

The Contributions of Samuel Adams to the American Revolution: A Historiographic Analysis

by Karen Perkins

As John Adams stated in a letter to Thomas Jefferson on May 27, 1819, Samuel Adams' character "will never be accurately known to posterity as it was never sufficiently known to its own age."¹ Adams made it a habit to burn or cut up his correspondences and personal writings, going so far as to end one wartime letter with "Burn this."² His collected writings fill only four volumes whereas George Washington's writings fill thirty-six volumes.³ The elusiveness of the character of Samuel Adams has allowed for a wide interpretation of his place and influence in American Revolution. Prominent American Revolution histories rarely discuss Adams at length and there are few biographies about him. With Samuel Adams' description in history going from heroic father of the Revolution to zealot and propagandist directing mobs to a complex man who greatly influenced the American Revolution, this essay will evaluate how the various interpretations of Samuel Adams over time in prominent American Revolutionary histories that discuss him and biographies, specifically analyzing arguments about his motivation and influence in beginning and sustaining the American Revolution.

The first histories of the American Revolution began to appear in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. These Whig histories were written from the winners' perspective and look at the Revolution in heroic and divine terms. Most of the Whig histories mention Samuel Adams but do not delve into his contributions to the Revolution. One Whig history that does is Mercy Otis Warren's *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the*

¹ Ira Stoll, *Samuel Adams: A Life* (New York: Free Press, 2008) 262.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

American Revolution interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observation from 1805. Though still not writing about him at length, Warren does describe Adams favorably and states that he has “a cool head, stern manners, a smooth address, and a Roman-like firmness.”⁴ For Warren, Adams was a virtuous and moral leader of the Revolution, never faltering from his religious or political beliefs. Warren shows that “Through a long life he exhibited on all occasions, an example of patriotism, religion, and virtue honorary to the human character.”⁵

One of the first histories that acknowledged and discussed the influence of Samuel Adams in the American Revolution at length was George Bancroft’s *History of the United States of America* written from 1864-1874. Bancroft depicts Adams as one of the most influential founding fathers and describes him in positive terms, stating that he had “the most clear and logical mind.”⁶ Dedicating three pages to describing him, Bancroft shows that Adams “received and held fast the opinions of the Fathers of New - England, that the colonies and England had a common king, but separate and independent legislatures.”⁷ This was Adams’ political creed and it motivated him in both writing and action. To Bancroft, Adams was the political leader in Boston that led the way to the Revolution. Already “famed as a political writer” before the passing of the Stamp Acts, Adams’ ability to “reconcile conflicting interests and promote harmony in action”⁸ helped him lead Boston into resisting Parliamentary action. Bancroft also shows that Adams’ religious faith played into his character that helped him become as influential as he was. As Bancroft stated, “his sublime and unfaltering hope had a cast of solemnity, and was as much a part of his nature as if his confidence sprung from insight into the divine decrees, and was as firm as a sincere Calvinist’s assurance of his election.”⁹ To Bancroft, Samuel Adams “set the example to other towns” to resist British encroachment of colonial rights and could be called “the last of the Puritans.”¹⁰

The first true biography of Samuel Adams was written by his great-grandson, William V. Wells published in 1865. In this detailed three volume

⁴ Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observations*, vol. 1 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1805), 211.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶ George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America: From the Discovery of the American Continent*, vol. 5 (Boston: Little Brown, 1864-74), 194.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 196-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 197 and 329.

account, Wells argues that Samuel Adams was the heroic force behind the movement towards revolution. Using numerous long quotes from primary sources, Wells believed that Adams wanted revolution because “fair representation in Parliament [was] utterly impossible.”¹¹ This stemmed from Adams’ belief in direct representation and his involvement in the town government of Boston. Wells argues that Adams’ influence was not only in being a leader of the Massachusetts Assembly but also in his writings that were published by the press of Boston. Wells uses these to support his theory that Adams was the most influential leader in the beginning of the revolution. Though biased due to relation to Adams, Wells is the first biographer to attempt to place Adams as a true revolutionary leader and is important because of the gathering of primary sources, especially letters, in his books.¹²

In the second major biography of Samuel Adams, James K. Hosmer attempts to “estimate more fairly his character and that of his opponents” as opposed to Wells “filial piety.”¹³ In his *Samuel Adams* from 1885, Hosmer argues that Adams had always been fascinated by politics and easily stepped into a leadership position during the Revolution due to his previous involvement in government. Hosmer states that Adams was greatly influenced by the patriotism of politicians James Otis and Oxenbridge Thatcher. Though Adams had been involved in politics for several years regularly writing instructions for representatives of Boston, Adams did not come into prominence until the death of Thatcher which prompted a special election in which Adams won his first representative seat for Boston in the Massachusetts Assembly.¹⁴ For Hosmer, Adams was a man of the town meeting and his influence in the Massachusetts Assembly was an extension of his influence in the Boston town meeting. Hosmer states that in the town meetings, Adams was “the controlling mind of one town” while in the Massachusetts Assembly, he was the controlling mind of “all the Massachusetts towns, who, as it were, sat down together.”¹⁵ Hosmer argues that “Massachusetts led the thirteen colonies during the years preliminary to the Revolution” and that “Boston led Massachusetts” therefore it is clear to him that it was “Samuel Adams who led Boston.”¹⁶ Hosmer shows that

¹¹ William V. Wells, *The Life and Public Service of Samuel Adams*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1865), 93.

¹² William V. Wells, *The Life and Public Service of Samuel Adams*, vol. 2 (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1865), 11-17.

¹³ James K. Hosmer, *Samuel Adams* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1885), xiv-xv.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38-40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 316.

Samuel Adams was a man of Boston and through his service to Boston as a “fire-ward, ...tax-collector, moderator to the town meeting” and then his extension to his representation of Boston in the Massachusetts Assembly, Adams helped push America towards independence.¹⁷

Early twentieth century historians began to view history in more progressive and liberal terms. Historians sought to reevaluate history, especially what they saw as rich, white men’s history and viewing the founding fathers more critically. Therefore, there was a major shift in the interpretation of Samuel Adams, becoming highly critical of his actions. The first of these new analyses was Ralph Volney Harlow’s *Samuel Adams, Promoter of the American Revolution: A Study in Psychology and Politics* published in 1923. Looking at the “psychological side of revolution,” Harlow argues that Adams had an inferiority complex that caused him to become a zealot who manipulated the truth to direct the public.¹⁸ Harlow believed that Adams’ interest in politics was due to the fact that he had been a “failure in everything else” and “had found success in one field.”¹⁹ Using psychology, Harlow claims that Adams’ political strivings became more intense because of his failures elsewhere and his desire to make up for those failures. Harlow goes on to say that “Adams revealed a curious trait which is common to all neurotics” in that he made “an effort to redress the lack of balance in the objective world by constructing mental worlds” for himself.²⁰ However, to Harlow, Adams was “one of the most important” leaders who “devoted [himself] to the task of convincing the people that they were oppressed, and in organizing them so that they could give point to their feeling.”²¹ Adams’ political influence had three distinct phases. First, he helped form a radical group in the legislature and brought it into power. This group was connected with the “controversy of the writs of assistance.”²² Second, this radical group created the tenets for revolution based mostly on democratic theory from Locke’s second essay on government. Finally, this group, with Adams leading it, spread these tenets through organizing with other colonies to “bring about a union of British North America.”²³ Through these phases, Samuel Adams was able to spread his propaganda and agitate the colonies into rebellion. Harlow argues that Adams’ mental state led to him

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 317.

¹⁸ Ralph Volney Harlow, *Samuel Adams, Promoter of the American Revolution: A Study in Psychology and Politics* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1923), ix.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²² *Ibid.*, 26.

²³ *Ibid.*

creating a radical movement and using propaganda and agitation to influence the American Revolution.

Influenced by Harlow yet differing in his approach, John C. Miller in his *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda* from 1936 described Adams as a propagandist who “controlled the mobs and Boston elections” through his activity with the Sons of Liberty club.²⁴ Miller claims that “the Sons of Liberty sprang from the Caucus Club, which had been in existence for a half-century” before 1765.²⁵ The Boston Sons of Liberty was “led by Sam Adams” and “boasted some of the most fiery, unruly Whigs on the continent.”²⁶ Miller argues that Adams’ father influenced his revolutionary spirit by having many radical politicians, namely Elisha Cooke, to his home for discussion. Miller states that it was “chiefly through Elisha Cooke that Sam Adams became imbued with the spirit that was to make him a revolutionary leader.”²⁷ Adams also inherited his involvement in the Caucus Club from his father which he turned “into a revolutionary machine and with its aid made himself ‘Dictator’ of Boston,” in which he controlled the revolutionary spirit.²⁸ Adams was able to use the clubs to form radical groups that would attempt to link the colonies together through propaganda. For this reason, Adams formed the committees of correspondence with Miller saying “Once Adams’s radical followers – under the name of committees of correspondence – were in power in every Massachusetts town, the whole colony would act in concert with Boston and the rural representatives would be sent down to the General Court with instructions to join the metropolis in whatever measures it took to oppose the mother country.”²⁹ For Miller, Samuel Adams used his involvement in clubs to form radical groups that persuaded the colonies to start the American Revolution.

Though viewing Samuel Adams’ “personality, rather than achievement” and in more positive terms than Harlow and Miller, Kenneth Umbreit in his *Founding Fathers: Men Who Shaped Our Tradition* published in 1941 argues that Adams was a still propagandist for the Revolutionary cause.³⁰ To Umbreit, Adams was the person who “determined to break up the British Empire” and “made a business of the revolution.”³¹ He was “more

²⁴ John C. Miller, *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1936), 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

³⁰ Kenneth Umbreit, *Founding Fathers: Men Who Shaped Our Tradition* (New York: Harper & Publishers, 1941), viii.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

than any other, ... responsible for arousing the people of such apparently abstract question."³² Though he knew his intent, Adams "was far too good a politician to let his true objectives be known" at the beginning of his political career.³³ Umbreit goes on to argue that Adams knew what a quest for independence entailed but that he felt it was necessary. Though he was "not a mob-leader" and "opposed to mobs and to any use of violence," Adams "was satisfied that the contest could only end in war."³⁴ For this, he created the committee of correspondence which "served an immediate object as a propaganda machine."³⁵ Though Umbreit does argue that Adams thought of and pushed for independence through propaganda, he does not view it as negatively as Harlow and Miller.

After World War II, patriotism and American values began to influence historians to again look at the American Revolution and the founding fathers in positive terms. With this influence, Stewart Beach uses Samuel Adams to positively describe the years and events that led to the Revolution in his *Samuel Adams: The Fateful Years, 1764-1776* published in 1965. Beach argues that Adams was an "intensely human and fascinating individual" who did not look for "personal prestige or gain."³⁶ To Beach, "Samuel Adams, more than any other man, launched the destiny of a new nation" by pushing for independence and gaining support of other colonies.³⁷ Beach insists that Adams was not a "rabble-rousing demagogue" as previous biographers had described him but instead shows that he "condemned the outrages of the mob."³⁸ Beach places Adams' motivation on his belief that the British government was encroaching on colonial rights.³⁹ Adams was able to be influential in the revolutionary movement because of his involvement with in the General Courts of Massachusetts.⁴⁰

In *The Grand Incendiary: A Biography of Samuel Adams* published in 1973, Paul Lewis argues that Samuel Adams' motivation comes from his dedication to the ideas of John Locke and his influence lay in his ability to "simplify complicated issues for the general public" and in building

³² Ibid., 185.

³³ Ibid., 184.

³⁴ Ibid., 185-186.

³⁵ Ibid., 187.

³⁶ Stewart Beach, *Samuel Adams: The Fateful Year, 1764-1776* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1965), x.

³⁷ Ibid., 10.

³⁸ Ibid., 120.

³⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 7-9.

communication throughout Massachusetts and into the other colonies.⁴¹ Lewis discusses the influence of John Locke on Adams multiple times, stating that Adams “never allowed himself to forget the fundamentals he had learned from reading John Locke.”⁴² To Lewis, Locke’s theories helped form Adams’ political beliefs, and he applied “the principles expounded by John Locke to specific, large problems that affected all Americans everywhere.”⁴³ According to Lewis, this is Adams’ greatest contribution, in applying these complex theories to problems in terms that the general public could understand and support. Though he made the ideas of the Revolution understandable, Lewis shows that he did not encourage mob violence and “had no intention of sparking an insurrection until the people of Massachusetts and the other colonies were prepared to support a rebellion and accept the sacrifices required in time of war.”⁴⁴ To Lewis, Adams was the “Father of American Independence” and was the chief organizer of the rebellion.⁴⁵

Writing for the bicentennial and published in 1976, Cass Canfield in his *Samuel Adams’s Revolution: 1765-1776* echoed Beach as he looked at the history of the beginning of the Revolution through Samuel Adams. However, Canfield believes that Adams’ role “had not been fully appreciated” and he was one “who fanned the flame of rebellion and that he did so more effectively than any other major American leader.”⁴⁶ Canfield suggests that Adams was not a hero but a “tenacious and uncompromising leader of the independence movement.”⁴⁷ To Canfield, Adams was an “outstanding” man even though he was a “master of covert propaganda, which he directed against the injustices of British rule in the colonies.”⁴⁸ Though he was influenced by his Puritanical beliefs, Adams was a true politician influenced by his father’s “anti-British views.”⁴⁹ Through his political skills and ability to influence, Adams showed the colonies that the “quarrel with Great Britain was no revolutionary act but based upon his interpretation of constitutional law” that Parliament was “violating the

⁴¹ Paul Lewis, *The Grand Incendiary: A Biography of Samuel Adams* (New York: The Dial Press, 1973), 35.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 391.

⁴⁶ Cass Canfield, *Samuel Adams’s Revolution: 1765-1776* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1976), xiii.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Massachusetts Bay Charter.⁵⁰ Canfield shows that Adams was a complex “man of opposites” who was both strictly religious and radical in his political beliefs and influential in his leadership in beginning the American Revolution.⁵¹

Contemporary biographies of Samuel Adams attempt to view Adams as more of a whole person with a multifaceted personality that was influenced by a wide range of events during his life. These biographers were influenced by the popularity of social and cultural history that seek a well-rounded history that looks at cultural and social influences. However, most of them interpret him as either more religiously influenced or more politically driven. The first of the religious interpretations of Adams is William M. Fowler, Jr. in his *Samuel Adams: Radical Puritan* from 1997. Fowler argues that Adams’ motivations stemmed from his belief in a covenant, “that the people of his community were bound to one another through a common history and reverence for virtue and simplicity.”⁵² This Puritanical belief in community, once threatened, is what led him to rebel. To Fowler, this made Adams a “classic radical” in the sense that he wanted to return to the “roots of his society.”⁵³ Adams “opposed any initiative that might weaken town autonomy.”⁵⁴ Through his local work in Boston, Adams made a political name for himself and gained a seat in the Massachusetts Assembly in July 1765.⁵⁵ Through the Stamp Act crisis, Adams became “the official voice of the House; he was the informal one as well.”⁵⁶ Fowler argues that Adams’ traditional Puritanical beliefs and his political ideology of participation through town governments increasingly made his voice heard in the Massachusetts General Courts, which in turn led the colonies in resisting Parliamentary authority.

Ira Stoll’s *Samuel Adams: A Life* from 2008 interprets Samuel Adams in the most religious terms of all the biographies. Stoll claims that the basis for Adams’ actions was his deep Puritanical beliefs inherited from his mother. He wanted to create an independent country because the American people could start afresh to make a pure Christian society. To Stoll, Adams, “in his mixture of religion with politics, his skepticism of a powerful federal government, his warnings about extravagance and the influence of money on elections, his recognition of the power of the press, and his endurance in a

⁵⁰ Ibid., 25-26.

⁵¹ Ibid., 31.

⁵² William M. Fowler, *Samuel Adams: Radical Puritan* (New York: Longman, 1997), xi.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 61-62.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 69.

war for freedom," was one of the most influential revolutionaries.⁵⁷ Adams used many means to disseminate his ideas but he believed in the power of the printed press and used it as he gained political influence to connect with other towns and colonies.⁵⁸ Stoll demonstrates that Adams repeatedly used religious references and themes in his writings as "Candidus" in the *Boston Gazette*. He also showed this in some of the letters that he wrote. As quoted by Stoll, Adams wrote in a letter to his wife Elizabeth "Righteous Heaven will surely smile on a Cause so righteous as ours is, and our Country, if it does its Duty will see an End to its Oppression."⁵⁹ It is in these writings that Stoll shows that Adams rationale for independence was based on his religious beliefs and that his beliefs helped him justify his participation in the Revolution.

Influenced by Stoll, Gary Scott Smith in his "Samuel Adams: America's Puritan Revolutionary," from the 2009 compilation *The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life*, argues that Adams was the most influential leader in "the colonies' decision to declare independence from England" and shows that Adams justified this push for independence in religious terms.⁶⁰ To Smith, "Adams arguably did the most to highlight the religious aspects of the colonial struggle for independence" with Adams believing that America was destined for independence.⁶¹ Adams was "strongly influenced by the Puritan covenantal tradition" and "insisted that God blessed or punished nations and communities based on the moral conduct of their people."⁶² Therefore, as Smith shows, Adams justified the revolution because the moral people of the colonies were being oppressed by the tyrannical and corrupt British government. For Smith, Adams played "a pivotal role in the colonists' decision to sever their ties with England and declare their independence" by spearheading "the creation of the Massachusetts Committee of Correspondence, which served as a model for other colonies" and by "helping to create a workable intercolonial government."⁶³ Smith shows that Adams justified independence through his religious beliefs and was the most influential revolutionary in convincing the colonies that America needed independence.

⁵⁷ Stoll, *Samuel Adams*, 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶⁰ Gary Scott Smith, "Samuel Adams: America's Puritan Revolutionary" in *The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life*, ed. Daniel L. Dreisbach et al. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 40.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 42.

John K. Alexander in his *Samuel Adams: America's Revolutionary Politician*, published in 2002, shifts the argument away from religion and focuses on politics arguing that Samuel Adams was America's first true politician, dedicating his life to political aspirations rather than material gain. Alexander shows that Adams was a "skillful political organizer" and that he "developed innovative ways of bringing ordinary citizens into the political process."⁶⁴ Adams sought to create a "virtuous society to sustain America's republican government."⁶⁵ Through looking at his political writings, Alexander attempts to show that Adams believed in republican virtue and using education to create a virtuous society that would protect constitutional liberties.⁶⁶ Though Alexander shows that Adams was a deeply religious man, he differs from Fowler, Stoll, and Smith in that he believed that Adams justified independence from a more political stance. He wanted a republican government that would protect the liberties that the British government was violating.⁶⁷ For Alexander, this is where Adams became the most influential Revolutionary politician and used his political career to create the republican government he sought.

In his *Samuel Adams: Father of the American Revolution* published in 2006, Mark Puls follows Alexander in that he sees Samuel Adams as being influenced more by political ideology rather than religious beliefs. For Puls, Adams saw himself as "encouraging the colonies to unite, to defend their liberties, to establish new state governments, to form a national Congress, and to be ready to declare national sovereignty."⁶⁸ Adams did this because he saw the British government violating the political rights of the colonist. Puls uses Adams' writings to show that Adams did not seek to control an unthinking mob but rather "placed his faith in logical persuasion" using "reasoned argument."⁶⁹ For Puls, Adams had great "foresight and broad understanding of political power" that he used not to change society but to "preserve rights he believed the colonist already possessed."⁷⁰ Puls shows that through his political presence Adams was able to connect the colonies and bring about revolution and claims he is the "father of the American Revolution."

⁶⁴ John K. Alexander, *Samuel Adams: America's Revolutionary Politician* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), ix.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 222-223.

⁶⁸ Mark Puls, *Samuel Adams: Father of the American Revolution* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 14.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

As Maier states, "All studies of Samuel Adams turn about one central observation: that his career climaxed in 1776."⁷¹ Through this study, it can be seen that Samuel Adams influence was in beginning the independence movement and encouraging the American Revolution. However, views about how Adams influenced the Revolution have changed over time. The understanding of his motivation for pushing for independence has changed, too. Adams has been viewed in heroic terms as a destined figure in the movement for independence against a tyrannical British Parliament. He has also been viewed as a man with complex psychological issues that led him to use his ability to agitate the masses to spark the rebellion. The most recent biographies attempt to look at Adams as a complex man who greatly influenced the Revolution and justifying independence either in religious or political terms. Historians should continue looking at Samuel Adams as a complex, multifaceted man but should combine his religious and political beliefs to fully understand his rebellious actions. As John Adams claims, it is difficult to know the true intent and influence of Samuel Adams. His elusiveness through the lack of primary writings has allowed for many varying interpretations of his motivation for and influence in the American Revolution.

⁷¹ Pauline Maier, "Coming to Terms with Samuel Adams," *The American Historical Review* 81, no. 1 (1976), <http://ezproxy.twu.edu:2069/stable/1863739>.