

John and Samuel Adams on the road to independence

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The Declaration of Independence has long been associated with Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Jefferson was the pen who drafted the Declaration. Adams was the leading speaker for independence in the Continental Congress.

At one point on July 1, in the debate leading up to the Declaration, Adams was called on to summarize both sides of the debate for late-arriving delegates from New Jersey. That was John Adam's strength -- speaking cogently on his feet. Nearly five decades later, Jefferson, whose oratorical skills were limited, called Adams, "our Colossus on the floor. He was not graceful, nor elegant, nor remarkably fluent; but he came out, occasionally, with a power of thought and expression that moved us from our seats."

But the driving forces for independence in Philadelphia and in the Continental Congress were not only John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. John's older, poorer, more pious, and more impatient cousin -- Samuel Adams -- should not be forgotten. The son of a brewer-merchant, Sam Adams himself was a failed brewer and businessman, tax collector, and influential politician.

Sam was better educated than John, having earned a master's degree as well as an undergraduate degree at Harvard. Compared to the aloof John, Sam was a man of the people. For more than a decade before the American Revolution, Sam was a leader in Boston's opposition to British policies. But so poor was he that when he was selected to represent Massachusetts in the First Continental Congress, his friends had to buy him a new suit of clothes.

The British knew Sam's importance. Sam Adams and John Hancock were at the top of the British "most wanted" list when they marched on Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775.

In the Second Continental Congress, Sam forged a close friendship with Richard Henry Lee, who introduced the resolution for independence in June 1776. While John's skill was on the legislative floor, Sam's skill was in the background. John wrote that he believed that Sam had, "the most thorough Understanding of Liberty, and her Resources, in the Temper and Character of the People tho not in the Law and Constitution, as well as the most habitual, radical Love of it, of any of them -- as well as the most correct genteel and artful Pen."

In Boston, Sam had helped run a newspaper. In Philadelphia, he supported independence by praising Thomas Paine's hugely influential "Common Sense," published in January

1776. Sam understood the incongruity of fighting British troops without legislating independence. Under the pen name "Candidus," Sam wrote for the Boston Gazette in February: "By declaring independence, we put ourselves on a footing for an equal negotiation."

Sam worked closely that spring with Philadelphians trying to reverse the anti-independence composition of the Pennsylvania legislature. In April, Sam Adams wrote James Warren: "The Child Independence is now struggling for Birth. I trust that in a short time it will be brought forth and in Spite of Pharaoh all America shall hail the dignified Stranger." As one historian wrote, Sam Adams played the, "role of midwife for the delivery of the child Independence."

Samuel Adams rejoiced at the approval of independence by Congress, but he regretted that it had taken so long. "Much I am afraid has been lost by delaying to take this decisive step," he wrote on July 9, 1774. His impatience for independence, victory, and peace would not be fulfilled until nine years later in 1783.