

The Spur of Fame



John Adams



Benjamin Rush

THE SPUR OF FAME

*Dialogues of
John Adams and
Benjamin Rush,
1805–1813*

Edited by John A. Schutz
and Douglass Adair



LIBERTY FUND

Indianapolis

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The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHEN JOHN ADAMS opened his famous correspondence with Benjamin Rush in 1805, he set a leisurely pattern of dialogue that allowed both men to ramble. Though the principal topic of their correspondence was fame, their treatment by posterity, they interwove into the fabric of their discussion local politics and personal problems, with much repetition of observation. The editors of this book in preparing the correspondence realized that a publication of all the letters or a full text of some letters would have required several volumes and obscured the purpose of the letters. They have therefore eliminated some materials on politics, family, and incidental subjects not pertinent to the central theme of the correspondence.

Though this is the first time these letters have been published together in dialogue, all of them are available in print. Alexander Biddle printed the Adams papers in 1892 as *Old Family Letters*, Series A. His was a limited, almost a private, printing that makes the book a rare item, but it is available in most research libraries. Since the editing was not always perfect, the editors of the present volume have consulted the original Adams letters whenever possible. When the Biddle estate was auctioned, the Adams letters were scattered. Some are missing except for the printed copy in the *Old Family Letters* or photostats in the Library of Congress. Others are available only in letter-book copies of the Adams Manuscript Trust, Boston, which has granted us permission to quote continuous passages of 250 words. The Rush letters are taken from the *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, edited by Lyman H. Butterfield, and can be easily located in those two volumes. We appreciate the assistance of the American Philosophical Society, which gave us permission to quote from the *Letters*, and also the help of Mr. Butterfield, who has advised us on many important matters. In addition, we wish to thank the librarians of the following depositories who have permitted us to quote

from their manuscripts: the Boston Public Library, the Lilly Library at Indiana University, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Princeton University, the Morristown National Historical Park, the Musée de Blerancourt, the Yale University Library, and the United States Naval Academy. We wish also to thank the librarians of the Library of Congress for their help in locating Adams manuscripts.

The editors have generally followed the standards of publication that were set by Mr. Butterfield in his preparation of the Rush letters. We agree with him that these letters were primarily intended to be read for the exchange of ideas and that eighteenth-century punctuation and spelling should give way to more modern usage. Where Adams and Rush have underlined for emphasis or purposely capitalized (or not capitalized) words, we have retained the original construction. For easier reading we have occasionally created new paragraphs; dates of the letters have been standardized. Where letters duplicate each other or do not materially contribute to the dialogue, we have omitted them.

The editors wish to thank the many scholars and friends who have helped them in this project. They appreciate the assistance of Gordon Marshall of Whittier College (now of Clark College), who worked with them in checking the sources, and that of Donn Nibblett and Neville Grow of Clark College. The editors are indebted to Professors George Mayhew of the California Institute of Technology, Albert H. Travis of the University of California, Los Angeles, French Fogle of the Claremont Graduate School, Wilbur Jacobs of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Gilbert McEwen of Whittier College, who frequently advised them on literary problems. They are also indebted to Allan Nevins and Ray Billington of the research staff of the Huntington Library for help and to the Board of Trustees of the Library for making the publication of this book possible. The editors express their special appreciation to Director John E. Pomfret of the Huntington Library for his understanding and encouragement, and to the editorial staff of the publications department for their sympathetic regard for accuracy, particularly to Nancy C. English and Anne W. Kimber. To John M. Steadman, also, we are most thankful for

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JOHN A. SCHUTZ
DOUGLASS ADAIR

July 4, 1965

LOCATION OF THE LETTERS

RUSH LETTERS:

Letters of Benjamin Rush, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield. 2 vols. Princeton, 1951. All Rush letters were taken from these volumes, though some originals were also examined. Cited in the text as *Letters*.

ADAMS LETTERS:

- AMT Adams Manuscript Trust, Boston
AW Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams. 10 vols. Boston, 1850–56. Cited in the text as *Works*.
BPL Boston Public Library
HSP Historical Society of Pennsylvania
LC Library of Congress
LCp Library of Congress photostats. The Library of Congress was given photostatic copies of a few Adams letters. Some of the originals are now missing or in the hands of private collectors who prefer to remain anonymous. Though these photostats could not be reproduced, they were consulted when preparing letter-book or printed copies.
LL Lilly Library, Indiana University
MHP Morristown National Historical Park
MB Musée de Blerancourt
OFL *Old Family Letters*, Ser. A, ed. Alexander Biddle. Philadelphia, 1892. Cited in the text as *Old Family Letters*.
PU Princeton University Library
USN United States Naval Academy
YL Yale University Library

October 12, 1755, AW
February 6, 1805, AMT
February 27, 1805, BPL
April 11, 1805, BPL
July 7, 1805, AMT, LCp
August 23, 1805, AMT, LCp

September 30, 1805, BPL
December 4, 1805, AMT, LCp
January 25, 1806, AMT
March 26, 1806, YL
June 22, 1806, AMT
July 23, 1806, HSP

- September 19, 1806, YL
 November 11, 1806, AMT
 December 22, 1806, YL
 February 2, 1807, BPL
 April 12, 1807, AMT
 May 1, 1807, AW, OFL
 May 21, 1807, AW, LCp
 May 23, 1807, AW
 September 1, 1807, AMT
 September, 1807, AMT, LCp
 November 11, 1807, AMT, LCp
 December 28, 1807, AMT
 February 25, 1808, BPL
 April 18, 1808, AMT, LCp
 June 20, 1808, BPL
 July 25, 1808, AMT, LCp
 August 31, 1808, PU
 September 27, 1808, BPL
 October 10–December 19, 1808, OFL, LCp
 December 22, 1808, OFL
 January 23, 1809, PU
 March 4, 1809, AMT
 March 14, 1809, HSP
 March 23, 1809, YL
 April 12, 1809, AW, LCp
 June 7, 1809, OFL
 August 7, 1809, HSP
 August 31, 1809, OFL
 September 1, 1809, OFL
 September 27, 1809, OFL
 October 8, 1809, MB
 October 25, 1809, YL
 January 21, 1810, AW
 February 11–23, 1810, OFL
 May 14, 1810, OFL
 September 16, 1810, YL
 October 13–15, 1810, OFL, LCp
 December 27, 1810 (1), BPL
 December 27, 1810 (2), BPL
 January 18, 1811, PU
 February 13, 1811, YL
 June 21, 1811, AMT
 July 31, 1811, AMT
 August 14, 1811, YL
 August 25, 1811, YL
 August 28, 1811, YL
 December 4, 1811, YL
 December 19, 1811, YL
 December 25, 1811, AW
 January 8, 1812, AMT, LCp
 January 15, 1812 [13], YL
 March 19, 1812, BPL
 April 22, 1812, BPL
 May 14, 1812 (1), AMT
 May 14, 1812 (2), BPL
 May 26, 1812, AMT
 June 12, 1812, AMT
 July 3, 1812, BPL
 July 7, 1812, AMT
 July 10, 1812, PU
 July 19, 1812, BPL
 August 1, 1812, BPL
 August 17, 1812, YU
 September 4, 1812, LL
 September 6, 1812, USN
 September 18, 1812, OFL, LCp
 November 14, 1812, LC
 November 29, 1812, YL
 December 8, 1812, AMT
 December 27, 1812, USN
 December 29–30, 1812, AMT
 January 4, 1813, BPL
 January 29, 1813, AMT
 February 21, 1813, BPL
 February 23, 1813, LL
 March 23, 1813, LL
 April 18, 1813, AMT
 April 24, 1813, AMT
 April 28, 1813, AMT
 September 20, 1816, MHP

The Spur of Fame

CHAPTER I

The Love of Fame, the Ruling Passion of the Noblest Minds

THE EFFORTS of Dr. Benjamin Rush to heal the breach between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson that developed in 1800 during their contest for the presidency stimulated Jefferson to record a most significant and dramatic confrontation in American history. The place: Jefferson's lodgings in Philadelphia; the time: Monday evening, April 11, 1791; the dramatis personae: John Adams, Vice-President of the United States; Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury; and Thomas Jefferson himself, Secretary of State. The occasion for the meeting, as Jefferson recalled twenty years after the event, was a minor diplomatic crisis which required action during President Washington's absence from the seat of government. The President had left instructions that in case of any emergency the heads of departments concerned should meet with the Vice-President and settle the matter.¹

Jefferson's words vividly recreate the scene for us—the only occasion of record when Adams, Hamilton, and Jefferson, not yet the bitter rivals competing to be Washington's successor, talked politics together. "I invited them to dine with me," Jefferson told Rush, "and after dinner, sitting at our wine, having settled our question, other conversation came on, in which a collision of opinion arose between Mr. Adams and Colonel Hamilton, on

1. See Washington's memorandum to his Cabinet, Apr. 4, 1791, in *The Writings of George Washington*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C., 1931–44), XXXI, 272–273. See also Jefferson's letter to the President, Apr. 17, 1791, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (New York, 1892–99), V, 320–322.

the merits of the British constitution, Mr. Adams giving it as his opinion, that, if some of its defects and abuses were corrected, it would be the most perfect constitution of government ever devised by man. Hamilton, on the contrary, asserted, that with its existing vices, it was the most perfect model of government that could be formed.”²

To Jefferson, who had returned from France in 1790 somewhat obsessively antimonarchical, and antiaristocratical, this praise of the British constitution from his colleagues smacked of heresy. Already in 1791 he was emphasizing privately the line of difference between his republicanism and Adams’ apostasy from the principles of 1776.³ His reporting to Rush this twenty-year-old anecdote was to reemphasize how different his opinions were from those of his great New England rival. But an even greater sin than admiration of the British constitution marked Hamilton in Jefferson’s view. “Another incident took place on the same occasion,” he continued to Rush, “which will further delineate Mr. Hamilton’s political principles. The room being hung around with a collection of the portraits of remarkable men, among them were those of Bacon, Newton, and Locke, Hamilton asked me who they were. I told him they were my trinity of the three greatest men the world had ever produced, naming them. He [Hamilton] paused for some time: ‘the greatest man,’ said he, ‘that ever lived, was Julius Caesar.’”⁴ For Rush in 1811, when the figure dominating world politics was an ex-republican general named Bonaparte who had emulated Caesar in making himself Emperor of France and then had waded through blood to conquer half of Europe, the very name Caesar carried all of the sinister implications that Jefferson intended.

2. Jefferson to Rush, Jan. 16, 1811, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, IX, 295.

3. See Jefferson to George Mason, Feb. 4, 1791, *ibid.*, V, 274–276, expressing fear that the American Constitution would fall “back to that kind of Half-way house, the English constitution . . . we have among us a sect who believe that to contain whatever is perfect in human institutions; . . . the great mass of our community is untainted with these heresies, as is [Washington].” Compare, too, Jefferson’s labored explanation (*ibid.*, V, 328–329) to Washington of how an indiscreet letter of his, attacking Adams’ Anglomania and apostasy to hereditary monarchy and nobility, got printed as an introduction to the first American edition of Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*. Jefferson sponsored the printing of Paine’s pamphlet as an antidote to Adams’ newspaper essays entitled “Discourses on Davila.”

4. Jefferson to Rush, Jan. 16, 1811, *ibid.*, IX, 295–296.

We can be grateful to Jefferson for remembering so accurately this dramatic double dialogue and for reporting it to us so vividly; we can understand his eagerness to insist that as a statesman he was different both from the misguided “monarchist” John Adams and the dangerous would-be “Caesar,” Alexander Hamilton. This insistence by Jefferson that Adams and Hamilton and their Federalist Party were linked in a conspiracy to subvert the Constitution was a justification for his successful bid for the presidency; their noxious opinions explained (so he believed) why he from the purest motives, without the least trace of personal and selfish ambition, was literally forced to seek political power. We can see that the very dialogue Jefferson recorded, thinking to underline the differences that set him apart from Adams and Hamilton, points rather to their likeness—points to a common and shared value that makes these three eighteenth-century revolutionaries blood brothers.

Ironically it is Sir Francis Bacon, the first named on Jefferson’s list of the world’s greatest men, who reveals the secret passion linking the Virginian to Hamilton and Adams. Bacon, in an essay entitled “Of Honour and Reputation,” codified for his contemporaries a series of graded evaluations of fame and honor that he—and the Americans of 1776—believed would guarantee immortality to those men who could win it. He set down the neoclassic categories of fame in a five-level pyramid, at the top of which was the “*conditores imperiorum*, founders of states and commonwealths,” naming such men as Romulus, Cyrus, Ottoman, Ishmael, and, most significantly, Julius Caesar. In second place on the scale of fame were the “*legislatores*” like Lycurgus, Solon, and Justinian, men who gave constitutions and principles to the commonwealth.⁵

Hamilton’s remark, then, in the spring of 1791, that he considered Caesar the greatest of men did not carry the undertones that Jefferson would impute to the statement twenty years later. In 1791 the French Revolution was still in its honeymoon stage; Napoleon had not made his bloody march toward world empire; and the Atlantic community was still living in peace. Even Rush, who shuddered appropriately in 1811 at Jefferson’s anecdote, had

5. *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding et al. (London, 1857–74), VI, 505–506.

written that Caesar's deeds were "perhaps . . . unrivaled in the history of mankind."⁶

Jefferson's choice of greatest men reveals his own secret passion for fame. Again, Bacon explains the context. In his more famous essay, the *Advancement of Learning*, Bacon revises his categories of supreme honor, arguing that those scientists, philosophers, and inventors who employed the divine gift of reason to the use and benefit of mankind merited veneration as gods. In Bacon's view honor was the attribute of a great or disinterested man; fame or sovereign honor was an attribute of human immortality, which on the very highest level partook of the glory of divinity itself. This spur, which goaded the Americans of 1776 to action, was identified by Hamilton himself in Number 72 of *The Federalist Papers* as "the love of fame, the ruling passion of the noblest minds."

A particularly revealing and significant entry in his diary indicates that as John Adams pondered fame, fortune, and power and how best he could utilize his talents and opportunities to capture immortality for himself, these lines from Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man" came to his mind:

Self-love but serves the virtuous mind to wake,
As the small pebble stirs the peaceful lake;
The centre mov'd, a circle straight succeeds,
Another still, and still another spreads;
Friend, parent, neighbour, first it will embrace;
His country next; and next all human race.⁷

John Adams threw his pebbles into the lake, and the circles formed. Years later, between 1805 and 1813, he and Benjamin Rush, who also had been making circles, worried about the enduring character of their life's work. Sometimes bitter, disillusioned, and angry over what fate seemed to have given them, they watched posterity elevate some men into places of honor which they thought were rightfully theirs. Thefts of fame by Revolutionary heroes, aided by historians and "puffers," were plainly immoral and bestial. How could Virginians honor only Virginians, historians attribute all virtue

6. Rush to Jeremy Belknap, Apr. 5, 1791, *Letters*, I, 579.

7. Pope's lines (363–368 of Epistle IV) are quoted in prose form in the *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), I, 337.

and wisdom to Washington, Democrats credit Jefferson with declaring independence and saving the democracy and Tom Paine with starting the Revolution? Still more lamentable, posterity, ignorant of the “facts,” was turning Washington and Franklin into gods. Artists were designing classical busts and shrines for them and wreathing them with olive branches, and the mythmakers were transforming the Revolutionary era into a saga of their great deeds. The next step, Adams opined, would be prayers to them: “Sancte Washington, ora pro nobis,” etc.

For Adams and Rush this process of hero worship was setting off counter-circles, sometimes creating whitecaps, and their own impressions in the nation’s lake were unclear. Both men had labored too long and accomplished too much to let posterity go on uninstructed and ignorant: posterity must do them justice. With this impulse Adams wrote his friend Rush in 1805, renewing a thirty-year acquaintance that had grown cold by distance and differences of opinion and suggesting a regular correspondence. Their letters were to be written in the classical fashion with the great Cicero primarily in mind, whose letters they believed to be the most revealing documents of Roman history. They began their correspondence by advising each other repeatedly to burn their letters, but knowing full well that these letters must be saved so that posterity could have a “truthful” account of the nation’s origin.

From 1805 to 1813, when Rush died unexpectedly, the men corresponded almost monthly. Their salty comments, sometimes too bold to be shared even with their families, were frequently raw, indiscreet, and personal, but they were trying to set the record right in their own minds. In 1816 when Richard Rush asked John Adams to let the Rush family read the correspondence, Adams assembled the letters, reread them, and then gave Richard his estimate of their importance to him: “There are naked Truths and, I am sure, nothing but the Truths, which were never communicated to your mother, yourself, your brothers or sisters, but which are so directly and so truly contradictory to all our histories and traditions that I dare not part with [the letters] without the most explicit request of your mother and yourself. . . . Dr. Rush’s letters are of inestimable value to me.”⁸

8. Adams to Richard Rush, Sept. 20, 1816, Morristown National Historical Park MS.

Adams and Rush first met in 1774 when Rush and other Pennsylvania “patriots” traveled out of Philadelphia to salute the arrival of the Massachusetts delegation to the Continental Congress and to escort it into the city. During the coach ride into Philadelphia, Rush spoke with John and Samuel Adams and noted that John was absorbed with problems of politics and seemed “cold and reserved.”⁹ First impressions changed, however, as he came to know Adams better; the New Englander’s reserve also lessened as surroundings became familiar. Adams’ forceful expressions, his poignant humor and satire, and his wide knowledge of ancient and modern literature drew feelings of friendship from Rush.

When they met in the country town of Frankford, the Pennsylvanian was one distinguished figure in a crowd of distinguished men and was not especially noticed by Adams. Even their conversation during the coach ride into Philadelphia received no formal notation in Adams’ diary and letters. By 1776, however, they were good friends; Adams, writing to a Bostonian in July of that year, called Rush a “worthy Friend of mine” and described him as a man of eminence, polish, and character. To his wife, Abigail, Adams cited qualities of mind, breadth of knowledge, and varied community interests as Rush’s strong points, but Adams believed him above everything else a “staunch American.” In the diary, however, Adams criticized Rush for talking too much—he “is too much of a Talker to be a deep Thinker.”¹⁰

During the years at Philadelphia, while Adams was a leading spokesman in the Congress, they met frequently and consulted regularly on matters of strategy that culminated in the Revolutionary cause.¹¹ When Adams left Philadelphia for duties in other parts of America and in Europe, Rush obliged his friend with reports on politics. In the first of many letters,

9. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush*, ed. George W. Corner (Princeton, 1948), p. 110.

10. Adams to Cotton Tufts, July 20, 1776; to Abigail Adams, July 23, 1776, *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), II, 54, 59; entry of Sept. 24, 1775, *Diary*, II, 182.

11. In his old age Adams constantly recounted for posterity his great deeds in the Continental Congress. As a member of committees to frame the Declaration of Independence, to confer and make treaties with foreign powers, and to concert war plans with Washington, and as chairman of the Board of War and Ordnance, Adams had a powerful hand in turning discontent into revolution.

August 8, 1777, Rush expressed the hope that the battle against Britain would last long enough to purge Americans of monarchical impurity so that their dress, habits, and thoughts would reflect the virtue essential for the creation of a republican state. In a letter of January 22, 1778, in which he congratulated Adams on his diplomatic mission to France, Rush admitted his fear of French influence upon American development when the culture was only partly purified of its British past: "A French war . . . would leave us in the puny condition of a seven-months child." Adams, replying from such distant places as Passy and Amsterdam, asked for information on politics in Philadelphia and then generously offered observations on the issues of the day. In a letter of September 19, 1779, he expressed satisfaction with the state of foreign affairs but thought Spain and France should be instructed in military tactics. "It is not by besieging Gibraltar, nor [by] invading Ireland, in my humble opinion, but by sending a clear superiority of naval power into the American seas, . . . by taking the West India Islands and destroying the British trade, and by affording convoys to commerce between Europe and America . . . that this war is to be brought to a speedy conclusion."¹² In making these recommendations, Adams could not always maintain a serious tone. "My best compliments to Mrs. Rush," he added in one letter, and please "desire her to move in the assemblies of the ladies, that their influence may be exerted to promote privateering. This and trade is the only way to lay the foundation of a navy."¹³

This theme of naval power was a favorite with Adams, but it did not provide the material for a continuing exchange of opinions with Rush. Though a dozen letters passed between them, the letters were sent at irregular intervals and never brought any sustained discussion. After 1780, the men traveled along radically different roads, and only a few messages were exchanged until Adams was proposed for the vice-presidency of the United States. The problems of the new national government gave them subject matter of mutual interest, but differing theories of republicanism in education and politics set off discussions that soon brought more heat than light. Adams had done much thinking since 1774 about the basis of republican government

12. *Old Family Letters*, p. 16.

13. Sept. 20, 1780, *ibid.*, p. 20.