm working on one in particular, I will probably only be listening to music from that era, while I'm writing and working in developing the program. I rotate the paintings and things in my study as I'm working. So, it's also artwork that they either liked or that reminds me of them or was coming through in the period. I try to be reading only books in that era. I definitely do like to do immersion in that time period. And the costume is also very important. And particularly for me the underpinnings because portraying someone like Jane Austen, who's in the Regency era, they had regency short stays. So, it's not a corset that's full length. You're not restricted at all in terms of your breathing. It's a short little corset that they call to jump and wearing that and the high waisted empire gowns feels very different to portraying Charlotte Brontë, and having on the full length, mid-19th century corset with the heavy petticoats. It's wonderful to feel just how the silhouette of these garments changes the way that you move and you interact with the world around you. For me, the foundation of any portrayal is always going back to their letters, their diaries and any other papers that are still extant, because if you're going to portray a woman, I really want to be able to know what her worldview was, know how she spoke. Her language pattern is very important to me. And it's lovely looking at the original letters because you can see in the handwriting when they're very excited, and the writing gets sort of messy, or they just have too much to say. Jane Austen loved cross hatching her letters, which means she would write horizontally and then turn the paper and write vertically as well because she just had so much to say, or there was one young woman I was studying during the Civil War. And it was fascinating that she never used crosshatching at all before the war. It was always very tidy on one piece of paper. And then once paper got much more expensive when the war started, suddenly she's cross hatching, and it's becoming much tighter. And she's trying to get as much information as possible into that one sheet of paper. The other wonderful thing about these primary sources to is I can see what these women are reading, what music they like, what instruments they're playing, what kind of tea they're drinking. So even looking at something like that can be a wonderful insight into how daily life is changing. Several of the archivists recommended, you need to be reading their friends' letters, as well, and seeing what else is going on in town in that era. And it is a delightful way to see what other people are saying about these

women, where they're appearing, how they're being described, but also reading books just about anything else going on in the time period. I know I've recently been working on the painter Christiana Swan, and she spent a great deal of time in France. So, reading about Napoleonic era France, because things are changing so rapidly. And so, you really don't know from day to day what the street is going to be named because it probably changed during the Revolution, and Napoleon's probably going to change it again. And looking at those details, again about daily life and how the politics of the world is affecting these young women who may seem to be so removed from it. Although always the grain of salt. There's a reason that we're called historical interpreters because we are interpreting these documents, and we know that many of them have been carefully curated. For example, after Jane Austen passed away, her sister Cassandra, burned and edited many of her letters. So, the image we have of Austen, we do have her own voice, obviously, but it's also an image curated by her sister very carefully. One of the things I have learned is that nothing I face in this life is likely to be as challenging as things that they faced on a daily basis. And I am endlessly inspired by the courage of all of these women and their grit and determination. They all have perfectly good reasons to feel very sorry for themselves from siblings dying to children dying, any number of horrid things happening wars on their doorstep, and yet they all carry on, and with the understanding that their letters are meant to be shared and read by others, and that they're putting a good foot forward. Still, the good spirits that they always portray, and the grit and determination they display in facing the challenges before them. It's wonderful and inspiring.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:50

So, Gwen, what do you hope people take away from reading John Quincy Adams' diary?

Gwen Fries 22:55

He was very aware. Their whole family was aware that their papers and their diaries were pretty much public domain. JQA's diary was a little bit public domain during his life, but they knew, essentially, that we would eventually get it and that it would be shared. So, his diary is not an effusive pouring out of his heart, although it sometimes is when his mother Abigail died, he really confided to his diary more than to the people around him. But it's more a record of the day of events of people, of places. He writes about things in a way that people besides just him could understand. Like he's not using a nickname for somebody. Or when he discusses places in Europe, he compares it to places in Boston. We have from when he's an infant, and his sister's rocking him

to sleep until after his death. And so, we get to see his professional trajectory, but also his personal trajectory. And when he was a kid, a teenager, and then at Harvard, he was kind of out of touch with his generation, because he had had all these phenomenal experiences. His science tutors were Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. And Abigail especially was really good about telling him remember, not everybody has had the opportunities that you have had, you can't act like this. I think she really provided really good bumpers for his life that he became so aware of other people because Abigail was always very aware of other people and how they felt about things and how they reacted to things. He became such a successful and such a decent person because he had parents who were ensuring it. He grew up pretty much in the Revolution. His earliest memories were probably his father in the Boston Massacre cases. I don't think he knew how to just relax and be a normal person. The fact that he didn't allow himself to sit down until eight o'clock at night and lounging probably meant, finally, being a dad and spending time with his wife, or visiting friends and family. He finally had some time off, he could have done nothing for a month, he could have just shut his brain off and just had a reset. But he didn't know how to do that. He was so afraid of wasting time. I don't think I realize quite how much. And you do feel like you've accomplished so much more when you're living his schedule. But I was so tired. The whole week, when I finished my workday, and I had to open William Winterbotham, I wanted to just start crying. And then you finish that and you're like, 'Oh, I'm gonna get bed and watch Netflix like, No, you're not, you're gonna walk for three more miles.' He either was like an incredibly energetic person, or he was tired all the time and just dealt with that. I don't know which it is.

Neal Millikan 25:51

I think the other thing that you really take away, when you look into his diary, is how devoted he was to public service. I mean, he was a lifelong public servant. And he always put the national interests first. I think part of that was being the son of John and Abigail Adams, and that was sort of drilled into him from a very young age. This also always meant that his personal beliefs, his connection to Massachusetts, even whatever political party he was part of at the time, all became secondary, he became a public servant first, when he was 14, back in 1781. He was tapped to be the secretary and interpreter to Francis Dana, who was going to St. Petersburg, Russia, trying to get Russia to recognize the new United States, and he literally died in public service. John Quincy Adams collapsed on the floor of the house 21 February 1848. And he died in the U.S. Capitol Building two days later. So, from the time he was 14, until his death, he was involved in some aspect of public service. His familial relationships were sometimes strained because they took second place to the nation. His relationship with his wife and with his children could be difficult. Probably the most famous example of this is when he does decide to become a U.S. Ambassador to Russia in 1809. And without his wife's knowledge, he decides that they're going to leave their two oldest sons in Massachusetts to continue their education. So, he and Louisa Catherine and their youngest son, Charles Francis, go to St. Petersburg. And it's almost six years until they see their two oldest sons

again. So, you can imagine how difficult that separation was. But I think the other thing you get to see about the diary that I think most people don't realize about John Quincy Adams is how much fun he had when he was serving in the House of Representatives. I mean, at this point, he's an elder statesman, people in the house look up to him. And it's the first time in his life where I think he can really voice his own opinions and speak out about the issues that he felt really strongly about preventing the expansion of slavery, repealing the gag rule in Congress, and one of his pet causes was the Smithsonian bequest. He wanted to make sure that the money that James Smithson gave to the United States was kept together. You really do get a sense that the public service was really important to him, but that it came at a price with his relationship with his family sometimes.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 28:18

After learning about the daily practices that Gwen tried to replicate, we then asked Neil and Laura what they thought of Gwen's experiment and whether they could spend a week living by John Quincy Adams' schedule?

Neal Millikan 28:30

Well, I have to say her blog post is an excellent read. It's one of my favorite posts that has been on the Beehive Blog, and her experiment shows just how regimented and methodical John Quincy Adams was during his life. I think it also shows how difficult it is even today to live up to the high standards he set for himself. Gwen chose a year 1803 by his own standards, he wasn't that busy, but by our standards, he was still very busy. But even then you can see how active he was during the day. He was not going to let any grass grow under his feet. So, I loved her experiment. I think it was a fabulous idea. And I applaud Gwen for willing to live the JQA lifestyle for a week. It's a fascinating experiment.

Laura Rocklyn 29:13

I think it's extraordinary and I so admire the attempt because I feel like anyone would be knocked out in a matter of days by John Quincy Adams' schedule. He was so rigorous and so hard working, and so disciplined. I mean, even to the extent that when he had that injury in his hand in England and couldn't write because it was too painful. He read so much the doctor told him he was going to lose his sight. I mean, this is not a man who takes life easy. So, I think it's absolutely extraordinary that she did that and I love the insights that she gained from it. And I think there's something very valuable about attempting the daily life of these historical figures because so many of them did have these incredibly high standards for themselves and hold themselves to these incredibly rigorous schedules and I think understanding what they expected of themselves can also help us understand how much they were able to achieve.

Cassie Cloutier 30:06

What did you learn from your experiment?

Gwen Fries 30:09

Reading about what someone does and then actually doing it are two very different things is what I learned. You would have more of an appreciation for him and what he put through for the betterment of his country. But also, like, you'd probably just feel better. I'm sure I'm a healthier person, because I walk seven miles a day. There is a lot of wisdom to be found in the past. Think I spend more time thinking about why they do things now, more than just memorizing the things that they did and the sequence that they happened. If you wake up four hours before you need to start work, and you take some time, just in quiet reflection, and then you walk for four miles and then if you get an ice cold shower, when you sit down to work, you are so awake, you are so hyper focused, and you're like proud of yourself for having the discipline and you feel like you can tackle whatever the rest of the day has for you. I understood why he did the things more than just understanding that he did these things. And that was to make the most of his time to be the best servant he could be. I mean, the William Winterbotham book was incredibly boring. But he was prepping for being a U.S. Senator. He had been out of the country for a lot of its early years, being a diplomat in Europe. So, he was kind of catching up. John Quincy Adams was not perfect. But he was really trying to be. He knew who he was. He knew what was expected of him, and what he expected of himself. And he really tried to do as much as he possibly could for his country. And for his family. He was trying to be all things to all people all the time. He had this incredible self-control, and decency. And he wasn't known for being particularly warm. But you can see in his diary, he had really strong emotions that he was just controlling himself to be what he needed to be. He is a complex person. He's a fascinating person. And I would be really hard pressed to find another person in history, who had the breadth of experiences that he had, and who wanted to make them available for us. Who wanted to give us an idea of what it was like when you're waiting around Buckingham Palace for the Prince of Wales to get ready to see you and what that room was like and who walked by and what did it sound like and what things smell like, what did they look like? I mean his diary is such an immersive experience and it is a joy to read.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 32:49

You can learn more about Gwen's experiment by visiting the Beehive, the MHS blog, which will add a link to Gwen's post in the show notes. And, of course, to look at some of the diary entries discussed in today's episode, visit our show website at www.masshist.org/podcast.

Cassie Cloutier 33:20

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