Samuel Adams

Popular patriot and agitator Samuel Adams is famous for organizing colonial resistance to British policies in Massachusetts, particularly the popular protests to the Stamp Act in 1765 and the Boston Tea Party in 1773. He was at the center of every major act of colonial defiance in Boston in the decade leading up to the American Revolution. Never as successful in politics as his cousin, John Adams, Samuel nevertheless earned an important place in American history as a fiery revolutionary leader and propagandist.

Born in Boston, Massachusetts on September 27, 1722, Adams graduated from Harvard College in 1740, where he also obtained his master's degree three years later. He tried studying law but gave it up; failed at running his own business; and after inheriting his father's brewery business and property, did so poorly in managing it that he soon fell into debt and was reduced to relying on friends in order to provide for his family, a situation that he found himself in frequently throughout his life.

In 1747, Adams became influential in local politics and began writing newspaper articles on current affairs. He married Elizabeth Checkley in 1749, and the couple subsequently had two children before she died in 1757. In 1756, Adams became tax collector for Boston, a position that required him to personally make up any shortfalls in the revenue. His continuing propensity to grant citizens extra time to pay their taxes, or to forgive citizens' taxes altogether, resulted in an eventual debt to the colonial government of £8,000.

Adams married Elizabeth Wells in 1764 and that year, embarked on a more active role in the colony's political sphere, primarily in protest to the British government's plans to increase taxation of the North American colonists. Sometime in the early 1760s, he had joined a small social group called the Caucus Club, which met to discuss the politics of the day. Gradually, this group became the center of colonial resistance in Boston, and Adams emerged as the leader of radical politics in the colony.

In 1765, Adams organized colonial protests to the Stamp Act, writing declarations reaffirming the colonists' rights within the British Empire and orchestrating public demonstrations against the act. Although his involvement could never be proven, many believed that he was behind the outbreak of violence in Boston in August of that year, which culminated in the intimidation of Stamp Commissioner Andrew Oliver into resigning his post and the sacking of Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson's house. These so-called Stamp Act riots sparked similar demonstrations throughout North America and established Adams as one of the primary figures behind colonial resistance.

On September 27, 1765, Adams was elected to the lower house of the Massachusetts colonial legislature. As a member of the legislature, he worked to fill the house with radicals, fought against the Townshend Acts (revenue acts passed by Parliament to replace the repealed Stamp Act), and drafted letters to the assemblies of other colonies. He also organized the nonimportation agreement by which colonists refused to buy goods imported from Great Britain and propagated the distribution of the Circular Letter to all of the colonial assemblies, urging them to work together in defense of their rights.

Adams formulated the basic premises for the break with England as early as 1765. When popular support for confronting the Crown periodically died down during the late 1760s and early 1770s, he kept the controversy alive...
with a steady stream of articles warning people against being lulled into accepting British tyranny. His lurid (and often false) depictions of British outrages committed on the people of Boston kept the controversy in the public eye.

Adams' greatest triumph as an agitator occurred in December 1773, when Bostonians protested against the hated Tea Tax by refusing to allow ships loaded with British tea to dock in Boston. Following a heated town meeting in which various proposals for dealing with the tea were discussed, Adams announced, "This meeting can do nothing more to save the country." His words were a prearranged signal to other members of the meeting, who promptly rose and walked out. Later that night, several town members, disguised as Native Americans, dumped the offending tea in Boston harbor. The Boston Tea Party, as the episode quickly became known, outraged the British government and prompted Parliament to pass the Coercive Acts the following spring, legislation that practically abolished self-government in Massachusetts.

In response, the colonies agreed that representatives from each must meet to discuss their relationship with Great Britain and decide on measures for the protection of their rights. At Adams' urging, an intercolonial congress was called, known as the First Continental Congress. He and four other delegates were chosen to represent Massachusetts.

Before leaving for Philadelphia (where the congress was being held), Adams was active in organizing the convention that adopted the Suffolk Resolves on September 9, thereby placing Massachusetts in a state of virtual rebellion. In Philadelphia, he used his influence to commit the Continental Congress to approval of the Suffolk Resolves.

Reelected to the Second Continental Congress, Adams returned to Philadelphia in 1775. He proposed a confederation of the colonies in favor of immediate independence and later signed the Declaration of Independence.

Once the break with Great Britain was achieved, Adams' political influence began to wane. He served in the Continental Congress until 1781 and then returned to Boston, where he was a delegate to the convention that drafted the Massachusetts state constitution. Under the new Massachusetts government, he served as a senator and member of the council. He supported the adoption of the federal Constitution, with the provision that the Bill of Rights be added. He failed to win election to the U.S. Congress in 1788 but was elected lieutenant governor in 1789 and governor in 1794, the office from which he retired to private life in 1797. Adams died on October 2, 1803.

Further Reading


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