

John Adams

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Requiem for an American President

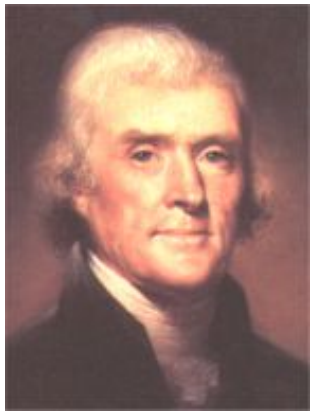


President John
Adams

The celebration of our Nation's 50th birthday was saddened this day in history by the death of our second president, John Adams. It was the eloquent Adams who had so persuasively defended Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence before the Continental Congress in 1776, ultimately leading to the birth of this new Nation. It may have been the last time Adams and Jefferson agreed on anything.

Jefferson's Declaration was born on June 7, 1776, when Virginia delegate Richard Henry Lee laid before the Congress a resolution calling for the 13 colonies to be "free and independent states, absolved of all allegiance to the British crown." Moderates argued against the historic resolution, pointing out that the middle colonies of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware were undecided about the complete separation of the colonies from the crown rule. By day's end, there was little consensus, but members of the delegation appointed a five-man committee to draft a declaration of independence for consideration at the July 1st meeting.

Drafting the Document



President Thomas
Jefferson

The task of drafting the declaration should have fallen to elder statesman Benjamin Franklin, but his illness precluded a timely completion of the task. The task then should have fallen to Adams, who argued instead that Jefferson should write it. Jefferson at first attempted to defer to Adams until, in frustration, the Massachusetts delegate grudgingly stated, "You are 10 times the writer I am." Thus Jefferson prepared the draft with suggestions for revisions coming from both Franklin and Adams. The finished document was presented to the Second Continental Congress on June 28th. A poor speaker, Jefferson's written work impressed the Assembly, despite some reservations. The more eloquent Adams vigorously defended the work, which was adopted on July 2nd. That evening Adams wrote his thoughts on the new declaration to his wife, stating in part: "The second day of July 1776 will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival."

Actually, Adams was two days off. Editing of the document continued until it was formally approved by 12 of the 13 colonies on July 4th. (The New York delegation abstained from the vote, but approved the Declaration five days later.) On August 2nd the 53 delegates present signed the document, and the 3 absent members subsequently added their names. Among the 56 signers were both of the men most responsible for the Declaration's existence, Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

Heroes Clash

From that point forward, the clashes between Adams and Jefferson were widely known. During Adams' two terms as vice president under George Washington, more than one conflict arose between him and Secretary of State Jefferson. As a Federalist, Adams found his political views quite at odds with the man who would become the leader of the rival Democratic-Republicans. When Washington left the Presidency the battle for a successor was bitterly fought between Vice President Adams and Secretary Jefferson. Adams defeated Jefferson by a 3 vote margin (71-68 electoral votes), becoming our

second president. That bitter campaign was renewed in 1800 when Jefferson defeated Adams to become our third President. So intense was their rivalry that, on the day of Jefferson's inauguration, Adams was carriage-bound out of the new Capital City when the new president assumed office. (The recent death of his son in New York provided a convenient excuse not to attend the inauguration of the incoming president.)

Jefferson served two terms as President after defeating the incumbent Adams, then retired to his home in Monticello. Meanwhile, from his retirement farm in Quincy, Massachusetts, Adams began to write long and elaborate letters to his old adversary. A grudging admiration for each other may have developed in their later years. Nonetheless, Adams always proclaimed that, though Jefferson was 7 years younger than himself... "I will outlive Jefferson."

An Ironic Ending

On his deathbed on Independence Day, 1826 John Adams uttered his last words. They were, "Thomas Jefferson survives." It is rumored that upon Adam's death, the messenger dispatched to carry the news to Jefferson's Virginia home actually passed a messenger dispatched from that site to Adam's home, also bearing sad tidings.

Just a few hours earlier, Thomas Jefferson had passed away...both architects of the document that gave birth to this new Nation, dead – 50 years to the day from the birth of the country they founded.

Footnote:

In 1831 James Monroe, our Nation's 5th President also died on the 4th of July. In 1850 our 12th President, Zachary Taylor participated in July 4th activities at the Washington monument. It was a blustery day and the president became quite ill. He died five days later on July 9th.



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