

The following contains letters from Benjamin Rush to John Adams (10/17/1809); John Adams to Benjamin Rush (10/25/1809); Benjamin Rush to John Adams (12/5/1809); and John Adams to Benjamin Rush (12/21/1809). Compiled by Warren Throckmorton; for more on these letters, see my series on [David Barton and John Adams](#).

To John Adams

My dear Friend

Philadelphia, October 17, 1809

Who were the ancestors and posterity of Homer, Demosthenes, Plato, and Aristotle? Who were the ancestors and posterity of Cicero, Horace and Virgil? Were any of them philosophers, orators, or poets? Who were the ancestors and posterity of Walsingham, Sully, Malborough, and Wolfe? Were any of them statesmen, generals or heroes? I do not ask whether they were descended from gentlemen, or whether they left gentle sons behind them. I ask, were their ancestors GREAT in the same elevated walks of life as themselves? I believe history and common observation will furnish many more instances of the truth of Lord Bacon's remark than of the reverse of it.

I send you herewith a new edition of my *Lectures upon Animal Life*, extracted from the third edition of my *Medical Inquiries* now in the press. It contains a number of new facts in support of the doctrine I have advanced. Should the perusal of them render an autumnal evening less gloomy to you, I shall be highly gratified.

"What book is that in your hands?" said I to my son Richard a few nights ago in a dream. "It is the history of the United States," said he. "Shall I read a page of it to you?" "No, no," said I. "I believe in the truth of no history but in that which is contained in the Old and New Testaments." "But, sir," said my son, "this page relates to your friend Mr. Adams." "Let me see it then," said I. I read it with great pleasure and herewith send you a copy of it.

"1809. Among the most extraordinary events of this year was the renewal of the friendship and intercourse between Mr. John Adams and Mr. Jefferson, the two ex-Presidents of the United States. They met for the first time in the Congress of 1775. Their principles of liberty, their ardent attachment to their country, and their views of the importance and probable issue of the struggle with Great Britain in which they were engaged being exactly the same, they were strongly attracted to each other and became personal as well as political friends. They met in England during the war while each of them held commissions of honor and trust at two of the first courts of Europe, and spent many happy hours together in reviewing the difficulties and success of their respective negotiations. A difference of opinion upon the objects and issue of the French Revolution separated them during the years in which that great event interested and divided the American people. The predominance of the party which favored the French cause threw Mr. Adams out of the Chair of the United States in the year 1800 and placed Mr. Jefferson there in his stead. The former retired with resignation and dignity to his seat at Quincy, where he spent the evening of his life in literary and philosophical pursuits, surrounded by an amiable family and a few old and affectionate friends. The latter resigned the Chair of the United States in the year 1808, sick of the cares and disgusted with the intrigues of public life, and retired to

his seat at Monticello, in Virginia, where he spent the remainder of his days in the cultivation of a large farm agreeably to the new system of husbandry. In the month of November 1809, Mr. Adams addressed a short letter to his friend Mr. Jefferson in which he congratulated him upon his escape to the shades of retirement and domestic happiness, and concluded it with assurances of his regard and good wishes for his welfare. This letter did great honor to Mr. Adams. It discovered a magnanimity known only to great minds. Mr. Jefferson replied to this letter and reciprocated expressions of regard and esteem. These letters were followed by a correspondence of several years in which they mutually reviewed the scenes of business in which they had been engaged, and candidly acknowledged to each other all the errors of opinion and conduct into which they had fallen during the time they filled the same station in the service of their country. Many precious aphorisms, the result of observation, experience, and profound reflection, it is said, are contained in these letters. It is to be hoped the world will be favored with a sight of them. These gentlemen sunk into the grave nearly at the same time, full of years and rich in the gratitude and praises of their country (for they outlived the heterogeneous parties that were opposed to them), and to their numerous merits and honors posterity has added that they were rival friends.

With affectionate regard to your fireside, in which all my family join, I am, dear sir, your sincere old friend,

BENJN: RUSH

(pp. 1021-1023, Butterfield, L.H, 1951)

QUINCY

October 25. 1809.

MY DEAR SIR,—I received yesterday your new edition on Animal Life and Madam read it in the evening to me and all the Family, to the great delight and edification of us all. Whether it is all solid or not we cannot say: but there are Ideas enough thrown out to excite and employ the attention and investigation of all the Philosophers, Physicians and Surgeons. Accept of all our Thanks for this favour.

Whether there are more instances in favour of Bacons observation or against it, I believe that almost all Great Men have Mothers at Least. I read in a Journal de Paris many years ago a List of almost all the Great Men who had lived and been famous in France, with an account of their Births, and they were almost all the sons of Tradesmen, Bakers, Brewers, Masons, Carpenters, Clothiers, Shoemakers, Cabinet Makers and some of them from Labourers, Livery, Servants and the lowest and meanest occupations in society. I regret that I did not preserve and copy this Catalogue. It was a Proof irrefragable that there is some Truth in Bacons Apophthegm. I believe however that there is in all such instances something more of mind in the father or Mother than is common. Have you never observed that Weavers, Shoemakers and Taylors are the most thoughtful Trades, because they are the most sedentary? Do they not at least produce the most inquisitive and talkative People? This is a Topick of inexhaustible speculation. But I believe there is as much in the Breed of Men as there is in that of Horses. I know you will upon reading

this cry out Oh the Aristocrat! The Advocate for hereditary Nobility! For Monarchy! and every political Evil! But it is no such Thing. I am no advocate for any of these Things. As long as sense and virtue remain in a Nation in sufficient Quantities to enable them to choose their Legislatures and Magistrates, elective Governments are the best in the world. But when Nonsense and Vice get the ascendancy, command the Majority and possess the whole Power of a Nation, the History of Mankind shews that sense and virtue have been compelled to unite with Nonsense and Vice in establishing hereditary Powers as the only security for Life Property and the miserable Liberty that remains. Let my Countrymen therefore have a Care how they confide in Callender, Paine, Burr or Hamilton for their political Guides. If they do not, Calamities, Devastations, Bloodshed and Carnage will convince them that there is no special Providence for them. They will go the way of all the earth.

A Dream again! I wish you would dream all day and all Night, for one of your Dreams puts me in spirits for a Month. I have no other objection to your Dream, but that it is not History. It may be Prophecy. There has never been the smallest Interruption of the Personal Friendship between me and Mr. Jefferson that I know of. You should remember that Jefferson was but a Boy to me. I was at least ten years older than him in age and more than twenty years older than him in Politicks. I am bold to say I was his Preceptor in Politicks and taught him every Thing that has been good and solid in his whole Political Conduct. I served with him on many Committees in Congress in which we established some of the most important Regulations of the Army &c., &c., &c.

Jefferson and Franklin were united with me in a Commission to the King of France and fifteen other Commissions to treat with all the Powers of Europe and Africa. I resided with him in France above a year in 1784 and 1785 and met him every day at my House in Auteuil at Franklins House at Passy or at his House in Paris. In short we lived together in the most perfect Friendship and Harmony.

I was sent to England in 1785. He came to me in England and I travelled over the Kingdom with him. He met me afterwards in Holland. I there instructed him in the situation of all my money Matters before I left Europe. I have a Bushell of Letters from him. If I were disposed to be captious I might complain of his open Patronage of Callender, Paine, Brown and twenty others my most abandoned and unprincipled enemies. But I have seen Ambition and Party in so many Men of the best Character of all Parties that I must renounce almost all Mankind if I renounce any for such Causes. Fare them all well. Heaven is their Judge and mine. I am not conscious that I ever injured any of them in thought word or deed to promote my own Interest or Reputation or to lessen theirs. Let them one and all say the same if they can.

I am &c.,

JOHN ADAMS.

TO John Adams

My dear Friend

Philadelphia, December 5, 1809

I picked up some time ago a magazine in which I met with a revival of the old controversy concerning the divine origin of Episcopal and Presbyterian ordination carried on by Dr. Hobart and Dr. Mason of New York. After reading a few pages of it, I threw down the magazine with disgust and committed the enclosed thoughts upon that subject to paper. The partiality you have been pleased to express for some of my dreams has induced me to send you a copy of it. It may perhaps afford some amusement to your parish minister after he has drunk his glass of wine and smoked his segar at your table.

I have great pleasure in informing you that my son who sailed from Philadelphia for Glasgow on the 15th of July, and my daughter, who with her husband and children sailed from Quebec on the 10th of July for Plymouth, both arrived at their wished port on the same day, August 29th, the day on which their brother was married to one of the most amiable and accomplished women in this country. A rare coincidence on *one* day of family blessings, for which I desire to be devoutly thankful! My son has been well received in Edinburgh and is much pleased with everything he has seen and heard in that part of the world.

I send you herewith a few numbers of the *Aurora*.

Excuse the shortness of this letter. For some weeks past, my lectures, the Hospital, and my private practice have occupied every moment of my time. My class amounts 300, 260 of whom are students of medicine. The rest are graduates in medicine, clergymen, and private gentlemen.

With love to your fireside, in which my dear Mrs. Rush joins, I am, dear sir, ever yours.

BENJN: RUSH

P.S. Has the prophecy (as you called it) contained in my last letter as yet become history?

ENCLOSURE (Click this link to read the Enclosure Rush sent to Adams)

The claims of the Episcopal and Presbyterian Churches to the divine origin of their respective modes of ordination proved to be just: extracted from a manuscript copy of T.E.'s "Travels into the East."

QUINCY

December 21. 1809.

MY DEAR SIR,—I thank you for the pleasing account of your Family in your favour of the 5th. As I take a lively interest in their Prosperity and Felicity, your relation of it gave me great Pleasure. We have Letters from our Colony navigating the Baltic, dated at Christians and. They had been so far as prosperous, healthy and happy as such Travellers could expect to be.

Pope said of my Friend General Oglethorpe

Some driven by strong Benevolence of soul
Shall fly like Oglethorpe from Pole to Pole.

But what was a Trip to Georgia in Comparison with the Journeys and Voyages that J. Q. Adams has performed? I do not believe that Admiral Nelson ever ran greater Risques at sea.

Tell Richard that I hope Mrs. Rush will soon present him with a son that will do him as much honour in proportion, as the first born of his Genius has already done him in the opinion of the world. W. S. S. our Guardian of the Athenaeum has obtained it and proclaimed it loudly every where the best Pamphlet that ever he read. Be sure you do not hint this to Mrs. Rush Senr. It would allarm her Delicacy.

I really do not know whether I do not envy your City of Philadelphia for its Reputation for Science, Arts and Letters and especially its Medical Professor. I know not either whether I do not envy you your Genius and Imagination. Why have not I some Fancy? some Invention? some Ingenuity? some discursive Faculty? Why has all my Life been consumed in searching for Facts and Principles and Proofs and Reasons to support them? Your Dreams and Fables have more Genius in them than all my Life. Your Fable of Dorcas would make a good Chapter or a good Appendix to The Tale of a Tub.

But my Friend there is something very serious in this Business. The Holy Ghost carries on the whole Christian system in this earth. Not a Baptism, not a Marriage not a Sacrament can be administered but by the Holy Ghost, who is transmitted from age to age by laying the hands of the Bishops on the heads of Candidates for the Ministry. In the same manner as the holy Ghost is transmitted from Monarch to Monarch by the holy oil in the vial at Rheims which was brought down from Heaven by a Dove and by that other Phyal which I have seen in the Tower of London. There is no Authority civil or religious: there can be no legitimate Government but what is administered by this Holy Ghost. There can be no salvation without it. All, without it is Rebellion and Perdition, or in more orthodox words Damnation. Although this is all Artifice and Cunning in the secret original in the heart, yet they all believe it so sincerely that they, would lay down their Lives under the Ax or the fiery' Fagot for it. Alas the poor weak ignorant Dupe human Nature. There is so much King Craft, Priest Craft, Gentlemens Craft, Peoples Craft, Doctors Craft, Lawyers Craft, Merchants Craft, Tradesmens Craft, Labourers Craft and Devils Craft in the world, that it seems a desperate and impracticable Project to undeceive it.

Do you wonder that Voltaire and Paine have made Proselytes? Yet there was as much subtlety, Craft and Hypocrisy in Voltaire and Paine and more too than in Ignatius Loyola.

This Letter is so much in the tone of my Friend the Abby Raynal and the Grumblers of the last age, that I pray you to burn it. I cannot copy it.

Your Prophecy my dear Friend has not become History as yet. I have no Resentment or Animosity against the Gentleman and abhor the Idea of blackening his Character or transmitting him in odious Colours to Posterity.

But I write with difficulty and am afraid of diffusing myself in too many Correspondences. If I should receive a Letter from him however I should not fail to acknowledge and answer it.

The Auroras you sent me for which I thank you, are full of Momentous Matter.

I am Dear Sir with every friendly sentiment yours

J. ADAMS.

Sources:

For letters from Benjamin Rush: Butterfield, L.H. Ed. (1951). Letters of Benjamin Rush. Vol. II – 1793-1813. Princeton University Press.

For letters from John Adams: Old Family Letters, (1892), available from [Google Books](#).