

The Farm of a Patriot

THE RECENT HBO SERIES HAS IGNITED LONG-OVERDUE INTEREST IN JOHN ADAMS. PEACE FIELD, HIS EXTRAORDINARILY WELL-PRESERVED QUINCY ESTATE OFFERS VISITORS A CHANCE TO SEE HOW HE AND HIS FAMILY LIVED.

John Adams' list

of accomplishments is infinite. The farmer's son from Braintree was a Revolutionary War hero and author of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the oldest democratic constitution still in use anywhere in the world. The loquacious, opinionated Harvard-educated attorney was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, an American ambassador in Europe, as well as the first Vice President and the second President of the United States. His legacy, however, has long been under-appreciated. There are no monuments in his honor, no currencies that bear his likeness. However, David McCullough's Pulitzer-Prize winning biography of John Adams sparked a reconsideration of the founding father's profound impact on the nation and the HBO miniseries based on the book that aired this year drew even more interest in his political career and family life.

BY JACI CONRY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID WINTHROP

Historic portraits grace the walls of the long room, including a 1670 painting of Abigail's great-aunt and one of Nabby, John and Abigail's daughter, completed in 1785.

The miniseries, produced by Tom Hanks and starring Paul Giamatti and Laura Linney, brought John Adams, the most passionate of all Patriots, to life like never before. Many viewers wanted a more tangible perspective of the lives of John and his family, and their pursuits have led them to the Adams National Historical Park in Quincy, which welcomed record numbers of visitors this spring and summer. In fact, the 14-acre park operated by the National Park Service, actually had to hire more staff to lead tours this year. The Park is comprised of the birthplaces of John Adams and John Quincy Adams—the five-room saltbox where John and Abigail lived for the first 20 years of marriage—; the United First Parish Church, final resting place of both presidents and first ladies Abigail and Louisa Catherine Adams; and the Old House, home to four generations of the Adams family. It's the rambling Old House, or Peace field, as John fondly referred to it, with its astounding collection of 78,000 artifacts, that most visitors are coming to see.

The Old House was built as a summer estate in 1731 by Leonard Vassall, a sugar planter from Jamaica. John's wife Abigail had visited the house as a little girl for tea, and she remembered the enjoyable experience vividly. Before the



The mahogany walls of the paneled room were painted white during Abigail's time in the house in an attempt to keep the room cool.



American Revolution, the house was recognized as one of the finest country homes in rural Braintree (which became Quincy in 1792).

By 1787, after a decade abroad representing the United States in various countries, John was ready to return home. Abigail, who'd been living in London with him while he was serving as U.S. Minister to Britain was now accustomed to living in a 30 room mansion and didn't want to go back to the John Quincy Adams birthplace that she referred to as "the little cottage." When she received word from overseas that the Vassall home was for sale, she convinced John to purchase the place for 600 pounds (a sum just shy of \$2,000). The house, a three-story frame building with brick chimneys on the east and west end, came with 75 acres of farmland including a variety of fruit trees, and outbuildings which would support a working farm.

Upon their return from Europe, the house that John and Abigail settled into included seven rooms: two rooms on the first floor, two on the second, and three smaller rooms in the third floor garret. A detached kitchen was located behind the main house on the north side. Peace field would serve as the Adams family estate for four generations: it was home to President John Quincy Adams and his wife Louisa Catherine; Civil-War-Minister-to-

Great-Britain Charles Francis Adams; and literary historians Henry and Brooks Adams. Unlike the estates of other Presidents, such as Mount Vernon or Monticello, Peace field never passed out of family hands. The house doesn't represent a single period of time, rather it is a blend of 18th, 19th, and 20th century life, with a mix of styles, furnishings, china, books, pictures, and memorabilia. More than 90 percent of the home's objects belonged to the Adamases, an astounding number compared to most historic house museums. There are several carpets that have been part of the décor since John's day, and the wallpapers haven't been changed since the 1870s.

To the left of the front door is the "paneled room" where the floor to ceiling San Domingo mahogany wood paneling, installed by Vassell, is considered to be the oldest wood paneling in the United States. The room was especially dark during the long cold New England winters, so when Abigail took residence, she had the walls whitewashed to bring in more light. The paneling was graciously restored 50 years later by her grandson Charles Francis Adams. In this room, John and Abigail entertained politicians, literary luminaries, and war heroes. It was here that John Quincy Adams met with lawyers for the slave ship Amistad and agreed to argue their case for freedom before the Supreme Court. Brooks



Abigail and John shared their last days together in the president's bedroom before she succumbed to typhoid fever in 1818. Their bed was purchased when John was representing the United States in the Netherlands.



Adams, the last generation to live in the house, who described the age of progress as "creeping destruction" treated the room as a time capsule, never allowing the use of gas or electric lighting.

In the dining room, where Abigail's mahogany table served as the gathering place for countless meals, portraits of George and Martha Washington hang on the wall. Commissioned by John when he was Vice President, the oil paintings were created by Edward Savage in 1790. A price tag on the back of George's portrait reveals that John paid 46 and two-thirds dollars for the pair. Presidential portraits of John Quincy Adams and James Monroe also grace the walls, and in a place of honor above the fireplace is a copy

Peace field contains an extensive selection of blue and white Canton porcelain from Asia. While traveling during the Revolutionary War, John sent a great deal of china to back to Abigail. When times were tough on the homefront, she sold some of it, at a considerable profit.

of the last portrait of John Adams, completed when he was 88 by Gilbert Stuart.

Upon his return from Europe, John had planned on becoming a farmer, but public service called for him shortly after he'd settled into Peace field when he was elected Vice President for two terms, and President in succession of Washington. So, for a dozen years, managing the farm fell to the very capable Abigail. Having lived grandly while abroad, she was disappointed by the lack of space at Peace field and she took it upon herself to have the house doubled in size in 1800 when John was serving his term as President and living in Philadelphia, very much to his surprise. A new East Wing provided the family with a formal parlor on the first floor, a new study for John on the second, and more bedchambers on the third floor. (The house was expanded again during the 1830s, bringing the total of rooms to 21.)

The formal parlor, known as the "long room" measures approximately 32 x 32, it was here that family weddings, anniversaries, and christenings were commemorated. The room is elegantly decorated much as it was during John



In the study, Henry Adams' desk presides in the center of the room, the barrel-back mahogany chair pushed up against it was used by John Quincy Adams. In the left corner is John Adams' treasured French secretary, it was while sitting at the elaborately inlaid piece that he signed The Paris Peace Treaty, thus creating a new nation.



Located on the edge of the garden, the exquisite Stone Library is a powerful presence. Books were the essential keys to many things for the Adams family, and the library, built by Charles Francis Adams to house his father John Quincy's vast collection, contains more than 12,000 volumes. Dominating the room is an oak library table, custom made for the space at which generations of Adamses sat to read, write, and study.



and Abigail's day with 12 Louis XV upholstered armchairs and a settee purchased by John during his diplomatic service in Europe.

John Adams called his second floor study his "little book room" for the vast amounts of books he paged through and stored in the ample space—during his lifetime, he had owned more than 4,000 volumes. Located in the northeast corner is his 1775 French secretary, upon which in 1783, he signed the Peace Treaty of Paris and where he wrote his correspondence with Thomas Jefferson during 1812-1826—producing a total of 329 letters. The desk of his Pulitzer prize winning great-grandson, Henry Adams, whose noted titles include the nine-volume *History of the United States (1801-1817)* is also in here along with John Quincy Adams' roll top desk and terrestrial globe, containing the latest discoveries and communications from the observations and surveys to the year 1799. Down the hall, the four-posted bed John and Abigail purchased in the Netherlands is centered in the President's bedroom, a pristine warming pan that was a wedding gift to the couple leans in the corner, and the iron back of the fireplace bears 1788, the date they moved into the house.

"It is not large, in the first place: it is but the farm of a patriot. But there are in it two or three spots from whence are to be seen some of the most beautiful prospects in the world," said John Adams of the home where he spent the last several decades of his life. It is to endure John's legacy and protect the historic integrity of the home that the following generations of Adamses were slow and stubborn to modernize Peace field. It wasn't until the third generation that plumbing was put into the house, and in 1915, electricity

was finally installed. The kitchen's domestic technology spans three centuries, Abigail's 1780 reflector oven is there, along with the Walker and Pratt stove, added around 1850, as is a gas stove added in 1915.

Adjacent to the house is the Stone Library, a medieval-style building made of Quincy granite and brick, with an imposing slate roof. The wisteria-covered structure was built in 1870 by Charles Francis Adams to house his father, John Quincy's books and presidential papers. The floor-to-ceiling oak shelves are stacked with more than 12,000 volumes that belonged to the Adams family. There are maps and manuscripts among the

leather-bound biographies, classics, novels, and scientific, geographical, travel, and religious texts, as well as poetry collections and philosophy books. While most of John Adams' collection was donated to the Quincy Public Library and later transferred to the Boston Public Library, there are several books that bear notes in his hand in the margins. The library contains the standing desk that John Quincy used on the floor of the United States Congress, where he served for 17 years after the presidency, and the Mendi Bible given to him by the captives of the Amistad whose freedom he secured.

When Brooks Adams passed away in 1927, the Adams

Memorial Society was established to share the Old House and Stone Library with the public as an educational and civic center. In 1946, the Society gave the buildings and their contents to the National Park Service.

Today, English boxwood planted by Vassell edges the front gardens and lilacs and roses planted by Abigail blossom every season. A miraculously intact time capsule, Peace field is a national treasure. The walls do seem to talk, and oh, the stories they tell: it is impossible to walk through the halls of the house and not feel, understand, and appreciate the impact of the great John Adams. [SSL](#)