

## **John Adams on the Stamp Act – 1765**

*In these documents Adams sings the praises of those who stand up to the crown, and publicly gives marching orders to all Americans colonists.*

*Adams wished to shed light on the habits of the British Parliament that he believed were un-republican and dangerous. These documents outline principles stating when government should be protested, when laws should be broken, and what responsibilities citizens have to right such wrongs.*

### ***Document 1***

#### **John Adams, *Instructions to Braintree’s Representative Concerning the Stamp Act*, 1765 [excerpt]**

“We should think ourselves Guilty of great Impiety to the Memory of our Fore fathers, of cruel Inhumanity to our Posterity and of great Injustice to our selves, nay We should dishonour the Name and Character of British subjects, in which we glory, and should even blush before our fellow subjects in great Britain if we tamely and silently saw our Rights and Liberties wrested from Us. –We cannot but recommend therefore the most clear and explicit Assertion and Vindication of our Rights [ . . . ] that the World may know [ . . . ] that with submission to divine Providence we can never be slaves”

John Adams, “Instructions to Braintree’s Representative concerning the Stamp Act,” [ante 24 September 1765] in *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 1, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1977), 136.

### ***Document 2***

#### **John Adams’s *Diary*, 18 December 1765 [excerpt]**

Braintree December 18<sup>th</sup>. 1765 Wednesday

The Year 1765 has been the most remarkable Year of my Life. That enormous Engine, fabricated by the british Parliament, for battering down all the Rights and Liberties of America, I mean the Stamp Act, has raised and spread, thro the whole Continent, a Spirit that will be recorded to our Honour, with all future Generations. In every Colony, from Georgia to New Hampshire inclusively, the Stamp Distributors and Inspectors have been compelled, by the unconquerable Rage of the People, to renounce their offices. Such and so universal has been the Resentment of the People, that every Man who has dared to speak in favour of the Stamps [ . . . ] has been seen to sink into universal Contempt and Ignominy.

The People, even to the lowest Ranks, have become more attentive to their Liberties, more inquisitive about them, and more determined to defend them, than they were ever before known or had occasion to be [ . . . ] The Crown Officers have every where trembled, and all their little Tools and Creatures, been afraid to Speak and ashamed to be seen.

John Adams diary 11, 18 - 29 December 1765 [electronic edition], *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

***Document 3***

**John Adams, *A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law*, 1765 [excerpt]**

[Monday, 21 October 1765]

We have been afraid to think. We have felt a reluctance to examining into the grounds of our privileges, and the extent in which we have an indisputable right to demand them [ . . . ]

[ . . . ] Let us dare to read, think, speak, and write. Let every order and degree among the people rouse their attention and animate their resolution. Let them all become attentive to the grounds and principles of government, ecclesiastical and civil. Let us study the law of nature; search into the spirit of the British constitution; read the histories of ancient ages; contemplate the great examples of Greece and Rome; set before us, the conduct of our own British ancestors, who have defended for us, the inherent rights of mankind, against foreign and domestic tyrants and usurpers, against arbitrary kings and cruel priests, in short against the gates of earth and hell [ . . . ] Recollect the civil and religious principles and hopes and expectations, which constantly supported and carried them through all hardships, with patience and resignation! Let us recollect it was liberty! The hope of liberty for themselves and us and ours, which conquered all discouragements, dangers, and trials! In such researches as these let us all in our several departments cheerfully engage! But especially the proper patrons and supporters of law, learning, and religion.

Let the pulpit resound with the doctrines and sentiments of religious liberty. Let us hear the danger of thralldom to our consciences, from ignorance, extream poverty and dependence, in short from civil and political slavery. Let us see delineated before us, the true map of man. Let us hear the dignity of his nature, and the noble rank he holds among the works of God! that consenting to slavery is a sacriligious breach of trust, as offensive in the sight of God as it is derogatory from our own honor or interest or happiness; and that God almighty has promulgated from heaven, liberty, peace, and good-will to man!

Let the bar proclaim, “the laws, the rights, the generous plan of power” delivered down from remote antiquity, -- inform the world of the mighty struggles and numberless sacrifices made by our ancestors in defence of freedom. Let it be known, that British liberties are not the grants of princes or parliaments, but original rights, conditions of original contracts, coequal with prerogative, and coeval with government. - That many of our rights are inherent and essential, agreed on as maxims and establish’d as preliminaries, even before a parliament existed. Let them search for the foundations of British laws and government in the frame of human nature, in the constitution of the intellectual and moral world. There let us see, that truth, liberty, justice and benevolence, are its everlasting basis; and if these could be removed, the superstructure is overthrown of course [ . . . ]

[. . .] But it seems very manifest from the [Stamp Act] itself, that a design is form'd to strip us in a great measure of the means of knowledge, by loading the Press, the Colleges, and even an Almanack and a News-paper, with restraints and duties; and to introduce the inequalities

and dependences of the feudal system, by taking from the poorer sort of people all their little subsistence, and conferring it on a set of stamp officers, distributors, and their deputies.

John Adams, "A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law," No. 4 in *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 1, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1977), 123-128.

### **John Adams on the Boston Massacre - 1770**

*Soldiers permanently quartered in Boston on the wintry, icy evening of March 5, 1770 became the focus of a small crowd's torment. Scuffles and fire broke out, leaving five colonists dead. Adams decided to defend the soldiers. To succeed, he would have to prove that the mob was a vicious and intimidating force, bent on inducing harm. Newspapers and fellow citizens alike vilified Adams.*

*These documents reveal why, seemingly without a second thought, Adams chose to defend the soldiers. His words about the trial and the incident itself reveal ideas about the ways citizens should behave even in the face of tyranny.*

#### ***Document 1***

#### **John Adams's Autobiography, 1770 [excerpt]**

The next Morning I think it was, sitting in my Office, near the Steps of the Town house Stairs, Mr. Forrest came in, who was then called the Irish Infant. I had some Acquaintance with him. With tears streaming from his Eyes, he said I am come with a very solemn Message from a very unfortunate Man, Captain Preston in Prison. He wishes for Council, and can get none. I have waited on Mr. Quincy, who says he will engage if you will give him your Assistance: without it possitively he will not. Even Mr. Auchmuty declines unless you will engage [. . .] I had no hesitation in answering that Council ought to be the very last thing that a ~~Council~~ an accused Person should want in a free Country. That the Bar ought in my opinion to be independent and impartial at all Times And in every Circumstance. And that Persons whose Lives were at Stake ought to have the Council they preferred: But he must be sensible this would be as important a Cause as ever was tryed in any Court or Country of the World: and that every Lawyer must hold himself responsible not only to his Country, but to the highest and most infallible of all Trybunals for the Part he should Act.

John Adams autobiography, part 1, "John Adams," through 1776, sheet 12 of 53 [electronic edition], *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society  
<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

## ***Document 2***

### **John Adams's speech in *Rex v. Wemms*, 1770**

*[the second trial, in defense of the soldiers indicted in the Boston Massacre]*

This witness swears he saw snow-balls thrown close before the party, and he took them to be thrown on purpose, he saw oyster-shells likewise thrown [. . .] Forty or fifty people round the soldiers, and more coming from Quaker-lane, as well as the other lanes. The soldiers heard all the bells ringing and saw people coming from every point of the compass to the assistance of those who were insulting, assaulting, beating and abusing of them-what had they to expect but destruction, if they had not thus early taken measures to defend themselves?

[. . .] We have entertained a great variety of phrases, to avoid calling this sort of people a mob. Some call them shavers, some call them genius's. The plain English is gentlemen, most probably a motley rabble of saucy boys, negroes, mullatoes, Irish teagues [nickname for an Irishman] and the out landish jack tarrs. – And why should we scruple to call such a set of people a mob, I can't conceive, unless the name is too respectable for them: -The sun is not about to stand still or go out, nor the rivers to dry up because there was a mob in Boston on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March that attacked a party of soldiers. –Such things are not new in the world, nor in the British dominions, though they are comparatively, rareties and novelties in this town [. . .] Soldiers quartered in a populous town, will always occasion two mobs, where they prevent one. –They are wretched conservators of the peace!

John Adams, *Legal Papers of John Adams*, vol.3, ed. L. Kinvin Wroth and Hiller B. Zobel, (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1965), 263-267.

## ***Document 3***

### **John Adams's Diary, 5 March 1773**

*[reflecting on the third anniversary of the Massacre]*

1773. March 5<sup>th</sup>. Fryday.

Heard an Oration, at Mr. Hunts Meeting House, by Dr. Benja. Church, in Commemoration of the Massacre in Kings Street, 3 Years ago. That large Church was filled and crouded in every Pew, Seat, Alley, and Gallery, by an Audience of several Thousands of People of all Ages and Characters and of both Sexes.

I have Reason to remember that fatal Night. The Part I took in Defence of Captn. Preston and the Soldiers, procured me Anxiety, and Obloquy enough. It was, however, one of the most gallant, generous, manly and disinterested Actions of my whole Life, and one of the best Pieces of Service I ever rendered my Country. Judgment of Death ~~would have been~~

against those Soldiers would have been as foul a Stain upon this Country as the Executions of the Quakers or Witches, anciently. As the Evidence was, the Verdict of the jury was exactly right.

This however is no Reason why the Town should not call the Action of that Night a Massacre, nor ~~against~~, is it any Argument in favour of the Governor or Minister, who caused them to be sent here. But it is the strongest of Proofs of the Danger of standing Armies.

John Adams diary 19, 16 December 1772 - 18 December 1773 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>.

### **John Adams on the Tea Party and the Coercive Acts – 1773**

*Adams did not organize the Tea Party, but he strongly supported it as an effective and proper response to the Tea Act. He publicly supported protest over the Intolerable Acts as well.*

*These documents reveal a great deal about what Adams believed to be the appropriate response to injustice – what actions citizens are called to take, and what sacrifices they must make. They also reflect his views on the types of people that constitute society and which of these are most apt to take action. They are an interesting complement to the previous sets of documents.*

#### ***Document 1***

#### **John Adams's Diary, 17 December 1773 [excerpt]**

*[the morning after the Tea Party]*

1775. Decr. 17<sup>th</sup>.

Last Night 3 Cargoes of Bohea Tea were emptied into the Sea. This Morning a Man of War sails.

This is the most magnificent Movement of all. There is a Dignity, a Majesty, a Sublimity, in this last Effort of the Patriots, that I greatly admire. The People should never rise, without doing something to be remembered -- something notable And striking. This Destruction of the Tea is so bold, so daring, so firm, intrepid and inflexible, and it must have so important Consequences, and so lasting, that I cant but consider it as an Epoque in History.

This however is but an Attack upon Property. Another similar Exertion of popular Power, may produce the destruction of Lives. Many Persons wish, that as many dead Carcasses were floating in the Harbour, as there are Chests of Tea: -- a much less Number of Lives however would remove the Causes of all our Calamities [. . . ]

What Measures will the Ministry take, in Consequence of this? Will they resent it? will they dare to resent it? will they punish Us? How? By quartering Troops upon Us? -- by annulling our Charter? -- by laying on more duties? By restraining our Trade? By Sacrifice of Individuals, or how.

The Question is whether the Destruction of this Tea was necessary? I apprehend it was absolutely and indispensably so [ . . . ] there was no other Alternative but to destroy it or let it be landed. To let it be landed, would be giving up the Principle of Taxation by Parliamentary Authority, against which the Continent have struggled for 10 years.

John Adams diary 19, 16 December 1772 -18 December 1773 [electronic edition], *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>.

## ***Document 2***

### **Letter from John Adams to James Warren, 17 December 1773**

Dr Sir

The Dye is cast: The People have passed the River and cutt away the Bridge: last Night Three Cargoes of Tea, were emptied into the Harbour. This is the grandest, Event, which has ever yet happened Since, the Controversy, with Britain, opened!

The Sublimity of it, charms me!

[ . . . ] I believe it will take them 10 Years to get the Province to pay for it. If so, we shall Save 1o Years Interest of the Money. Whereas if it is drank it must be paid for immediately [ . . . ]

[ . . . ] Threats, Phantoms, Bugbears, by the million, will be invented and propagated among the People upon this occasion. Individuals will be threatened with Suits and Prosecutions. Armies and Navies will be talked of – military Execution – Charters annull'd – Treason – Tryals in England and all that – But – these Terrors, are all but Imaginations. Yet if they should become Realities they had better be Suffered, than the great Principle, of Parliamentary Taxation given up.

The Town of Boston, was never more Still and calm of a Saturday night than it was last Night. All Things were conducted with great order, Decency and *perfect Submission to Government*. No Doubt, we all thought the Administration in better Hands, than it had been.

Please to make Mrs. Adams's most respectfull Compliments to Mrs. Warren and mine.

I am your Friend,

John Adams

John Adams to James Warren, 17 December 1773, in *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 2, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1977), 1-2.

## ***Document 3***

### **John Adams, *The Letters of Novanglus*, 1775 [excerpt]**

*[published in The Boston Gazette, Adams's letter reflects on the colonists' response to the Coercive Acts.]*

But most people in America now think the destruction of the Boston tea, was absolutely necessary, and therefore right and just. It is very true, they say, if the whole people had been united in sentiment, and equally stable in their resolution, not to buy or drink it, there might have been a reason for preserving it; but the people here were not so virtuous or so happy. The British ministry had plundered the people by illegal taxes, and applied the money in salaries and pensions, by which devices, they had insidiously attached to their party, no inconsiderable number of persons, some of whom were of family, fortune and influence, tho' many of them were of desperate fortunes, each of whom, however, had his circle of friends, connections and dependents, who were determined to drink tea, both as evidence of their servility to administration, and their contempt and hatred of the people. These it was impossible to restrain without violence, perhaps bloodshed, certainly without hazarding more than the tea was worth. To this tribe of the *wicked*, they say, must be added another, perhaps more numerous, of the *weak*; who never could be brought to think of the consequences of their actions, but would gratify their appetites, if they could come at the means. What numbers are there in every community, who have no providence, or prudence in their private affairs, but will go on indulging the present appetite, prejudice, or passion, to the ruin of their estates and families, as well as their own health and characters! How much larger is the number of those who have no foresight for the public, or consideration of the freedom of posterity? Such an abstinence from the tea, as would have avoided the establishment of a precedent, depended on the unanimity of the people, a felicity that was unattainable. Must the wise, the virtuous and worthy part of the community, who constituted a very great majority, surrender their liberty, and involve their posterity in misery in complaisance to a detestable, tho' small party of knaves, and a despicable, tho' more numerous company of fools?

John Adams, "The Letters of Novanglus," in *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 2, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1977), 298-299.

## **John Adams on Shays's Rebellion - 1786**

*By 1786, the colonies had cast off chains of tyranny, and the states were trying to live and relate with one another under the Article of Confederation. Adams was amongst those who supported the creation of a new constitution with a significantly strengthened central government. Shays's Rebellion provided the evidence, for many, that that step should be taken. John and Abigail Adams were in England throughout the course of the rebellion. Jefferson was in Paris. At some distance, they write about the rebellion. Adams seems to have written very little about the event. But here one can see four authors with varied perspectives on the event.*

*Consider the role might time and proximity may have played in these perspectives. Examine what each is suggesting about how justified the farmers are in taking up arms against the state.*