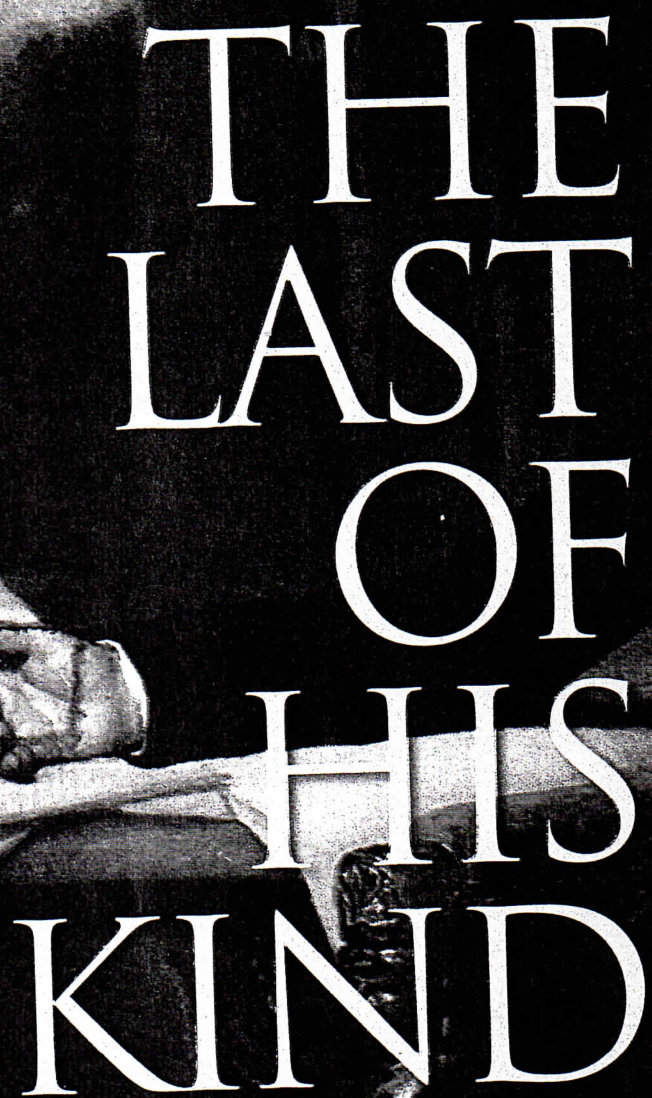
THE LAST OF HIS KIND



PRESIDENT JOHN QUINCY ADAMS'S ONE-TERM ADMINISTRATION WAS NOT A SUCCESS, BUT HIS LATTER-DAY CONGRESSIONAL CAREER TRANSFORMED HIM INTO A NATIONAL HERO

BY JOSEPH WHEELAN

After losing a bruising re-election campaign for a second term as the nation's sixth president in 1828, John Quincy Adams went home to Quincy, Mass., to lick his wounds. Two years later, he was urged to run for the House of Representatives from his home district. During his 17 years in Congress, he gradually found his voice and became the institution's conscience, leading the fight, sometimes single-handedly, against the slave powers in the South. Here, Joseph Wheelan tells the story of how Adams stubbornly championed his beliefs till the very end of his life and, in doing that, earned the respect and enduring love of his countrymen.

John Quincy Adams embarked on his congressional career with no fanfare and no expectations other than to serve his constituents. He had no partisan ax to grind, no cause to champion, and nothing further to prove. For 35 years, with scarcely a break, he had served his country as a diplomat to Europe, a senator, secretary of state, and president.

The same deeply felt obligation to public duty that had compelled the reluctant George Washington to serve as the first president persuaded Adams to obey the summons of his friends and neighbors in the Plymouth District in 1830. It was an impulse that was fading from American public life when Adams commenced his duties at Seat 203 in the House of Representatives on Dec. 5, 1831. At 64, Adams was the oldest of the 89 freshman congressmen seated that day.

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS
1825-1829

Adams probably expected that he would serve out his term in the 22nd Congress and then retire to Quincy with his family, books, diary, garden, and memories. He may have envisioned a more graceful exit than the one occasioned by his defeat by Andrew Jackson. And he may also have secretly entertained hopes of avenging the abuses heaped upon him during the mudslinging 1828 presidential campaign. But never did he imagine the career that lay before him. Rather than being a museum piece from America's founding generation, Adams became Congress's conscience.

Adams's mental superstructure was an amalgam of 18th-century Enlightenment thought and the Calvinism of Cotton Mather. He could also be described as a Renaissance man, when one considers his literary accomplishments, his devotion to astronomy and forest cultivation, and his commitment to establishing the Smithsonian Institution and a national observatory. Puritan self-discipline infused every facet of his life; he consistently pushed himself to rise earlier, to read and write more, to walk and swim farther and faster. In all this, he was not anomalous to American men of his generation and education. But after most of his contemporaries had passed on, Adams stood out as a rarity.

Although Adams was a poet, intellectual, scholar, and lifelong learner, he was no ivory-tower philosopher. He craved public life. He discovered this truth about himself only after spending decades longing for retirement among his books and plants.

As Adams found out, his congressional seat granted him a degree of freedom that he had never before enjoyed in public life. As a diplomat, he was tethered to U.S. policy and handcuffed by protocol. As a Massachusetts senator, he was answerable to the state General Assembly. When he was secretary of state, the

HOME BOY. John Quincy Adams (opposite); his family home in Quincy, Mass., now a historic landmark (above)

FROM LEFT: PETER NEWARK AMERICAN PICTURES / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY; BETTMANN / CORBIS

president was the final arbiter. And as president, Adams, incorrigibly inept as a politician, was a leaf carried along on powerful political currents.

Now accountable to just 11,000 constituents, Adams was free either to toil in anonymity as one of 213 representatives, quietly safeguarding the interests of his people, or to champion a cause. Having embarked on a wholly new public career, he learned that being a former president granted him visibility but no special privileges or advantages; some members respected his station, while others found vulnerabilities in his long public history to attack.

But Adams was no ordinary congressman; he was a statesman with a mind trained to analyze issues and take action. He made himself a master of parliamentary rules—with his nearly photographic memory and encyclopedic mind, this was not particularly difficult —and consequently, he became an exceptionally effective congressman. He was so conversant in House procedures and protocol that in December 1839, when the House was unable to organize itself, his colleagues turned to him to lead them out of the morass.

Adams possessed another, incalculable advantage:

☆ AS ADAMS FEARED, THE SLAVERY DEBATE BROUGHT ON THE DEADLIEST WAR IN AMERICAN HISTORY.

a moral rudder that steered by principle and not politics. It had been an albatross when he was president. But in Congress, he could play the part of an Old Testament prophet, auguring civil war unless the United States shed its shameful legacy of slavery. Four years after first taking his seat in Congress, all the ingredients were present, awaiting the pinch of yeast, the cause worthy of his talents and energy.

It came to him in December 1835. The South's suppression of the abolition societies' mass mailings and Southerners' indignant defense of their prerogatives as slaveholders had exhausted his former tolerance for the institution of slavery. Rumblings that they might next suppress the abolitionists' right to send Congress petitions against slavery impelled him finally to act: "I have taken up the glove in the House."

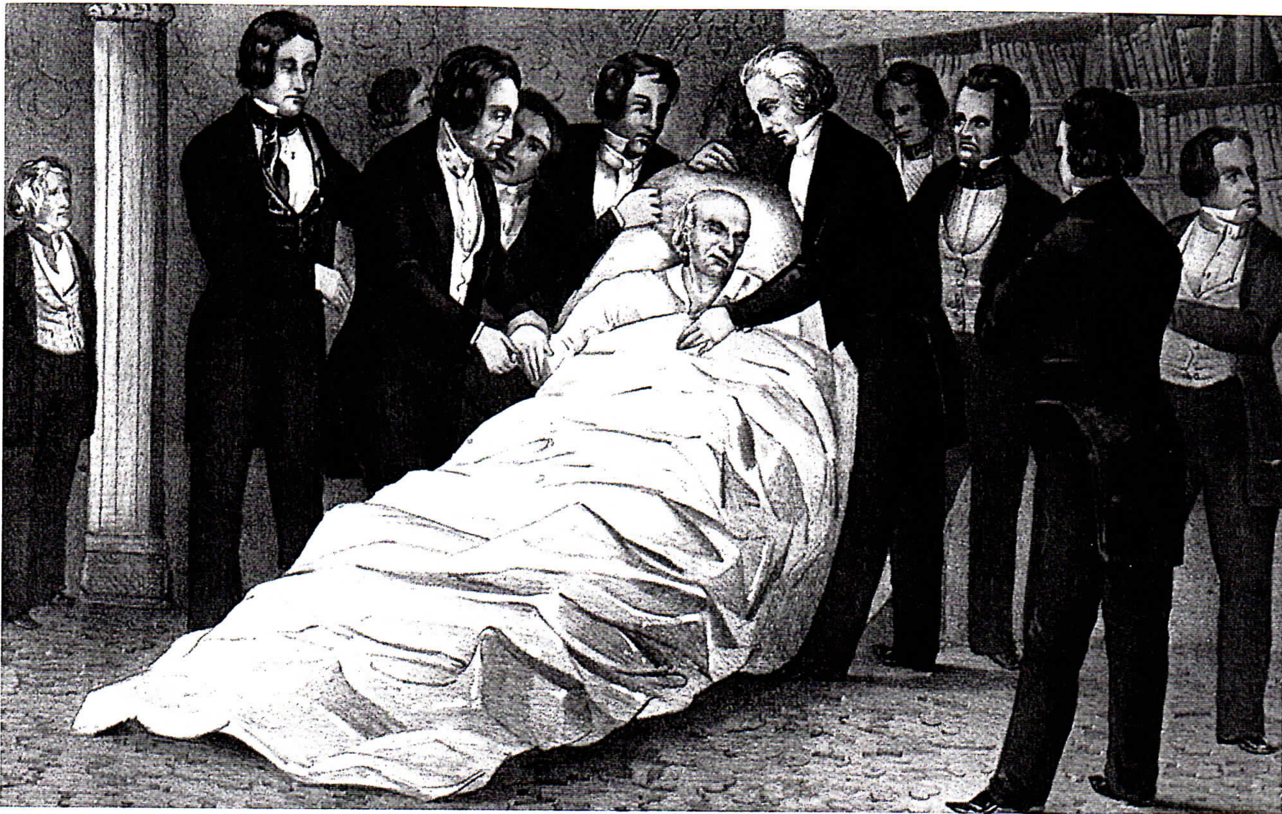
With this one decision, Adams changed his life, his legacy, and the course of events. "The cause is good and great," he wrote. He became expert at waging the long fight. It took eight years to rescind the gag rule against antislavery petitions in Congress; for nine years, he was almost single-handedly responsible for delaying the annexation of Texas. He repudiated the federal government's heartless Indian removal policy (where Indians were pushed off fertile land and sent westward to areas with much poorer soil, allowing white settlers to claim the better land) and defended women's political rights and the right of free speech. "The right of petition ... is essential to the very existence of government; it is the right of the people over the Government; it is their right, and they may not be deprived of it." All the while, he baited and fought the slave power. Slavery was "a sin before the sight of God."

Surprisingly, given his previous reticence, Adams found that he enjoyed the rough-and-tumble House debates, and he wore his vilification by Southerners as a badge of honor. He not only relished the fights on the House floor but also discovered a late-blooming talent for oratory and debate. Extraordinarily skilled in marshaling facts from his nearly infallible memory into cogent argument, "Old Nestor" was a formidable adversary and potent advocate.

All along, Adams intuitively knew not only that slavery was inherently evil but also that it would lead to civil war. He introduced three constitutional amendments in the House to gradually phase it out. The South, he argued, going to the heart of its objection to emancipation, stood to gain congressional representation by transforming slaves, each counting for census purposes as three fifths of a white man, into citizens counting as whole men. He proposed that all children born in the United States on or after July 4, 1842, be free, that slavery be abolished in the District of Columbia by 1845, and that no new slave state, Florida excepted, be admitted into the Union. As Adams expected, his attempts to amend the Constitution died. And as Adams feared, the slavery debate, irrevocably unstoppered by the Mexican War (which in theory could open vast new territories where slavery might be allowed), later brought on the deadliest war in American history.

Because historians rate American presidents on their accomplishments in office and not on their post-presidencies, John Quincy Adams usually fares poorly. Responsibility for this assessment lies largely with Adams; he was politically tone-deaf, almost willfully so, at the very moment that a new political party system was rapidly taking shape in the country.

During the 1824 election, Henry Clay threw his electoral votes for the presidency to Adams when there was no clear winner, enabling Adams to defeat Jackson, the previous front-runner. Adams then naively named Clay secretary of state, heedless of the appearance that a "corrupt bargain" had been made during the campaign. He refused to wield his patronage or to form a party organization, and his concept of seeking office was hopelessly anachronistic. Furthermore, his administration's "Liberty With Power" program was decades ahead of its time and out of step with public sentiment. Thus, it failed in every respect: Few canals, bridges, or roads were built; no national university, national observatory, or U.S. naval academy was established; government research and ex-



ploration languished; Adams's dream of a Department of the Interior would not be fulfilled until after the Mexican War, which lasted from 1846 to 1848; and Congress bridled at his attempts to foster hemispheric unity.

Less to blame, but sharing some responsibility for Adams's dismal presidential legacy, is his nemesis, Andrew Jackson, who gave his supporters free rein to vilify Adams, especially during the vicious 1828 presidential campaign. The winners write the history, and Jackson's legion of propagandists, both politicians and historians, succeeded in tagging Adams as an elitist with monarchical leanings. Perhaps this was retribution for Adams's protestations against the unsavory aspects of the Jackson program: his safeguarding of slavery, his efforts to annex Texas and thereby extend slavery, and his forced removal of the eastern Indian tribes to enable Southern slaveholders to occupy their lands.

Adams was skilled at agitating his political enemies —and they were legion—to the point that they tried to censure him, a decision they instantly regretted as Adams, in self-defense, proceeded to carve them up on the House floor. Following the unsuccessful censure attempt in 1842, Adams's congressional colleagues increasingly began granting him the same iconic respect that Adams's countrymen were according him. During the Roaring '40s, the industrial age gained momentum in America with its steamships, railroads, the telegraph, and the penny press. As often happens in times of rapid change, there was an upwelling of nostalgia for a bygone era —the war for independence and the nation's founding. Books written about that era, such as *Washington and His Generals,* became bestsellers as people sought to learn more about American independence. Thus, it stood to reason that the public would revere the last connection with that golden age.

And so, with his powers rapidly ebbing, Adams became, of all things, a living symbol. Surely, it must have made him secretly proud, and a bit amused, as would have the enormous public outpouring of emotion at his death in 1848.

While rising to cast a vote in Congress, Adams suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage and died two days later in the House speaker's chamber in the Capitol.

William Seward, who would later become secretary of state under Abraham Lincoln, observed in his eulogy for his good friend that, like Cicero, Adams could say, "I have rendered to my country all the great services which she was willing to receive at my hands, and I have never harbored a thought concerning her that was not divine."

From the book Mr. Adams's Last Crusade *by Joseph Wheelan. Excerpted by arrangement with PublicAffairs, a member of the Perseus Books Group. Copyright © 2009.*

A DEATH IN THE HOUSE. Quincy's final moments (above); a copper campaign coin bearing his name (left)

FROM TOP: N. CURRIER / LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; DAVID J. & JANICE L. FRENT COLLECTION / CORBIS