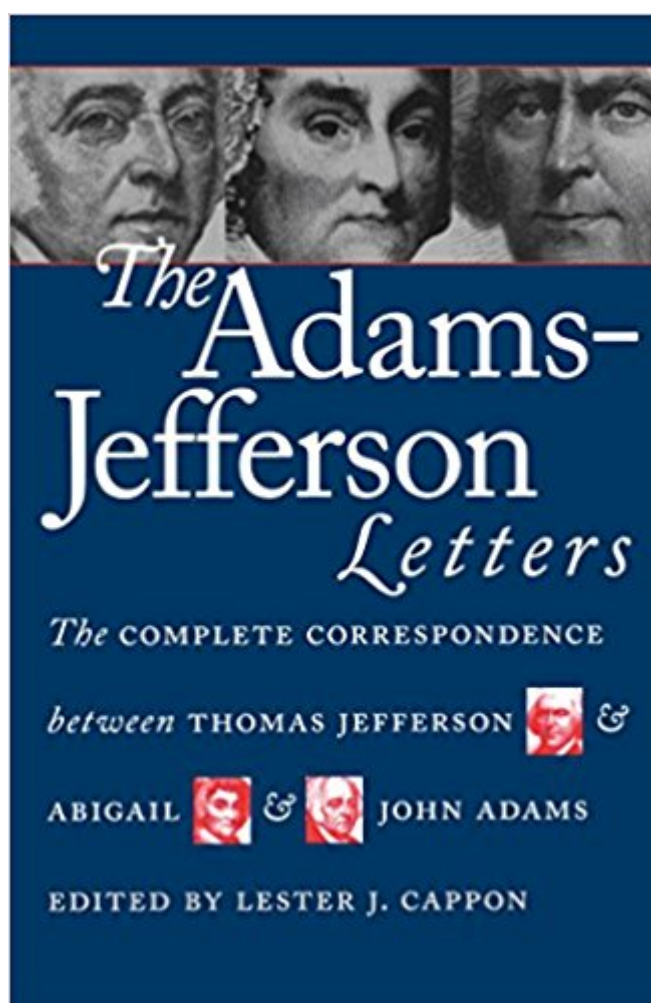


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The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson And Abigail And John Adams



Synopsis

An intellectual dialogue of the highest plane achieved in America, the correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson spanned half a century and embraced government, philosophy, religion, quotidian, and family griefs and joys. First meeting as delegates to the Continental Congress in 1775, they initiated correspondence in 1777, negotiated jointly as ministers in Europe in the 1780s, and served the early Republic--each, ultimately, in its highest office. At Jefferson's defeat of Adams for the presidency in 1800, they became estranged, and the correspondence lapses from 1801 to 1812, then is renewed until the death of both in 1826, fifty years to the day after the Declaration of Independence. Lester J. Cappon's edition, first published in 1959 in two volumes, provides the complete correspondence between these two men and includes the correspondence between Abigail Adams and Jefferson. Many of these letters have been published in no other modern edition, nor does any other edition devote itself exclusively to the exchange between Jefferson and the Adamses. Introduction, headnotes, and footnotes inform the reader without interrupting the speakers. This reissue of *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* in a one-volume unabridged edition brings to a broader audience one of the monuments of American scholarship and, to quote C. Vann Woodward, 'a major treasure of national literature.'

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"A major treasure of national literature." C. Vann Woodward, "Key Reporter" "[This] is a correspondence that covers all topics; . . . that reveals both of these statesmen and philosophers at their most felicitous." Henry Steele Commager "The publication, in full and integrated form, of the remarkable correspondence between these two eminent men is a notable event." Dumas Malone, New York Times Book Review "A major treasure of national literature." C. Vann Woodward, "Key Reporter" "This is a correspondence that covers all topics; . . . that reveals both of these statesmen and philosophers at their most felicitous." Henry Steele Commager "The publication, in full and integrated form, of the remarkable correspondence between these two eminent men is a notable event." Dumas Malone, New York Times Book Review"

American history offers no parallel to the friendship between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, spanning the first half century of the Republic. . . . The publication, in full and integrated form, of the remarkable correspondence between these two eminent men is a notable event.--Dumas Malone, New York Times Book Review "A major treasure of national literature.--C. Vann Woodward, Key Reporter "[This] is a correspondence that covers all topics; that embraces most of two lifetimes; that never fails of learning, wit, grace, and charm; and that reveals both of these statesmen and philosophers at their most felicitous.--Henry Steele Commager

Our second and third presidents lived long lives for their time and were instrumental in epochal events in world history. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson not only helped build their new country and serve it as chief executives, but maintained a long but sometimes strained friendship from the 1770s until their deaths on, incredibly, the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. This volume contains the complete correspondence between the two as well as between Jefferson and Abigail Adams. Adams and Jefferson were ambassadors to Britain and France, respectively, in the 1780s, and their correspondence during those years dealt with issues involved in helping their new country get its footing in the world--they discussed treaties, trade and commerce, national credit, threats of war, and the proper size and strength of our military. Letters during this time touch on differences between the characters of England and France and between those of England and America. Some of the letters exchanged during their diplomatic posts were even written in code. After the two returned to the United States, there was a hiatus in the correspondence since the two were working in government and could talk to each other face-to-face. After the epic election of 1800 in which Jefferson unseated Adams, the friendship cooled for many years. Abigail Adams made an effort at reconciliation in 1804, but the letters exchanged in that year reveal partisan strife

that was still too strong in that moment, and the wounds from 1800 had not yet healed. Adams had been out of office for eleven years and Jefferson for three in early 1812 when the two finally reconciled. They then focused on larger philosophical issues--the long list of topics broached in their later years included science, religion, the improvements of the eighteenth century, philosophy, marriage, aristocracy, education, the future of America, banks, books, free speech and thought, the afterlife, language, dealing with slander, and even whether life was worthwhile. The two did not totally neglect politics in their retirement correspondence, though, reflecting back on the Revolution and other political issues, including political science, and noting that they were two of the last of the Revolutionary generation to survive. In their very last years, they frequently discussed aging, life in retirement, and health issues. When reading these letters, the ways in which life was different then are brought home, including slow travel and communication and customs no longer observed. However, the letters also show the commonalities about life in any century, including big historical happenings, and it is fascinating to read Jefferson and Adams react to Shays' Rebellion, the Constitutional Convention, the War of 1812, the Napoleonic Wars, the Panic of 1819, and the election of John Quincy Adams to the presidency as those events happened. Readers will find that sayings such as "irons in the fire," "in the dumps," and "the cat is out of the bag" were already in use two centuries ago. These letters show that Jefferson and Adams had differences in personality and temperament, but both were supremely consequential statesmen and political philosophers, and the country is fortunate that this correspondence was preserved for future generations of Americans to read. This volume has a good preface and introduction, and history buffs who tackle this long correspondence will likely be glad that they did so.

What did these Founding Fathers discuss, via post, from 1777 to 1826? Surprisingly, very little was said about The Constitution of the United States (1789). As foreign ambassadors for the Washington administration they prodded Europe looking to fund the debt caused by the Revolutionary War. The novice Jefferson often yielded to his mentor Adams. There was great respect and personal affection between them. Then a long silence following the election of 1800 (where Jefferson defeated Adams). Their correspondence resumed because of Abigail Adams. The letters between Abigail and Jefferson in 1812 are a national treasure, a must read. The social customs of the 18th century are brought to life. They also exchanged information on their various personal interests and some curious musings. Several letters made assumptions about the ancestry of Native Americans. What did they think of Benjamin Franklin? Who fancied fine wine? Because Adams served as President between Washington and Jefferson, he was

“forgotten” at least by me. I have a much higher opinion of Mr. Adams (and Mrs. Adams) after reading these letters. I also now see Thomas Jefferson in other ways, beyond a great thinker.

In history, I find it best to read, if possible, the primary-source materials from key individuals. This is especially the case when those individuals are such great writers. Ditch the textbooks and go for material like this. While some of the letters date from the tumultuous years of the revolution, the bulk of the letters date from 1812-1826, when Adams and Jefferson were elder statesmen.

There are only a few people who have the desire and the patience to read 600 pages of 200-year-old letters. If you are one of these people, do yourself a favor and read this book now. If you are not one of these people, try really really hard to become one of these people and read this book now. And if you can't possibly imagine ever being the kind of person who reads this kind of book, then do the rest of us a favor and don't go all over the Internet popping off about what "The Founding Fathers" believed about stuff based on something that you heard on the radio. Because it is probably a lot more complicated than that. Lester J. Cappon's Adams-Jefferson letters were first published in two expensive, hardbound volumes in 1959. Cappon was a historian and professional archivist who worked with these documents all of his life, and his edition is a model of good scholarship: it is thorough, it footnotes nearly everything that the modern reader would have trouble with, and it situates the letters in their historical context with 13 excellent, succinct section introductions to various series of correspondence. In 1988, the University of North Carolina Press did us all a favor and published a complete, one-volume paperbound edition of the letters. The letters themselves trace all extant correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and both John and Abigail Adams beginning in 1777, the year after both men worked on the drafting committee for the Declaration of Independence, up until 1826, when both men died, within five hours of each other, on July 4, on the 50-year anniversary of the document in which they both pledged "[their] lives, [their] fortunes, and [their] sacred honor." From the very beginning, these letters give us a view of America's founding by two of the people who had the most to do with it. Letters between Jefferson and Abigail Adams (along with John) begin after the Jeffersons and the Adamses served together as America's minister to France in 1784. In 1800, Adams and Jefferson were on opposite sides of one of the most contentious presidential elections in American history. Adams, a Federalist, stood for strong military preparation, a powerful federal judiciary, and an effectively pro-British foreign policy (though it was Adams, against the wishes of his own party, who secured peace with France in

1800). Jefferson, the leader of the emerging Republican Party (no relation), stood for stronger ties with France, a weak judiciary, and the abolition of standing armies and navies. The two sides savaged each other, and each other's standard-bearers, and Jefferson and Adams stopped communicating with each other. From 1796 through 2012, all we get are a few very formal letters between the two of them around the time that Jefferson was moving into Adams' house (The White House). And then, in 1812, something remarkable happened. Through the agency of friends, Jefferson and Adams began corresponding again. And, over the next 13 years, they exchanged almost 60 letters about the past, the present, religion, politics, books, France, England, slavery, Native American culture, and, well, everything else. This is one of the most remarkable stories of reconciliation in our history and proof that severe political differences do not have to be an absolute bar to respect, civility, and friendship. There are so many people talking and writing about history these days. But history itself has never been as available and accessible as these letters make the early days of America. Instead of reading other people's books about the Founding Fathers (including mine), take the time to read what they actually had to say for themselves. Really. You won't be sorry.

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