



Season 6, Episode 8: John Adams Book

Gwen Wright: Our first story investigates the connection between a tattered book and America's second President. As a leader of the American Revolution – and a signer of the Declaration of Independence -- John Adams helped father a country. Yet some of the greatest highs and lows of his life came as the father of five children, one of whom died in infancy. At once caring and autocratic, Adams held his children to the highest standards. One son became president...while another struggled through a short and troubled life. Now, Lynn McCabe of Littleton, New Hampshire, has discovered a family heirloom that may be connected to this founding father.

Lynn: It sort of fell open to this page where there was a signature I just went "oh my gosh".

Gwen: I'm Gwendolyn Wright, and I'm eager to see what Lynn has found.

Lynn: This is the book.

Gwen: Wow, it says "Trial of Patriots".

Lynn: Yes.

Gwen: Well tell me how you found it first of all.

Lynn: Well this was in the belongings of my husband's aunt, so it intrigued me. So I opened a few pages and came upon this at the top of this page that says Charles Adams from his father, I immediately got a little more excited as I came upon John Adams signature and a date.

Gwen: The book is a collection of proceedings from several political trials that took place in Ireland and Scotland in the 1790's. Lynn's husband's grandfather was a lawyer, so she suspects he may have been the one who first acquired it.

Gwen: So I presume that you want to know if this did indeed belong to John Adams. Are there other questions you would like me to try to find out?

Lynn: Yes I would love to find out whether or not this had any significant value to John Adams as a second president of the United States.



Gwen: I am excited to take this on Lynn. Thank you so much. The book certainly looks old, and the publishing date is from a major point in Adams' political career. But did it belong to the John Adams who was our first Vice President? He did have a son named Charles. Each of the four political trials, which are the subject of the volume, pitted the British government against a different defendant: Archibald Hamilton Rowan, Robert Watt and David Downie, Joseph Gerrald, and Thomas Muir. I have never heard of any of these five. It appears that during the early 1790's they were each tried and convicted on charges ranging from sedition to treason. This is a little odd... the page numbers are not continuous. Perhaps the book was printed in sections. And there's something else unusual here. It says John Adams 17, probably 1794 but it's cut off. In fact all the pages seem to be cut. The date 1794 appears throughout the book, so that probably is the date alongside the signature. Down here a whole second line has been cut off. Whoever owned this book filled the margins with comments and notations, even arguments. It's interesting: he writes here, false... and this is probably an exclamation mark in the margin. I'm showing the book to Beth Prindle at the Boston Public Library's John Adams Library Project. Adams' personal library of nearly 3,000 books was donated in 1894. Now this is a series of proceedings of four trials. First of all, does this handwriting look familiar to you?

Beth: It doesn't. Now that is somewhat surprising. It certainly doesn't look like anything that we have in Adams' collection.

Gwen: But the John Adams signature inside does look familiar. Beth shows me a book from the library's collection that has a John Adams signature with the same date.

Beth: The signature on the title page, "John Adams 1794" is a date that certainly matches with what you have.

Gwen: It's not just a date. Look at that, my handwriting isn't that consistent. This could be a stamp, it is exactly the same.

Beth: Looking at these two signatures there I don't have a shadow of a doubt that both volumes were once in the collection of John Adams.

Gwen: It's a terrific discovery. A political volume once owned by one of the nation's most significant figures. Beth explains that the notations in the margins are a hallmark of Adams, and evidence that he was deeply interested in the subject of the trials.

Beth: Adams was an inveterate annotator. It's really note taking; it's a way for him to quickly find things in a paragraph. He will just put key words next to a paragraph so that when he comes back, he can find it quickly.



Gwen: Beth also explains why much of the writing has been cut off – the book is a collection of pamphlets printed at different times. They were trimmed to a uniform size before being bound. This explains why the page numbers are not continuous. The library has dozens of books Adams gave to his children. Beth explains that he imposed on them a strict regimen of reading and self improvement.

Beth: There is certainly a pattern of behavior that the Adams loved giving books to their children but also felt that it was very much part of creating the moral and educated child.

Gwen: Beth shows me another book that John had given to Charles, his second son.

Beth: One of the interesting things about this is that you have a book that shows on the title page that it was owned by John Adams. But then you have on the third page Charles' signature is much more aggressive. You have the fact that he didn't obviously blot his pen well and there's smudges everywhere.

Gwen: What a difference in signature, such a flourish. Beth says Charles' handwriting looks similar to the writing on the cover, and on the contents page. So if this is Charles' hand, it seems likely he received these pamphlets from his father. But what was John Adams' interest in the trials of these Scottish and Irish radicals? I'm visiting the alma mater of both John and Charles Adams: Harvard University.

Dan: This is really remarkable.

Gwen: Dan Coquillette is a Professor of History at the law school, and he's familiar with the trials in Lynn's book

Dan: Archibald Rowan was a famous Irish radical. Joseph Gerrald and Thomas Muir were two of the five Scottish martyrs, famous Scottish radicals.

Gwen: Dan explains that the so-called Scottish martyrs were activists who demanded greater political freedom for all British citizens.

Dan: What they wanted was something that today we'd regard as everybody's normal right, the right to vote. But in Scotland, and in England, too, that was not an ordinary right.

Gwen: Under British common law it was illegal to criticize the government. Although these men became heroes in Scotland, all of the martyrs were convicted of sedition and banished to Australia. What would Adams have thought about universal suffrage?



Dan: He was against it. He wasn't for a vote for women, either.

Gwen: Dan says that although Adams did not support the martyr's cause, as a champion of an independent judiciary in the U.S., he was disgusted by the corruption of the British courts, which he saw as a miscarriage of justice.

Dan: Blackwell, the presiding judge, was regarded as a really terrible judge. He announced ahead of time had he thought they were guilty, he packed the jury.

Gwen: The martyrs and Adams were influenced by the revolutionary writings of Thomas Paine. But John Adams suspected the martyrs, inspired by the radicalism of the French Revolution, hoped to overthrow the British government.

Dan: Everyone was afraid of the French following the French Revolution. All establishment types, and Adams certainly was. So I'm sure that one of the reasons why John Adams was so interested in the trial of these men is that he saw similar threats in the United States.

Gwen: Four years after the Scottish martyrs were banished to Australia, John Adams, now president, signed the notorious alien and sedition acts, making it a crime to criticize the government or its officials. Dan says the stated purpose of these acts was to prevent anyone from inciting a violent uprising in the United States, but many of the convictions were politically motivated.

Dan: And so the Sedition Act was used to suppress opposition. One of the prosecutions under the Sedition Act was a man who was fined \$150 for making fun of John Adam's butt.

Gwen: These acts harmed Adams' reputation. Public outcry over the sedition laws may have contributed to his electoral college defeat by Thomas Jefferson in 1800.

Dan: Adams believed till the day he died that one of the reasons why the Republicans swept into power was because the Alien and Sedition Acts were so unpopular.

Gwen: The notes in the margins of Lynn's book may be John Adams sketching out his early thoughts about how to handle political opposition. But why did he give this to his son Charles? I'm visiting with historian John Ferling at the Adams family home in Quincy, Massachusetts.

Gwen: What a beautiful place, so this was Adams' house?



John: It was.

Gwen: This was a gift that it says in the front page, this was a gift to Charles from his father.

John: And that's clearly John's handwriting. I know of course that Charles was a lawyer in New York. I am sure this was part of that.

Gwen: Adams had decided that Charles would pursue a law career, and got him an apprenticeship in Alexander Hamilton's law firm in New York. John suggests this was typical of Adams' rather domineering approach to parenting.

John: He thought: I know my sons aren't capable of making the right choices and so I'm going to push them in a direction that I think will be best for them.

Gwen: By 1794, Charles had been practicing law for two years. But the reluctant student had become a reluctant lawyer, and was not very successful. John tells me that Charles' lack of success was in part related to a problem that plagued several members of the family: an addiction to alcohol.

John: Abigail Adams had an older brother who had been an alcoholic and then two of her sons become alcoholics.

Gwen: Both Charles and his brother Thomas Boylston developed severe drinking problems.

John: Alcoholism takes over and Charles winds up abandoning his wife and his children...he had two daughters. We tend to think of alcoholism as a disease. In the 18th century though people looked on alcoholism as a moral flaw and that seems to be how John saw it. He in one of his letters says that Charles is in the possession of the devil.

Gwen: Charles' escalating drinking led to the collapse of his career. By 1799, Charles had developed severe liver disease. At this point, John lost hope, and finally broke off all ties with him.

John: He says I renounce Charles, that he's a rake, and that I want nothing to do with him any longer.

Gwen: So what was the motive behind John giving these pamphlets to his son? And how did the wayward Charles respond to it? Because he was away from home so much – sometimes for years -- John mainly communicated through letters... Thousands of which are housed here at the Massachusetts Historical Society. It is quite extensive. There are a quarter million documents in this collection, representing generations of



Adamses. Editor Jim Taylor says that late in his presidency, John Adams was haunted by a realization that he himself had been obsessed with his responsibility to the new nation.

Jim: I think as time went by, John reflected and thought that maybe he spent a little too much time in public service and it would have been better off that he would have spent more time with his family.

Gwen: Jim shows me a letter written in 1798 from John to Abigail lamenting the time he spent away from his children during their formative years.

Jim: "It is too late for this chemistry now. The die is cast, and I am not far from the end of my life. I have done all for my children that I could and meant all for the best. What have I not suffered? What have I ever enjoyed?"

Gwen: I'm interested in that relationship. Jim is not familiar with Lynn's book. But he does have an amazing resource for solving Adams family mysteries. Researchers here have spent decades transcribing the Adams letters into a searchable database. We're enlisting the help of managing editor Maggie Hogan.

Maggie: Probably the best way to start searching is simply through keyword searches.

Gwen: We'll start with the defendant's names from the book. The first name was Archibald Hamilton Rowan. A real 18th century name.

Maggie: Yeah that's a great name. Let's see if anything comes up for that ... no, okay. Let's just try Rowan and see what turns up there. Oh, there we go!

Gwen: The corresponding letter is from John to Charles on January 31, 1795...And confirms that Lynn's book originated in John Adams' personal collection.

Maggie: "You do not mention the receipt of Rowan's trial which I sent you. I hope you'll have all the trials I've sent you bound up in volumes."

Gwen: The letter also answers some questions for the Massachusetts Historical Society. Until now, researchers didn't know anything about the mysterious rowan in Adams' letter. Maggie then shows me a second letter from father to son that reveals a deeper significance of the book.

Maggie: The enclosed trials of Muir, Margarot and Gerrald...



Gwen: It's time to tell Lynn what I've discovered. Well Lynn this has been one of the most exciting investigations I've ever done, I can tell you that these are indeed John Adams' signatures.

Lynn: I have chills. I have chills, its just, oh my gosh.

Gwen: I tell Lynn how my investigation led me to the Massachusetts Historical Society, where letters between the then Vice President and his son revealed why John Adams chose these writings as a gift for his beleaguered Charles.

Maggie: "As nothing lays open the spirit and temper of the times better than the criminal proceedings in the court of justice, I thought I could not send you a more acceptable present." John loved the law, and I think he really wanted his son to love the law as well. And this was something they could discuss together and really have a dialog about.

Gwen: Digging deeper, we find Charles' response. It seems that, through Lynn's book, father and son may have found some common ground.

Maggie: "I have to acknowledge the receipt of your letters accompanying the trials of Gerrald, Muir, and Margarot. Posterity will give little praise to the independence or candor of scotch judges." Charles is echoing the same ideas John has that an independent judiciary is not necessarily popular, but it's so important.

Gwen: It shows Adams as both a public and a private man. This book gives us insights into John Adams' personal struggle to resolve questions of freedom and authority for the nation and for his own children.

Lynn: Oh my goodness. Wow.

Gwen: He wanted to reach out to Charles in perhaps the only way he could by giving him things to read and talk about with his father.

Lynn: In my heart of hearts I sort of knew that it was old and maybe these were authentic signatures, but I never dreamed of the importance of perhaps this could play in filling in a few pieces of their lives.

Gwen: One of the questions to think about is whether the importance of this might lead you to think of putting it in a public place where other scholars can look at it. But that's for you to decide probably once you've had a little time to take it in.

Lynn: Yes definitely.