

# Introduction

Samuel Adams, patriot and Revolutionary statesman, played an important role in American politics for more than two decades. Beginning with resistance to the Stamp Act in 1765, Adams was instrumental in organizing resistance to British rule and in articulating the means by which it could be achieved. Older than most other revolutionaries, he was single-minded in his devotion to the cause in which he found expression for his energy and talent.

Adams was born in Boston on September 27, 1722. His father, a brewer and merchant, was a prominent Boston citizen, active in local politics. The younger Samuel Adams studied at the Boston Grammar School and then attended Harvard College, graduating in 1740. He received a Master of Arts from Harvard in 1743. Adams tried his hand at law, at newspaper publishing, and at brewing but found none of these careers satisfactory. Like his father, he was active in local politics. In 1747 he helped to form the Whipping Post Club and wrote articles for its publication, the *Independent Advertiser*. Later, in 1763 during his tenure as tax collector for the town of Boston, he joined the Caucus Club. Adams had become well known as a political writer by 1764 when the town commissioned him to write its letter of instruction to its representatives in the colonial legislature. The Sugar Act of 1764, imposed by Parliament in an attempt to reduce the debt incurred during the Seven Years' War and to raise revenue to support British troops stationed in America, gave Adams the perfect opportunity to further exercise his talent for political activism.

Adams long had been associated with the popular party opposing the old, established families of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who exercised most political power. The Sugar Act, and the Stamp Act of the following year, gave the popular party political leverage. Burdened by costs of the war and a shortage of hard currency, middle-class Americans resented the Stamp Act, which required government stamps to be applied to a variety of legal documents. Throughout the summer of 1765 waves of protest swept the colonies, often organized by the Sons of Liberty, of which Adams was a member. American merchants refused to import British goods, British entrepreneurs suffered, and American agents in London and English politicians declared the tax unenforceable. It was repealed in March 1766.

Adams was also instrumental in turning public opinion against the conservatives on the issue of the Stamp Act. In 1765 he again

drafted instructions to the Boston representatives in the colonial legislature, then in September was elected to fill a vacancy in the House. While serving in the House, he wrote “Answer . . . to the Governor’s Speech” and “Resolution of the House,” thereby setting forth an early theory of American rights. Adams and his allies continued to gain political ground so that in 1766 the radicals were elected to a majority in the House of Representatives. Adams, too, was reelected and served until 1774 as clerk of the House, drafting most official documents of that body. Adams became the leader of the House radicals, writing many political documents for circulation throughout the colonies, stirring up resentment toward British troops which culminated in the Boston Massacre of 1770, and keeping up resistance to the Commissioners of the Customs appointed to collect Townshend duties. The Townshend Act of 1767 imposed duties on glass, lead, paints, paper, and tea imported to the American colonies, and the Commissioners could enforce the acts without the violators having recourse to trial by jury. The Massachusetts legislature was dismissed by Governor Thomas Hutchinson when it issued the Circular Letter, written by Adams, describing its actions against the Townshend Acts. The Circular Letter led the colonies to adopt the Non-Importation Agreements, which reduced colonial imports from Great Britain by half in 1768–69. In April 1770 all the Townshend Acts were repealed except the duty on tea.

During two years of conservatism after the repeal of the Townshend Acts, Adams kept the Revolutionary spirit alive. He contributed many articles to Boston newspapers, drawing public attention to subtle imperial injustices that were slowly combining to deprive colonists of their liberties. To resist this insidious tyranny, Adams began forming a committee of correspondence in the Massachusetts legislature in 1770 to communicate resistance to British abuses to other colonial legislatures. At a Boston town meeting in 1772, a committee of correspondence was created to draft a declaration of rights, and Adams was elected to it. By private correspondence, he already had prepared other towns for the project and had urged them to create similar committees. In the Boston Declaration of Rights, Adams placed more stress than ever on natural rights and on America’s rightful legislative independence of Parliament.

On May 10, 1773, Parliament passed Lord North’s Tea Act, which granted a virtual monopoly on tea importation in the colonies to the East India Company. Despite efforts by Adams and the Sons of Liberty to persuade him to refuse to land the tea, Governor Hutchinson remained steadfast in his intention to allow the tea to land at Boston

Harbor. By November, Adams knew that the ships' arrivals could precipitate a crisis and began to organize resistance to the landing of the tea. At a mass meeting on December 16, 1773, upon receiving word that the governor would not allow the ships to return to England without landing their cargo, Adams gave the signal whereby the tea was dumped into Boston Harbor by the Sons of Liberty. This action confirmed Massachusetts's role as the core of the resistance to British rule and, as Adams had anticipated, brought on a crisis.

In retaliation for the Boston action, Parliament instituted what became known as the Coercive Acts, a series of measures designed to punish Massachusetts in general and Boston in particular for their resistance to parliamentary rule. Officially known as the Restraining Acts, the Coercive Acts included the Boston Port Bill, the Administration of Justice Act, the Massachusetts Government Act, and the Quartering Act. Adams led the resistance to these measures in Massachusetts. Other colonies, too, were outraged by the Quartering Act, which allowed Royal troops to be billeted in private homes throughout the colonies. To coordinate resistance the First Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia in September 1774. As a delegate from Massachusetts, Adams used his influence to commit Congress to the adoption of an association to enforce economic sanctions against Britain.

Adams was elected to the Second Continental Congress in May 1775. He favored immediate rebellion and in January 1776 proposed a confederation of the colonies ready for independence and supported the formation of independent state governments. He voted for and signed the Declaration of Independence. Adams was a member of the committee assigned to draft the Articles of Confederation and continued to serve in Congress until 1781, when he returned to Boston. In 1788 he was a member of the convention to ratify the Federal Constitution, which he initially opposed because he feared centralized government. From 1789 to 1793 he served as lieutenant governor under John Hancock, becoming governor upon Hancock's death in 1793. He was reelected in 1794 and served until 1797, when illness forced his retirement. He died in 1803.