

THE VINDICATION OF JOHN ADAMS: *REX V. CORBET*, AND THE BATTLE FOR THE HERITAGE OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, 1760-1816

“This trial...is a mystery never yet explained, – a labyrinth without a clue! an enigma that never can be unriddled,” wrote John Adams to Dr. Jedidiah Morse in a letter dated 20 January 1816.¹ This letter, written by an elderly Adams just a decade before his death, refers to the *Rex v. Corbet* law case from 1769.² The case involved Adams as a young and inexperienced lawyer, defending an American sailor named Michael Corbet, who had killed a British Naval officer after he had attempted to forcibly impress him into the British Navy in pre-Revolutionary Boston.³ This is a case that has been largely forgotten in the annals of history, however, overshadowed by such events as the Stamp Act, the Townshend Act, and most notably, the Boston Massacre, after which Adams represented the notorious British soldiers as defense counsel.⁴ Why, then, does Adams display such a particular interest in, and attachment to this Corbet case nearly forty-seven years after the fact? Was it truly an “enigma” as he so labeled it for Dr. Morse, or is Adams’ emphasis on the importance of this case indicative of something greater?

Following his defeat in the 1800 Presidential elections, Adams retired to a private life, settling into his family farm, just outside of Quincy, Massachusetts.⁵ There, he thrust himself into his writings, beginning work on his autobiography, and resuming a voluminous correspondence

¹ JA to Jedidiah Morse, 20 Jan. 1816, from *The Works of John Adams*, Vol. 10, p. 210. *Rex* in this instance, refers to the ‘King,’ and therefore served to represent the British Crown.

² John Adams: born October 30, 1735, died July 4, 1826 at the age of 90.

³ ‘Impress’ refers to the practice by which the British Navy would force American sailors and merchants to serve aboard their ships during times of war throughout the 17th and 18th Centuries. It was an incredibly contentious issue at the time of the American Revolution, and it served as the base for many legal, political and moral arguments. More details on impressments to follow later.

⁴ After the Boston Massacre of 5 March 1770, during which British soldiers killed five Boston civilians, Adams served as the legal counsel for the soldiers, notably Captain Thomas Preston, who was acquitted of all charges. (*The Legal Papers of John Adams*. Edited by L. Kinvin Wroth and Hiller B. Zobel. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981. Print. Vol. III, p. 33).

⁵ Morse, John Torrey. *John Adams*. Harvard University: Houghton, Mifflin, 1898. p. 319.

with many of his old friends. He also began to re-examine his involvement, and his role in the American Revolution. He had been infuriated by friends and colleagues who, upon writing their histories of the Revolution so many years later, had largely neglected Adams' role in the events that shaped our nation. Therefore, throughout his correspondence, and even in his autobiography, Adams' concern was not so much academic inquiry, political discussion, or even historical recounting, as it was attempting to mold his public image in the eyes of history.⁶ Adams' letter to Dr. Morse falls within this purview as Adams, in narrating the events of that trial so many years earlier, offers his interpretation of the case, and thereby establishes his unique view of the American Revolution, and his role in it.

At six o'clock on the morning of 22 April 1769, the H.M. Frigate *Rose* of the British Navy was patrolling the coast of Marblehead, Massachusetts, when the ship intercepted and stopped the brig *Pitt Packet*.⁷ A colonial cargo ship captained by Thomas Power, the *Pitt Packet* was on its way back from Cadiz, Spain with a cargo of salt when it was spotted by the *Rose* in the early morning light.⁸ Once the British ship had pulled alongside the brig, Lieutenant Henry Panton of the British Navy went aboard the *Pitt Packet* with a few sailors and marines, demanding the ship's log before commencing a search of the brig's hold.⁹ As the British scoured Captain Power's ship, they found four crewmen hidden in the forepeak of the brig, between the

⁶ Lepore, Jill. "The Divider." *The New Yorker*. 17 March 2008.

⁷ *Boston Chronicle*, 1 May 1769, p. 139, cols. 2-3.

⁸ *Letters and Diary of John Rowe, Boston Merchant, 1759-1762, 1764-1779*, ed. Anne Rowe Cunningham, Boston, 1903. pp. 186-187. It is interesting to note that Rowe also mentions Cadiz several times throughout his diary as a bustling merchant city; Cadiz is a city and port in southwestern Spain, and it is the capital of the Cadiz Province. During the 1700s, shifting sandbars on the Guadalquivir River forced the Spanish government to transfer much of their international trade from Seville (which is located upriver) to Cadiz. During this time period, the city of Cadiz flourished in a golden era, and nearly three-quarters of all of its trade was with the Americas. The sail from Cadiz, Spain to Marblehead, Massachusetts would take roughly two to three months depending upon the weather (Young, Margaret Walsh. *Cities of the World*. The University of California: Gale, 1985. Print, p. 600).

⁹ *Boston Chronicle*, 1 May 1769. In this context, a 'hold' refers to the lower, interior cargo space of the ship's hull (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

stem and the main hold of the *Pitt Packet*.¹⁰ To their surprise, however, crewmen Michael Corbet, Pierce Fenning, John Ryan, and William Conner, had armed themselves with a fish gig, musket, hatchet and harpoon, and menacingly held their ground against the British, even as reinforcements arrived from the *Rose*.¹¹

The stories of what happened next diverge markedly between accounts of the event during the trials, and Adams' later remembrances. As Adams later reminisced, Corbet drew a line of salt on the deck of the forepeak, and said to Lt. Panton, "If you step over that line, I shall consider it as a proof that you are determined to impress me, and by the eternal God of Heaven, you are a dead man."¹² Taking a pinch of snuff, Panton then deliberately stepped over the line, revealing his intentions to seize the sailor.¹³ Corbet responded to this threat by immediately plunging his harpoon into the jugular vein of the British Lieutenant, killing him nearly instantly.¹⁴

Adams' minutes of the trial, which were taken during the testimony from 14 June to 17 June 1769, reveal a much different course of events. As the sailors testified, Lt. Panton came on board with "2 Midshipmen, and seven Men," and proceeded to "order his men to follow him [down forward]" into the forepeak.¹⁵ In the small space, crowded with men, pushing and shoving

¹⁰ *Ibid.* This specific location on a merchant vessel refers to the section of the ship's hold that is the furthest forward. It is between the main hold, and the stem, which is the most forward part of a ship's bow (*OED*); It is worth noting that in his *Legal Papers*, John Adams mentions that these crewmen are Irish, but in not other document is their nationality discussed.

¹¹ *Ibid.* A 'fish gig' was an instrument used for striking fish during the 17th and 18th Centuries. It consisted of several strong, barbed points fixed on a pole that was about six feet long and loaded at the end with lead (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

¹² *The Legal Papers of John Adams*. Edited by L. Kinvin Wroth and Hiller B. Zobel. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981. Print. Vol. 2, p. 277.

¹³ Snuff is ground or pulverized tobacco that is inhaled, or "snuffed," through the nostrils. It was first brought to the colonies by the British, and thereafter became a widely used product, particularly among the elite.

¹⁴ Although this is the way that John Adams remembered the incident, it is clearly a romanticized memory, since even if both Panton's exterior and interior jugular vein had been sliced simultaneously, he would have still lived for over two minutes (*OED*). In point of fact, however, while no coroner's inquest can be found, both newspaper accounts of the time and minutes of the trial corroborate the fact that he died nearly two hours after the incident. This means that his jugular vein was *not* punctured, but instead, Panton had sustained a deep wound to his neck, causing him to die from loss of blood without immediate medical attention. (*The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: with a Life of the Author*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, Boston, 1850–1856. Vol. 10, pp. 312, 318.)

¹⁵ Wroth and Zobel, Vol. 2, pp. 315-316.

between the crews ensued. With emotions and tensions running high, the situation quickly escalated, and one British marine fired his pistol into the forepeak. In the confused melee that ensued, Corbet thrust his harpoon in the direction of the British soldiers, striking Panton in the throat. The Lieutenant, who stumbled away from the blow, was carried to the weather deck of the *Pitt Packet*, where he bled to death within two hours.¹⁶

As British troops detained the sailors, several problematic issues surfaced. For the British authorities, it was unclear what crime these sailors would actually be charged with, and what law they would be tried by. There was no questioning the fact that Corbet had killed Panton, but was it in self-defense, and had Panton been justified in boarding the *Pitt Packet*? These issues were controversial enough by themselves, but the situation was further complicated by previous acts of the British Crown that had convoluted the colonial jury laws over the years.¹⁷ The authorities needed to decide whether or not the sailors would be granted the right of a jury in their trial. Amidst these unsettled issues revolving around this incident, a young John Adams, thirty-three at the time, and James Otis, Jr., the famed colonial lawyer, took the case.

Stepping in to defend Corbet and his three fellow sailors, Adams was a brilliant, ambitious, and hardworking lawyer.¹⁸ He had completed his undergraduate years at Harvard College, and afterwards studied law under James Putnam, the Attorney General for the colony of Massachusetts.¹⁹ After passing the bar examination for the state of Massachusetts on 6 November 1759, Adams spent the majority of his early years dealing with property rights'

¹⁶ *Boston Chronicle*, 27 April 1769, p. 135, col. 2. 'Weather Deck' here refers to the topmost deck of the ship, exposed to the outside (*OED*).

¹⁷ An Act of Henry VIII (1509-1547) specified a jury trial before a special Admiralty court in England, however a statute passed in the time of William III (1650-1702) indicated that trial in the colonies should not include a jury. Finally, an Act of George I (1714-1727) seemed to restore the jury right. Given this situation, the defendants pushed for a trial while the Crown advocates fought against it (Wroth and Zobel, Vol. 2, pp. 276-335.)

¹⁸ Vile, John R. "John Adams," in *Great American Lawyers: An Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1. ABC-CLIO, June 2001. Print, p. 3.

¹⁹ James Putnam (1725-1789) had been a local judge before becoming Attorney General. He was the last to serve in this post before the onset of the American Revolution (*OED*).

disputes, specifically concerning the commonplace problem of livestock that wander from one man's fields to another's.²⁰ However as his law practice grew, Adams moved his law offices from his home in Braintree into the city of Boston in 1767, shortly after the birth of his son, John Quincy Adams.²¹

Known for his combative and argumentative style, Adams was an outspoken man who became heavily involved in the political debates of pre-Revolutionary Boston. He was not one for persuasion, either, instead utilizing the sheer superiority of his intellect to outline convincing, legal arguments in the courtroom.²² Adams believed in the impartiality of "the law," and thought that the colonies should be "governed by [this] law."²³ He was a man who valued logic and reason above all else. This serious demeanor reflected a man whose personality was not necessarily pleasing, but whose character was as austere and Puritan as his legal style. Yet despite his attitude, Adams had become the busiest lawyer in Massachusetts by 1768.²⁴

It was during this period that Adams' reputation not only blossomed legally, but also began growing substantially within the political arena. In response to the Stamp Act in May of 1765, Adams had begun work on an essay that would eventually become his first extended political work. The piece, entitled *A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law*, was published anonymously by the thirty-year-old Adams in the *Boston Gazette* at the height of Boston's fervent opposition to the Stamp Act.²⁵ This essay, which discussed freedom not as an ideal, but as an inalienable right, called upon the general population to exercise their intellectual

²⁰ McCullough, David G. *John Adams*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001. Print, pp. 44-45.

²¹ Vile, p. 4. John Quincy Adams, (11 July 1767 – 23 February 1848) was the oldest son of John Adams, and later a famed American diplomat who served both in the House of Representatives and the Senate before becoming the sixth President of the United States.

²² Vile, p. 5.

²³ "Join or Die," Episode 1 of the HBO television series *John Adams* (2008).

²⁴ *The Legal Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 1, p. ix.

²⁵ McCullough, p. 59.

independence.²⁶ “Let us dare to read, think, speak, and write,” Adams wrote.²⁷ This outspoken essay garnered Adams praise and respect from many political leaders, and put him on the political map, so to speak, of pre-Revolutionary Boston. As Boston’s senior pastor Charles Chauncy wrote to Ezra Stiles, a Rhode Island clergyman and the future president of Yale College, “The author is a young man, not above 33 or 34, but of incomparable sense. I esteem this piece is one of the best that has been written. It has done honor to its author.”²⁸

Soon after publishing this *Dissertation*, Adams continued his writings in the political realm by drafting his *Braintree Instructions*. This document, which was meant to be read as instructions from the freeholders of Braintree to the General Court of Massachusetts, provided a concise and logical defense of colonial rights.²⁹ Discussing the rights of representation, and declaring that there must always be a trial by jury, Adams’ *Instructions* were printed in the *Boston Gazette* in October of 1765, and were adopted by over forty towns in a short amount of time.³⁰ Adams had quickly become one of the leading political writers of the pre-Revolutionary era, and a valued member among Boston’s Revolutionary ‘elite,’ meeting regularly with Jeremiah Gridley, James Otis, and Samuel Adams, among others.³¹ Jonathan Sewall, a British judge and later the last British Attorney General of Massachusetts, had predicted this success in a letter to Adams from 1760.³² “In future ages,” Sewall wrote, “when New England shall have risen to its intended grandeur, it shall be as carefully recorded among the registers of the literati

²⁶ Adams, John. *A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law*, from the *Boston Gazette*, August 12, 1765.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Dexter, Franklin Bowditch. *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901. Vol. I, January 1, 1769 – March 13, 1776. Print.

²⁹ Adams, John. *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. Print. Vol. 1, p. 271.

³⁰ McCullough, p. 61.

³¹ *Ibid.* Jeremiah Gridley was a famous American lawyer during this period. James Otis was also a famous lawyer, to whom the phrase “Taxation without Representation is Tyranny,” is most often attributed. Finally Samuel Adams, a second cousin of John’s, was a well-known political philosopher and statesmen during the American Revolution (*OED*).

³² Sewall was a dear friend to Adams throughout his life. Although they were separated ideologically by the Revolution, with Sewall even serving as a Crown Advocate during the *Rex v. Corbet* trial, Adams valued their friendship highly. Adams even took the time to seek out Sewall, who had been exiled to Great Britain as a Loyalist after the Revolution, in London in 1774. The two chatted for over two hours (McCullough, pp. 348-350).

that Adams flourished in the second century after the exode of its first settlers from Great Britain.”³³ By 1769, Adams had become a powerful voice in pre-Revolutionary Boston.

Given his expanding influence, Adams was handed the responsibility of Corbet’s potentially explosive case. Tension between the British and the colonists had mounted in Boston, and peace, it seemed, was carefully teetering on the precipice. Although Adams may have proved that his Revolutionary rhetoric was worthy, he remained a relatively amateur lawyer. *Rex v. Corbet* was Adams’ first murder trial.³⁴ Yet there was more resting in Adams’ hands than just four men’s lives. This case, which was inextricably tied to the current and unfolding struggle within Boston, raised the great question of parliamentary authority. Large crowds turned out for the trial, and all anticipated a great deal from the talented Adams.³⁵ The high expectations and mounting pressure would be enough to crush any inexperienced lawyer, however Adams was not alone. Joining him on the defense as a co-counsel was his role model, James Otis, Jr.³⁶

Otis was a lawyer in Massachusetts and an ardent patriot throughout the American Revolution, particularly in the pre-Revolutionary era of 1760-1775.³⁷ Known historically for his use of the phrase, “Taxation without representation is tyranny,” he became famous for his argument against the Writs of Assistance in 1761.³⁸ These ‘writs,’ established by Great Britain in 1760, were search warrants that permitted British customs officers to search a person’s private property for smuggled goods without any documented reason for suspicion.³⁹ In February of

³³ Sewall to Adams, 13th Feb 1760. This letter is chronicled in the *Papers of John Adams*, Ed. by Robert J. Taylor, Vol. 1, p. 40. The fact that Adams had so well chronicled everything that touched is life is a testament to his tenacity in attempting to mold his image, which will be discussed in more depth later. There are few primary sources from the era that match Adams’ diary, autobiography and papers in breadth and detail; In this quote, the word ‘exode’ is a somewhat rare form of the word ‘exodus’ that was largely used throughout the 17th and 18th Centuries (*OED*).

³⁴ Wroth and Zobel, Vol. 1-3. An examination of each of his cases, done by Wroth and Zobel in the *Legal Papers of John Adams*, corroborates that *Rex v. Corbet* was Adams’ earliest experience with criminal law.

³⁵ Shaw, Peter. *The Character of John Adams*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976. Print, p. 62.

³⁶ Wroth and Zobel, Vol. 2, pp. 276-277.

³⁷ McCullough, p. 61.

³⁸ *Ibid*. Although no one is sure who first used this phrase, it is usually attributed to Otis.

³⁹ *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of Law*. Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, 1996.

1761, acting *pro bono* on behalf of the colonial merchants who had challenged these writs, Otis delivered a five-hour oration before a packed crowd in the Town House in Boston.⁴⁰ This speech was one of the first challenges to Parliamentary authority in the colonies, and therefore represented an important step in the course of the revolution. “Every man, of an immense crowded audience, appeared to me to go away as I did, ready to take arms against writs of assistance,” Adams said.⁴¹ “Then and there, was the first scene of the first act of opposition to the arbitrary claims of Great Britain – then and there the child Independence was born.”⁴²

To Adams, Otis was the shining example of what a lawyer, a scholar, and a Revolutionary thinker should be. He was a decade older than Adams, and he served as one of the most important influences on Adams as a political figure.⁴³ “Otis [was] fiery and fev’rous,” Adams wrote in his diary.⁴⁴ “His Imagination flames, his Passions blaze...with a promptitude of classical allusions, a depth of research, a rapid summary of historical events and dates, a profusion of legal authorities.”⁴⁵ Adams had nothing but respect for Otis’ rational intellect and legal abilities, traits which Adams himself valued highly. While Adams was seen by the Boston community as a burgeoning leader in these trying times, it is this deep admiration for Otis that reflects a level of level of self-doubt in the naïve Adams. He understood that he had not yet proven himself, but part of him must have been excited to be working with the famed Otis.

Unfortunately Otis, suffering one of his “unlucid intervals,” brought an unhappy distemper to the case.⁴⁶ Otis was going mad. He had descended into a general “confusion,” in his

⁴⁰ Morse, Jedidiah. *Annals of the American Revolution*. Harvard University, 1824. Print, p. 225.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Shaw, p. 60.

⁴⁴ Adams, John. *Diary and Autobiography*. Vol. 1, p. 271.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ JA to Jedidiah Morse, 20 January 1816.

later years, something that Adams referred to a few times in his diary.⁴⁷ After initially agreeing to serve as defense counsel with Adams, Otis soon refused to converse with him on the subject of Corbet. Although Adams' minutes of the trial reveal that Otis was present for some of the cross-examinations, his involvement in the case was minimal, at best.⁴⁸ As Adams would later write in his diary, on 16 January 1770, "Otis is in confusion yet. He loses himself. He rambles and wanders like a Ship without an Helm."⁴⁹ The inexperienced Adams was left with the burden of Corbet's case, and without his scholarly idol to guide him. "The whole burden of responsibility was thus cast upon me," Adams wrote to Otis' biographer, Judge William Tudor, in 1816.⁵⁰

With four men's lives in his hands, and a community watching, Adams anxiously began preparations for the case.⁵¹ The officers of the Crown had proceeded carefully, given the precarious situation, and on 23 May 1769, a Special Vice-Admiralty Court convened.⁵² This court, which essentially functioned like a tribunal without a jury, was comprised of the Governor of Massachusetts Francis Bernard, and Lieutenant-Governor and Chief Justice Thomas Hutchinson, among others.⁵³ This court was designed to try Corbet's case promptly, but Adams, as counsel for the sailors, moved first to obtain a jury trial.⁵⁴ Since each client was expected to plead for himself, Adams was required to write four pleas to the Court, each one setting forth

⁴⁷ *Diary and Autobiography*. Vol. 1, p. 348.

⁴⁸ John Adams' *Legal Papers* reveal that Otis, who was intended to serve as co-counsel for this case, instead only participated minimally, making his strongest appearance in the cross-examination of John Forbes, the Master at Arms for the British Naval Frigate *Rose*. During this cross-examination, Otis asked three questions.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* This general "confusion" may have been attributable to mental illness, as McCullough suggests on p. 63 of his biography of Adams.

⁵⁰ JA to William Tudor 30 December 1816, from *The Works of John Adams*, Vol. 2, pp. 224-25. Tudor was a wealthy lawyer in Boston who studied in the law offices of John Adams and later wrote a biography of James Otis, Jr. This letter from 1816 reflects Adams' same longing to re-fashion his historical image as his letter to Dr. Morse, from the same year, does.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Wroth and Zobel, Vol. 2, pp. 278-279.

⁵³ *Ibid.* The special vice-admiralty court, was further comprised of the Judge of Admiralty Auchmuty, the Governor of New Hampshire John Wentworth (1737-1820), Commodore Alexander Hood (1726-1814) who later became the first Viscount Birdport of Great Britain, as well as multiple counselors from Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Rhode Island. JA was not particularly close with any of these members of the British administration (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

acts of parliament, issues of common law, and precedent.⁵⁵ These pleas, which kept Adams awake for “more than one night” to formulate and transcribe, failed to convince Hutchinson and the Special Vice-Admiralty Court.⁵⁶ Adams’ motion for a trial by jury was overruled, and the Court gave no justification or explanation for this decree.⁵⁷

On 14 June the Court proceeded to trial.⁵⁸ Evidence was taken, and testimony was given for three days before Adams rose to speak in defense of the prisoners. Adams’ argument, which he had honed over the previous weeks, revolved around one key issue. “The first Question that is to be made,” Adams wrote in his report, “is, whether Impresses in any Cases, are legal.”⁵⁹ Delving into the issue of Naval Impressments, Adams argued that if Lt. Panton had boarded the *Pitt Packet* with the intention of forcibly impressing Corbet and the others into the British Royal Navy, then Corbet had a right to resist him, and therefore the homicide was justifiable.⁶⁰ This issue of impressments had created substantial tension along the Boston waterfront, as the British Navy was notorious for actively hunting colonial sailors to fill their ranks during times of war.⁶¹ As a result, colonial sailors lived in near-constant fear of impressment, and of a life that, according to survivors, was as brutal and severe as slavery.⁶² It is no wonder then, that Corbet and his fellow sailors would risk their lives in taking up arms against the British soldiers to ensure that they did not live a life of impressment. The only other possible option would be that

⁵⁵ JA to William Tudor 30 December 1816.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Wroth and Zobel, Vol. 2, p. 279.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

⁶⁰ According to Civil Law, the convicted would be sentenced to death if the court decided that it was murder. However, there was no death penalty for manslaughter, which was recognized as intentional homicide *without* malice (Wroth and Zobel, Vol. 2, pp. 328-329).

⁶¹ Bourne, Russell. *Cradle of violence how Boston's waterfront mobs ignited the American Revolution*. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2006. Print, pp. 58-59.

⁶² Bourne, p. 58. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Impressment was the act of forcibly compelling men to serve in the British Navy without notice or consent. Particularly during times of war, when impressment was used to man British warships, the Boston waterfront became a battleground between impressment crews from the anchored warships of Great Britain and the terrified colonial sailors. Nearly half of impressed sailors died at sea, and colonists were well aware of this fact. As a result From the 1740s through the 1760s, sailors in Boston began to fight back, exerting their influence where they could against the tyrannical British Navy.

Panton boarded the *Pitt Packet* as a customs official in order to check the ships' hold for smuggled goods. However, Panton had no warrant for this type of search, and as one of his Midshipman, Mr. John Bowen, admitted during the trial, "First I searchd for Men and then for goods." ⁶³

Having made it clear that Panton's intentions were to forcibly impress Corbet, Adams then addressed the legality of such impressments. This was a case that Adams had taken great pains to examine, working tirelessly for weeks, "appealing to Heaven and earth," and investigating, "every thing that could have any relation to the subject."⁶⁴ His diligence paid off when he discovered a lesser-known statute known as the Sixth of Anne (6 Anne, c. 37, § 9).⁶⁵ This statute deemed it illegal for British naval officers to forcibly impress an American seaman, and in Adams' mind, it would ensure a victory.⁶⁶ For a man who so prided himself on his logic and legal reasoning, this statute served as the lynchpin for a foolproof argument. Before the trial had even commenced, Adams believed that he understood every angle of the case. His legal argument and his prepared speech rivaled that of Otis, in his mind, and he knew that he could stir the audience in his favor.⁶⁷ Above all, Adams understood that this statute was not an issue that the Special Vice-Admiralty Court wanted discussed publicly, particularly given the instability of British and colonial relations in 1769.

On the morning of Saturday 17 June, Adams rose to make his argument.⁶⁸ In front of a

⁶³ *Boston Chronicle*, 1 May 1769, p. 139, cols. 2-3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the exact wording of this statute is no longer available, as the records of the United Kingdom's Parliament only date back to 1834. As their Office of Public Sector Information (OPSI) makes clear, "all the records of the House of Commons before 1834 were destroyed in the fire of that year which burnt down the old Houses of Parliament."

⁶⁶ JA to William Tudor 30 December 1816. This statute, passed in 1708 during the reign of Queen Anne, was intended "for the Encouragement of Trade to America."⁶⁶ As issues of impressment came to trial, this statute was called upon in defense of American seaman. However, given the increased stress upon British naval commanders during the pre-Revolutionary era, it fell into disuse, and ceased to be enforced within the colonies in 1746. This change in the status quo did not bode well for Corbet and his crewmen, who encountered the frightening reality of impressment nearly two decades later.

⁶⁷ Shaw, p. 62.

⁶⁸ Wroth and Zobel, Vol. 2, p. 280.

crowded audience, sitting silently in eager anticipation, Adams began his discussion of Panton's death, portraying the homicide as justifiable on Corbet's part.⁶⁹ Yet Adams had barely commenced when Hutchinson stood to interrupt him, and moved that the Court should adjourn. Four hours later, the court returned with its verdict: justifiable homicide, and the prisoners were set free.⁷⁰ As Hutchinson wrote, "It appeared that neither the lieutenant nor any of his superior officers were authorized to impress, by any warrant or special authority from the lords of the admiralty; and the court was unanimously of opinion that the prisoners had a good right to defend themselves."⁷¹ In other words, Adams' legal argument had, in fact, prevailed.

This verdict, delivered so suddenly and without warning, embarrassed and confused Adams. He was cut off in the middle of his argument, an argument which he had spent weeks researching and refining. While the verdict was in his favor, the trial left a sour taste in Adams' mouth. Why had Hutchinson so abruptly adjourned the trial? Was it fear of the non-impressment act that Adams had carefully dug up, or was there something else that Adams did not know?⁷² He had only recently joined the ranks of Boston's Revolutionary elite, before being thrust into this strenuous case. Lacking legal and political guidance, Adams was left to his own devices, so he did what he did best – he worked hard, he researched thoroughly, and he presented a sound, legal argument. And yet nothing could have prepared Adams for the surprise that he would encounter in the trial. He was a man who had believed that he was prepared for anything. While the situation supports the fact that Hutchinson made his decision in order to avoid any potential

⁶⁹ JA to William Tudor 30 December 1816.

⁷⁰ Wroth and Zobel, Vol. 2, p. 280.

⁷¹ Hutchinson, Thomas. *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts-Bay*, ed. Lawrence Shaw Mayo, Cambridge, Mass., 1936. Vol. 3, pp. 166-167.

⁷² I have turned Widener and Harvard upside down looking for a primary source in which Hutchinson states his reasoning for dismissing the case so abruptly. After searching through every book that relates to Hutchinson, as well as his *History of the Massachusetts Bay Colony*, and even *The Diary and Letters of Thomas Hutchinson*, I have failed to find anything. Aside from briefly mentioning the case in his *History*, while refusing to provide his own opinion, he avoids the issue entirely in his *Diary and Letters*. The situation supports the fact though that Hutchinson made his decision to avoid conflict between the colonists and the British, as times were tense in 1769. Adams, who failed to see the situation in the political light as Hutchinson viewed it, saw Hutchinson's decision as made out of "fear" of Adams' foolproof argument, which would have surely won the case.

conflict, Adams was caught off-guard by the abrupt decision.

In December of 1769, thinking back upon *Rex v. Corbet* nearly six months after the fact, Adams wrote in his diary, “A great Variety of useful Learning might be brought into an History of that Case—and the great Curiosity of the World after the Case, would make it sell. I have half a Mind to undertake it.”⁷³ Adams was still perplexed by Hutchinson’s seemingly rash decision. In his mind, he had caught the British red-handed, and his infallible legal argument would stop the Crown in its tracks, proving once and for all that the tyrannical Parliament of Great Britain had overstepped its bounds. What Adams failed to recognize, however, was the political side of the situation. Adams did not enjoy playing the political game, choosing instead to rely on facts and reason.⁷⁴ He was therefore astonished and angered when Hutchinson chose to cut the trial short, ignoring Adams’ thoughtful argument, and failing to provide a sufficient reasoning for the verdict.⁷⁵ In other words, Adams was incapable of seeing that, at the time of the trial, Hutchinson had made the best possible decision to assuage tensions and avoid conflict within the Boston community.

This Corbet case served as Adams’ first major step into the Revolutionary era. After 1769, things began moving very quickly for the lawyer turned Patriot. Less than a year after this diary entry, Adams would find himself on the other side of the Revolutionary dispute, defending Captain Thomas Preston and his British soldiers in the Boston Massacre Trials. The soldiers, accused of killing five Boston civilians on the night of 5 March 1770, were acquitted of murder thanks to Adams’ brilliant legal rationale. Arguing that the soldiers had been endangered by the

⁷³ *Diary and Autobiography*. Vol. 1, p. 347. The entry is dated 23 December 1769.

⁷⁴ This is one of the characteristics of Adams that would lead to his lengthy rivalry with Thomas Jefferson, particularly in the Presidential elections of 1800, when Jefferson’s behind-the-scenes party politics proved to be a crucial factor in his victory over Adams. The Federalist had been replaced by the Democrat-Republican (McCullough, pp. 554-557).

⁷⁵ Shaw, p. 63.

riotous mob, and therefore had the legal right to defend themselves, Adams convinced the jury to acquit Preston and six of his soldiers.⁷⁶ Although he had been initially hesitant about defending the soldiers, fearing for his reputation and future, Adams firmly believed that these soldiers deserved a fair and impartial trial. Instead of playing the politics and refusing the British soldiers' pleas for a defense, Adams took the case, and provided rational reasoning that wound up saving their lives. Writing in his diary exactly three years after the incident, Adams called his defense "one of the most...manly and disinterested actions of my whole life."⁷⁷

The following three decades were a whirlwind for Adams. Having proven himself in both the courtroom and at the printing press, Adams became enveloped in the unfolding events of the Revolution. He represented the State of Massachusetts in the First and Second Continental Congresses from 1774 to 1777, drafted the Declaration of Independence in 1776, served as an American minister in France recruiting foreign assistance in 1778, negotiated a treaty of amity and commerce with Great Britain in 1782, and held the offices of both the Vice-President and President of the United States.⁷⁸ Certainly, Adams had left his mark. Upon running for Presidential re-election in 1800, though, the tides began to shift against the aging Adams.

Elected as President in 1796, Adams had become the first, and only, Federalist President of the United States.⁷⁹ Yet Adams had only edged out the Democratic-Republican candidate Thomas Jefferson by three electoral votes.⁸⁰ Running against his bitter rival again in 1800,

⁷⁶ Wroth and Zobel, Vol. III, p. 33. Two of the soldiers were convicted of murder due to overwhelming evidence against them, however Adams convinced the judge to reduce their crimes to manslaughter by exploiting a loophole in the British common law. By demonstrating that the soldiers could read passages of the Bible, Adams was able to use the *Benefit of the Clergy* (an outdated provision by which clergymen could claim themselves to be outside the jurisdiction of the law) to reduce the sentencing for these first-time offenders. By the 17th and 18th Centuries, the "benefit" had become more lenient, and was applicable to a large number of offenders (Baker, J.H. *An Introduction to English Legal History*. Oxford University Press, 4th ed, 2002. Print, pp. 513–15).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Diary entry dated 5 March 1773.

⁷⁸ McCullough, Shaw, Vile.

⁷⁹ Shaw, p. 247. Although many consider George Washington to be a Federalist, he was merely a supporter of the Federalist agenda, choosing to remain independent throughout his Presidency.

⁸⁰ Ferling, John E. *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800*. Oxford University Press, 2004. Print, p. 87.

amidst slanderous campaigning and personal attacks by both parties, Adams lost by eight electoral votes.⁸¹ Known as the “Revolution of 1800,” this election represented the first peaceful transfer of executive power from one political party to the next.⁸² However the election reflected more than a shift in power. Jefferson’s election was a victory for the Democratic-Republican Party.⁸³ It was a victory for arguments of decentralization and democracy, both of which Adams detested. As a staunch Federalist, Adams favored a strong national government. He understood that dissolution was the single greatest threat to the United States, and he did not want to risk handing power over to the people so soon, for fear that their state allegiances would tear apart the young Union.⁸⁴ “The fate of this government,” Adams wrote to Judge Tudor, “depends absolutely upon raising it above the state governments.”⁸⁵ In other words, Adams did not trust the people to act in the nation’s best interest.

Likewise, the people had grown weary of Adams. In the months leading up to the election, Adams found himself attacked on two political fronts.⁸⁶ He was harangued by the Democratic-Republican party for his lack of faith in the people.⁸⁷ They criticized his foreign policy, viewing it as favorable toward Great Britain. They denounced the Alien and Sedition Acts, which Adams had passed in 1798 in order to protect the infant American experiment from alien citizens of enemy powers and from seditious attacks that could potentially weaken the government.⁸⁸ As always, his primary concern was ensuring the success of the United States, but

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁸³ McCullough, pp. 550-551.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

⁸⁵ JA to William Tudor, 9 May 1789.

⁸⁶ McCullough, pp. 556-557

⁸⁷ Ferling, p. 114.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* The Alien and Sedition Acts constituted four bills that were passed under Adams’ presidency by the 5th United States Congress. They included the Naturalization Act, the Alien Friends Act, the Alien Enemies Act and the Sedition Act. While these acts were not initially popular among the colonists, they became a major issue during the election of 1800. The Democrat-Republican Party attacked the acts as being unconstitutional and ultimately designed to smother any potential opposition to Adams’ administration.

public opinion and the political atmosphere were quickly changing. The people began to see Adams as a monarchist. Further exacerbating his situation was the fact that Adams found no support within his own party. He was attacked by Alexander Hamilton and the “High Federalists,” who had grown impatient with the moderate incumbent, and who schemed to elect Adams’ Vice-Presidential candidate, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, in his stead.⁸⁹ Abandoned by his party, Adams lost by a 22.8% margin in the popular vote, the largest loss ever by an incumbent President.⁹⁰ Looking back at this election in 1811, Jefferson wrote in a letter to Dr. Benjamin Rush, “The nation at length passed condemnation on the political principles of the federalists, by refusing to continue Mr. Adams in the Presidency.”⁹¹ In the election of 1800, the people had spoken.

Leaving the White House after his loss, Adams retired to his farm in Quincy, Massachusetts with his family.⁹² Arriving home on the 18 March 1801, he was able to sit back in private for the first time in decades. However his thoughts were still occupied by his soured public perception in the wake of the 1800 election, as well as political relationships that he had left in shambles. While he seemed to enjoy his retirement, spending the majority of his time tending to his farm and reading, Adams displayed a level of disquiet that was not reflective of a man at peace with himself.⁹³ He had not been known to be a pleasant man throughout his political career, and he had the tendency to create tension, and alienate his friends and peers.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 142.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 170-171.

⁹¹ Jefferson to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 16 January 1811, from Jefferson, Thomas. *Letters and Addresses of Thomas Jefferson*. Parker, Willam B., and Viles, Jonas eds. Harvard University: The Unit Book Publishing Co., 1905. Print, p. 198. Dr. Benjamin Rush was Pennsylvanian, and a Founding Father of the United States. He was a signatory of the Declaration of Independence, as well as a participant in the Continental Congress. Today, Rush is best known as the man who helped Adams and Jefferson reconcile their differences later in life, as he encouraged both of them to resume their correspondence in 1812.

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 569.

⁹³ Shaw, p. 270.

⁹⁴ While there are multiple people whom the austere Adams successfully offended throughout his political career, the few notable figures are Benjamin Franklin, John Jay and James Madison during Adams’ time in France, and Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr during the election of 1800.

As Jefferson wrote to James Madison in 1784, mocking both Adams' affection for reason as well as his difficult personality, "His dislike of all parties, and all men, by balancing his prejudices, may give the same fair play to his reason as would a general benevolence of temper. At any rate honesty may be expected from even a poisonous weed."⁹⁵

Adams' eldest son, John Quincy, sensed his father's wounded pride and recommended that he take a more direct approach to cure his ailments and quiet his mind. John Quincy suggested that his father write an autobiography.⁹⁶ Although Adams initially fought the idea, he eventually gave in to his son's advice. "You have recommended to me, a Work, which instead of increasing my indifference to public affairs, would engage my feeling and enflame my Passions," Adams wrote.⁹⁷ "I wish not to be reminded of my Mortifications, Disappointments or Resentments."⁹⁸ Yet Adams possessed an extraordinary amount of pride, and amidst his son's innocent proposal, Adams saw the opportunity to achieve the vindication that he desperately wanted.⁹⁹ He had given much of his life to the promise of freedom and the idea of America, and he had done the state a great many services over the past few decades. Now, as Adams sat on his farm in Quincy, removed from the world of politics, he saw this autobiography as a chance to tell people of his work. In Adams' mind, people should know all that he had done.¹⁰⁰

Writing in impulsive and inconsistent bursts from 1802 until 1807, Adams composed an autobiography that was less a well-written piece of literature, and more a reflection on the open wounds that Adams had tried to therapeutically treat through this writing process.¹⁰¹ He said little about his political contemporaries, and instead focused on his personal battles in attempting

⁹⁵ *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Julian P. Boyd, John Catanzariti and Charles Cullen, eds. Print. Vol. VI, p. 241. James Madison was a prominent American politician at the time, later becoming the fourth President of the United States.

⁹⁶ Ellis, Joseph J. *Passionate Sage: the character and legacy of John Adams*. New York: Norton, 1993. Print, p. 59.

⁹⁷ *Diary and Autobiography*. Vol. 1, p. lxix.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Shaw, p. 273.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 274.

¹⁰¹ Ellis, p. 61.

to reconcile his private life with the public's opinion.¹⁰² Ironically though, Adams seemed to know why he wasn't as popular in the public eye as some of his peers. As he wrote in the third volume of his autobiography, "The Examples of Washington, Franklin and Jefferson are enough to shew that Silence and reserve in public are more Efficacious than Argumentation or Oratory."¹⁰³ Yet despite his insight, Adams could not overcome his self-doubt and insecurities. He continued his incessant ranting, voicing his unsettled concerns through three volumes of his autobiography in an effort to set the record straight. In his retirement, Adams had become an outcast obsessed with the injustice of having being labeled a monarchist by the public, and consumed by his desire for recognition.¹⁰⁴

When Adams suddenly stopped writing his autobiography in 1807, it was not because he had finally cleared his mind, but rather because something more pressing had upset his temper. In the summer of that year, Adams began a correspondence with Mercy Otis Warren, the younger sister of James Otis, Jr. and a prominent American writer.¹⁰⁵ In 1806, Warren had published her *History of the rise, progress, and termination of the American Revolution*, which was a three-volume, comprehensive history of the American Revolution. Covering the Stamp Act to the ratification of the United States Constitution, Warren's *History* contained views of the Revolution that were still controversial, and detailed the relationships between many of the Founding Fathers.¹⁰⁶ In her discussion of John Adams, however, Warren did not hold back. "[Adams was] corrupted by his residence in England," Warren wrote of Adams' diplomatic time

¹⁰² Shaw, p. 274.

¹⁰³ *Diary and Autobiography*, Vol. 3, p. 305.

¹⁰⁴ Shaw, p. 285.

¹⁰⁵ Rubin Stuart, Nancy. *The Muse of the Revolution: the secret pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the founding of a nation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2008. Print, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶ Warren, Mercy Otis. *History of the rise, progress, and termination of the American Revolution*. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988. Print.

in Europe in the late 1770s.¹⁰⁷ “[He has] relinquished the republican system and forgotten the principles of the American revolution, which he had advocated for nearly twenty years.”¹⁰⁸

This sharp and public criticism surprised Adams, who had long considered Warren a friend. Her sentiments, on the other hand, had clearly shifted over the years. Not only had Adams denied her husband, James Warren, an appointment during his vice-presidency, but Warren had also grown weary of Adams’ general distrust of the people.¹⁰⁹ Like the general public, she believed Adams to be a monarchist, and therefore attempted to paint him as a traitor to the American idea. Refusing to sit by and watch, Adams immediately began a correspondence with Warren. “I shall observe no order in selecting the passages,” Adams wrote, referring to each time Warren had mentioned him in her *History*, “but take them up as they occur by accident.”¹¹⁰ Over the course of the year, Adams continued harassing Warren with letters, justifying his actions throughout the American Revolution, exaggerating his roles, and trying to figure out what he had done to “merit so much malevolence,” from a woman whom he considered a close friend.¹¹¹ Yet his efforts were futile, and they did nothing more than make him “look silly...talking [and] writing concerning himself.”¹¹² With this *History*, Adams’ fears became realities, as he was publicly criticized, and his historical image as a Founding Father was tarnished.¹¹³

By 1808, the letters between John Adams and Mercy Otis Warren finally stopped, thereby ending a lifelong friendship between the two prominent figures and their families.¹¹⁴ As with his autobiographical project, though, Adams did not leave the Warren incident calmly.

¹⁰⁷ Warren, Mercy Otis, Vol. 3, p. 675.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Shaw, pp. 288-291.

¹¹⁰ Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 11 July 1807, in *Correspondence between John Adams and Mercy Warren*. Edited by Charles F. Adams. New York: Arno Press, 1972. Print.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Warren, Mercy Otis, Vol. 3, p. 675.

¹¹³ Shaw, p. 291.

¹¹⁴ McCullough, p. 596.

Mercy Otis Warren's public thrashing of him had only incensed Adams further, and seeing as writing an unpublished autobiography was not therapeutic for the emotional and unpredictable older man, Adams entered a more public arena. In 1809, Adams began regularly submitting essays to the newly founded *Boston Patriot*, a widely circulated colonial newspaper.¹¹⁵ The letters appeared one to two times per week, and this time Adams had no pretensions about hiding his motives. "At first I intended to encumber your paper with no documents but such as were absolutely necessary for my own vindication," Adams wrote to the printers of the *Patriot*.¹¹⁶ "But I hope you will allow me room for such other papers as may serve to throw light." The string of letters and essays, which lasted until 1812, was Adams' last public effort in self-justification.

This twelve-year period, following Adams' loss to Thomas Jefferson in the Presidential election of 1800, proved to be an embarrassing period for the retired Adams. Unlike many of the other Founding Fathers, particularly Franklin and Jefferson, Adams was unable to let go of his demons from the American Revolution. He was emotional, impressionable, and concerned with the opinions of the masses. During this period, as we have seen, he constantly felt the need to "set the record straight," so that his contemporaries, and the future, would know of his involvement in the American Revolution. He was unconfident and filled with self-doubt, writing both privately and publicly in a vain search for vindication. By 1812, however, Adams' quest for public affirmation had slowed. He had grown frustrated with the near-constant battle that he had been fighting along multiple fronts, and many of the contemporaries whom he wished to

¹¹⁵ Ellis, pp. 75-79.

¹¹⁶ Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, 31 December 1809, as quoted in Shaw, pp. 295-296.

enlighten were dying off.¹¹⁷ In the month that Adams stopped publicly writing, Adams wrote to fellow Founding Father Benjamin Rush, “My Reputation has been so much the Sport of the public for fifty years.”¹¹⁸

But Adams was not tired. In June 1812, war broke out with England, and Adams believed firmly that this war, like the Revolutionary War before it, would help to refine America’s greatness.¹¹⁹ Reminded of the Revolution, his reminiscences gradually took him back to his role during this tumultuous era. In a letter to his friend, and then Vice-President, Elbridge Gerry in the spring of 1813, Adams wrote, “It is in my opinion our duty to brave the Imputation of Vanity and Egotism by recording Facts that no other human Beings know.”¹²⁰ As one of the few Founding Fathers still alive, Adams saw this as an opportunity to influence his public perception by harking back to an epoch that was fading in America’s memory.

He was clearly unhappy with the way that recent histories had portrayed his role in the Revolution, yet this dissatisfaction was reflective of Adams’ discontent with his *actual* role in the American Revolution. He had lived through the greatest moments of the American Revolution, and yet was never the main character. He was a man who defended the *British* during the Boston Massacre trials, was on the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence and yet did not write it, served as Minister Plenipotentiary to France and yet was overshadowed by Franklin’s success, held the office of President of the United States and yet lost his re-election, abandoned by the people and his own party. Adams tried in vain to mold the historical image of his role in the American Revolution, but it had already been written into the history books.

¹¹⁷ Shaw, pp. 298-299.

¹¹⁸ JA to Benjamin Rush, 14 May 1812.

¹¹⁹ Shaw, p. 301.

¹²⁰ JA to Gerry, 26 April 1813. Gerry was an American statesman who, throughout his life, served in the United States House of Representatives, as the Governor of Massachusetts, and finally as the fifth Vice-President of the U.S.

In 1813, Adams decided to change his outlook, focusing his greatest writing effort into letters on the Revolution.¹²¹ He shifted his focus from his role *during* the American Revolution, to his role *before* the Revolution, during the crucial time period of 1760-1775. Although at the time, Adams had been too young, and too politically inexperienced to fully grasp the historical importance of his actions during this period, looking back upon this era as an eighty year-old man helped Adams gain the needed perspective. He had been involved in several seminal moments, and contributed to the Revolutionary rhetoric; it was his role in the *Rex v. Corbet* case, however, that especially intrigued him so many years later. Corbet was a case that had the potential to stir the colonial population of Boston. Because the trial had been so discreetly handled by Lieutenant-Governor Thomas Hutchinson, the tense situation quickly abated, and the incident was largely forgotten in the pages of history.

In the wake of the War of 1812, Adams began to see this case in a new light. As one of the remaining few figures from this time period, he felt himself justified in re-visiting Corbet's trial, and designating it historical importance, for who else was alive to judge?

No trial had ever interested the community so much before, excited so much curiosity and compassion, or so many apprehensions of the fatal consequences of the supremacy of parliamentary jurisdiction, or the intrigues of parliamentary courts. No trial had drawn together such crowds of auditors from day to day; they were as numerous as those in the next year, at the trials of Preston and the soldiers.¹²²

This excerpt, demonstrating Adams' newfound perspective, is from a letter written to Judge Tudor on 30 December 1816, the same year that Adams wrote to Dr. Morse on the same subject. In Adams' mind, this case was not only important because of its pre-Revolutionary implications, as Hutchinson was forced to adjourn the case in an effort to keep things under control in 1769

¹²¹ Shaw, p. 305.

¹²² Although the temper was calm within the courtroom during the Corbet case, many gathered outside to hear the news (*Boston Chronicle*, 1 May 1769). 'Preston' in this excerpt refers to the British army Captain Thomas Preston who was charged with the murder on the night of the Boston Massacre (Zobel).

Boston, but it was also important because it was *his*. Tudor had been in the process of writing a biography for James Otis, Jr. at the time, and Adams wanted Tudor to know that it had been he, not Otis, who had worked tirelessly on Corbet's case.¹²³ Adams had studied and researched for the trial. Adams had found the Sixth of Anne non-impressment statute. Adams had forced Hutchinson's hand. "Snider, ought to have been remembered, but Panton and Corbet ought not to have been forgotten. Preston and his soldiers ought to have been forgotten sooner," Adams wrote, concluding the letter.¹²⁴

While History may have ultimately forgotten the *Rex v. Corbet* case, emphasizing instead the importance of the Writs of Assistance, the Stamp Act, and the Boston Massacre trial as landmark events in the course of the American Revolution, Adams understood its significance. He may have been too young, and too ambitious to see it for what it was at the time, but in his old age, Adams was finally able to recognize the Corbet case for what it could offer him – vindication. The Corbet case was Adams' alone to understand and interpret. Instead of adhering to historical interpretations of the American Revolution, which seemed to have become standardized versions of the same events, the Corbet case allowed Adams to define the American Revolution in his own terms. As Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1815, "As to the history of the Revolution, my ideas may be peculiar, perhaps singular. What do we mean by the Revolution? The War? That was no part of the Revolution. It was only an Effect and Consequence of it. The Revolution was in the Minds of the People, and this was effected, from 1760-1775, in the course of fifteen years before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington."¹²⁵

The case, and the pre-Revolutionary era, also represented something more to Adams. It

¹²³ Tudor, William. *The Life of James Otis, of Massachusetts*. Harvard University: Wells and Lilly, 1823. Print.

¹²⁴ This is a final reference to Captain Preston and his soldiers, who fired into an angry mob on King Street in Boston on 5 March 1770. In the subsequent trial, *Rex v. Preston*, JA defended Preston and the British troops, calling it "one of the most gallant, generous, manly and disinterested Actions of [his] whole life," (*Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, Vol 2, p. 79).

¹²⁵ Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 14 August 1815, as quoted in Ellis, p. 104.

was a period during which he was idealistic about the future of the American experiment. His Federalist opinions were forming, and Adams believed that a great country could be born from the same logic and reason with which he so carefully defended Michael Corbet in 1769. For Adams, the pre-Revolutionary era represented a hopeful age, before the White House had been overrun by party politics, and when a strong and united Union was feasible in the hearts and minds of men. Adams feared “the people,” and he believed that power in the hands of the populace would inevitably lead to anarchy and disunion. Writing to Jefferson in 1815, Adams said, “The fundamental Article of my political Creed is, that Despotism, or unlimited Sovereignty, or absolute Power is the same in a Majority of a popular Assembly, and Aristocratical Counsel, and Oligarchical Junto and a single Emperor.”¹²⁶ In Adams’ mind, the Revolution was best defined by Federalism, by logic, and by foolproof arguments, long before the American experiment was betrayed by popular enthusiasm. That was *his* revolution, and it was exemplified by the Corbet case of 1769. In Corbet, as in reason, Adams found solace.

¹²⁶ JA to Jefferson, 13 November 1815.