

# Adams



National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historic Site, Massachusetts

The political and intellectual contributions of the Adams family to the Nation remain as yet unmatched by those of any other family. President John F. Kennedy said in 1961 that the successive Adamses' "vitality" and "devotion to the public interest" run like a "scarlet thread throughout the entire tapestry" of American history, and the record of their achievements "intimidates us all." Mr. Kennedy was simply expressing in his own apt words what many have tried to say before, and what many, many more have felt.

We owe our knowledge of this remarkable record to the care and foresight of the Adamses themselves, who were well aware of the hand of history on their shoulders. "Whatever you write, preserve," John Adams instructed two grandsons who were sailing in 1815 to join their father, John Quincy Adams, the new American minister to London. The advice could have served as a family motto. Toward the end of the 19th century a visitor reported, after surveying the crowded shelves of Adams archives running around three sides of the family library, that he had seen "the manuscript history of America in the diaries and correspondence of two Presidents and of that Minister to England [Charles Francis Adams] who spoke the decisive word which saved England and America from a third war."

After the Civil War, New England became simply one corner of the United States, and the electorate and the family agreed—somewhat reluctantly on both sides, perhaps—that Adamses were not to return to national office. But the family was by no means through with either making history or writing it. The four sons of President Abraham Lincoln's minister to England constituted a galaxy of talent astonishing in its range and influence. The eldest was a second John Quincy, for many years a leader

in his community, in Massachusetts politics, and in the affairs of Harvard College. Next was a second Charles Francis, who made his mark as an officer in the Union Army during the Civil War, as a railroad reformer and administrator, and as a biographer and historian. The third, Henry, wrote three of the undisputed classics in American literature. The writings of Brooks, the youngest of the brothers, blended economic theory, world history, and philosophical speculation.

A good claim can thus be made that the house continuously occupied by four generations of Adamses from 1788 to 1927 is the *most* historic house in the United States. Unlike Mount Vernon or Monticello, it never passed out of family hands and its furnishings have not had to be sought out or replaced. To be sure, the building itself has been greatly altered and added to over the decades, but in large part just to accommodate the family's acquisitions during their missions and travels to all parts of the world. And so, again unlike Washington's and Jefferson's homes, neither the architecture nor the contents of the house represent any single period of time. But by the same token the house tells more history. Its mixture of styles and its agreeable clutter of furniture, china, rugs, pictures, books, kitchen equipment, and memorabilia, acquired at different times in many places, show the evolution of taste and manners over nearly a century and a half as nothing else could do. Adams National Historic Site may be compared to an archeologist's "dig," with all the strata of successive cultures laid bare to enable the student to reconstruct the domestic life of one of the few dynastic families America has produced. For those who are attentive, it is a speaking witness to the Adamses' aspirations and achievements, and, of course, to their frustrations and failures, too, as they moved with or against the tides of history.

“... waking or sleeping I am ever with you”

Abigail to John Adams, 1782

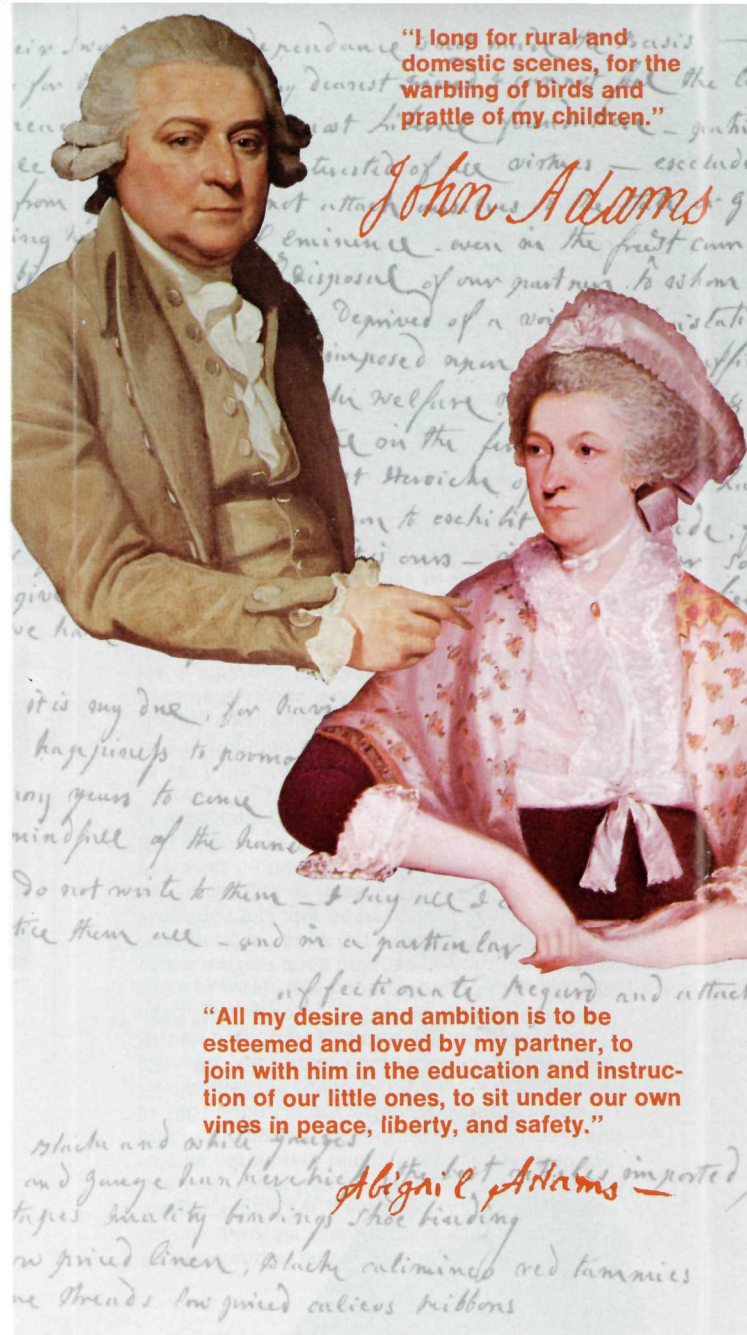
For more than a century the Adams family in America, beginning with Henry Adams the immigrant (ca. 1583-1646), who “took his flight from the Dragon persecution” in Somerset, England, and “alighted with eight sons, near Mount Wollaston,” lived out their lives with respectability but below the level of historical scrutiny on the South Shore of Massachusetts Bay. Deacon John Adams (1691-1761) did make something of a mark for himself as an officer of the town, the parish, and the county militia; but no one could have foretold that the eldest of his three sons would become the second President of the United States, or for that matter that there would be a United States to become president of. This eldest son, also named John, was sent, a little against his will, to Harvard College (class of 1755) and chose the law as his profession. He had a quenchless curiosity about the world, the people in it, and its history and political institutions. He also had a desire to be heard on these subjects and a peculiarly pungent and forceful literary style. These traits and gifts brought him quickly to the fore as the contest between Great Britain and her colonies on the North American mainland developed in the mid-1760’s.

Meanwhile, he had met a parson’s daughter from neighboring Weymouth whose qualities of character and abilities complemented and equaled his own. Abigail Smith descended from families which had long been members of the religious, political, landholding, and mercantile “establishment” of the Bay Colony. But she herself was altogether an individual, like the young lawyer she married in 1764. No one can take up a letter that either one of them wrote—and they wrote many hundreds to each other—and not recognize the independent mind as well as the distinctive style infusing it. It is a cheering paradox that the record shows how heavily dependent each of them was on the other over their 54 years of married life, and how, at the same time, their partnership existed and flourished on the basis of almost perfect equality.

This did not preclude little tiffs and teasings, as when Abigail thought her husband neglected writing her and threatened to “foment” a female insurrection if the new American government did not provide equal rights for women. Or when John Adams, absent in Europe, dampened his wife’s enthusiasm about a suitor for their daughter’s hand by saying that he did not like “this method of courting mothers.” But essentially they thought alike on domestic, national, and international issues, even when separated by many leagues of land or a whole ocean. Mrs. Adams willingly shouldered the tasks of tending the family and farm while John Adams represented Massachusetts in the Continental Congress and the United States in Europe. He considered her at least as good a “farmeress” as he was a statesman, and it is probable that the family stayed solvent largely through her resourceful management during trying times. She continued these responsibilities during his vice-presidency and presidency, freeing him for what he considered his chief accomplishment as president—ending the Quasi-War with France in 1800. This courageous move lost him the support of the Federalist party and his re-election to the presidency, but it brought peace to the country and confirmed the earliest name he gave his home in Quincy—“Peacefield.”

The Adamses’ years of retirement at “Peacefield” were comparatively serene. John Adams’ bruised feelings were healed by time, the increasing promise of John Quincy’s public career, the company of his books, and his never-ending correspondence, much of it devoted to reminiscences of his earlier life. In long letters and autobiographical sketches, he fought the Revolution over again, recalling his successful defense of the British soldiers in the Boston “massacre” trials of 1770; his impatience with equivocal colleagues when the choice between independence or continued subjection to Great Britain was squarely before the Continental Congress; his drafting of the Constitution of Massachusetts; his tussles with known foes and supposed friends in European courts; his lonely but eventually triumphant campaign in the Netherlands to win recognition and desperately needed loans for the United States; and the

John Adams. From the painting by Mather Brown, 1788  
Boston Athenaeum



“All my desire and ambition is to be esteemed and loved by my partner, to join with him in the education and instruction of our little ones, to sit under our own vines in peace, liberty, and safety.”

Abigail Adams

signing of the treaty with Great Britain in 1783, under the terms of which, as he characteristically said, his children would have, if nothing more, “their liberty and the right to catch fish on the Banks of Newfoundland.”

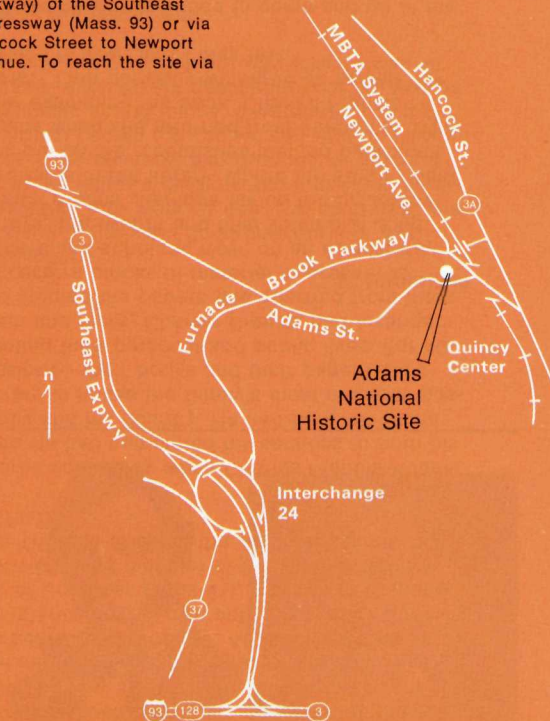
It was Abigail Adams who maintained the ties of the family by sending news to the children and the increasing number of grandchildren, and extracting news in return. Her death in 1818 stirred the Rev. William Bentley to recall in his diary his last sight of her. As he had ridden by the Adams home in Quincy, Mrs. Adams was in her garden “shelling beans for a family dinner to which without any ceremony or apology she invited me.” She possessed, Bentley went on, a good knowledge of the “history of our country [and] of our public men and measures,” which “she was free to disclose but not eager to defend in public circles. . . . Mr. Adams always appeared in full confidence, but that of an equal and friend who had lived himself into one with the wife of his bosom.”

John Adams made his last official appearance in 1820 at the convention to amend the State Constitution he had written 40 years earlier. He proposed an amendment extending the equal protection of the laws to “all men of all religions.” But this was premature and failed of adoption. On the Fourth of July, 1826, just 50 years to the day after he had voted for the Declaration of Independence, John Adams died in the upstairs study of the Old House while his fellow townsmen celebrated the anniversary a few hundred yards away. In his last words he spoke of Jefferson, who had been his colleague, then his rival and opponent, and, before the end, the warmest of friends. Unknown to Adams, however, Jefferson had died at Monticello just a few hours earlier. As the news spread north, south, and west from Virginia and Massachusetts, this conjunction of events took on for Americans an almost mystical significance. Surely, they said, the deaths of the two patri-archs on the great anniversary day were not something to mourn but, rather, a manifestation of divine favor to Adams and Jefferson and the Nation they had helped bring forth.

Abigail Adams. From a painting variously attributed to Mather Brown and Ralph Earl, 1785.  
New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown.

#### About Your Visit

Adams National Historic Site is on the corner of Adams Street and Newport Avenue, Quincy, Mass., about 8 miles south of Boston. By automobile the site can be reached via Exit 24 (Furnace Brook Parkway) of the Southeast Expressway (Mass. 93) or via Hancock Street to Newport Avenue. To reach the site via



#### Administration

Adams Mansion was designated a national historic site on December 9, 1946, made possible by the gift of the property to the Federal Government by the Adams Memorial Society. On November 26, 1952, the name was changed to Adams National Historic Site. It contains 4.77 acres and includes the house, library, garden, and stables. On December 8, 1972, the adjoining Beale property,

Rapid Transit, take the Red Line from Boston to Quincy Center. The site is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., April 19 to November 10.

consisting of 3.68 acres on the west boundary, was purchased and added to the original donated property. The Beale House is occupied and is not open to the public.

The site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is 135 Adams Street, P.O. Box 531, Quincy, MA 02269, is in charge.

**"It is but the farm of a patriot"**

John Adams, 1788

"The Old House"—that is what the Adamses began to call it early in the 19th century, and still call it. This was natural, because it was already an old house when John and Abigail moved into it in 1788. It had been built as a country villa soon after 1730 by Leonard Vassall, a sugar-planter from Jamaica, who also had a house in Boston. Vassall's daughter Anna inherited the house and married John Borland; but Borland sided with the crown, Anna left the country, and the property fell into dubious legal status and physical neglect during the Revolutionary War. At the end of the war, Anna Borland, whose husband was now dead, managed to recover the estate and sold it to her son, Leonard Vassall Borland, from whom John Adams bought it in 1787 while he was still at his diplomatic post in London.

Adams, who remembered his father saying he had never known a piece of land to "run away or break," had had his eye on "the Borland place" for a long time, coveting in particular the rich arable land, "covered with corn and fruits," south of the road (present Adams Street) on the eminence now known as Presidents Hill. By the late 1780's, after a decade of European missions, Adams was ready—or persuaded himself he was ready—to forget kings, courts, and congresses and settle down to farming his acres with his family around him. Abigail wholly approved. From London, just before sailing home, she wrote Thomas Jefferson in Paris that farming and gardening would have more charms for her "than residing at the Court of St. James where I seldom meet with characters so inoffensive as my hens and chickings, or minds so well improved as my garden."

The property John and Abigail acquired, according to a newspaper description, consisted of "A very Genteel Dwelling House, and Coach House, with a Garden, planted with a great Variety of Fruit Trees, an Orchard, and about 40 Acres of Land. . . . This agreeable Seat is pleasantly Situated . . . about ten Miles from Boston, on the Great Road to Plymouth." Yet, surprisingly, this "agreeable Seat" did not quite match their memories and expectations. Doubtless their years abroad and familiarity with countryseats in Europe had altered their scale. The Vassall-Borland house consisted of only the present paneled room, west entry, and dining room on the ground floor, two bedrooms on the second floor, and several small rooms in the attic. At the back was the kitchen, originally detached (as commonly found in southern climates) but probably joined by 1788, with servants' and tenants' quarters in a separate utility building close behind. The rooms seemed so small and the ceilings so low in the main house that Abigail wrote her daughter that "it feels like a wren's house" and warned her to "wear no feathers" when she came to visit.

Public duties, first as vice-president and then as president in succession to Washington, prevented John Adams from becoming a farmer

except occasionally during the next 12 years. So it fell to Abigail, as so often before, to manage the farm and supply the deficiencies of the homestead. This she did with vigor, proceeding first to make the most necessary repairs in the house and then enlarging the "farm building" in the rear to accommodate, among other things, her husband's library, which he had greatly enlarged while living abroad. Her chief contribution, carried out in the closing years of John Adams' presidency, was virtually doubling the capacity of the house by constructing the spacious east wing, with a new entry, wide hallway, and the Long Room on the ground floor, a similar arrangement above it, bedrooms on the third floor, and extensive alterations in the western or kitchen ell. Much of this was done without her husband's knowledge, some of it in fact to surprise him, for, as she confided to one of her accomplices, "the sound of the hammer and the clutter &c. will not be half as acceptable as stone wall and sea weed to the President"—that is, such farm improvements as enclosing his pastures and enlarging his compost heaps.

To this tranquil and commodious homestead in Quincy the Adamses returned in 1801 after John Adams' defeat for a second presidential term. The Old House had by now entered fully into its role as permanent family headquarters and the point of incessant departures and returns. Later in 1801 John Quincy Adams came home from Berlin after his round of diplomatic assignments. His wife, the former Louisa Catherine Johnson, British-born, partly reared in France, and accustomed to court life, found the climate and ways of rural New England bleak; but not many years were to pass before she set off again, this time to accompany her husband as the first American minister accredited to the Court of St. Petersburg in Russia. Then it was on to London after he had signed the Treaty of Ghent that ended the War of 1812, our "second war of independence."

In 1817 the older and younger generations were briefly reunited in Quincy, when John Quincy Adams was recalled from England to serve as President James Monroe's secretary of state. He discharged the duties of this post with im-

mense distinction for a full 8 years. But his single term as a "minority" president was wrecked by a coalition of powerful adversaries, and when he returned from Washington in 1829, his father and mother were dead, the house and farm were in a state close to ruin, and the ex-president concluded that he must content himself with "the slender portion of [his countrymen's] regard which may be yielded to barren good intentions, and aspirations beyond the temper of the age." This did not prove altogether true. By returning to the national House of Representatives for a whole "second career" in 1831, Adams became a hero, almost a folk figure, in his old age because of his bulldog tenacity and eventual success in defending the constitutional right of the people—men and women, blacks and whites—to petition Congress on any matter whatsoever, including slavery and the slave trade.

John Quincy Adams loved the Old House as the home of his revered parents, but he was too engrossed in politics to give it much attention. He planted trees on the grounds and added the

second-story passageway at the back of the house, but for years on end he left the constant and demanding tasks of upkeep to his son Charles Francis. Charles often gloomily thought the burden and expense so great that it would be better to demolish the house and build anew. Just as often, he drew back from such desecration, and in the end, thanks to both his marrying well and his businesslike habits, he converted John Adams' working farm into a Victorian country gentleman's seat. He tore down unsightly outbuildings, greatly extended and improved the kitchen facilities, and, hiring the best architects that Boston afforded, built the Stone Library on the edge of the garden and the carriage-house complex backing up on the railroad and new street (present Newport Avenue) that had cut through the eastern boundary of the homestead property. All this was done in the intervals of his own public career as a member of Congress (1859-61), minister to England (1861-68), and member of the Geneva Arbitration Tribunal to settle the *Alabama* claims (1871-72).

There came a day when Charles Francis Adams knew he had completed his services to both his family and his country. He had built the Stone Library to house the family's most precious possessions—their books and their papers documenting their personal and public lives. For 40 years and more, Charles Francis had arranged and studied the papers and quarried from them successive blocks of material to present to readers and scholars. Now, on an August day in 1877, the twelfth and final volume of John Quincy Adams' *Memoirs* lay on the baize-covered table in the library, where the editor could look out on the rosebushes planted by Abigail Adams when she returned from London in 1788. After examining the book, Charles Francis wrote: "I am perfectly willing to go myself. My mission is over, and I may rest."

Still, Adams continued to come and go at the Old House. After his father's death in 1886, Henry Adams spent several summers there in order to look after his mother, and he finished his 9-volume *History of the United States* at the same table his father had used. When Abigail (Brooks) Adams died in 1889, her four sons placed the whole estate in a trust, and Brooks, the youngest, agreed to look after the house and live in it during the summers. He gave it loving care, making no drastic changes but providing some of the most attractive features it retains (such as the ornamental front gates), and planning for its continued care. This was arranged for early in 1927, within weeks of Brooks' death, by the organization of the Adams Memorial Society to take possession and custody of the homestead.

The ultimate arrangement was made, however, in 1946, when all the descendants of the Adams statesmen, acting jointly, gave outright to the American people the Old House, with its contents, dependencies, and grounds. In the long list of the family's tangible and intangible benefactions to their country over two centuries, this was one of the most generous, durable, and significant.

L. H. Butterfield

This 1798 rendering by E. Malcom shows "The Old House" much as it looked when John Adams purchased it in September 1787. Abigail was "sadly disappointed" in its size, perhaps because of the contrast it offered to the French and English houses with which she had become familiar during her sojourn abroad. The diagram (inset) shows house and grounds today.



**Four Generations of the Adams Family**

John Adams, 1735-1826, fifth in descent from Henry Adams, who came from Somerset, England, to Braintree, Mass.; 2d President of the United States. Married 1764

Abigail Smith, 1744-1818, daughter of the Rev. William Smith of Weymouth, Mass.

Abigail Adams, 1765-1813, married 1786 William Stephens Smith of New York and had four children.

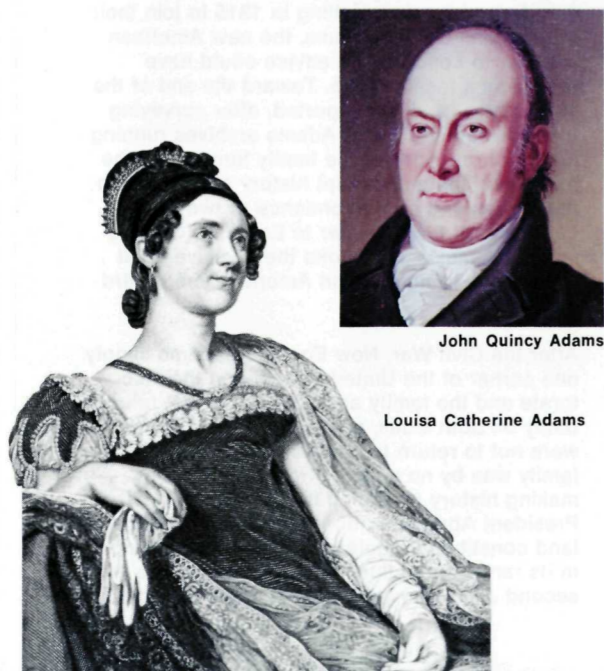
John Quincy Adams, 1767-1848, 6th President of the United States. Married 1797 Louisa Catherine Johnson, 1775-1852, daughter of Joshua Johnson, first American consul to Great Britain.

Charles Adams, 1770-1800, lawyer in New York City. Married and had two children.

Thomas Boylston Adams, 1772-1832, lawyer and judge in Philadelphia, Pa., and Quincy, Mass. Married and had seven children.

"The charm which has always made this house to me an abode of enchantment is dissolved; and yet my attachment to it, and to the whole region round, is stronger than I ever felt it before."

—John Quincy Adams following his father's death in 1826.



John Quincy Adams

Louisa Catherine Adams

George Washington Adams, 1801-1829, lawyer in Boston, Mass.

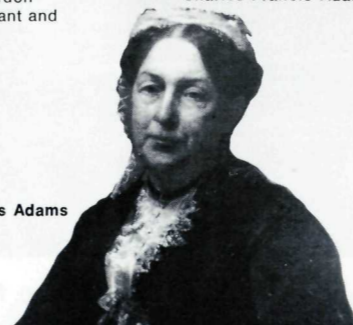
John Adams II, 1803-1834, private secretary to his father when president. Married and had two children.

Charles Francis Adams, 1807-1886, U.S. Minister at London, 1861-1868. Married 1829 Abigail Brooks, 1808-1889, daughter of Peter Chardon Brooks, Boston merchant and insurance broker.

Abigail Brooks Adams



Charles Francis Adams



Louisa Catherine Adams, 1831-1870, married 1854 Charles Kuhn of Philadelphia, Pa.

John Quincy Adams II, 1833-1894, politician and gentleman farmer in Quincy, Mass. Married and had six children.

Charles Francis Adams, Jr., 1835-1915, railroad executive and historian in Quincy and Lincoln, Mass. Married and had five children.

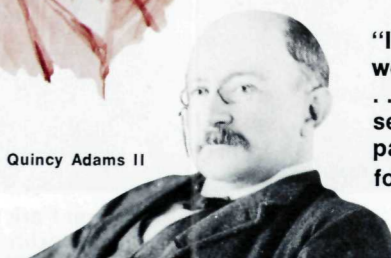
Henry Adams, 1838-1918, writer and professor of history in Boston, Washington, and elsewhere. Married.

Mary Adams, 1845-1928, married 1877 Dr. Henry Quincy of Boston, Mass., and had two children.

Brooks Adams, 1848-1927, writer in Boston and Quincy, Mass. Married.



Brooks Adams



John Quincy Adams II



Henry Adams



Charles Francis Adams, Jr.

"I knew the Old House as a wonderful playground. The garden . . . was always a mass of bloom in season and the carefully tended paths were simply an invitation for racing."

—Abigail Adams Homans, daughter of John Quincy Adams II, 1966.