

Silence Over Their Tombs:

A Microhistory of American Perceptions of Alcoholism in the Late Eighteenth and Early
Nineteenth Centuries Using the Adams Family Papers

A Senior Project
presented to
the Faculty of the History Department

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

Dr. Murphy

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in History

By

Lucy Wickstrom

June 2020

Abstract

The perception of alcohol addiction in the United States of America has changed numerous times throughout the nation's history, with people accepting it as a mere part of life in the colonial era before preachers and thinkers began to denounce it as a vice and a moral failure. The influential writings of respected patriot Dr. Benjamin Rush, however, initiated a fundamental shift in the way that Americans understood alcoholism, as he was the first to make the argument that it was a disease beyond the control of its sufferers. This paper uses the example of the famous Adams family to illustrate this shift in thought, since both of John Adams's younger sons, Charles and Thomas, died from complications related to alcoholism. By examining the writings of the family left behind in the Adams Family Papers, as well as other relevant primary documents, I argue that the Adams family was influenced by changing societal ideas as they addressed Thomas's struggles quite differently from the way they had Charles's decades earlier.

Introduction

On March 17, 1777, John Adams wrote a letter to his third child and middle son, Charles. Away at the Continental Congress, the concerned father wanted to check in on his six-year-old, a sensitive boy, and ask his opinion on current events. “What Subject do your Thoughts run upon these Times,” Adams wrote, wondering how Charles felt about the war for independence. “You are a thoughtfull Child you know, always meditating upon some deep Thing or other. Your Sensibility is exquisite too. Pray how are your nice Feelings affected by the Times?”¹ This “exquisite sensibility” is referred to by Charles’s parents, aunts, uncles, and siblings repeatedly in the Adams Family Papers, and he was such a “delightful little fellow” that his usually stoic father even declared in 1780, “I love him too much.”²

By 1799, however, John Adams’s writings about his middle boy, by that time twenty-nine years old, are characterized by very different language. On a visit to Charles’s wife in New York, he wrote home to his wife Abigail that “Sally Opened her Mind to me for the first time...A Madman possessed of the Devil can alone express or represent” Charles’s behavior. He lamented that “Davids Absalom had some ambition and some Enterprize. Mine is a mere Rake, Buck, Blood and Beast,” and coldly penned the simple yet powerful words “I renounce him.”³ It hardly seems possible that Adams wrote this letter about the same thoughtful, exquisite child he had adored “too much” not two decades earlier, yet the tragic truth remains: Charles, afflicted by disease resulting from alcoholism, died a suffering and disowned man on December 1, 1800, at

¹ John Adams to Charles Adams, 17 March 1777, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-02-02-0133>, accessed 6 February 2020.

² John Adams to Abigail Adams, 16 March 1780, Adams Family Papers, https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17800316jasecond&bc=%2Fdigitaladams%2Farchive%2Fbrowse%2Fletters_JA.php, accessed 1 February 2020.

³ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 12 October 1799, Adams Family Papers, https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17991012ja&bc=%2Fdigitaladams%2Farchive%2Fbrowse%2Fletters_1796_1801.php, accessed 12 February 2020.

only thirty years old. He left behind his wife, two small daughters, and an entire stunned and devastated family. Just over three decades later, his younger brother Thomas lost his life at the hands of the same affliction, just after their famous and successful older brother John Quincy Adams had completed his presidential term. Interestingly, though, rather than disown Thomas, John and Abigail allowed him to live in their home with them, signaling an apparent shift in the family's view of their sons' affliction.

In this essay, I examine the language employed in the Adams family's letters and diaries to describe alcoholism. Historians have created an extensive amount of scholarship about this famous political family, yet Charles and Thomas's addiction and the perceptions of their parents and siblings toward their challenges have been largely dismissed. I conducted a microhistory of the perceptions of alcoholism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the United States of America using Charles, Thomas, and their family. Because of the wealth of writings left behind by the Adamses, they are ideal subjects for such a microhistory, yet their appropriateness for this study goes beyond even that: during their lifetimes, many crucial shifts in thought occurred surrounding alcoholism and its causes, dangers, and implications. I have sought to understand the Adams family's language describing alcoholism as it manifested in the lives of their two younger sons, arguing that while they likely desired to make things right after disowning Charles by keeping Thomas close, they were also influenced by the changing ideas of their society. The early nineteenth century saw a shift in thought occur that viewed alcoholism, for the first time, as a disease, which is reflected in the ways the Adams family wrote about and behaved toward Charles and Thomas.

A significant amount of historical scholarship on alcoholism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been produced. In 1990, historian Jean-Charles Sournia published *A*

History of Alcoholism, which is often considered the definitive history of this addiction in human society. Sournia tracks shifting perceptions of drinking and drunkenness throughout time, detailing the shift from the belief that it was just a part of a life, to a moral failure and a vice, and then finally to a malady and its own type of disease.⁴ Other scholars have taken similar or varying approaches in their investigation of alcoholism's history. In his article "Chronic Alcoholism in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," William F. Bynum argues that in the early eighteenth century, the interest of doctors in the harmful effects of drinking increased significantly, leading to the popular belief that drunkenness was a vice and a moral failure; he then details the faint beginnings of a possible connection, described by nineteenth century doctors, between alcoholism and mental afflictions.⁵

Another article, "Consequences and behaviour problematised: The establishment of alcohol misuse as an object of empirical inquiry in late 18th- and early 19th- century European medicine" by Arto Ruuska presents the nuanced argument that rather than the nineteenth century being remembered as a time when doctors began to view alcoholism as its own disease, its legacy should be that doctors started to study the addiction empirically, often coming to the conclusion that people drank because of their socio-cultural environment.⁶ Medical historian Harry Gene Levine proposes in his article "The Alcohol Problem in America: From Temperance to Alcoholism" that all contemporary ideas about alcoholism stem from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when it came to be viewed as not only a disease, but also the cause for

⁴ Jean-Charles Sournia, *A History of Alcoholism*, Nicholas Hindley and Gareth Stanton, trans. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1990).

⁵ William F. Bynum, "Chronic Alcoholism in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 42 no. 2 (1968): 160-185.

⁶ Arto Ruuska, "Consequences and behaviour problematised: The establishment of alcohol misuse as an object of empirical inquiry in late 18th- and early 19th- century European medicine," *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 30 no. 1-2 (2013): 13-32.

most if not all social problems that existed.⁷ Ruuska and Levine's views of this time period fundamentally disagree about the direction of the cause and effect relationship between alcoholism and social issues.

The 1998 book *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*, written by clinician and researcher William I. White, argues that the motivation and philosophy behind treatment of alcohol and drug addiction has alternately shifted in America multiple times between the belief that addiction is an issue of public health and public morality, essentially determining whether addicts are placed in treatment centers or jails. He concurs with most other scholars in that he pinpoints the writings of Dr. Benjamin Rush in the early part of the nineteenth century as the pioneering force behind the idea that alcoholism was a disease that should be treated as such, and not as a sin.⁸ The volume *Alcohol: A Social and Cultural History*, compiled and edited by Mark P. Holt and published in 2006, features thirteen articles which delve into the history of alcoholism in various nations and in many time periods. One article specifically describes the changing views and uses of alcohol in the portions of North America which became the United States from before the arrival of Europeans to the late twentieth century. In this article, Jack S. Blocker, Jr. makes the argument that the predominant sphere of drinking shifted from inside the home in the early colonial period, to public spaces in the days before and during the American Revolution, back to the home in twentieth century.⁹ He diverges from White's book and most other works about alcoholism in that he argues that a significant growth in sobriety did not occur until the middle of the nineteenth century, positing that

⁷ Harry Gene Levine, "The Alcohol Problem in America; From Temperance to Alcoholism," *British Journal of Addiction* 79 (1984): 109-119.

⁸ William I. White, *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* (Bloomington, IL: Chestnut Health Systems/Lighthouse Institute, 1998).

⁹ Jack S. Blocker, Jr., "Kaleidoscope in Motion: Drinking in the United States, 1400-2000," in *Alcohol: A Social and Cultural History*, edited by Mark P. Holt (New York: Berg, 2006): 225.

industrialization promoted temperance as part of “a new code of manly conduct” due to factory owners’ desire for disciplined workers.¹⁰ All of these works, and others, compose an impressive historiography of this addiction during the pivotal era on which I am focusing.

The Adams family boasts an impressive amount of scholarship in itself, as numerous historians have written books and articles which focus on this famous political dynasty of the nation’s formative years. Biographies have detailed the personal life stories and political involvement of John Adams, his wife Abigail, and their eldest son John Quincy, including the seminal *John Adams* by David McCullough, *Abigail Adams* by Phyllis Lee Levin, and *John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit* by James Traub, to name only a small number of what is truly an impressive collection.¹¹ Some books have been published which inspect the lives of the Adamses through the lens of the family unit and their relationships to each other. The book *Abigail & John*, written by Edith B. Gelles and published in 2009, situates itself in the literature as the first biography of this famous couple in tandem, as equals. Gelles characterizes Charles as a great source of joy and hope for his parents until his struggles became known and he died shortly thereafter, and her discussion of Thomas is comparatively sparing, though she does describe the presence of him and his children in their home as a cause for happiness in John and Abigail’s old age, despite the fact that he too had developed alcoholism.¹² The book *First Family: Abigail and John Adams* by Joseph J. Ellis, was published the next year in 2010 and studies the Adams family in its entirety, though still primarily focusing on the lives of Abigail and John, and concluding with John’s death. Ellis frames his book as an examination of an extraordinary time

¹⁰ Ibid., 229.

¹¹ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001) ; Phyllis Lee Levin, *Abigail Adams: A Biography* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2001) ; James Traub, *John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

¹² Edith B. Gelles, *Abigail & John* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

in American history, using John and Abigail as his subjects because of the wealth of writings they left behind to each other, their children, and their friends. The book spends a significant amount of time on Charles's descent into alcoholism, but only mentions Thomas's struggles.¹³

Some works on the Adamses delve into a certain amount of psychology while examining the family through a generational lens. Paul C. Nagel's 1983 book *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family* tells the story of each generation that produced at least one public figure for the United States of America. This book is unique in that it dedicates an equal amount of time to those members of the family considered failures by their relatives, and focuses on personal aspects of life rather than politics or public duties.¹⁴ Nagel's work is referenced in the 1985 article "All in the Family: A Psychobiography of the Adamses" by Peter Shaw, which follows the same four generations but focuses exclusively on the family members who were perceived as having failed. Shaw makes the argument that rather than success and strength, "failure was really the Adams norm, along with depression and breakdown, both physical and mental, and...these character traits...are the keys to the family's history."¹⁵ Both Nagel and Shaw presented the Adamses as a family that, despite the outward semblance of great success, had struggles which persisted through the generations.

My research and argument in this paper diverge from previous Adams family scholarship in that I have examined the writings and behavior of the Adamses regarding both the younger sons and studied changes through time. Previous work has discussed both Charles and Thomas as alcoholics, but has not sought to understand why John, Abigail, and other members of the

¹³ Joseph J. Ellis, *First Family: Abigail and John Adams* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

¹⁴ Paul C. Nagel, *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

¹⁵ Peter Shaw, "All in the Family: A Psychobiography of the Adamses," *The American Scholar* 54 no. 4 (1985), 501.

family dramatically shifted their views between the time Charles was found to have an addiction and the years that it became apparent in Thomas. I have also given Charles and Thomas the attention and focus which I believe they deserve in historical scholarship. In addition, I will contribute to the literature on alcoholism by arguing that the unprecedented ideas put forth into society by the works of Dr. Benjamin Rush truly had an impact on the daily lives and minds of Americans, which the writings and behavior of the Adamses demonstrate.

I have performed this microhistory by first conducting an overview of societal perceptions of alcoholism in the years before the Adamses lived. Next, I give an overview of the early lives of Charles and Thomas, before delving into the circumstances surrounding their addiction and the writings left behind by their family members pertaining to it. I analyze these writings alongside the period's shifting ideas about alcoholism.

Perceptions of Alcoholism: Historical Background

In the American colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, alcohol was such a common and accepted part of life that it was rarely viewed in a negative light. In his article "The Discovery of Addiction: Changing Conceptions of Habitual Drunkenness in America," Harry Levine details the evolving ideas of Americans about drink and drinking from the colonial period all the way through the post-Prohibition era. He describes alcohol as a sort of universal tool in the minds of colonial Americans, consumed heavily and freely at mealtimes, weddings, christenings, funerals, dedications of new churches, and casual gatherings at taverns and public houses; in many ways, it was the center of everyday life, something to congregate around and

enjoy together.¹⁶ Alcohol itself was not looked upon as a hindrance, but “habitual drunkenness,” as it was called at the time since the term “alcoholism” did not exist, could become problematic if it prevented a person from functioning independently in society. When this was the case, the “drunkard” in question was sometimes chastised publicly in the hopes they would reform; these Americans did not believe that excessive drinkers were driven by addiction or any kind of need, but instead a simple desire to consume alcohol. Often, they were seen as just one more population in society, like the poor or the mentally ill, which would always exist and inevitably have to be cared for by family or neighbors, as argued in David J. Rothman’s influential book *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic*.¹⁷ This type of excessive drinking, however, was not viewed as a sin or a moral failure until such ideas began to be perpetuated in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Moral and spiritual warnings against drinking to the point of drunkenness originated in the Christian community. The Bible contains a myriad of stories in which its heroes partake in alcohol, but it condemns drinking to excess, and Puritan preachers in the early eighteenth century used such cautionary passages to demonstrate the dangers and evils of habitual drunkenness. The sermon “Wo To Drunkards,” first given in Boston in 1673 by the reverend Increase Mather, was reprinted in 1712 because the minister felt that “there was then [in 1673] need of Preaching & Writing against this prevailing Evil. There is so much more at this Day.”¹⁸ He revealed in his introduction to the republication that “if but one Drunkard...shall be bro’t to Repentance for this

¹⁶ Harry Gene Levine, “The Discovery of Addiction: Changing Conceptions of Habitual Drunkenness in America,” *The Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 15 (1978): 494-5.

¹⁷ David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971).

¹⁸ Increase Mather, “Wo To Drunkards,” (Boston: Timothy Green, 1712); Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N01322.0001.001/1:2?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>, accessed 1 May 2020.

Sin, that will be a blessed Reward for this endeavour.”¹⁹ Mather’s language certainly does not reflect prior common ideas of drunkenness as a predominantly harmless aspect of some people’s character; instead, he wrote of excess drinking as an evil and a sin of which individuals must urgently repent. He argued in the sermon that “a Drunkard is an Universal Transgressor of the whole Law of God. James saith, Chap. 2 v. 10 *Whosoever shall keep the whole Law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all*” and even that “the Drunkard is an Idolater, for he loveth Drink as he should love God, that is above all, even above Wife & Children, & Name and Estate.”²⁰ Mather described the drunkard as a person who, by this sole sin, actively breaks the entirety of God’s law and will not even place his family and his respectability over his love of drink. His use of the word “love” is interesting, as it implies that the drinking person has an actual affection for alcohol and the state of drunkenness, as he would or should have for his wife, children, and property.

Another sermon, this one penned by another Boston minister named Thomas Foxcroft in 1726, pleads with the congregation to abstain from going to the taverns and public houses which had previously served as the social center of conversation and gathering. Entitled “A serious Address to those who needlessly frequent Taverns & Publick Houses,” the sermon begins by characterizing the frequent visitation of these places as a waste of time, money, and conversation in an environment where idleness and ill company abound. Foxcroft warned the men listening that their children and servants may, too, “be tempted to tarry out late...if the Heads of the Family do.”²¹ He granted that while some people may be strong enough to resist the temptation

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Thomas Foxcroft, “A serious Address to those who needlessly frequent Taverns & Publick Houses” (Boston: S. Gerrish, 1726); Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N02346.0001.001/1:4?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>, accessed 25 April 2020.

of alcohol present at taverns, they will only serve as a “stumbling Block” for others who lack “the Skill to avoid...the Temptations...They drink down Poison in their pleasant Cups...and their Souls [are] destroy’d!”²² Foxcroft asked listeners whether they would like to meet death and final judgment while wasting time in a tavern, and consistently wrote of drinking as a sin against God; in this way, he expressed extreme disapproval of the use of alcohol even as a social function, though it had been a significant part of group gatherings for all of human history and particularly in colonial America.

One final source I consulted from this period is “Sermons to gentlemen upon temperance and exercise,” given in 1772 in Philadelphia by Benjamin Rush, who is best known as a physician and statesman who signed the Declaration of Independence. He was highly interested in “the use and abuse of wine and strong drink,” as he described it in this sermon, and went on to write *An Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits on the Human Body and Mind*, the pamphlet which prompted a fundamental shift in thought surrounding alcohol and is credited with starting the temperance movement.²³ In this 1772 sermon, however, Rush exhibited ideas about drinking that are similar to those of his contemporaries, although he added the nuance of the difference between drinking at all and drinking to excess. He equated excessive drinking with unhealthy eating and a lack of exercise, in fact only using one of the three sections of his speech to discuss alcohol. He stated that there are certain people who should refrain from alcohol consumption altogether, including children, young adults, and, interestingly, public figures. He “call[s] upon statesmen, legislators, and all those who labour for the public good, to abstain from wine. Remember you are the guardians of your country. Public business should, like time, have no

²² Ibid.

²³ Levine, “The Discovery of Addiction: Changing Conceptions of Habitual Drunkenness in America,” 500.

pauses.”²⁴ Rush posited that politicians and those responsible for the public good should abstain from drinking because it could prevent them from being effective representatives and “guardians” of the land, and statesmen must always be ready to give of their time and wisdom. I believe this is a vital piece of information, since John and Abigail Adams were very close friends of Dr. Rush and likely had great respect for his ideas and opinions. In addition, it was the ardent desire of the Adams parents that their sons serve their country and the public good; therefore, Rush’s assertion that such figures should ardently avoid drink could have been a major factor in their disappointment in Charles’s alcohol abuse.

The Early Lives of Charles and Thomas Adams

Charles Adams was born on May 29, 1770, two and a half months after the Boston Massacre enraged the people of Massachusetts and half a year before his father defended the British soldiers involved in trial and earned an acquittal. Charles joined a four-year-old sister, Abigail, who was usually called Nabby, and a brother, John Quincy, not yet three. At the time of his birth, his parents were mourning the loss of another baby, Susanna, who had died of an unknown illness in January at six months old; this event was so traumatic to John and Abigail that neither wrote a word about it until 1813, when Abigail assured her daughter-in-law, whose infant child had just died, that she understood her grief.²⁵ Thomas Boylston, the youngest Adams child, arrived on September 15, 1772.

²⁴ Benjamin Rush, “Sermons to gentlemen upon temperance and exercise” (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1772); Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N09857.0001.001/1:5?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>, accessed 18 April 2020.

²⁵ Abigail Adams to Louisa Catherine Adams, 30 January 1813, as quoted in Levin, *Abigail Adams: A Biography*, 454.

The boys grew up in a time of tension and change. Their upbringing was loving—albeit strict—but the outside world was ominous and marked by conflict as the Massachusetts militia went to war against the British army in 1775 and the American colonies voted unanimously for independence the following year. Before and during this conflict, whether their father was away on business as a lawyer, at the Continental Congress, or in Europe serving as foreign minister, the Adams children lived under the direct care of their mother Abigail while often only hearing from John through letters. This reality pained both parents, and John wrote wistfully to his wife in one 1775 letter, “My dear Nabby, Johnny, Charly and Tommy, I long to see you—and to share with your Mamma the Pleasures of your Conversation.”²⁶ In 1777, he lamented, “What will they say to me for leaving them, their Education and Fortune so much to the Disposal of Chance?”²⁷ The children keenly felt the absence of their father, as well. Abigail recounted to her husband in 1777 one scene in which four-year-old Thomas became inconsolable when his father wrote letters to all his siblings but not to him, insisting that “Pappa does not Love him he says so well as he does Brothers.”²⁸ John had neglected to do this because Thomas could not yet read, but the boy was nonetheless heartbroken, and Abigail comforted him while the older children made “many comparisons...to see whose Letters were the longest.”²⁹

John Adams’s parental advice, preserved in his letters, was marked by a strong emphasis on education, obedience, and duty. He reminded Abigail in 1776 to “tell them [the children] I charge them to be good, honest, active and industrious for their own sakes, as well as ours.”³⁰ They viewed their offspring as reflections of themselves and always expected goodness and

²⁶ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 7 July 1775, in *My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams*, edited by Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor (Massachusetts: First Harvard University Press: 2007), 69.

²⁷ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 10 February 1777, ed. Hogan and Taylor, 162.

²⁸ Abigail Adams to John Adams, April 1777, ed. Hogan and Taylor, 171.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 24 January 1776, ed. Hogan and Taylor, 96.

usefulness from them all. Additionally, they believed it was never too early for children to start learning and considering their future careers. He told Thomas to “mind your Books—for it is only from your Books and the kind Instructions of your Parents that you can expect to be usefull in the World,” and upon hearing his youngest son had dreams at four years old of being a soldier, wrote, “I believe I must make a Phisician of you. Would it not please you to... relieve your Fellow Creatures under the severest Pains... Is not this better than to be destroying Mankind by Thousands. If you are of this Opinion, you will change your Title from General to Doctor.”³¹ In another letter penned the next day, John asked Charles, then six, “what Course of Life do you intend to steer...a Lawyer, a Divine, a Phisician, a Merchant, or what? Something very good and usefull I think you will be, because you have...a good Disposition. Dont loose a Moment, in improving these to the best Advantage.”³² Though the boys’ responses do not survive, it can be surmised that Charles and Thomas’s upbringing was characterized by great pressure to be helpful, industrious human beings and respectable citizens of their young country. Scholar Linda Pollock makes the argument in her book *Forgotten children: Parent-child relations from 1500-1900* that texts left behind by eighteenth-century parents “contain the first specific references to the ‘training’ of a child.”³³ The language of the Adamses toward their children reflect this concept of training and molding a child into a productive human being.

When Charles was nine years old, he travelled to Europe with his father, the foreign minister to Holland, and his brother John Quincy, who had accompanied John on a prior

³¹ John Adams to Thomas Boylston Adams, 20 October 1775, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-04-01-02-0201#sn=0>, accessed 12 February 2020 ; John Adams to Thomas Boylston Adams, 16 March 1777, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-04-02-02-0131#sn=1>, accessed 1 May 2020.

³² John Adams to Charles Adams, 17 March 1777.

³³ Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten children: Parent-child relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univerity Press, 1983), 119-120

excursion and relished the experience. Charles, however, spent much of their travels unhappy, until finally two years later John Adams sent him home with a servant. Though the prospect of their young son travelling across the Atlantic in winter virtually alone concerned both John and Abigail, John assured his wife that “he had set his heart so much upon going home...that it would have broken it, to have refused him.”³⁴ He told the boy’s mother that, though he was “a delightfull Child, [he] has too exquisite sensibility for Europe.”³⁵ Accounts sent home with Charles corroborated the long-held opinions of relatives that he was a wonderful child, with one businessman on the same Atlantic journey using such phrases as “your worthy Amable little Son,” “your little Dear Son,” and “and your dear little Darling” to describe him to Abigail.³⁶ Though the remnant of the family left behind in America was overjoyed to be reunited, it lasted only two years before John requested that Abigail join him in Europe, as it seemed his business would take longer than expected. Abigail departed the United States and took Nabby with her, leaving Charles and Thomas in the care of their aunt and uncle so they could prepare to attend Harvard.

The family correspondence of these years is marked mostly by letters from the boys’ aunt, Abigail’s sister, lovingly describing their antics and changing appearances to their mother, with a special focus on their studies and preparation for the university. She assured Abigail in March of 1784, when the boys were thirteen and eleven, “your Children are well, Charles studies

³⁴ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 2 December 1781, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/AFC04/pageid/AFC04p249>, accessed 30 April 2020.

³⁵ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 11 July 1781, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/AFC04/pageid/AFC04p170>, accessed 1 March 2020.

³⁶ Joseph Gardoqui & Sons to Abigail Adams, 30 November 1781, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/AFC04/pageid/AFC04p246>, accessed 8 May 2020.

as if it was a pleasure to him, and he in some degree sensible of the importance of Time. Tommy makes Latin, his Uncle says better than he did.”³⁷ They both displayed an anxiousness to be admitted to Harvard and worked hard as a result, and Charles’s studies ensured “his favourable, and gracious acceptance at the University” in 1785, which his aunt announced to his mother with great pride.³⁸ She sent Abigail a full report of her sons’ temperaments and conduct the following year, declaring that “in Charles I behold those Qualities that form the engaging, the well accomplished Gentleman...in Thomas B A, I discern a more martial, and intrepid Spirit. A fine natural Capacity, a love of Buisiness...indefatigable in everything that shall render him a useful member of Society.”³⁹ At this time, both boys displayed every outward indication of becoming the exact industrious and effective citizens that their parents and other relatives hoped they would be.

Notably, Thomas seemed to experience anger and resentment toward his absent parents, implied by his apparent refusal to write to them. In 1785, John Quincy, having recently returned from Europe, wrote to his mother, “Tommy, is very well. I have been endeavouring to perswade him to write you, but cannot prevail on him. He says he knows not what to write, except that he is well, and that I can as well do for him.”⁴⁰ Thomas had not seen his father since he was six years old, and his parents would not return until he was fifteen. By this time, he and Charles

³⁷ Elizabeth Smith Shaw to Abigail Adams, 26 March 1784, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/AFC05/pageid/AFC05p314>, accessed 28 May 2020.

³⁸ Elizabeth Smith Shaw to Abigail Adams, 7 September 1785, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=%20Author%3A%22Shaw%2C%20Elizabeth%20Smith%22&s=1111311111&r=17>, accessed 28 May 2020.

³⁹ Elizabeth Smith Shaw to Abigail Adams, 18 March 1786, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/AFC07/pageid/AFC07p94>, accessed 28 March 2020.

⁴⁰ John Quincy Adams to Abigail Adams, 6 October 1785, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/AFC06/pageid/AFC06p410>, accessed 28 April 2020.

were both students at Harvard, where disciplinary records give insight into some possible signs of alcoholism in Charles in particular.

Charles Adams and Alcoholism

Abigail Adams was not a stranger to habitual drunkenness and the impacts it could have on a family. Her only brother William drank heavily, culminating in desertion of his wife and children and his death at only forty-two. Abigail and her sisters wrote only of their brother very cryptically, referring to him as “poor man” rather than by name.⁴¹ This pattern of secretiveness would continue into the next generation of Adamses, and this fact presents a challenge in the study of their language surrounding alcoholism. Family shame was an extremely powerful thing, which is hardly surprising, considering the belief at the time that excessive drinking was a moral failure, even a sin, unbecoming of anyone who wanted to live a productive, industrious life. In fact, Adams scholar Peter Shaw details in his article “All in the Family: A Psychobiography of the Adamses” the way that Charles Francis Adams, John Quincy’s son and the keeper of the family papers, destroyed most of the writings of his uncle Charles, for whom he was named, and that Thomas destroyed many of his own papers due to feelings of failure and inadequacy compared to his famous family members.⁴² This explains why it is difficult to find many letters written by Charles and Thomas, even those that we know existed at one time because they are referred to in other relatives’ writings.

At Harvard, Charles and Thomas performed well academically and garnered praise from their family, but there was cause for anxiety for the Adams parents. Neither younger boy

⁴¹ McCullough, *John Adams*, 363.

⁴² Shaw, “All in the Family: A Psychobiography of the Adamses,” 508.

possessed the natural studiousness of their older brother John Quincy, and their charming personalities and popularity concerned their family that they may spend too much of their time with friends and not study. John Adams wrote to his middle son from Europe, reminding him, “You have in your nature a sociability, Charles, which is amiable, but may mislead you, a scholar is always made alone. Studies can only be pursued to good purpose, by yourself—dont let your Companions then, nor your Amusements take up too much of your time.”⁴³ Upon Thomas’s acceptance into the college, John Quincy took it upon himself to write the youngest Adams a letter of strict advice. He reminded Thomas that “next to the Ambition of supporting, an unblemished moral Reputation, that of excelling as a Scholar, should be nearest your heart,” and implored his brother to remember that “some [in his class] will be virtuous and studious. These two Qualities are most commonly united, as are also their opposites, vileness and vice. It is not necessary to tell you that those of the first sort will be proper Companions for you.”⁴⁴

By Charles’s final year at Harvard, relatives were writing each other letters expressing anxiety and helplessness about some of his social activities. Although there is no existing letter in which the Adamses explicitly reveal what Charles had done, Harvard’s disciplinary records give considerable insight into the causes of their disappointment. While Thomas was only punished once while at the university for the minor offense of absence from prayer, Charles was admonished around twenty-six times in his four years of education. While many of these punishments were for more minor infractions, such as absence and tardiness, he was disciplined for “damage done in the Hall” and again for “going to a tavern,” and once he was “fined and

⁴³ John Adams to Charles Adams, 2 June 1786, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-04-07-02-0075#sn=6>, accessed 1 April 2020.

⁴⁴ John Quincy Adams to Thomas Boylston Adams, 2 July 1786, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/AFC07/pageid/AFC07p230>, accessed 1 April 2020.

publicly admonished” for an unrecorded offense.⁴⁵ In 1787, while working as a waiter in the university dining hall, he participated in a riotous disruption after Thanksgiving dinner with around thirty other students, during which they made “tumultuous and indecent noises, breaking the windows of the Hall, throwing the benches out of the windows into the yard &ca. which conduct was greatly to the damage and to the dishonor of the College.”⁴⁶ Charles was listed first on the report out of all the offending students and was dismissed from his job in the dining hall.

In 1789, soon before Charles was to graduate, Abigail expressed to John Quincy that “I have many anxious hours for Charles...for the new scene of life into which he is going...I have written to him upon some late reports which have been circulated concerning him.”⁴⁷ Her letter to Charles has not been found, but she told his older brother that she looked ahead anxiously to Charles’s graduation, believing that “it will be of great service to have him with his Father, & more to take him intirely away from his acquaintance.”⁴⁸ John Quincy concurred with his mother’s opinion that proximity to his father would solve his issues, writing to his cousin William Cranch, “I wrote him a very serious Letter three weeks ago and conversed with him at Haverhill upon the subject in such a manner as must I think lead him to be more cautious. However... I am well convinced that if any thing can keep him within the limits of regularity, it will be...my fathers being [near him and the?] fear of being discovered by him.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Eliphalet Pearson, “Journal of College Disorders, 1788-1797,” *Papers of Eliphalet Pearson, 1768-1819*, HUM 79 Box 3, Harvard University Archives, [https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:46973310\\$2i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:46973310$2i), accessed 8 February 2020.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, 30 May 1789, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-08-02-0195>, accessed 10 May 2020.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ John Quincy Adams to William Cranch, 27 May 1789, Adams Family Papers, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-04-08-02-0194#sn=0>, accessed 16 May 2020.

In a more alarming letter written two weeks later, John Adams assured his cousin Cotton Tufts that he had burned “the Note inclosed in your letter...as soon as I had read it: but not untill it had made too deep an Impression on my heart as well as Memory.”⁵⁰ The contents of this destroyed note are unknown, as John did not provide any hint as to its subject matter except by lamenting, “What shall I do, with that tender hearted Fool?”⁵¹ Due to the proximity to his wife and son’s letters and the secretive nature of the correspondence, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the note contained some information about or discussion of Charles’s misbehavior, and scholars have indeed made this assumption. In keeping with his mother’s and brother’s wishes that he be with his father, Charles was not left in Massachusetts after graduation to apprentice with an established lawyer like John Quincy had; instead, he was moved to New York, where his parents lived and could closely supervise him, to continue his studies there.

Charles’s infractions at Harvard could be an indication of more than merely the boisterous behavior of a popular schoolboy. His family’s apparent shame to the point of cryptic language and burning of letters implies that their anxiety could have stemmed from a deeper issue. Interestingly, his punishment for being at a tavern recalls to mind the sermon of Thomas Foxcroft and its condemnation of those who frequented taverns because of the temptations present in such places. It could be argued, of course, that the Adamses’ firm belief in strict and constant studiousness since their children’s earliest years caused their extreme disappointment on its own; however, the secretive nature of their language closely mirrors their writing of ten years later while discussing Charles’s drinking, indicating that alcohol could have been involved in many of the young student’s disciplinary infractions.

⁵⁰ John Adams to Cotton Tufts, 12 June 1789, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-0618>, accessed 10 May 2020.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

For nearly ten years, all appeared to be well with the middle Adams son, as his law practice in New York flourished and he married, having two daughters. His parents delighted in him again as their exquisite, charming boy, and his waywardness at Harvard seemed like the distant past as John informed Abigail during a 1795 visit, “I am happy to Day in the Company of our Charles, who arrived at my Invitation from New York as fat as a Squab or Duck...he is a Steady Man of Business.”⁵² John Quincy trusted his brother so much, in fact, that when he travelled to Europe in 1796, appointed by President Washington to be the foreign minister to the Netherlands, and took Thomas along as his secretary, he asked Charles to invest his savings so that he would have financial security upon his return home.

The first indication that there may be something amiss with Charles came in 1797, when John Quincy’s letters requesting information about his accounts began to go unanswered. “In all my letters I have urged you to write me, constantly & frequently, and particularly to send me a state of the accounts between us at the close of every year,” he wrote in February of 1798, and again in August, still having not received a response: “I must again repeat the request that you would give me immediate information concerning the property which I have entrusted to you.”⁵³ Finally, in September, having still heard nothing, he wrote to Charles requesting that he turn all authority over his funds to Thomas, who was soon returning home.⁵⁴ It was Abigail who finally

⁵² John Adams to Abigail Adams, 16 January 1795, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-04-10-02-0225#sn=15>, accessed 19 May 2020.

⁵³ John Quincy Adams to Charles Adams, 14 February 1798, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=Period%3A%22Adams%20Presidency%22%20Author%3A%22Adams%2C%20John%20Quincy%22%20Recipient%3A%22Adams%2C%20Charles%22&s=1111311111&r=2>, accessed 2 May 2020 ; John Quincy Adams to Charles Adams, 1 August 1798, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=Period%3A%22Adams%20Presidency%22%20Author%3A%22Adams%2C%20John%20Quincy%22%20Recipient%3A%22Adams%2C%20Charles%22&s=1111311111&r=3>, accessed 2 May 2020.

⁵⁴ John Quincy Adams to Charles Adams, 29 September 1798, Adams Family Paper, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=Period%3A%22Adams%20Presidency%22%20Author%3A%22Adams%2C%20John%20Quincy%22%20Recipient%3A%22Adams%2C%20Charles%22&s=1111311111&r=3>, accessed 2 May 2020.

wrote John Quincy with information about his savings, though it was hardly what he must have desired to learn. She told him in November that she had written Charles multiple times requesting information but received no answer, calling her middle son “the only Child whose conduct ever gave me pain.”⁵⁵ At last, she received word from Charles later in the month that has not survived, but which she transcribed in part in her own letter to her oldest son, that revealed the long-awaited truth: an ultimately foolish investment had caused Charles to lose all of his brother’s money. “I have not enjoyed one moment’s comfort for upwards of two years on this account,” a tortured Charles informed his mother, “my sleep has been disturbed, and my waking hours embittered.”⁵⁶ Perhaps Charles turned back to his college habit of drinking to obtain some relief from his unbearable guilt; perhaps he had been drinking all along but hiding it well from his family, and this had contributed to his poor judgment in investing. The answer to this cannot be determined, but either way, Charles’s perceived weakness and misconduct was known to all the family by 1799.

When Thomas, previously discussed the least of all the siblings by his parents, returned from Europe in February, he was looked upon as a model child and a saving grace. “He has returned to his Native Country, an honest sober and virtuous citizen,” Abigail wrote to John Quincy, “I hope he will continue an honour and a comfort to his Parent’s tho...[we] experience different sensations with respect to one, of whose reformation I can flatter myself, with but faint

ohn%20Quincy%22%20Recipient%3A%22Adams%2C%20Charles%22&s=1111311111&r=4, accessed 2 May 2020.

⁵⁵ Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, 15 November 1798, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=%20Author%3A%22Adams%2C%20Abigail%22%20Recipient%3A%22Adams%2C%20John%20Quincy%22%20Period%3A%22Adams%20Presidency%22&s=1111311111&r=16>, accessed 18 April 2020.

⁵⁶ Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, 2 December 1798, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=%20Author%3A%22Adams%2C%20Abigail%22%20Recipient%3A%22Adams%2C%20John%20Quincy%22%20Period%3A%22Adams%20Presidency%22&s=1111311111&r=17>, accessed 18 April 2020.

hope's...I wish however some means could be devised to save him, from that ruin and destruction with which he must soon be overwhelmed, if he is not already."⁵⁷ A month later, she wrote her oldest son again and gave updates on many relatives, seeming at a complete loss when she arrived at the time to discuss Charles. "What shall I say that will not pain us both?" She lamented, going on to wish Charles would change his ways like the biblical Prodigal Son. Apparently, he wanted to do so, or at least conveyed this to his mother, who wrote that "he has formed some good resolutions, could he keep them how would it rejoice us all, but the Heart, the principles must co-operate," finally calling him "a Graceless child."⁵⁸ She hardly dared to hope for Charles, whom she feared was past the point of change, focusing instead on her children "in whom I can rejoice. may their Lives and usefulness be continued."⁵⁹

The final blow to the Adams parents' relationship with Charles came in October of 1799, when John at last travelled to New York from the new capital in Philadelphia to see for himself how Charles was living. His findings shocked him; the situation was far beyond anything he had ever expected. Charles had disappeared by this time, leaving his wife Sally and two small daughters alone in their home, and Sally told her father-in-law the full extent of her husband's fall from grace. Although, unsurprisingly, John did not reveal specifics in his letter to Abigail, he did call Charles a "Madman possessed of the Devil" and a "Rake, Buck, Blood and Beast" before declaring, "I renounce him."⁶⁰ Two days later, after safely depositing Sally and her children at a

⁵⁷ Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, 14 February 1799, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=%20Thomas%20Period%3A%22Adams%20Presidency%22%20Author%3A%22Adams%2C%20Abigail%22&s=1111311111&r=93>, accessed 8 May 2020.

⁵⁸ Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, 12 June 1799, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=%20Author%3A%22Adams%2C%20Abigail%22%20Recipient%3A%22Adams%2C%20John%20Quincy%22%20Period%3A%22Adams%20Presidency%22&s=1111311111&r=20>, accessed 8 May 2020.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 12 October 1799.

different house where Abigail was to arrive shortly, John promised his wife that “the Reprobate shall be punished.”⁶¹ In order to truly understand John Adams’s reasons for disowning his once beloved son, it is important to consider the connotations of the words he used to describe Charles. Of course, saying he was possessed by the devil bears religious significance, and the Adamses were a Puritan New England family to whom such a phrase would have been shocking. The term “rake,” short for rakehell, was used to denote a young man who squandered away money in pursuit of pleasures, typically involving alcohol and sexual promiscuity, and “reprobate” describes a depraved person. Clearly, he did not see the moral resemblance between this man and his once “exquisite” and sensitive child.

The Adamses wrote almost nothing about Charles for the next year, behaving as if he did not exist, and his father stood his ground and did not write to or see him again. While Charles was at Harvard, his family had been willing to work with him, giving him advice and then keeping him close to ensure his success, all the while still writing very affectionately of him. In his 1789 letter to Cotton Tufts, John Adams had called his boy a “tender hearted Fool,” despite his failings, and not a possessed, depraved madman. Between the loss of finances entrusted to him by his older brother, his deception and refusal to tell John Quincy the truth, and his abandonment of his wife and children, Charles had strayed too far from his parents’ vision of duty to family and society. Though the exact details that Sally Adams revealed to her father-in-law that day cannot be known, it is reasonable to assume, judging by John’s extreme and final reaction, that Charles’s actions had been very alarming.

⁶¹ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 14 October 1799, Adams Family Papers, https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17991014ja&rec=sheet&archive=&hi=&numRecs=&query=&queryid=&start=&tag=&num=10&bc=/digitaladams/archive/browse/letters_1796_1801.php, accessed 10 February 2020.

Charles's life came to an end on December 1, 1800 at the New York home of his sister Nabby, who had taken him in and cared for him during his last few weeks; he was thirty years old. Abigail had visited shortly before his death, and in a letter to her sister announcing his loss, mentioned explicitly Charles's struggles with alcohol addiction for the first time in any Adams family letter. Though she knew that "food has not been his sustenance; yet he did not look like an intemperate Man—he was bloted, but not red."⁶² She grieved over the loss of her son who was "no Mans enemy but his own...beloved, in spite of his errors" and told her sister that before the end, he "spoke with grief and Sorrow for his habits," exhibiting repentance for his actions and imploring his mother for forgiveness.⁶³ Of course, regrets and the desire to reconcile with loved ones are typical at the end of life, but Charles may have also been echoing the conventions of the era that alcohol was a vice and a sin against God. Abigail herself could merely hope that "my supplications to heaven for him, that he might find mercy from his maker, may not have been in vain," concerned that the cause of her son's untimely death may prevent him from obtaining eternal salvation.⁶⁴

Though John Adams had fully committed to his renunciation of Charles while his son was alive, he mourned greatly once he was gone. In a letter to Thomas written on December 17, he grieved the "melancholly decease of your Brother" and expressed his wish that "I had died for him if that would have relieved him from his faults as well as his disease."⁶⁵ By his "disease," he likely meant the failure of Charles's liver that ultimately cost him his life, and by "faults," the excessive drinking that led to this; he did not think of his son's alcohol consumption as a disease

⁶² Abigail Adams to Mary Smith Cranch, 8 December 1800, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-0807>, accessed 9 February 2020.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ John Adams to Thomas Boylston Adams, 17 December 1800, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-0817>, accessed 21 April 2020.

in itself. Writing to Thomas Jefferson in March of 1801, John Adams called his deceased son “once the delight of my Eyes and a darling of my heart” who had been stripped of his life “by causes which have been the greatest Grief of my heart and the deepest affliction of my Life.”⁶⁶

Interestingly, the language employed in the writings of Charles’s brothers surrounding his death does not bear the sentimental longing and sorrow of their parents’ letters. Five days after Charles died, Thomas wrote a lengthy letter to John Quincy, who was still in Europe, which dealt mostly with matters of politics and business; in the final paragraph, he at last briefly broke the news that “we have lost our Brother at New York.”⁶⁷ He asked that his older brother “be prepared to meet this mournful intelligence with resignation & composure. We have long been looking for the catastrophe, which it was not in human power to avert.”⁶⁸ Thomas concluded his letter with the striking statement, “let silence reign forever over his tomb.”⁶⁹ John Quincy’s response two months later does not sound quite as cold as Thomas’s words, but all he said of “the death of our unhappy brother” was that he wished to know “of the Situation in which he has left his wife and children” so that he could provide aid to the best of his ability.⁷⁰ In the privacy of his diary, however, he did allow himself to express his grief when he received Thomas’s letter, lamenting, “Had letter today from...my brother, my only brother!” He said of Charles,

⁶⁶ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 24 March 1801, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=Page-Ref%3ATSJN-01-33-02-pb-0426&s=1511311112&r=1>, accessed 12 May 2020.

⁶⁷ Thomas Boylston Adams to John Quincy Adams, 6 December 1800, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=%20Recipient%3A%22Adams%2C%20John%20Quincy%22%20Author%3A%22Adams%2C%20Thomas%20Boylston%22%20Period%3A%22Adams%20Presidency%22&s=1111311111&r=14>, accessed 9 February 2020.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ John Quincy Adams to Thomas Adams, 7 February 1801, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-0886>, accessed 9 February 2020.

“May the tender mercies of our gracious Heaven have attended him in his passage,” echoing his mother’s hope that God could forgive Charles of his moral failures.⁷¹

Neither surviving Adams son shared with each other their grief or anguish at losing their brother, with whom they had both been close all their lives. One 1786 letter illustrates the deep love between the brothers, as the boys’ aunt wrote her sister Abigail that while visiting her home, the three “chose to lodge together in our great Bed, though there was another in the Chamber.”⁷² She told them how much she wished their mother could see them now, “embracing each other in Love, Innocence, Health, and Peace.”⁷³ Charles’s death was almost unmentioned by his brothers after their initial letters, and of course they were navigating severe grief in their own ways, but their shame and disappointment at a member of their family failing utterly to live up to their parents’ expectations of duty and industriousness likely contributed to their desire to let silence reign over their beloved brother’s tomb. Charles was not buried in the family plot or even brought back to Massachusetts to be laid to rest, but was buried alone in New York.

Benjamin Rush and Pivotal Changes

In the early part of the nineteenth century, Dr. Benjamin Rush, the Adamses’ dear friend since the days of revolution, wrote a pamphlet entitled *An Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits upon the Human Body and Mind*. Though it was not published in its final form until 1811,

⁷¹ Diary of John Quincy Adams, February 1801, Adams Family Papers, http://www.masshist.org/jqadiaries/php/doc?id=jqad24_317&year=1801&month=02&day=&entry=entry&start=0, accessed 18 May 2020.

⁷² Elizabeth Smith Shaw to Abigail Adams, 18 March 1786, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-04-07-02-0026>, accessed 1 February 2020.

⁷³ Ibid.

Rush had been working on different editions and versions of it for many years, even sending John Adams a copy in 1805. Adams told the physician, “I thank you sir for your valuable Pamphlet on the effects of Ardent Spirits on soul and Body. I read it like all your other Writings with much Pleasure and Profit.”⁷⁴ The knowledge that Adams read Rush’s pamphlet and enjoyed it is very illuminating, as *Inquiry* bore some revolutionary language surrounding the consumption of alcohol.

While Rush’s *Inquiry* still denounced habitual drunkenness as a thing that led to evil behavior and entreated people to avoid drinking hard alcohol, he strayed from the societal narrative in that he did not condemn drinking itself as a vice; he freely admitted that spirits, in moderation, had their important and appropriate uses. Most significantly, this was the first written work to classify habitual drunkenness not as a mere part of society, and not as a sin leading to damnation, but rather as a disease. Rush argued on the first page of the pamphlet that drinking to excess is an “odious disease (for by that name it should be called).”⁷⁵ This is a huge deviation from any published ideas about drinking up to this point.⁷⁶ Rush’s assertion that habitual drunkenness was a disease means that this kind of excessive drinking must not be by the individual’s choice. In opposition to the sermons by Increase Mather and Thomas Foxcroft, this pamphlet presents the argument that drunkards could not merely ask for repentance or stop loving the state of drunkenness to suddenly abstain from liquor. In another of Rush’s works, an 1812 treatise called *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind*, which

⁷⁴ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 11 April 1805, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=%20Author%3A%22Adams%2C%20John%22%20Recipient%3A%22Rush%2C%20Benjamin%22&s=1111311111&r=29>, accessed 15 May 2020.

⁷⁵ Benjamin Rush, *An Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits upon the Human Body and Mind* (New York: Cornelius David, 1811), U.S. National Library of Medicine Digital Collections, <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-2569025R-bk>, accessed 15 February 2020, 1.

⁷⁶ Bynum, 167.

was the first American book on psychiatry, he maintains that habitual drunkenness is a disease which the sufferer is unable to control, using as an example a man he heard say in a tavern in Philadelphia: “Were a keg of rum in one corner of a room, and were a cannon constantly discharging balls between me and it, I could not refrain from passing before that cannon, in order to get at the rum.”⁷⁷ By including this anecdote, Rush communicated his belief that alcoholics, though he did not use such terminology, would stop at nothing to keep drinking because they did not have the choice, even when they knew that the alcohol put their lives in severe danger.

Another revolutionary idea that Rush presented in his *Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits upon the Human Body and Mind* is the notion that habitual drunkenness may be inherited. He found it “remarkable, that drunkenness resembles certain hereditary, family...diseases,” going on to describe the frequency with which he had known families to contain three, four, or five alcoholics.⁷⁸ He warned readers to exercise caution when considering marital partners for their children, since they could be endangering the next generation with a hereditary predisposition to addiction.⁷⁹ It is highly likely that this assertion spoke to John Adams when he read this pamphlet. Abigail’s family history with her brother, who abandoned his wife and children, sank into debt, and ultimately died due to his alcoholism must have plagued the minds of John and Abigail as they witnessed their son Charles slip into an eerily similar situation twelve years later; the argument that alcoholism could be inherited and passed on through a family probably intrigued the Adams parents. It is both interesting and tragic to note that the next three

⁷⁷ Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind* (Philadelphia: Grigg, 1812), U.S. National Library of Medicine Digital Collections, <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-66551140R-bk>, accessed 19 May 2020, 264.

⁷⁸ Rush, *Inquiry*, 4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

generations of Adamses contained at least one person who struggled with alcoholism and died from it.⁸⁰

A final fascinating aspect of Rush's argument in his *Inquiry* is his list of circumstances which may initially drive a person to start drinking, before ultimately forming a habit. This list included such examples as strenuous labor, stomach ailments or other bodily pains, and sociability, but two of the situations he described particularly apply to the Adams children. Rush suggested that "men who follow professions, which require constant exercise of the faculties of their minds, are very apt to seek relief, by the use of ardent spirits, from the fatigue which succeeds great mental exertions."⁸¹ Since Charles and Thomas were small children, their parents encouraged them to exercise their minds at all times, and both men pursued professions in law which required the exact kind of "great mental exertion" which Rush described. This may have struck John Adams as a possible cause of Charles's downfall when he read the *Inquiry*, but another of the circumstances listed likely sounded even more familiar. Rush argued that "persons under the pressure of debt, disappointments in worldly pursuits, and guilt have sometimes sought to drown their sorrows in strong drink."⁸² This perfectly mirrors Charles's situation at the time soon before his death, as he experienced crippling guilt and fear over having lost his brother's money and ended up in severe debt, and the Adamses may have reflected on this painful memory while reading Rush's pamphlet.

The work of Dr. Rush surrounding alcohol consumption paved the way for a new understanding of habitual drunkenness in the United States. As people reflected on the idea that alcoholism could be a disease, unable to be controlled by its sufferers, some desired to end the

⁸⁰ Shaw, 503-504.

⁸¹ Rush, *Inquiry*, 19.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 20.

consumption of drinks with such disastrous potential altogether; in fact, according to scholar Harry Levine, “the temperance movement rightly claimed Benjamin Rush as its founder.”⁸³ Interestingly, an 1866 book entitled *Temperance Recollections* quoted John Quincy Adams as having characterized the temperance movement, in 1846, as “one of the most remarkable phenomena of the human race.”⁸⁴ In addition, together with Andrew Jackson and James Madison, John Quincy signed a temperance statement in July of 1831 which stated that “the entire disuse of it [liquor] would tend to promote the health, the virtue, and the happiness of the community.”⁸⁵ The notion that Charles and Thomas’s brother, who had by this time seen the ravages of alcoholism in both his brothers and his sons George and John, lent his support to the temperance movement is illuminating and reveals the importance that Rush’s ideas held within the Adams family.

Benjamin Rush and John Adams corresponded back and forth about their families for much of their lives. In 1811, Adams wrote his friend with an update on his grandchildren, making a rare mention of Charles by name when he said, “Charles’s Widow and two Daughters are with me. The Daughters are grown up, and are good Girls.”⁸⁶ There is of course no way to know this for certain, but it is possible that Rush was partly inspired by the fate of his dear friends’ son to write his pamphlet, which diverged in many ways from his previous writings on habitual drunkenness. Whatever the case, the Adamses were influenced by Rush’s influential

⁸³ Levine, “The Discovery of Addiction: Changing Conceptions of Habitual Drunkenness in America,” 501.

⁸⁴ John Quincy Adams, as quoted in John Marsh, *Temperance Recollections: Labors, Defeats, Triumphs* (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1866), 142.

⁸⁵ James Madison: Temperance Statement, July 1831, The Papers of James Madison, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=%20Author%3A%22Adams%2C%20John%20Quincy%22%20Period%3A%22post-Madison%20Presidency%22&s=1111311111&r=377>, accessed 16 May 2020.

⁸⁶ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 21 June 1811, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-5649>, accessed 15 April 2020.

ideas and the pivotal changes they inspired in society when their youngest son began to suffer from the same disease that had taken Charles.

Thomas Adams and Alcoholism

In Adams scholar Paul C. Nagel's book *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family*, Brooks Adams, John Quincy's grandson, is quoted as saying of Thomas Boylston Adams, "There was never any harm in poor Tom except that he would drink. He nearly drove John Adams and J.Q.A. to insanity with it."⁸⁷ This piece of apparent family lore was not always the case, however, as Thomas Adams became, in many ways, his parents' hope in America after his return while John Quincy was still in Europe. He had been, for the most part, a well-behaved and industrious young man, with only the occasional misstep at Harvard and a general dislike for his legal profession, though he continued to work at it. In 1801, John Quincy wrote to his brother with a fleeting desire to leave the cities on the East Coast and venture out into the frontier to begin new lives, and Thomas responded with immediate enthusiasm. "I am ready at a short warning to embrace, with zeal & ardor, any practicable enterprize which may justify a renunciation of my present, ill-requited labors in an ungracious profession," he assured his older brother. "... Head-work is bad business, and I never was fond of it."⁸⁸ This plan to go out west never materialized, but Thomas continued to dislike practicing law and changed careers many times throughout his life, working alternately as a lawyer, a journalist, a farmer, and a judge, never keeping any one profession for long.⁸⁹ He eventually moved into his parents' home,

⁸⁷ Brooks Adams as quoted in Nagel, *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family*, 122.

⁸⁸ Thomas Boylston Adams to John Quincy Adams, 7 December 1801, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-1031>, accessed 12 May 2020.

⁸⁹ Fred Kaplan, *John Quincy Adams* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), 342.

as he experienced considerable financial difficulty and had a wife and six children to support. He and his older brother made arrangements for the move in early 1819, with John Quincy assuring him “I approve...of every thing which may...contribute to your welfare and that of your family.”⁹⁰

As it happened, Thomas and his family would rely on his father and brother for financial support for the rest of Thomas's life.⁹¹ It is impossible to determine when his struggles with drinking began, but by 1818, he was heavily into alcohol and, John Quincy suspected, gambling as well. After receiving a letter from Thomas which has not survived, the concerned older brother responded, “You implicitly and distinctly deny having contracted any gaming debts— This is of itself a great relief to my mind, from the concern I had felt for your family, and yourself on that account.”⁹² He expressed his hesitation to push Thomas any further about his struggles with drinking and debt, saying, “I am afraid anything farther that I could now say would alienate still more your affection from me, which I should deeply lament,” adding “if in any instance I have unnecessarily wounded your feelings I am sorry for it...be kind to yourself.”⁹³ Of the financial assistance he was providing Thomas on a regular basis, he insisted, “If in settling your accounts I have not done you to say the least entire justice, I am ready to do it as you yourself shall prescribe.”⁹⁴ This tireless gentleness and tactful wording diverges significantly from the way John Quincy consistently pressed Charles to inform him on the

⁹⁰ John Quincy Adams to Thomas Boylston Adams, 22 February 1819, Adams Family Paper, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-3628>, accessed 14 May 2020.

⁹¹ Diary of Charles Francis Adams, 4 September 1829, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/DCA03/pageid/DCA03p29>, accessed 5 May 2020.

⁹² John Quincy Adams to Thomas Boylston Adams, 18 December 1818, Adams Family Papers, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=%20Author%3A%22Adams%2C%20John%20Quincy%22%20Recipient%3A%22Adams%2C%20Thomas%20Boylston%22&s=1111311111&r=214>, accessed 8 May 2020.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

progress of his investments, and then ceased writing to him altogether once his mother gave him the difficult news. It is reasonable to surmise that John Quincy spent more money providing for Thomas and his large family than he ever lost as a result of Charles's mistakes, signaling a change in the eldest brother's thoughts surrounding the alcohol addiction that plagued his family members.

In addition, in stark contrast to John Adams's disowning of his middle son due to the consequences of his drinking problem, the Adams patriarch allowed Thomas to live with him in his home through John's death in 1826. Thomas had financial problems, lost jobs, and failed to provide for his wife and children, and his drinking often shifted his personality from charming and amiable to cruel and brutish. John Quincy's son Charles Francis recorded many anecdotes about his uncle which reveal the drastic change in Thomas's demeanor. One diary entry penned in 1824, when Charles Francis was fifteen, reports, "My Uncle...tried to provoke me into a quarrel with him. Many bitter things he said which stirred my blood but conscious of the extreme folly of making a difficulty with him I remained silent. This being perceived, he sprang up and went off declaring that there was no congeniality among us."⁹⁵ Two days later, a similar incident bothered the boy enough for him to record it as well, explaining that "my Uncle did not appear until very late at dinner...in such a humour that he made himself extremely disgusting. He is one of the most unpleasant characters in this world, in his present degradation, being a brute in his

⁹⁵ Diary of Charles Francis Adams, 29 May 1824, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/DCA01/pageid/DCA01p163>, accessed 2 May 2020.

manners and a bully in his family. No one addressed a syllable to him and he went off in a rage.”⁹⁶

This behavior affected not only Thomas’s nephew, but his wife and children, as well. Charles Francis confided to his diary that “the younger part of the family appear considerably affected by it. His wife suffers also,” and gave his opinion that because of his uncle’s issues, “all that family have learned to be such accomplished dissemblers.”⁹⁷ “I am sorry for the Children,” he wrote in 1829, “because this is the punishment occasioned by the fault of the father.”⁹⁸ Thomas’s shortcomings as a father were so extreme at times that at least three of his children lived with John Quincy at one point or another, including his daughter Elizabeth, who lived at the White House while her uncle was president.⁹⁹ In 1799, Charles’s abandonment of his wife and children due to his alcoholism had been grounds for his father to renounce him and cut off all contact; yet Thomas’s conduct toward his family did not keep John Adams from allowing his youngest son to remain in his home. No writing exists wherein Thomas’s father reprimands him for his drinking and resulting actions. The single provision that John made was to place Thomas’s inheritance in a trust for fear he would squander it if he received it all at once, and Thomas was bound to this agreement for the rest of his life, with Charles Francis recording in one 1830 diary entry that “my Uncle the Judge called in order to obtain his allowance for the Quarter a day in advance.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Diary of Charles Francis Adams, 31 May 1824, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/DCA01/pageid/DCA01p165>, accessed 2 May 2020.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Diary of Charles Francis Adams, 4 September 1829.

⁹⁹ Kaplan, 427.

¹⁰⁰ Diary of Charles Francis Adams, 30 October 1830, Adams Family Papers, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/DCA03/pageid/DCA03p330>, accessed 6 May 2020.

It is reasonable to hypothesize that John Adams was softened toward his youngest son because he experienced guilt for breaking off his connection with Charles, who was repentant in the end and was, as his mother said, “no Mans enemy but his own.” It also seems, though, that society’s changing ideas surrounding the habitual drunkenness that plagued both Charles and Thomas shifted the perspectives of John and John Quincy Adams, who lovingly supported Thomas, giving him financial support and a home, rather than cease to associate with him. Perhaps this was due to the “Pleasure and Profit” that John Adams derived from the pamphlet by his friend Dr. Rush; perhaps the idea that alcoholism was a disease which its sufferers did not love and could not control resounded with this family.

When Thomas died in March of 1832 at the age of fifty-nine due to complications from alcoholism, John Quincy took to his diary to express his grief. “A letter from Charles [Francis] received by the mail,” he wrote on March 17, “inform[ed] me of the death of my dear and amiable brother Thomas Boylston Adams.”¹⁰¹ In the rest of the day’s entry, he revealed that he cancelled plans with two friends and penned a letter to Thomas’s widow. He wrote nothing of praying that heaven would receive Thomas despite his vices, as he had after Charles died; rather, he merely mourned the loss of a brother who had been “dear and amiable.”

Conclusion: Opportunity for Further Research

The Adams family were influenced by the changing ideas of society around them, particularly the writings of their close friend Benjamin Rush that classified alcoholism as a disease, when dealing with and writing about their youngest son, standing in stark contrast to

¹⁰¹ Diary of John Quincy Adams, 17 March 1832, Adams Family Papers, http://www.masshist.org/jqadiaries/php/popup?id=jqad38_404, accessed 12 May 2020.

their perceptions of their middle son while he suffered from the same affliction decades earlier. The lives of Charles and Thomas Adams are both fascinating and important, not only because these men were members of such a famous political dynasty, but because they lived at a time when the disease from which they suffered was just beginning to be studied and understood. Though Charles died before he could experience the benefits of a more understanding society and medical community, Thomas was able to keep the support of his parents and brother due to the pioneering work of Benjamin Rush, which would inspire many future innovations and further study. The sad truth, however, is that both men likely suffered from other underlying illnesses that went undiagnosed and had little to no treatment in their day.

I believe an excellent opportunity for further research would be to conduct a study of perceptions of and language surrounding mental illness in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries using the Adams family as a focus. Scholars have long supposed that many in the Adams family suffered from depression, and this may have been one of the reasons Charles and Thomas turned to alcohol, especially in difficult times. That the Adamases themselves seemed to recognize a kind of fundamental unhappiness in Charles and Thomas's dispositions is indicated in their letters and writings. For example, Abigail's letters about Charles in the years before his death imply that she may have made a connection between her son's condition and the deeper problem of mental illness. She wrote to John Quincy in 1798, "the poor child is unhappy I am sure. he is not at Peace with himself."¹⁰² In her letter to her sister after Charles's death, she referred to him as her "poor unhappy child" and, in reference to his "intemperan[ce]," declared that "afflictions of this kind are a two-edged sword—the Scripture

¹⁰² Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, 15 November 1798.

expresses it as a mitigation of sorrow.”¹⁰³ She hinted at the idea that a fundamental sadness in her son’s composition was at least partly to blame for his reliance on alcohol, which does not remotely agree with the era’s reigning mentality that addiction was due to moral weakness.

In the case of Thomas, while serving as John Quincy’s secretary in Europe in 1798, he wrote in his own diary that he had to go out or take rides “to drive off the blue devils” and come
¹⁰⁴ The phrase “blue devils” was used in the eighteenth century to denote extreme sadness and depression, meaning that Thomas understood himself to be someone who frequently struggled with this kind of mental affliction. These are just two examples of the ways the Adams family wrote about mental health, though there was little knowledge about mental illness in their day, and a continuation of this project which includes this type of study would yield intriguing results, illuminating our understanding of both the Adamses and the time in which they lived.

¹⁰³ Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, 8 December 1800.

¹⁰⁴ *Berlin and the Prussian Court in 1798: Journal of Thomas Boylston Adams*, 3 July 1798 (New York: New York Public Library, 1916), 20.

Bibliography

- Adams Family Papers. Founders Online. National Archives. <https://founders.archives.gov>.
- Adams Family Papers. Massachusetts Historical Society.
<http://www.masshist.org/2012/adams/adams-family-papers>.
- Berlin and the Prussian Court in 1798: Journal of Thomas Boylston Adams*. New York: New York Public Library, 1916.
- Blocker, Jr., Jack S. "Kaleidoscope in Motion: Drinking in the United States, 1400-2000." In *Alcohol: A Social and Cultural History*, edited by Mark P. Holt (New York: Berg, 2006): 225-240.
- Bynum, William F. "Chronic Alcoholism in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 42 no. 2 (1968): 160-185.
- Ellis, Joseph J. *First Family: Abigail and John Adams* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).
- Foxcroft, Thomas. "A serious Address to those who needlessly frequent Taverns & Publick Houses." Boston: S. Gerrish, 1726. Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership. Accessed 25 April 2020.
- Gelles, Edith B. *Abigail & John* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).
- Hogan, Margaret A. and Taylor, C. James, edited. *My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams*. Massachusetts: First Harvard University Press: 2007.
- Kaplan, Fred. *John Quincy Adams*. New York: Harper Collins, 2014.
- Levine, Harry Gene. "The Alcohol Problem in America; From Temperance to Alcoholism." *British Journal of Addiction* 79 (1984): 109-119.
- Levine, Harry Gene. "The Discovery of Addiction: Changing Conceptions of Habitual Drunkenness in America." *The Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 15 (1978): 493-506.
- Levin, Phyllis Lee. *Abigail Adams: A Biography*. New York: St. Martins Press, 2001.
- Marsh, John. *Temperance Recollections: Labors, Defeats, Triumphs*. New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1866.
- Mather, Increase. "Wo To Drunkards." Boston: Timothy Green, 1712. Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership. Accessed 1 May 2020.
- McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.
- Nagel, Paul C. *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- Papers of James Madison. Founders Online. National Archives. <https://founders.archives.gov>.

- Pearson, Eliphalet. "Journal of College Disorders, 1788-1797." *Papers of Eliphalet Pearson, 1768-1819*. HUM 79 Box 3, Harvard University Archives.
- Pollock, Linda A. *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500-1900*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Rothman, David J. *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971.
- Rush, Benjamin. *An Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits on the Human Body and Mind*. New York: Cornelius David, 1811. U.S. National Library of Medicine Digital Collections. Accessed 15 February 2020.
- Rush, Benjamin. *Medical Inquiries and Observations upon the Diseases of the Mind*. Philadelphia: Grigg, 1812. U.S. National Library of Medicine Digital Collections. Accessed 19 May 2020.
- Rush, Benjamin. "Sermons to gentlemen upon temperance and exercise." Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1772. Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership. Accessed 18 April 2020.
- Ruuska, Arto. "Consequences and behaviour problematised: The establishment of alcohol misuse as an object of empirical inquiry in late 18th- and early 19th- century European medicine." *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 30 no. 1-2 (2013): 13-32.
- Sournia, Jean-Charles. *A History of Alcoholism*. Translated by Nicholas Hindley and Gareth Stanton. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1990.
- Shaw, Peter. "All in the Family: A Psychobiography of the Adamses." *The American Scholar* 54 no. 4 (1985): 501-516.
- Traub, James. *John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).
- White, William I. *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*. Bloomington, IL: Chestnut Health Systems/Lighthouse Institute, 1998.