



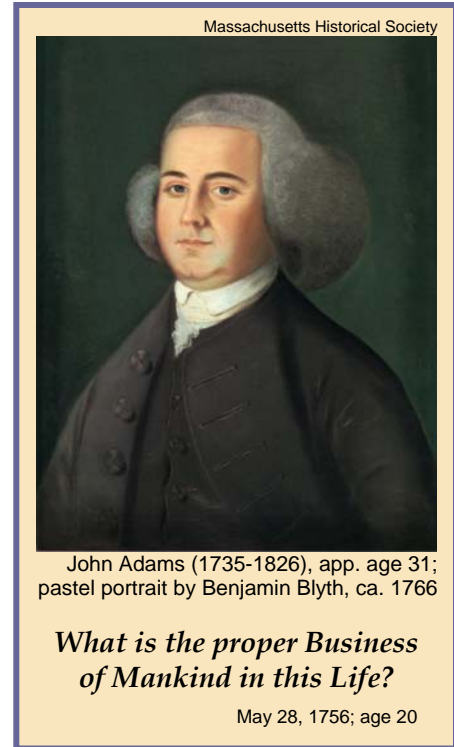
# YOUNG JOHN ADAMS

## On Learning, Wisdom, Virtue, and the “Business of Mankind”

John Adams, first vice president and second president of the United States, was born in Braintree, Massachusetts in October 1735. At age fifteen he entered Harvard College in Boston, where he began to keep a diary. His college entries are usually brief comments on the weather, his classes, and classmates. Not until his graduation in 1755 does his diary reveal the personal and intellectual strivings that he maintained throughout his life.

These excerpts span Adams’s twenties as a college graduate, schoolteacher, law student, and young lawyer (1756-1765). They represent the learning opportunities available for privileged men of his time: college, legal studies with a practicing lawyer (not in a law school), men’s clubs for conversation and camaraderie, and — Adams’s ever-diligent quest — self-assigned daily reading and reflection.

The annotations of the diaries’ editor, L. H. Butterfield, are in brackets within the text; the National Humanities Center’s annotations are placed in sidebars.



**1756** Age 20. After graduation from Harvard in 1755, Adams becomes a schoolteacher in Worcester, Massachusetts, to earn money for his professional studies.

### FEBRUARY 21, 1756

A Snowy day. Snow about ankle deep. I find by repeated experiment and observation, in my School, that human nature is more easily wrought upon and governed, by promises and encouragement and praise than by punishment, and threatenng and Blame. But we must be cautious and sparing of our praise, lest it become too familiar, and cheap and so contemptible. Corporal as well as disgraceful punishments, depress the spirits, but commendation enlivens and stimulates them to a noble ardor and emulation.

...

### MARCH 15, 1756

I sometimes, in my sprightly moments, consider my self, in my great Chair at School, as some Dictator at the head of a commonwealth. In this little State I can discover all the great Genius’s, all the surprizing actions and revolutions of the great World in miniature. I have severall renowned Generalls but 3 feet high, and several deepprojecting Politicians in peticoats. I have others catching and dissecting Flies, accumulating remarkable pebbles, cockle shells &c., with as ardent Curiosity as any Virtuoso in the royal society. Some rattle and Thunder out A, B, C, with as much Fire and impetuosity, as Alexander fought, and very often sit down and cry as heartily, upon being out spelt, as Cesar did, when at Alexanders sepulchre he recollected that the Macedonian Hero had conquered the World before his Age. At one Table sits Mr. Insipid foppling and fluttering, spinning his whirligig, or playing with his fingers as gaily and wittily as any frenchified coxcomb brandishes his Cane or rattles his snuff box. At another sits the polemical Divine, plodding and wrangling in his mind about Adam’s fall in which we sinned all as his primer has it. In short my little school like the great World, is made up of Kings, Politicians, Divines, L.D. [LL.D.’s?], Fops,

ADAMS ON HIS  
YOUNG STUDENTS

Alexander:  
Alexander the  
Great, the  
“Macedonian  
Hero” (4<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.)

Cesar:  
Julius Caesar  
(1<sup>st</sup> c. B.C.)

Divine:  
preacher

primer: i.e., *The  
New England  
Primer*

LL.D: academic  
law degree

National Humanities Center , 2008: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds. Full text of Adams’s diaries available online from the Massachusetts Historical Society: *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive* at www.masshist.org/digitaladams. Source of transcription: L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*. Vol. 1. Harvard University Press, 1961. Reproduced by permission of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Adams’s entries are presented as written and transcribed as in Butterfield; his dating method has been replaced by a standard date/day/year format. Butterfield’s annotations are in brackets within the text; the Center’s annotation are in sidebars. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm.

Buffoons, Fiddlers, Sychophants, Fools, Coxcombs, chimney sweepers, and every other Character drawn in History or seen in the World. Is it not then the highest Pleasure my Friend to preside in this little World, to bestow the proper applause upon virtuous and generous Actions, to blame and punish every vicious and contracted Trick, to wear out of the tender mind every thing that is mean and little, and fire the new born soul with a noble ardor and Emulation. The World affords no greater Pleasure. Let others waste the bloom of Life, at the Card or biliard Table, among rakes and fools, and when their minds are sufficiently fretted with losses, and inflamed by Wine, ramble through the Streets, assaulting innocent People, breaking Windows or debauching young Girls. I envy not their exalted happiness. I had rather sit in school and consider which of my pupils will turn out in his future Life, a Hero, and which a rake, which a phylosopher, and which a parasite, than change breasts with them, tho possesst of 20 lac'd wast coats and 1000 a year. . . .

lac'd wast coats, i.e.,  
laced waist coats  
1000 a year,  
i.e., annual income

**APRIL 23 [i.e. 24], 1756**

A cloudy morn. All my Time seems to roll away unnoticed. I long to study sometimes, but have no opportunity. I long to be a master of Greek and Latin. I long to prosecute the mathematical and philosophical Sciences. I long to *illegible* know a little of Ethicks and moral Philosophy. But I have no Books, no Time, no Friends. I must therefore be contented to live and die an ignorant, obscure fellow. A showery Day.

**APRIL 28 [i.e. 29], 1756**

Fast day. Heard Mr. Maccarty. Spent the Evening at Mr. Putnams. Our proper Business in this Life is, not to accumulate large Fortunes, not to gain high Honours and important offices in the State, not to waste our Health and Spirits in Pursuit of the Sciences, but constantly to improve our selves in Habits of Piety and Virtue. Consequently, the meanest Mechanick, who endeavours in proportion to his Ability, to promote the happiness of his fellow men, deserves better of Society, and should be held in higher Esteem than the Greatest Magistrate, who uses his power for his own Pleasures or Avarice or Ambition.

Fast day:  
religious day of  
fasting specified  
by the local  
church  
meanest, i.e.,  
of lowest  
status

**APRIL 29 [i.e. 30], 1756**

A hazy, dull Day. Reading Milton. That mans Soul, it seems to me, was distended as wide as Creation. His Powr over the human mind was absolute and unlimited. His Genius was great beyond Conception, and his Learning without Bounds. I can only gaze at him with astonishment, without comprehending the vast Compass of his Capacity.

Milton:  
John Milton  
(1608-1674),  
English poet and  
philosopher,  
author of  
*Paradise Lost*

**MAY 28 [i.e. 29], 1756**

Drank Tea at Mr. Putnams. — What is the proper Business of Mankind in this Life? We come into the World naked and destitute of all the Conveniences and necessaries of Life. And if we were not provided for, and nourished by our Parents or others should inevitably perish as soon as born. We increase in strength of Body and mind by slow and insensible Degrees. 1/3 of our Time is consumed in sleep, and 3/4 Of the remainder, is spent in procuring a mere animal sustenance. And if we live to the Age of three score and Ten and then set down to make an estimate in our minds of the Happiness we have enjoyed and the Misery we have suffered, We shall find I am apt to think, that the overballance of Happiness is quite inconsiderable. We shall find that we have been through the greatest Part of our Lives pursuing Shadows, and empty but glittering Phantoms rather than substances. We shall find that we have applied our whole Vigour, all our Faculties, in the Pursuit of Honour, or Wealth, or Learning or some other such delusive Trifle, instead of the real and everlasting Excellences of Piety and Virtue. Habits of Contemplating the Deity and his transcendent Excellences, and correspondent Habits of complacency in and Dependence upon him, Habits of Reverence and Gratitude, to God, and Habits of Love and Compassion to our fellow

men and Habits of Temperance, Recollection and self Government will afford us a real and substantial Pleasure. We may then exult in a Conciousness of the Favour of God, and the Prospect of everlasting Felicity.

...

**JUNE 15, 1756**

Consider, for one minute, the Changes produced in this Country, within the Space of 200 years. Then, the whole Continent was one continued dismal Wilderness, the haunt of Wolves and Bears and more savage men. Now, the Forests are removed, the Land coverd with fields of Corn, orchards bending with fruit, and the magnificent Habitations of rational and civilized People. Then our Rivers flowed through gloomy deserts and offensive Swamps. Now the same Rivers glide smoothly on through rich Countries fraught with every delightful Object, and through Meadows painted with the most beautiful scenery of Nature, and of Art. [illegible] The narrow Hutts of the Indians have been removed and in their room have arisen fair and lofty Edifices, large and well compacted Cities.

...

**JULY 21, 1756**

Kept School. — I am now entering on another Year, and I am resolved not to neglect my Time as I did last Year. I am resolved to rise with the Sun and to study the Scriptures, on Thursday, Fryday, Saturday, and Sunday mornings, and to study some Latin author the other 3 mornings. Noons and Nights I intend to read English Authors. This is my fixt Determination, and I will set down every neglect and every compliance with this Resolution. May I blush whenever I suffer one hour to pass unimproved. I will rouse up my mind, and fix my Attention. I will stand collected within my self and think upon what I read and what I see. I will strive with all my soul to be something more than Persons who have had less Advantages than myself.

Massachusetts Historical Society

Entry of 21 July 1756 (detail), Adams diary #1

***I am now entering on another Year,  
and I am resolved not to neglect  
my Time as I did last Year.***

**JULY 22, 1756**

Fast day. Rose not till 7 o'clock. This is the usual Fate of my Resolutions! Wrote the 3 first Chapters of St. James. Wrote in Bolinbroke pretty industriously. . . .

...

**AUGUST 22, 1756** Adams begins studying law with James Putnam in Worcester while continuing to teach school.

Yesterday I compleated a Contract with Mr. Putnam, to study Law under his Inspection for two years. . . Necessity drove me to this Determination, but my Inclination I think was to preach. However that would not do. But I set out with firm Resolutions I think never to commit any meanness or injustice in the Practice of Law. The Study and Practice of Law, I am sure does not dissolve the obligations of morality or of Religion. And altho the Reason of my quitting Divinity was my Opinion concerning some disputed points, I hope I shall not give Reason of offence to any in that Profession by imprudent Warmth.

quitting  
Divinity,  
i.e.,  
deciding  
not to  
become  
a minister

...

## 1758-1759

Age 22-23. In 1758 Adams is admitted to the bar and begins his own law practice in the town where he was born and raised — Braintree, near Boston, Massachusetts.

### OCT.-NOV. 1758 (draft or copy of letter to John Wentworth)

. . . But to be plain, I am beginning Life anew. I have new Friendships to make, new Employments to follow, new Concerns, Prospects and Studies, opening before me. [illegible] And now I have mentioned Studies, I find my self entering an unlimited Field. A Field in which Demosthenes, Cicero, and others of immortal Fame have exulted before me! A Field which incloses the whole Circle of Science and Literature, the History, Wisdom, and Virtue of all ages. — Shall I dare to expatiate here in full Career, like the nobler Animals, that range at large, or shall I blindly, basely creep, like the mole, or the weezell? — Tell me. . .

. . .

### FEBRUARY 11, 1759 . . .

I spent one Evening this Week at Billy Belchers. I sat, book in Hand, on one side of the fire, while Dr. Wendell, Billy Belcher and Stephen Cleverly and another young Gentleman sat, in silence, round the Card Table, all the Evening. Two Evenings I spent at Samll. Quincys, in the same manner, Dr. Gardiner, Henry Q., Ned Q., and S.Q. all playing Cards the whole Evening. This is the wise and salutary amuzement, that young Gentlemen take every Evening in this Town, playing Cards, drinking Punch and Wine, Smoaking Tobacco, swearing &c. while 100 of the best Books lie on the shelves, Desks, and Chairs, in the same room. This is not Misspence of Time. This is a wise, a profitable, Improvement of Time. Cards, and Back Gammon, are fashionable Diversions. I'le be curst if any young fellow can study, in this town. What Pleasure can a young Gentleman, who is capable of thinking, take, in playing Cards? It gratifies none of the Senses, nor Sight, [illegible] Hearing, taste, smell, feeling. It can entertain the Mind only by hushng its Clamours. Cards, Back Gammon are the great antidotes to Reflection, to thinking, that cruel Tyrant within Us. What Learning, or Sense, are we to expect from young Gentlemen, in whom a fondness for Cards, &c. outgrows and choaks the Desire of Knowledge?

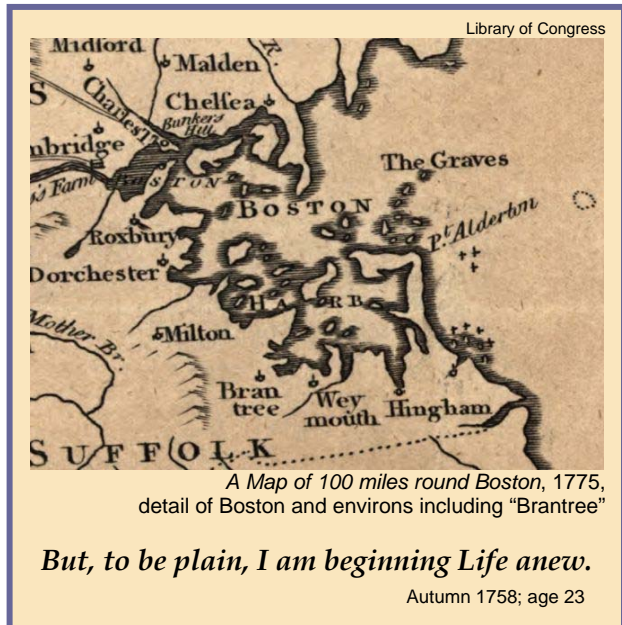
### SPRING 1759 . . .

The Difference between a whole Day and a divided scattered Day.

[Query]. Can any Man take a Book in his hand, in the Morning, and confine his Thoughts to that till Night. Is not such a Uniformity tiresome? Is not Variety more agreable, and profitable too? Read one Book one Hour, then think an Hour, then Exercise an Hour, then read another Book an Hour, then dine, smoke, walk, cutt Wood, read another Hour loud, then think, &c. and thus spend the whole day in perpetual Variations, [illegible] from Reading to thinking, Exercise, Company, &c. But what is to be acquired by this Wavering Life, but a Habit of Levity, and Impatience of Thought?

I never spent a whole Day upon one Book in my Life.

What is the Reason that I cant remove all Papers and Books from my Table, take one Volume into my Hands, and read it, and then reflect upon it, till night, without wishing for my Pen and Ink to write a Letter, or taking down any other Book, or thinking of the Girls? Because I cant command my attention. My Thoughts are roving from Girls to friends, from friends to Court, to Worcester, to Piscataquay, Newbury, and then to Greece and Rome, then to France, from Poetry to oratory, and Law, and Oh, a





earliest known bookplate of John Adams, ca. 1770s; from his copy of Henri-Louis Duhamel du Monceau's *A Practical Treatise of Husbandry*, 1759 (English ed., 1762)

*Could I fix my attention, and keep off every fluttering Thought that attempts to intrude upon the present subject, I could read a Book all Day. Wisdom, curse on it, will come soon or late.*

Spring 1759; age 23

rambling, Imagination. Could I fix my attention, and keep off every fluttering Thought that attempts to intrude upon the present subject, I could read a Book all Day. Wisdom, curse on it, will come soon or late.

I have to smooth and harmonise my Mind, teach every Thought within its Bounds, to roll, and keep the equal Measure of the Soul.

...

### SUMMER 1759

Consider what Profession you have chosen? The Law. What Rule and Method must I observe to make a figure to be useful, and respectable in that Station. Ask this Question upon every Occasion, of what Use to the Lawyer? [*illegible*] of what use at the Bar — [to have?] perfection of Knowledge in Theory or

Expertness in Practice, or Eloquence at Bar? Let my Views concenter, and terminate in one focus, in one Point, a great, useful, lawyer virtuous Lawyer. With this View I might plan a system of study for seven Years to come, [*illegible*] that should take in most Parts of Science and Literature. I might study Mathematics, and Poetry and Rhetorick and Logick, as auxiliary Sciences and Arts, but my principal Attention should be directed at british Law, and roman and Grecian Antiquities.

...

## 1760-1761

Age 24-25. Adams writes often about his young law practice and his wide-ranging interests, chastising himself for a lack of self-discipline as an independent learner.

### JUNE 5, 1760

Arose late. Feel disordered. 8 o'Clock, 3 1/2 Hours after Sun rise, is a sluggard's rising Time. Tis a stupid Waste of so much Time. Tis getting an Habit hard to conquer, and Tis very hurtful to ones Health. 3 1/2, 1/7 of the 24, is thus spiritlessly dozed away. God grant me an Attention to remark, and a Resolution to pursue every Opportunity, for the Improvement of my Mind, and to save, with the Parsimony of a Miser, every moment of my Time.

### JUNE 6, 1760

Arose very late. A cold, rainy northeasterly storm, of several Days continuance. I have an ugly Cold, a phlegmatic stomach and a Cholicky Pain in my Bowells this morning. Read Timon of Athens, the Man hater, in the Evening at the Drs.

Shakespeare, *The Life of Timon of Athens*, 1623

### JUNE 7, 1760

Arose late, again. When shall I shake off the shackells of morning slumbers, and arise with the sun? Between sun rise, and Breackfast, I might write, or read, or contemplate, a good deal. I might, before Breakfast, [*illegible*] entirely shake off the Drowziness of the Morning, and get my Thoughts into a steady Train, my Imagination raised, my Ambition inflamed, in short every Thing within me and without, into a Preparation for Improvement. — I have some Points [of] Law to examine to day.

...

**JUNE 15, 1760**

Rose early, 5 o'clock. A pleasant Morning. The more I write the better. Writing is a most useful improving Exercise. Yesterday morning before Break fast I wrought my Mind into a Course of Thinking, by my Pen, which I should not have fallen into the whole day without it; and indeed often not resuming my Pen after Breakfast, I insensibly lost my attention.

**NOVEMBER 14, 1760**

Another Year is now gone and upon Recollection, I find I have executed none of my Plans of study. I cannot Satisfy my self that I am much more knowing either from Books, or Men, from this Chamber, or the World, than I was at least a Year ago, when I wrote the foregoing Letter to Sewal. Most of my Time has been spent in Rambling and Dissipation. Riding, and Walking, Smoking Pipes and Spending Evenings, consume a vast Proportion of my Time, and the Cares and Anxieties of Business, damp my Ardor and scatter my attention. But I must stay more at home — and commit more to Writing. A Pen is certainly an excellent Instrument, to fix a Mans Attention and to inflame his Ambition. I am therefore beginning a new literary Year, with the 26th. of my life.

**NOVEMBER 14, 1760<sup>1</sup>**

I am just entered on the 26th Year of my Life, and on the fifth Year of my studies in Law, and I think than it is high Time for a Reformation both in the Man, and the Lawyer. 25 Years of the Animal Life is a great Proportion to be spent, to so little Purpose, and four Years, the Space that we spend at Colledge is a great deal of Time to spend for no more Knowledge in the science and no more Employment in the Practice of Law. Let me keep an exact Journal therefore of the Authors I read, in this Paper.

This day I am beginning my Ld. Hales History of the Common Law, a Book borrowed of Mr. Otis, and read once already, Analysis and all, with great Satisfaction. I wish I had Mr. Blackstones Analysis, that I might compare, and see what Improvements he has made upon Hale's. . . .

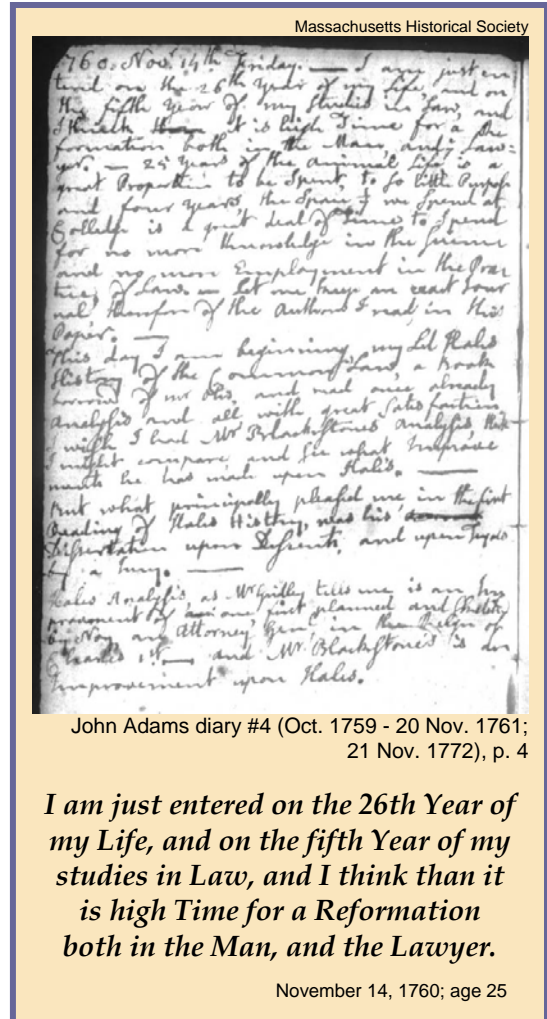
**FEBRUARY 9, 1761**

This morning, as I lay abed, I recollected my last Weeks Work. I find I was extremely diligent, constantly in my Chamber, Spent no Evenings abroad, not more than one at the Drs. Have taken no Walks, [illegible] never been on Horseback the whole Week, excepting once, which was on Tuesday, when I went to Boston. Yet how has this Retirement, and solitude been spent? In too much Rambling and Straggling from one Book to another, from the Corpus Juris Canonici, to Bolingbroke, from him to Pope, from him to Addison, from him to Yoricks sermons, &c. In fine, the whole Week, and all my Diligence has been lost, for want of observing De Wits Maxim, "one Thing at once. . . ."

abroad, i.e., out of his house

Corpus Juris Canonici: Body of Canon Law (Roman Catholic Church)

<sup>1</sup>The two entires dated November 14, 1760, are consecutive entries in Adams's diary #4, October 1759 - 20 November 1761, 21 November 1772.

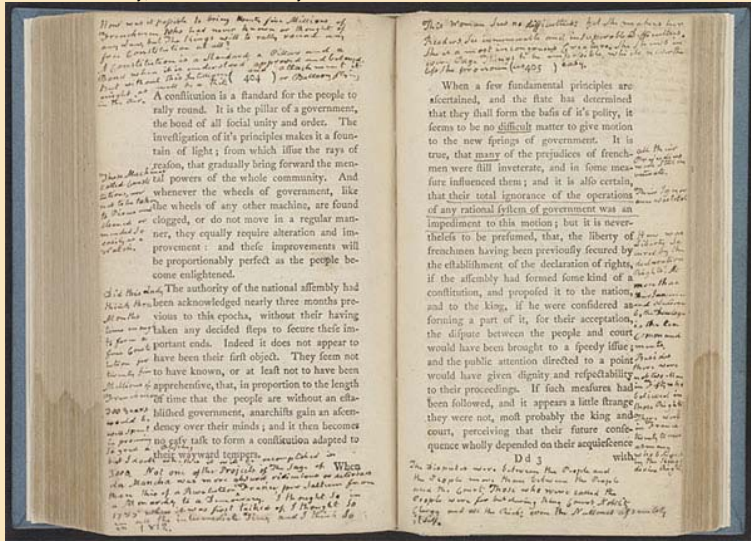


## AUGUST 1, 1761

... the English Law greatly favours Education. In every English Country, some sort of Education, some Acquaintance with Letters, is necessary, that a Man may fill any station whatever. In every English Country In the Countries of slavery, and Romish superstition, the Laity must not learn to read, least they should detect the gross Impostures of the Priesthood, and shake off the Yoke of Bondage. But in Protestant Countries and especially in England and its Colonies, Freedom of Enquiry is allowed to be not only [illegible] the Priviledge but the Duty of every Individual. We know it to be our Duty, to read, examine and judge for ourselves, even of ourselves what is right. No Priest nor Pope has any Right to say what I shall believe, and I will not believe one Word they say, if I think it is not founded in Reason and in Revelation. Now how can I judge what My Bible justifies unless I can read my Bible.

"In every English Country ... Yoke of Bondage," i.e., while learning is considered a privilege and a duty in English colonies, it is not allowed in the colonies of Catholic nations which stifle protest against the power of the priests and rulers .

John Adams Library, Boston Public Library



With over 10,000 words written by Adams in the margins, this volume — Mary Wollstonecraft's *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794) — is the most heavily annotated book in the Adams Library collection of the Boston Public Library.

*A Man who can read, will find in his Bible, in the common sermon Books that common People have by them and even in the Almanack and News Papers, Rules and observations, that will enlarge his Range of Thought, and enable him the better to judge who has and who has not that Integrity of Heart, and that Compass of Knowledge and Understanding, which form the Statesman.*

August 1, 1761; age 25

The English Constitution is founded, tis bottomed And grounded on the Knowledge and good sense of the People. The very Ground of our Liberties, is the freedom of Elections. Every Man has in Politicks as well as Religion, a Right to think and speak and Act for himself. No man either King or Subject, Clergyman or Layman has any Right to dictate to me who the Person I shall choose to for my Legislator and Ruler. I must judge for myself, but how can I judge, how can any Man judge, unless his Mind has been opened and enlarged by Reading. A Man who can read, will find in his Bible, in the common sermon Books that common People have by them and even in the Almanack and News Papers, Rules and observations, that will enlarge his Range of Thought, and enable him the better to judge who has and who has not that Integrity of Heart, and that Compass of Knowledge and Understanding, which form the Statesman.

**1765** Age 29. Adams has been admitted as a barrister before the Superior Court of Judicature in Boston, i.e., he may present cases before the colony's highest court.

## JANUARY 24, 1765

Soon after I got to Boston, at Jany. Court Mr. Fitch came to me upon Change, and told me, that Mr. Gridley and he had something to communicate to me, that I should like, in Sacred Confidence however. I waited on Mr. Gridley, at his office, (after many Conjectures what the secret might be) and he told me,

That He and Mr. Fitch had proposed a Law Clubb — a private Association, for the study of Law and oratory. . .

We accordingly agreed to meet the next Evening in one of Ballards back Chambers and determine upon Times, Places, and studies.

We accordingly met the next Evening, Mr.

Gridley, Fitch and I, and spent the whole Evening. Proposals were to read a Reign and the statutes of that Reign, to read Hurds Dialogues and any new Pieces. But at last we determined to read The Feudal Law and Cicero only, least we should loose sight of our main Object, by attending to too many. Thursday Nights were agreed on, and to meet first at Mr. Gridleys office. There we accordingly met on the Thursday Night following, and suffered our Conversation to ramble upon Hurds Dialogues, the Pandects, their Discovery in Italy by Lotharius in 1127, in the Reign of Stephen, upon Lambard de priscis Anglorum Legibus, in Saxon and Latin, upon Ld. Kaims [Kames], Mr. Blackstone &c. But we agreed to meet the next Thursday night at Mr. Fitch's, and to read the Three first Titles of the feudal Law, and Tullies oration for Milo.

. . .

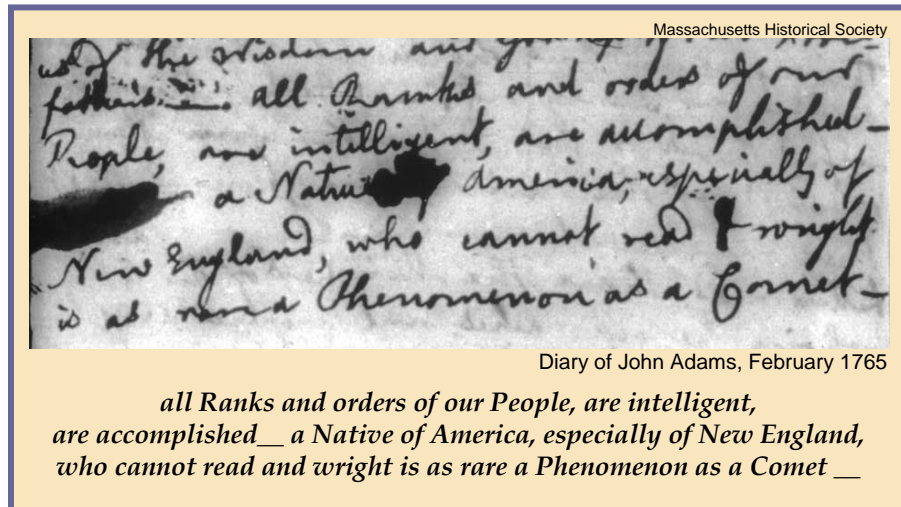
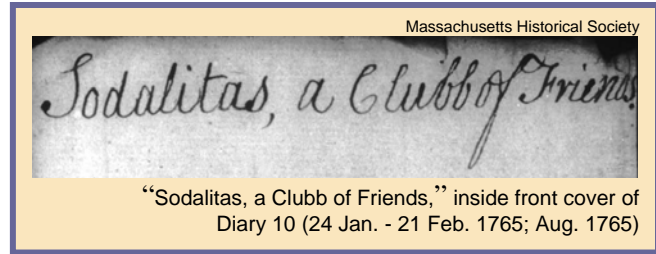
**FEBRUARY, 1765** [Fragmentary draft of a dissertation on canon and feudal law]<sup>2</sup> . . .

I always consider the settlement of America with Reverence and Wonder — as the Opening of a grand scene and Design in Providence, for the Illumination of the Ignorant and the Emancipation of the slavish Part of Mankind all over the Earth.

their great grand sons, tho educated at European Universities, can scarcely read. Archbishop King him self, (I think it was, for I say this upon Memory) observed of the Puritans in General, that they were much more intelligent, and better read than the Members of the Church whom he reproaches, and censures very warmly for that Reason.

Provision was early made by Law, that every Town should be accommodated with a grammar school — under a severe Penalty — so that even Negligence of Learning was made a Crime, a Stretch of Wisdom in Policy that was never equalled before nor since unless by the ancient Egyptians who made the Want of Generosity and Humanity a Capital Crime.

But besides the Obligation laid on every Town to provide the means of Learning, a Colledge nay a Number of Colledges were formed very early, and a very early Attention to them from the Legislature, exempted from Military Duties — exemptions from Taxes, and many other Encouragements have taken Place. And in fine We their Posterity, have seen the Fruits and Consequences of the Wisdom and Goodness of our Forefathers. All Ranks and orders of our People, are intelligent, are accomplished — a Native of America, especially of New England, who cannot read and wright is as rare a Phenomenon as a Comet.



<sup>2</sup> An early draft of an essay later published in the *Boston Gazette* in four parts, 12 and 19 Aug., 30 Sept., and 21 Oct. 1765. [Butterfield note]