

A More Perfect Union: Final Project

Book Review: *Descent From Glory: Four  
Generations of the John Adams Family*  
by Paul C. Nagel

Kevin Bates  
Harwich High School  
September 25, 2008

History teachers are often faced with the difficult decision of how deeply to delve into the personal lives of important historical figures. Is understanding the personal life of these men and women important in understanding the past? Some observers such as Douglas Freeman believe, "The influence of personality cannot be overestimated." John Adams on the other hand held that "intimate acquaintance with the great will diminish our reverence." In his book, *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family*, Paul Nagel provided an intimate look into the personal lives of four generations of the Adams family beginning with the birth of John Adams in 1735 and ending with the death of the last member of the "fourth" generation, Brooks Adams in 1927. Through access to the large and previously closed Adams family collection of letters and diaries (opened to scholars in 1954), Nagel gives one a unique look into the private lives of the successful and in some cases unsuccessful and tragic members of one of America's most illustrious families. As Nagel states in his introduction, "This public attainment by one family is awesome, but to be fully appreciated, it needs to be placed beside the

distressing story of the Adamses' private difficulties."

(Nagel p.5) By providing such an extensive personal history, complete with lofty achievements and bitter and often tragic failures and disappointments, Nagel has provided a vehicle to show students that flawed human beings can achieve greatness and heroes may indeed be imperfect.

The root of the numerous successes and failures of these four generations of the Adams family may be found in the personal lives of John and Abigail Adams. As Nagel notes, "For several generations before John and Abigail's story began, there was nothing significant about the Adams family." (Nagel p.10) Both came from rather humble backgrounds, although Abigail's mother was a descendant of Edmund Quincy, one of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In fact, for a time, Elizabeth Quincy Smith hoped that her daughter Abigail would choose to marry into a more notable family than the Adamses. Abigail's mother eventually came around and the couple was married in 1764. This marked the beginning of the four "great" Adams generations. A family marked during this period by both extraordinary success and devastating heartbreak and failure.

The achievements of John Adams are well documented. Students of American History are familiar with his role as our nation's second president and first vice president. They may well remember his role as one of America's first diplomats, as one of the joint commissioners to France during the Revolutionary War, and then as minister to the Netherlands and to Great Britain. They may even recall John Adam's role in negotiating the Treaty of Paris in 1783 and as author of the Massachusetts State Constitution in 1780. These are all impressive achievements, but take on added meaning when measured against the backdrop of John Adams' personal life.

Starting with his own generation, John Adams was faced with the death of his brother Elihu at the age of thirty-four in 1776. His own children presented Adams with additional difficulties and even tragedy. Of his two daughters, Susanna died before the age of two in 1770, and Abigail, known as Nabby, died of breast cancer at the age of forty-eight in 1813. Nabby's unhappy marriage to William Smith, a man whose career Paul Nagel described as one mostly of "disappointment and disgrace (Nagel p.40), caused much personal and financial difficulty for John and Abigail Adams. Among his three sons, two, Charles and

Thomas, had what Nagel described as, "tragic lives of failure" due to alcoholism, dying at the ages of thirty and sixty respectively.

Given the difficulties, both political and personal, that he faced in his long career, it is interesting (and perhaps understandable) to note that John Adams longed for a simpler life. "Let me have my Farm, Family, and Goose Quil, and all the Honours and Offices this world can bestow, may go to those who deserve them better, and desire them more. I covet them not." (Nagel p.16) Many years after the end of Adams' political career, his grandson, Charles Francis Adams, acknowledged that his grandfather's career was shaped by his zeal "to return to the only spot in which he took delight, his home and his farm." (Nagel p.17)

This longing for a simpler, rural way of life was likely a reaction to an internal struggle John Adams faced for most of his life. On the one hand, he was ambitious and desired some measure of fame and public acknowledgement for his accomplishments. On the other hand, he was constrained by his Puritan background which emphasized human frailty and man's propensity for sin. As Nagel states, "Much of what John learned came from the old Puritan and Calvinist messages about sin-ridden man's

helplessness before God. This sobering view also contends that man should strive to be good stewards, should seek to labor for lofty causes despite the knowledge that mortals are capable ultimately of only evil and folly." (Nagel p.7) Nagel goes on to point out that while this "paradox" was troubling to John Adams and many members of the three generations to follow, it produced an expectation of public service and led some to seek public office (Nagel p.7) This family sense of public duty brought with it a corresponding need to excel, the ramifications of which were felt across the following three generations.

For the successful members of the following three generations, the need to excel proved to be either a source of motivation, frustration, or both. Regardless, the expectation was unmistakable. John and Abigail both made it clear to their children that they were expected to excel, that the world was full of "sin and folly" and that these temptations must be resisted at all costs. What was expected of the Adams children was devotion to duty. Nagel points out that, "Indeed, the solemnity of duty fulfilled or duty avoided would be the sweet joy and the terrible burden for John and Abigail's four children. (Nagel p.28)

Of these four children, only John Quincy Adams would ultimately succeed. His success was remarkable by any standard but was especially so given how much was expected of him and the tragedies that he also endured. Not only did he have to deal with the unfortunate deaths of his sister and two alcoholic brothers, but he also had to watch as history repeated itself with the third generation.

John Quincy Adams and his remarkable wife Louisa Catherine, managed to produce four children, three boys and one girl, while he was in the process establishing his career as a diplomat, Secretary of State, President of the United States and Congressman. As was the case with his own sister Susanna, John Quincy Adam's daughter, Louisa Catherine (named for her mother) died before the age of two. Her death devastated both parents and caused John Quincy to lament to his sons that the loss of a sister meant "a new obligation upon you to contribute every thing in your power to the consolation of your parents . . . which you can only do by your steady and continued improvement in piety and virtue. (Nagel p.110) One could easily imagine the same thoughts coming from the lips of John or Abigail Adams. The three sons of John Quincy Adams also found themselves in similar situations as their second

generation uncles. The two oldest boys, George Washington Adams and John Adams died at the ages of twenty-eight and thirty-one respectively, both due to alcoholism. Their surviving brother, Charles Francis Adams the high achiever of this generation, echoed sentiments expressed by earlier generations of Adamses when he expressed the belief that it was only "divine goodness" that had called him back from his own earlier bout with this weakness and he didn't consider the deaths of either of his brothers as a "calamity" since their deaths spared the family and themselves much misery. (Nagel p.174) Charles attempted to resist the attractions of public service and remain somewhat independent, mindful as he was of the family's past triumphs and failures. He told his diary, "The history of my family is not a pleasant one to remember. It is one of great triumphs in the world but of deep groans within, one of extraordinary brilliancy and deep corroding mortification." (Nagel p.181) Charles also believed that neither he nor his children should become involved in politics if they had to pay such a personal cost. He said, "I would not have any of my children particularly distinguished, at the price of such a penalty on the



rest."(Nagel p.181) Eventually, Charles did enter public service, first as a congressman from his father's old district and then as the third Adams to serve as minister to Great Britain where he played a major role in keeping Britain from openly siding with the Confederacy during the Civil War. After a distinguished public career, Charles resisted attempts to become further involved in national politics and he retired, leaving it to the fourth generation to uphold the family reputation for greatness.

Unlike the three previous generations where one prominent person rose to the forefront, the four sons of Charles Francis Adams all attained some measure of success. The oldest, John Quincy Adams II was probably the least accomplished of the brothers yet was a participant in local politics and was nominated for the vice presidency on a minor party ticket in 1868. The second brother, Charles, who at times showed poor business judgment (which at one point put the Adams family assets in a devastatingly precarious position), became the president of the Union Pacific Railroad and was an advocate for railroad reform. He later published historical books and essays. The remaining brothers, Henry and Brooks were well known authors. Among his works, Henry wrote and published his

*History of the United States* while dealing with the mental illness and eventual suicide of his wife, Marian "Clover" Hooper. Despite Henry's personal difficulties, Nagel notes that, "Henry's *History* remains in the opinions of many scholars the finest single work by a historian of the United States." (Nagel p. 328) The youngest of Charles Francis Adams sons, Brooks was also an author of note whose works not surprisingly, given the notoriously pessimistic view of human nature shared by many in the Adams family, were noted for their warnings about the impending collapse of Western institutions. It was Brooks more than any other member of this generation who assumed responsibility for preserving the "Old House" in Quincy (Peacefield) by not only physically rehabilitating the premises, but also by reacquiring as many of the old family items from relatives as possible. (Nagel p.350) It was Brooks' efforts that eventually allowed the house to maintain the historical integrity that has allowed it to become in the words of Paul Nagel "the finest historical site in America" (Nagel p.381).

In *Descent From Glory*, Paul Nagel has highlighted the importance of preserving the humanity of historical figures. By giving a human face to history, Nagel has

deepened our appreciation for the accomplishments of this remarkable family. Students of history may gain a greater understanding of the personal obstacles faced by historically significant figures such as John and Abigail, John Quincy, Louisa Catherine, Charles Francis, Henry and Brooks Adams, and develop respect for their ability to ultimately persevere. High School students especially may be able to relate to the impossibly high standards set by John and Abigail for their children and for the generations that followed and gain a newfound respect for their accomplishments.

Works Cited

Nagel; Paul C. *Decent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983