



“THINGS KEPT AND CHERISHED”: A HISTORY OF ADAMS NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

LAURA A. MILLER



ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY
PRESENTED TO ADAMS NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN HISTORIANS/
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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Cover Illustration: The Old House at Peace field. Photo by author, November 4, 2018.

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Cover Illustration: The Old House at Peace field. Photo by author, November 4, 2018.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADAM	Adams National Historical Park (in notes only)
AMS	Adams Memorial Society (in notes only)
GMP	General Management Plan
GSA	General Services Administration
HABS	Historic American Buildings Survey
HACE	Historic Architecture, Conservation and Engineering Center
HSR	Historic Structures Report
MHS	Massachusetts Historical Society
NACP	National Archives at College Park
NAHPC	North Atlantic Historic Preservation Center
NER	Northeast Region
NMSC	Northeast Museum Services Center
NPS	National Park Service
OAH	Organization of American Historians
SPNEA	Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities
UFPC	United First Parish Church

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INTRODUCTION

FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE

On my first research trip to Adams National Historical Park in March 2018, I was handed volume one of Superintendent Wilhelmina Harris's ten-volume *Furnishings Report of the Old House*, printed in 1968. From 1920 to 1927, Harris worked as the social secretary to Brooks Adams, the final Adams family member to live in the Old House at Peace field. From 1950 to 1987, Harris was the park's superintendent. Park Curator Kelly Cobble and Museum Technician Patty Smith suggested that Harris's report was a good place to start my research into the site's history.¹

I was, admittedly, a bit confused by this suggestion. I had only two days for my first foray into the Park's archives, and I was not eager to spend it combing through a furnishings report written in the 1960s. Wasn't this missing the forest for the trees? I was ready to start poring over superintendent's correspondence, digging through monthly progress reports, and perusing historic newspaper clippings and photographs. I wanted to learn all I could about the people that made this place tick, not the furnishings that decorated it.

Looking back on this moment two years later, I now realize what I could not comprehend at the time: Wilhelmina Harris, and her interpretation of the Old House, are deeply ingrained in the DNA of Adams National Historic Park. To understand how the Park developed over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, I had to first understand Wilhelmina Harris's role in that development. Her *Furnishings Report* (and especially its first volume) reveals this perhaps better than any other document. It is much more than a mere record of the Old House's furnishings. It is also a history of the house itself and the people who lived there, supplemented by quotes from the Adams family papers, Harris's recollections, and—filtered through Harris—the recollections of Brooks Adams. It is also a profound assertion of her own expertise, at a time when she was facing criticism from agency historians who questioned the Site's interpretive reliance on “personal memory.” By including her memories and the memories related to her by Brooks Adams in a multivolume, footnoted report, Harris made the case that these were equally valid sources, as authoritative as the other sources the report relied on—quotations from the Adams papers, historical scholarship, and experts on portraits, Oriental rugs, and china.

¹ Wilhelmina S. Harris, “Furnishings Report of the Old House: The Adams National Historic Site, Quincy, Massachusetts,” Volume I (1968).

In short, the *Furnishings Report* is as important for what it tells us about furnishings as what it tells us about Wilhelmina Harris herself. It illuminates the (sometimes problematic) ways that she interpreted the Old House, the network of experts that she drew on to support the Historic Site's work, and how she asserted her authority in a male-dominated agency. Wilhelmina Harris once said that "there seems to be no end to the things kept and cherished by the descendants of John Adams," many of which they donated to the NPS.² The *Furnishings Report* is not only a record of all those "things," but also of the interpretive frameworks kept and cherished by Harris herself. It took me months of poring over archival records and *then* returning to the *Furnishings Report* to realize this.

I don't mean to suggest that Harris alone was responsible for making Adams National Historical Park what it is today. Many individuals were intimately involved in the creation, preservation, and interpretation of the Park and the historic buildings that comprise it. This process began with none other than the Adamses themselves. Multiple generations of the family were deeply committed to preserving and shaping their own histories, beginning with John Adams and John Quincy Adams, the second and sixth presidents of the United States. When John Adams's great-grandson Brooks Adams died in 1927, family members formed the Adams Memorial Society to preserve the family homestead in Quincy. The Memorial Society managed the Old House as a museum for nearly two decades, before donating the property to the federal government in 1946.

Many stewards followed the Adams Memorial Society: NPS leaders who were eager to acquire the historic home of two former presidents; Raymond Corry, an enthusiastic custodian who briefly but tirelessly worked to maintain the newly-acquired house on a shoestring Park Service budget; Wilhelmina Harris, who sought to lovingly preserve the home and landscape as Brooks Adams left it; and Harris's successor and protégé, Superintendent Marianne Peak, who played a critical role in modernizing and improving the Park at the turn of the twenty-first century. There was also a corps of dedicated park staff who protected and interpreted the home for generations of visitors, and still do today; civic leaders who helped the NPS fend off encroaching development schemes; and local and state politicians, boosters, and historical organizations eager to preserve local history, promote Quincy's heritage, and build the local tourism economy. Through it all, the Adams descendants and their family organization, the Adams Memorial Society, remained a constant and influential presence. They opened up the family's papers to the public in the 1950s, kept a close watch on developments at the Old House under NPS stewardship, donated an ongoing stream of family heirlooms, and advocated on the Park's behalf when needed. All these individuals were critical to the history that follows.

² October 1956 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report, Resource Management Records, Adams National Historical Park (hereafter ADAM), Quincy, MA.

Yet Wilhelmina Harris's presence looms large over these pages, as a bridge between the Old House's former life as the home of four generations of Adamses and its new life as a venerated National Historical Park. She was, in the words of one interviewee, "more Adams than the Adamses, so to speak."³

* * *

Because Wilhelmina Harris controlled the narrative of the Old House so tightly for so long—an effort that still influences Park interpretation today—one could be forgiven for thinking that time has stood still at the Old House. In fact, the park, which is comprised of several properties across the city of Quincy, Massachusetts, has changed dramatically since its public opening in 1947. Established as Adams Mansion National Historic Site in 1946, the site slowly grew—and changed names a couple of times—before reaching its present form in 1998. This change came at a measured pace, but it came nevertheless: boundaries were expanded to preserve sightlines, historians were brought in to conduct research, and several properties were added. More recently, under Superintendent Marianne Peak, new partnerships were forged and a downtown visitor center and trolleys were incorporated to move visitors more efficiently across the park's properties.

To understand how the Park came into being, we need to first sketch out the basic details of the primary properties within its boundaries: the John Adams and John Quincy Adams birthplaces, the Old House at Peace field, the neighboring Beale Estate, and, in downtown Quincy, the United First Parish Church (UFPC) and Adams Crypt. The coming chapters trace the history of these sites from their pre-Park Service origins to their eventual consolidation into one National Historical Park in 1998. We will see how the Park's expansive boundaries have enabled staff to interpret the Adams family history from cradle to grave.

³ Lawrence Gall, interview with Laura Miller, September 13, 2019.

The John Adams and John Quincy Adams Birthplaces

The John Adams and John Quincy Adams birthplaces, located at the foot of Penn's Hill in Quincy (formerly Braintree), Massachusetts, were originally situated along the Old Coast Road, connect Quincy to Boston to the north and Plymouth to the south. The John Adams birthplace was built in the 1680s, and was purchased by Deacon John Adams in 1720. He and his wife Susanna Boylston had three sons; future president John Adams, the eldest, was born in this house in 1735. In 1744, Deacon John Adams bought the saltbox cottage and property next door, built in 1663. John Adams inherited this house and forty acres of land after his father's death. When he married Abigail Smith in October 1764, the couple moved into this home, and raised their children here—Abigail (“Nabby”), John Quincy, Susannah (“Suky,” who died in infancy), Charles, and Thomas Boylston. This is also where John Adams established his law office, and drafted the Massachusetts Constitution in 1779.



Figure 1. The John Adams birthplace. Photograph by author, November 4, 2018.



Figure 2. The John Quincy Adams birthplace (left) and John Adams birthplace (right).
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

These two modest houses were incorporated into Adams National Historic Site in 1979, but their preservation story begins nearly a century before. The drive to preserve the Adams birthplaces began with the death of Charles Francis Adams, the son of John Quincy Adams and grandson of John Adams, in 1886. A year after Charles Francis's death, his heirs created the Adams Real Estate Trust to oversee his property holdings, and quickly sold off the vast majority of the 200-acre Penn's Hill farm for development.⁴ It was a lucrative time to do so: Quincy's shipbuilding and quarrying industries were booming, and the city was only ten miles from Boston, ensuring rapid population growth and suburbanization in the coming decades. The Real Estate Trust kept only the Adams birthplaces, nestled on a miniscule .34-acre parcel of land on Franklin Street. The property around the two houses was rapidly divided up and developed, and the birthplaces themselves were rented out.

By the late nineteenth century, many Quincy residents watched the dramatic social and economic changes unfolding in the city around them and grew anxious about the future of the historic Adams birthplaces. In August 1892, an individual identified as "WAF" wrote to the *Quincy Patriot* newspaper to express their concerns about the impact of the city's rapid development on local historic sites:

Have all our old landmarks—in this age of dollar chasing—to be destroyed in order to make room for brown stone fronts, for street railways, for 16-storied business houses? Must our children and our children's children grow up in

⁴ This division of the family's farmland began with Charles Francis Adams himself; he sold plots for development, and gave land to Old Colony Railroad in 1883, which was used to create streets surrounding the Quincy Adams station. See Kirsten Holder, *Cultural Landscape Report for Adams Birthplaces, Adams National Historical Park* (Boston: National Park Service, 2014), 63–66.

entire ignorance of everything of an historical nature save what they learn from books? Can we not leave something in tangible shape that was closely related to great events in the history of our great country? Or must we eventually lose our identity entirely as Americans and gradually become absorbed in the mighty flood of humanity which is pouring in upon us from across the sea[?]

These new immigrants, the author added, had little interest in learning about “the grand deeds of those who took so active a part” in the country’s history.⁵ A few months later, the *Boston Evening Transcript* printed a letter from a concerned citizen who was horrified to discover that the John Quincy Adams birthplace was now home to Irish renters. Worse still, the room where John Quincy Adams was born now prominently displayed a portrait of the pope. (Historian Lawrence Gall noted that the letter writer also “accus[ed] the Adams family of indifference to their ancestral home.”)⁶ These New Englanders fretted that they were not only being besieged by urban and industrial development, but also by European immigrants supplying labor for local mills, shipyards, and quarries.

The region’s Yankee elite, working hand-in-hand with patriotic societies, rushed to preserve sites of historical significance throughout Massachusetts. These men and women felt an imperative to preserve colonial historic sites which reflected their own heritage for the edification of their children and new immigrants alike. Several Quincy residents rallied quickly to ensure that the Adams historic birthplaces were preserved and appropriately (in their eyes) venerated. The Quincy Historical Society was established in 1893, and Charles Francis Adams Jr. was made its first president. Three years later, in 1896, the Historical Society set up shop in the John Quincy Adams birthplace. Charles Francis Adams Jr. funded the home’s restoration in 1897, which was led by Quincy Historical Society librarian, William Gardner Spear.⁷

In October 1896, Charles Francis Adams Jr. gave the local chapter of the Daughters of the Revolution permission to lease the John Adams birthplace for their meetings. Leading this patriotic organization was Lillian Blanche Titus, who recalled in 1899: “For years these two houses had fallen into comparative disuse, and were occupied by tenants who cared nothing for their great historic value.” She noted that Adams “dismissed the tenant so that we should have complete occupancy of the property.”⁸ The next year, Titus oversaw its restoration. In the late nineteenth century, historic house museums and

⁵ “WAF” to the *Quincy Patriot*, August 20, 1892, quoted in Lawrence D. Gall, *The Adams Birthplaces: An Interpretive Study in New England Preservation History*, December 11, 1978, 5.

⁶ This letter is from December 1892. Cited in Gall, *The Adams Birthplaces*.

⁷ For details about this 1897 restoration, see Larry Lowenthal and Peggy A. Albee, “The Restoration of the John Quincy Adams Birthplace: Evaluation of Significance, including Description of the 1897 Restoration and Analysis of Integrity” (Boston, MA: Boston Support Office, National Park Service, April 1998).

⁸ Lillie B. Titus, “The Restoration of the Birthplace of John Adams,” in *Adams Birthplaces*, Adams National Historic Site records, Shelf 101, Box 15, Folder “John Adams Birthplace Restoration 1897,” Quincy Historical Society, Quincy, Massachusetts.

patriotic organizations like the Daughters of the Revolution grew in popularity alongside one another, and often toward the same ends. As historian Patricia West has argued, “late-nineteenth-century museums would increasingly focus on their ability to promulgate national loyalty in an increasingly polyglot citizenry. The invention of a shared vision of America, set in an immutable past, was a potent middle class response to the conflicts and heterogeneity of the late nineteenth century.” Organizations like the Daughters of the Revolution (and its similarly-named contemporary, the Daughters of the American Revolution) saw historic house museums as a valuable asset in these efforts.

Both birthplaces were first opened to the public in 1897—the John Quincy Adams birthplace in June, and the John Adams birthplace in October. The birthplaces were managed by the Quincy Historical Society (John Quincy Adams birthplace) and the Daughters of the Revolution (John Adams birthplace) for the next several decades.

The City of Quincy acquired the Adams birthplaces on June 18, 1940, when they were deeded to the City by the Adams Real Estate Trust. The Quincy Historical Society continued to manage the John Quincy Adams birthplace, and took over management of the John Adams birthplace from the Daughters of the Revolution a decade later, in 1950. The City expanded the plot surrounding the birthplaces to almost three-quarters of an acre by purchasing two neighboring lots and demolishing the houses that were on them. The properties were designated as National Historic Landmarks in 1960, listed in the National Register in 1966, and designated as part of the Adams Birthplace Historic District in 1975.⁹ Although consolidating the properties under the City’s authority may have eased the tensions of administrating the birthplaces, the City struggled to give the birthplaces the attention and funding they desperately needed. In 1979, they were donated to the NPS, and incorporated into Adams National Historic Site. This process is discussed in greater detail in chapter six.

Today, visitors to Adams National Historical Park begin their tour at the John Adams and John Quincy Adams Birthplaces. Here they learn about life in the houses in the revolutionary era, and about Abigail Adams’s role as “Patriot on the Home Front” during the ten years that she and her husband were separated during the Revolution.¹⁰ Unlike the many priceless family heirlooms on display at the Old House, the birthplaces are sparsely decorated with replica furnishings.

Visitors might be surprised to find that these two seventeenth-century saltbox structures are nestled within a bustling urban neighborhood. They are tucked between a variety of businesses, from a funeral home and cosmetic dentistry office, to a barbershop and a neighborhood restaurant. It would be difficult to know this based on promotional

⁹ Kirsten Holder, *Cultural Landscape Report for Adams Birthplaces, Adams National Historical Park* (Boston: National Park Service, 2014), 99–100. See also Lawrence D. Gall’s *The Adams Birthplaces: An Interpretive Study in New England Preservation History* (Adams National Historic Site, 1978).

¹⁰ For an overview of interpretation at Adams National Historical Park today, and the key facts emphasized for each of the Park’s properties, see Caroline Keinath, *Adams National Historical Park, Quincy, Massachusetts* (Lawrenceburg, IN: The Creative Company, 2014).

photographs (past and present) of the birthplaces, which rarely show the houses *in context*—these pictures are usually taken at close range to obscure the reality of the neighborhood surrounding them. The juxtaposition of twenty-first century urban life with the modest birthplaces of the second and sixth presidents is jarring, but it is also nothing new. Visitors and Quincy natives alike have been debating the development around the birthplaces since the 1880s.

The Old House at Peace Field

The mile and a half trolley ride from the John Adams and John Quincy Adams Birthplaces to the Old House at Peace field takes only five minutes, but the transition from one part of this urban park to the other is striking. You begin in the cramped, bustling neighborhood of the Adams birthplaces, and end in the spacious landscape surrounding the Old House. Here, there are no neighborhood businesses in view, and there is minimal traffic whizzing by. It took a tremendous amount of effort to preserve this peaceful atmosphere in the midst of a rapidly developing city.



Figure 3. The Old House at Peace field. Photograph by author, November 4, 2018.

John and Abigail Adams moved into the Old House at Peace field in 1788 upon their return from London, where Adams had served as the first United States Minister to Great Britain. The home, known at the time as the Vassall-Borland house, was built in 1731 as a summer estate for Leonard Vassall, a Jamaican-born sugar plantation owner and slaveholder who immigrated to Boston in the 1720s. In September 1787, Abigail Adams arranged for the purchase of the house and its accompanying 75 acres of farmland. They lived in the Old House together for only a short time; Adams had to leave Braintree again in 1789, to take up his duties as Vice President of the United States. For the next several years, Abigail Adams held down family homestead while John Adams was away. She also made the first substantial alterations to the Old House, adding on the Long Room and Presidential Study.¹¹ Adams went on to become the second president of the United States in 1797; for five months, he was also the first president to occupy the White House in Washington, DC. When Thomas Jefferson defeated Adams in the 1800 presidential election, John and Abigail returned once again to Quincy, and the Old House.

Subsequent generations of Adamses held varying levels of attachment to the Old House. John Quincy Adams and his wife Louisa Catherine inhabited the property primarily in the summer months. Their son, Charles Francis Adams, and his wife, Abigail Brown Brooks Adams, were more committed to improving the family home. This work was made easier, no doubt, by Abigail's substantial family fortune. They significantly expanded the Old House, adding a three-story servant's wing and a laundry room, as well as the Stone Library in 1870, and the carriage house in 1873. The Stone Library, containing 12,000 books, manuscripts, and maps belonging to four generations of Adamses, was much used and loved by the family. After Charles Francis Adams died in 1886, his son Henry Adams moved into the Old House with his widowed mother. He worked on his acclaimed nine-volume *History of the United States* in this Library.

By the 1890s, Henry's brother Brooks Adams became the Old House's primary steward, returning to the property each summer until he died on February 13, 1927. At that point, the property was taken over by the members of the newly-formed Adams Memorial Society, who opened the house up to the public as a museum.¹² The Memorial Society turned the property over to the NPS in 1946.



Figure 4. The Stone Library. Photograph by author, November 4, 2018.

These preservation efforts are described in detail over the next several chapters. But it is worth noting here that tours of the Old House today trace this history in broad strokes, while also immersing visitors in stories about the public and private lives of the four generations of Adamses who lived in the Old House. Unlike the birthplaces, the Old House is full of objects—big, small, obscure, and famous—that tie us to the men and women who lived there. We can see the Chippendale-style camelback sofa where John Adams sat for his 1823 portrait by Gilbert Stuart, the desk where he corresponded with Thomas Jefferson, a silver tea set belonging to Louisa Catherine Adams, and even the kitchen servant bell system Charles Francis Adams had installed in 1850. Suffice it to say that there are far too many family heirlooms to detail in a book’s introduction. A perusal of Harris’s ten-volume furnishings report will confirm this.

For Park visitors, the contrast between the birthplaces and the Old House is striking. The birthplaces are an interpretive blank slate, where park rangers might ask visitors to tune out the twenty-first century urban chaos around them, and focus on the

stories they tell about life in Revolutionary-era Braintree.¹³ At the Old House, there is a different kind of sensory overload—the house is packed to the brim with family heirlooms and objects that jostle for visitors’ attention at every turn. Here, the material culture takes center stage, and rangers use those objects as a window into the lives of the Adamses.

The Beale Estate

The Beale House is a late-Georgian/early-federal style home on the western edge of Adams National Historical Park, adjacent to the Old House. Built in 1792, it was originally the home of three generations of the locally prominent Beale family. The year it was built, John Adams relayed news of the home’s construction in a letter to his daughter Nabby: “Capt. Beale of Squantum has set up, between me and my brother, a new house, the largest and handsomest ever built in the neighbourhood.”¹⁴ Adams family correspondence from the 1790s to the 1850s indicates that the Beales were friends and business associates of the Adamses. Generations of the Beale family lived in the house until 1906. In 1907, the property was purchased by Fred Rice, the son of Boston shoe manufacturer William B. Rice. Fred Rice grew up in Quincy, attended the Adams Academy, and was strongly invested in local history, serving as president of the Quincy Historical Society from 1924 to 1933. Under his ownership, the Beale property was restored by prominent architect Joseph Everett Chandler. Chandler was notable at the time for his work to restore the Dorothy Quincy House in Quincy, and later the Paul Revere House in Boston and the House of Seven Gables in Salem, among others. The Beale House and Carriage House were sold in 1940 to doctors Merry E. Pittman, Dorothy K. Schiedell, and Esther E. Bartlett. These three women used the house as a home and office space for their practices.¹⁵

The Beale estate was desired by the NPS as a buffer to encroaching development around the Old House. The NPS succeeded in acquiring the property in 1972, after years of false starts and negotiations. Maintenance staff were not able to begin renovating the building, however, until after the death of the home’s final resident, Dr. Esther Bartlett, in 1989. It then took another decade for renovations to be completed, and staff finally moved into the offices in 2001. Although the Beale Estate is a historically significant property in its

¹³ In Curator Kelly Cobble’s words, “you’re really standing in a crazy situation and you really want to impart on them, ‘just don’t pay attention to what you see right now, listen to what I have to say.’” Kelly Cobble, phone interview with Laura Miller, October 17, 2019.

¹⁴ John Adams to Abigail Adams Smith, October 29, 1792, *Adams Family Correspondence*, volume 9, Adams Papers Digital Edition, Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://nerfc.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-04-09-02-0178>.

¹⁵ Details about the Beale house’s ownership are from Maureen K. Phillips, *Beale House Historic Structure Report, Adams National Historic Site* (Boston: Cultural Resources Center, Building Conservation Branch, National Park Service North Atlantic Region, 1993 draft), 26.

own right, it was more important to the park as a critical buffer to surrounding development. It also became the Park's headquarters, providing sorely needed space for the park's administrative and maintenance staff.

The United First Parish Church ("The Church of the Presidents")

Located on Hancock Street in Quincy, the UFPC's imposing façade makes it a striking fixture in the downtown landscape.¹⁶ The church's congregation has existed since 1639, but this "stone temple" was a nineteenth century creation. In 1822 John Adams deeded 220 acres to the town of Quincy. Income from the donation, managed by what was known as the Adams Temple and School Fund, was to be used to create "a temple to be built of stone, to be taken from the premises, for the Public worship of God, and the public instruction in religion and morality, and for the use of the Congregational Society in said town."¹⁷

The resulting church, designed by Boston architect Alexander Parris, was built of Quincy granite in the Greek revival style. Construction began a year after John Adams's death in 1826, and it was completed and dedicated in 1828. When John Adams died, his son, President John Quincy Adams, asked the Adams Temple and School Fund for permission to include a tomb underneath the church for the "mortal remains of the late John Adams, and of Abigail his beloved and only wife."¹⁸ John Quincy Adams would fund this expense himself, and he and his wife Louisa Catherine Adams would also be laid to rest there.



Figure 5. The United First Parish Church, as seen from the Hancock Cemetery.
Photograph by author, September 11, 2019.

The Adams crypt beneath the church, the final resting place of these father and son presidents and their wives, became another important tourist destination for visitors to Quincy. The UFPC was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1970, and was brought into the Park's boundaries through federal legislation in 1980. The property was never conveyed to the federal government, however, and the Church is still owned by the congregation and remains active today. This history is an important part of the story of Adams National Historical Park, and is described in greater detail in the coming chapters.

“What is the ‘Park Story’?”

In 1955, NPS leaders sent Historian Herbert Olsen to Quincy to assess Adams National Historic Site’s collections and determine whether they merited the creation of an on-site museum (his assessment is discussed in greater detail in chapter 4). Olsen quickly brushed off the idea of a museum, and homed in on his larger concern: interpretation. Was “the park story” a national story about the lives of the Adamses “in the political, diplomatic, literary, and intellectual history of the nation?” Or was it “the more *unique* one of the lives of the Adamses *at the Old House and in Quincy*”?¹⁹ The history that follows takes up Olsen’s question from a broader perspective. What is the “park story” today? What does an assessment of the park’s past tell us about the history of the NPS, and what does it reveal about the forces that shaped this charming and idiosyncratic collection of Adams-related properties?

Many aspects of Adams National Historical Park’s history echo agency-wide challenges. Like many parks in urban and suburban areas, the Park has struggled from its earliest days to adapt to the pressures of urban development. The push and pull between restraint and expansion, halting progress and embracing modernization, is woven throughout the history of both the Park and the Park Service. The Park’s history also reflects a nearly-universal NPS struggle to interpret and preserve its own history, and come to terms with the remarkable staying power of early commemorative efforts. The influence of NPS trends and directives—from extreme underfunding and staff shortages in the postwar period, to Mission 66’s modernization efforts, and the Reagan-era turn toward visitor services—are all reflected in the pages that follow.

Yet in many ways, Adams National Historical Park is an outlier. It has a particularly complex web of properties, stakeholders, and interests. It also has an astonishing record of staff retention, and has had only two superintendents since it opened in 1947 (with two very brief exceptions); there has been a remarkable degree of staying power in the leadership, goals, priorities, and interpretive frameworks throughout the Park’s history. This continuity has been both a valuable asset, and at times, a deterrent to necessary change.

The Park’s relationship with the Adams Memorial Society is also unique. “Friends of the Park” organizations are not uncommon in the NPS system, but the extent to which the Memorial Society was invested in the Park’s development and, at times, actively participated in decision-making is unusual. The Society’s close partnership with Wilhelmina Harris, in particular, ensured that throughout most of the twentieth century the family participated in making curatorial decisions, shaping interpretation, and lobbying NPS leadership for the Park’s (and family’s) wishes.

For much of the Park’s history, the Adams family’s memorialization efforts were nearly indistinguishable from the Park’s. Many generations of Adamses have cared deeply about their family’s public image and how their contributions to society would be

remembered. This process began with John and Abigail Adams, who carefully preserved a written record of their lives. John Adams was very attentive to how the American Revolution, and his role in it, would be remembered. By preserving his letters for this purpose, he succeeded in shaping narratives about his generation of revolutionaries.²⁰ His son, John Quincy Adams, was also mindful of the importance of family record-keeping; his voluminous diary spanned more than 68 years (from 1779 to 1848) and more than 14,000 pages.²¹ The first editor of the Adams Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Lyman H. Butterfield, described John Quincy's diary-keeping as "one of the great tasks, as it was one of the great accomplishments, of his life." It was also a "self-imposed burden" that Adams "complained bitterly about," Butterfield noted.²² John Quincy Adams's son, Charles Francis Adams, was particularly heavy-handed in his attempts to shape public perceptions of his ancestors. He recognized the importance of preserving and publishing his family's papers, but focused on revealing letters and diary excerpts that omitted the more painful episodes in his family's history.²³

Subsequent generations of Adamses were also mindful—often grudgingly so—of how their family history would be remembered. At the turn of the twentieth century, Brooks Adams fretted that his generation would be a mere historical footnote when compared to the tremendous public service of his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. As he grew older, Brooks became particularly attentive to his family's legacy, believing that it was his "duty . . . to save the family reputation for the next generation." This effort involved both turning the Old House into a museum to honor their legacy, and striving to keep the family's papers closed to the public. Following Brooks Adams's death, his nieces and nephews began putting his plans into action. They established a family organization, the Adams Memorial Society, and opened the Old House to the public. (As we will see later, they strayed from his preferred approach to the family papers.) Not long after the Adams descendants donated the Old House to the federal government in 1946, Brooks Adams's social secretary, Wilhelmina S. Harris, was appointed the National Historic Site's first superintendent. Harris was mindful of the family's legacy of memorialization, and she committed to the task as if she were an Adams herself. Her role in shaping interpretation at the Park, and the Adams legacy more broadly, is a central theme of this book.

²⁰ See Peter Bastian, "Forgotten Founder: Revolutionary Memory and John Dickinson's Reputation," in *Remembering the Revolution: Memory, History, and Nation Making from Independence to the Civil War*, eds. Michael A. McDonnell, Clare Corbould, Frances M. Clarke, and W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 64–66.

²¹ The diaries are available in full online in the Massachusetts Historical Society's "The Diaries of John Quincy Adams: A Digital Collection." <https://www.masshist.org/jqadiaries/php/>.

²² L. H. Butterfield, "The Papers of the Adams Family: Some Account of Their History," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 71 (Oct. 1953–May 1957), 331.

²³ In the words of biographer Paul Nagel, Charles Francis Adams "presented the Adams story in a much more intimate and appealing light." Paul C. Nagel, *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 8.

Much has been written about the Adamses, thanks in part to the opening of the family's papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston in 1956. This fostered an explosion of publications, TV series, and films about the family, whose history is by turns fascinating, awe-inspiring, and tragic.²⁴ The history of Adams National Historical Park, by contrast, has been largely unexamined.²⁵ Staff have long recognized the need for an administrative history. Wilhelmina Harris advocated for one as early as 1976, and the NPS North Atlantic Regional Director Denis P. Galvin judged her "the appropriate person to draft such a history." Harris's administrative history never came to be, however.²⁶ Perhaps this is for the best; she was such a critical part of the Park's history that it is hard to imagine how she could have critically narrated its development over time.²⁷ The "park story" that follows seeks to bring these once-siloed histories together, and untangle and illuminate the many individuals, interests, and agendas that have shaped the history of Adams National Historical Park.

²⁴ Some of these books include Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993); David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001); Paul C. Nagel, *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983); Robert V. Remini, *John Quincy Adams* (New York: Times Books, 2002); and Woody Holton, *Abigail Adams: A Life* (New York: Atria, 2009).

²⁵ Writings about the park includes Malcolm Freiberg, "From Family to Nation: The Old House Becomes a National Historic Site," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 98 (1986); Charles E. Peterson, *The Adams Mansion, Quincy, Massachusetts* (Washington, DC: Ross & Perry, 2003); and Wilhelmina S. Harris, *Adams National Historic Site: A Family's Legacy to America* (Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1983).

²⁶ Acting Regional Director, North Atlantic Region to Superintendent, Adams National Historic Site, "Park Review," January 30, 1976, RG 79, Box 2, Folder A-5427 (ADAMS), 74–76; National Park Service North Atlantic Region Program and Subject Files 1962–1977 (National Archives at Boston, Waltham, Massachusetts).

²⁷ Writing on NPS administrative histories includes: Joan M. Zenzen, "Why Administrative Histories Matter," *The Public Historian* 38, No. 4 (November 2016), 236–263; Case Statements from the 2015 NCPH Annual Meeting Working Group, "After the Administrative History: What Next?," <https://ncph.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/AftertheAdministrativeHistoryWhatNext-Case-Statements.pdf>; and the National Park Service's *National Park Service Administrative History: A Guide* (US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2004), <https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/hisnps/NPSHistory/guide.pdf>.

CHAPTER ONE

“TO SAVE THE FAMILY REPUTATION FOR THE NEXT GENERATION”: THE ADAMS MEMORIAL SOCIETY, 1927–1946

Each generation of the Adams family seemed to have one individual who took particular interest in the Old House, showing great affection for the property’s many quirks and the many more familial memories embedded in it. Brooks Adams became his generation’s steward of the family home, following in the footsteps of his father, Charles Francis Adams, and grandfather, John Quincy Adams. Brooks Adams was best known as a historian and author of the 1895 book, *The Law of Civilization and Decay: An Essay on History*.²⁸ Although he was by most accounts a social and thoughtful—if argumentative—young man, he grew more difficult and cantankerous with age. After a devastating failed romance with a French teacher in Boston named Heloise (of whom we know very little), and Heloise’s death from leukemia in the 1880s, Adams married Evelyn Davis (“Daisy”) in 1889.²⁹ Davis was the sister-in-law of Henry Cabot Lodge, one of Brooks Adams’s close friends. They did not have any children, and spent most of their years together traveling between Boston, Quincy, and Europe. Adams told a friend that his marriage proposal to Davis included an important caveat. He told her that he “was eccentric almost to madness, and that, if she married me, she must do so on her own responsibility and at her own risk.” “She seemed to regard this as a kind of poor joke,” he added.³⁰ Historian Paul Nagel has suggested that Brooks’ increasingly demanding and brash behavior as he grew older did indeed put a tremendous strain on Evelyn’s mental health.³¹

²⁸ Brooks Adams, *The Law of Civilization and Decay: An Essay on History* (New York: Macmillan & Co, 1895).

²⁹ Historian Paul Nagel attributes the shift in Brooks Adams’s personality, at least in part, to this “tragic romance.” Heloise rejected his overtures to marriage, arguing that their social classes were too far apart for the relationship to work, despite the approval of his family. Heloise’s death left Brooks even more devastated. Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 252–253.

³⁰ Cited in Marc Friedlaender, “Brooks Adams ‘En Famille,’” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 80 (1968), 90–91.

³¹ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 349. Unfortunately, Nagel did not include any footnotes in his account of four generations of Adamses, leaving it difficult for other historians to follow in his archival footsteps and assess the veracity of this claim.

In the midst of this personal turmoil, Brooks Adams increasingly focused his energies on preserving the Old House in Quincy. Although Charles Francis Adams’s will offered the property to each of his sons in order of age, only Brooks, the youngest, showed any sustained interest in it. His father anticipated this. In an 1866 letter to Brooks, he wrote, “I know your affectionate disposition too well not to understand how much more comfortable you would feel in treading on the boards of the old homestead, and sitting down to table under your father’s roof.”³² Perhaps this expectation became a self-fulfilling prophecy (or a very effective guilt trip), because Brooks became the last Adams family member to live in the Old House.

Although the Adams descendants retained their ties to the city of Quincy, only Brooks and Evelyn remained in the community by the late nineteenth century. They recognized, however, that the aging mansion was not conducive to year-round living and lacked modern luxuries. They spent winters at their home at 33 Chestnut Street in Boston, purchased in 1909, with its greater comforts and proper heating. They took up residence at the Old House each spring and summer with a staff that included gardeners, a chauffeur, cooks, and maids.³³ To Brooks Adams, the Old House was an idyllic suburban retreat from the chaos of urban life in Boston. But Quincy was, and had been for some time, rapidly changing. In reality, immigration, industrialization, and progress were at his Quincy doorstep, too.³⁴ His own father, Charles Francis Adams, had contributed significantly to the city’s business growth and development in the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁵ Despite this tension, Adams’s fond memories of and deep personal attachment to the Old House made him stay, at least in the warmer months. Although it lacked some of the comforts of his Boston house, it still felt like home.

Brooks Adams took this stewardship and its myriad responsibilities seriously, envisioning that the Old House would one day become a memorial honoring his ancestors. He instructed his relatives to donate family heirlooms that were integral to achieving this goal, and accumulated them in his Boston home.³⁶ He believed that these objects formed a

³² Cited in Marc Friedlaender, “Brooks Adams ‘En Famille,’” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 80 (1968): 79–80.

³³ Wilhelmina S. Harris, *Adams National Historic Site: A Family’s Legacy to America* (Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1983), vii.

³⁴ In *Preserving New England*, Lindgren writes: “Brahmins idealized rural life; most could escape to their country cottage or suburban home to enjoy its rewards. SPNEA’s many country dwellings reinforced those beliefs, but contrasted strangely with the tensions and disorder of cities.” James M. Lindgren, *Preserving Historic New England: Preservation, Progressivism, and the Remaking of Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 172.

³⁵ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 284.

³⁶ Historian Marc Friedlaender notes that correspondence with his brother Henry indicates that he was thinking in these terms as early as 1903. Friedlaender, “Brooks Adams ‘En Famille,’” 81.

“collection which will probably be one of the most valuable and curious, if not the most valuable and curious, in the world.” “Taking the manuscripts and the house together,” he wrote to his brother Charles Francis Adams Jr., “there is nothing in America comparable, and if there is anything in England, I hardly can lay my hands on it. I incline to think it unique.”³⁷



Figure 6. Miniature portrait of Brooks Adams by H. De Callias, dated 1909. Image courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

³⁷ These quotes from 1911 are cited in Paul C. Nagel, “Brooks Adams after Half a Century,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 90 (1978), 45.



Figure 7. Photograph of Brooks Adams, ca. 1910.
Courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

As Brooks Adams grew older, he planned for the home’s future as a memorial with greater urgency. In addition to accumulating family heirlooms, he continued to make his own improvements to the house and property. Adams made several changes to the Old House in 1921 that were “for the most part to restore the structure to its earlier state”—to a time before it had been, in his words, “*improved* almost out of recognition.”³⁸ Many of the changes reflected a colonial revival impulse, driven by Adams’s intention to make the home “reflect Abigail Adams’ taste.” He painted the house white with green shutters, removed the east portico to improve lighting in the Long Room, painted the dining room’s woodwork white, and replaced its Victorian wallpaper. The dining room in particular was sore spot for Adams—his mother Abigail Brooks Adams “ruined this room first,” he would say.³⁹ He did not intend for the house to be furnished and interpreted strictly to his great-grandparents’ time, however. Adams made several of his own changes and updates, including the addition of furniture from his brother Henry Adams’s Paris apartment. Taken together, Brooks Adams’s renovation and decorating decisions reflected what historic furnishings researcher Janice Hodson succinctly described as “a combination of his practical needs as a homeowner, his antiquarian’s sense of what constituted an early American interior and his desire to memorialize various generations of his family.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Quoted in Friedlaender, “Brooks Adams ‘En Famille,’” 81.

³⁹ Janice Hodson, “Historic Furnishings Assessment: Old House, Adams National Historical Park” (Northeast Museum Services Center: National Park Service, May 2005), 9–10. Hodson’s report provides a thorough and invaluable analysis of the many changes to the furnishings in the Old House over time, from Brooks Adams, to the AMS, and finally, the National Park Service under Wilhelmina Harris’s stewardship.

⁴⁰ Hodson, “Historic Furnishings Assessment,” 11.



Figure 8. The Old House with the east portico, ca. 1880. Brooks Adams removed the portico in 1921.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

Several impulses drove Brooks's desire to preserve the Old House as a museum. The work offered a diversion from the heartbreak he suffered from his brother Henry's death in 1918, Evelyn's deteriorating mental state, and his own troubled mind. Like many of his family members he was historically-minded by nature, and had long shown an interest in his accomplished ancestors. In 1908, he attempted to write a biography of his grandfather, John Quincy Adams, but his draft was so ruthlessly critiqued by his brother (and fellow historian) Henry that Brooks never published it. He again attempted to give his family historical treatment after Henry's death in 1918. Adams wrote an essay, "The Heritage of Henry Adams," which he published the next year alongside three of his brother's essays in *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*.⁴¹ Brooks was also committed to the history of Quincy more broadly, raising money among his family members to help pay the First Church's debts, and serving as president of the Quincy Historical Society ("taking an active if somewhat reclusive part in its affairs," in the words of historian Paul Nagel).⁴²

Brooks Adams was also a product of his time. Although his collection of family objects may have been unique, his impulse to collect was not. In the early twentieth century, antiques collecting grew in popularity among New Englanders like Brooks, who sought to preserve family objects and the memories embedded therein for future generations. Nor

⁴¹ Henry Adams with an introduction by Brooks Adams, *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920). Nagel, *Descent From Glory*, 352–353, 356–357.

⁴² Nagel, "Brooks Adams after Half a Century," 44–45.

was Brooks’s distaste for Victorian furnishings and decor unusual. This was a common sentiment at a time when men like Brooks Adams increasingly embraced the simplicity of colonial furnishings and the Yankee values they supposedly represented—above all, morality, humility, and hard work.⁴³

By the turn of the twentieth century, historic house museums were being created throughout New England to preserve significant sites from the colonial and Early Republic eras. The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA, today known as Historic New England), founded in 1910 by William Sumner Appleton, worked closely with patriotic organizations to preserve historic homes in the Northeast. Their preservation efforts had overtly nationalistic intentions which went hand-in-hand with turn of the century Yankee anxieties about immigration. Historian James M. Lindgren notes that “Appleton considered it a ‘laudable’ mission to promote the ‘veneration’ of Revolutionary heroes and their work.” George Francis Dow, SPNEA’s museum director, saw these historic sites as “‘appropriate’ vehicles for informing foreigners and less enlightened natives as to American traditions and values.”⁴⁴

The efforts of these New England preservationists were undoubtedly well-known to Brooks. This preservation momentum had already swept up the John Adams and John Quincy Adams birthplaces, which were cared for by the Daughters of the Revolution and the Quincy Historical Society, respectively. He may have even inherited an interest in the preservation of presidential homes from his mother, Abigail Brooks Adams. In the late 1850s, she served as a county manager for the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, helping to raise funds to preserve George Washington’s estate.⁴⁵ Such models offered Brooks a template for turning the Old House into a historic shrine. He likely felt that a museum created by his family would not only have better artifacts, thanks to his collecting habits, but would also give them better control over the narrative of their family’s history. Historian Carter L. Hudgins has suggested that for early historic preservationists, “While the medium was important, the message mattered more.”⁴⁶ Brooks Adams had very concrete ideas about what that message should be.

⁴³ In the words of historian James Lindgren, these men “prized their ancestors’ belongings as mementos to which affection could cling, and squirreled them away in attics and barns.” *Preserving Historic New England*, 156.

⁴⁴ James M. Lindgren, “‘A Constant Incentive to Patriotic Citizenship’: Historic Preservation in Progressive-Era Massachusetts,” *The New England Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (1991), 603.

⁴⁵ See <https://www.masshist.org/adams/biographies>. Thanks to archivist Rebecca Baird at George Washington’s Mount Vernon for details about the role of a “county manager”—they were usually affluent, well-connected women to help raise funds for Mount Vernon in areas that the Mount Vernon Ladies Association members could not easily reach.

⁴⁶ Carter L. Hudgins, “Mount Vernon and America’s Historic House Museums: Old Roles and New Responsibilities in the Preservation of Place,” in Carol Borchert Cadou, Luke J. Percoraro, and Thomas A. Reinhart, eds., *Stewards of Memory: The Past, Present, and Future of Historic Preservation at George Washington’s Mount Vernon* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2018), 198.

A Carefully Curated Family History

Brooks Adams was far from the first member of his family to attempt to shape the Adams’ historical legacy. His great-grandfather John Adams was very attentive to how the American Revolution, and his role in the same, would be remembered by future generations. He made a point of preserving his letters for this purpose, and in doing so, succeeded in helping to shape narratives about his generation of revolutionaries.⁴⁷ Brooks’ father, Charles Francis Adams, edited and published several volumes of his family’s letters and diary excerpts, but with a careful eye and selective editing that, in the words of family biographer Paul C. Nagel, focused on “pleasing aspects in the personal life of his forebears,” and omitting “many of the most personal documents and passages.”⁴⁸ Brooks, too, recognized both the importance of the Adams family history, and the importance of packaging it for public consumption.

Like his father before him, Brooks Adams sought to protect the considerable heartache—including alcoholism, depression, and other misfortunes—that was interwoven with his family’s many accomplishments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁴⁹ He had suffered his own share of misfortune, and was further burdened by the anxiety that his generation of Adamses would not be able to live up to the accomplishments of their predecessors.⁵⁰ This created a notable tension in Adams’s determination to preserve the Old House as a memorial. At the same time that he was envisioning turning the house into a museum, he sought to shield the family’s papers—and his own—from the public’s prying eyes.

Brooks, his brother Henry, and sister Mary were all opposed to making the family’s papers open to the public. Their brother Charles Francis Jr., however, favored a more open-access approach. “My family have a large mass of historical material,” he wrote, “and it has been my rule to make it as accessible as possible to investigators, always, of course, excepting matters of personal or family concern.”⁵¹ Charles Francis Jr. technically lost this battle: the family’s papers, beginning with John Quincy Adams and Charles Francis Adams’s papers, were moved bit by bit from the Stone Library to the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS) in 1902. As historian (and onetime MHS Editor

⁴⁷ Bastian, “Forgotten Founder: Revolutionary Memory and John Dickinson’s Reputation,” 64–66.

⁴⁸ Nagel, *Descent From Glory*, 8.

⁴⁹ Nagel’s *Descent from Glory* is perhaps the book that delves most deeply into the personal lives and misfortunes of the Adamses. Nagel wrote in the introduction (page 5), “This public attainment by one family is awesome, but to be fully appreciated, it needs to be placed beside the distressing story of the Adamses’ private difficulties.”

⁵⁰ Marianne Peak, phone interview with Laura Miller, January 24, 2020.

⁵¹ Quoted in Malcolm Freiberg, “The Adams Manuscript Trust, 1905–1955,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 106 (1994): 113–14.

of Publications) Malcolm Freiberg notes, however, Charles Francis Jr. was the MHS’s president, and nevertheless “continued his wonted liberality” with the papers.⁵² Charles Francis later described the many family arguments that ensued over these decisions:

A few years ago I got the papers transferred from Quincy—the danger of fire and certainty of damp—to the building of the Historical Society. More row!—For fear that I would make some use of the materials—diary and letters—Brooks proposes to me to hermetically seal them up for fifty years—no-one practically to have access to them.⁵³

Brooks made his feelings plain in a 1908 letter to Charles Francis:

The more I know . . . the clearer I am that no stranger should have access to them. Our ancestors, especially John Adams, have suffered enough from indiscreet publication, and breach of private confidence. I do not care to further diminish what credit we have by continuing to print, or to permit to have printed, documents which may sell some publication, but which injure us.

He did not specify the nature of these supposed betrayals, but he felt a strong sense of responsibility to tightly control access to the family’s papers. He continued: “I am clear that if I have any duty further in this world it is to save the family reputation for the next generation,” he wrote. This sentiment extended even more ruthlessly to his own reputation—he destroyed most of his own correspondence and papers, leaving future historians to piece together his life and legacy from a limited archival record.⁵⁴

Brooks Adams’s plans for the Old House were driven by this same sense of duty. He saw the preservation of the Old House and its collection of precious family heirlooms as a way to create a curated history of the Adams family for public consumption, giving the family the respect and honor he felt it deserved. Whereas opening the family papers to the public would put the narrative out of the family’s control, a museum run by the family would enable the Adams descendants to shape how their family’s history was presented. It was an early, and ultimately quite effective, effort at image-management for the family.

In 1920, Adams made a decision that would have a profound impact on the future of the Old House: he hired a young social secretary, Wilhelmina Harris (née Sellers). Harris was born in 1896 in Franklin, Alabama to William and May Sellers.⁵⁵ Wilhelmina, known by her family as “Willie,” was the youngest of eight children (three sons and five daugh-

⁵² “The Adams Manuscript Trust, 1905–1955,” 114.

⁵³ Quoted in “The Adams Manuscript Trust, 1905–1955,” 115.

⁵⁴ “The Adams Manuscript Trust, 1905–1955,” 119; and “Brooks Adams after Half a Century,” 40.

⁵⁵ Marianne Peak noted that Harris was one of eight children and the only girl; Harris told Peak that her father wanted a boy and named her Wilhelmina because she was not a William: “She reminded me she was named for Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands—of course, where John Adams traveled to treat for peace.” From Marianne Peak’s comments on the first draft of this book, January 2020.

ters). Her father was a farmer.⁵⁶ In 1914, she moved to Boston to study concert piano at the Faelten Pianoforte School, and after receiving her B.A. in Music, she began looking for work.⁵⁷ She went to an employment agency that had just received a call from Brooks Adams, who was seeking a social secretary for his wife Evelyn. As Evelyn’s physical and mental health was declining, Brooks felt it necessary to hire someone to plan trips, dinners, and manage their social calendar. Harris first met the Adamses in the fall of 1920 at their Beacon Hill home at 33 Chestnut Street, and she was quickly hired. It would prove to be a fortuitous moment for both of them.

⁵⁶ Details about Harris’s family and childhood in Alabama are sparse; information here is derived from the 1900 and 1910 United States Federal Census, McKinley County, Monroe (1900) and Franklin, Alabama (1910), Ancestry.com.

⁵⁷ A 1909 advertisement described the school as “A school of 1000 pupils which prepares the student to become an efficient performer and teacher ready to enter upon a successful professional career.” See Albert Nelson Marquis, ed., *Who’s Who in New England*, first edition (Chicago: A. N. Marquis & Company, 1909), 1085. Ebook available through Google Books, <https://books.google.com/books?id=8dDUv19AKv4C&pg=PA1#v=one-page&q&f=false>.



Figure 9. Wilhelmina Harris (née Sellers) as a young woman, date unknown.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

Harris became Brooks Adams’s close companion, confidante, and protégé. She would later say that Brooks “liked to teach and she liked to learn.”⁵⁸ She accompanied Brooks and Evelyn on several trips to Europe, where he educated her on matters of taste and culture. While in Boston and Quincy, she capably managed the couple’s social arrangements and oversaw the work of the family’s household staff.

From the very beginning, Adams impressed upon Harris the importance of the family home in Quincy. Harris recalled her first visit to the Old House in the spring of 1921:

We arrived at the “Old House” from the direction of East Milton and after a few minutes pause for a look across Adams Street at the house, the chauffeur turned the car around and stopped directly in front of the 1731 entrance. We stepped out of the automobile and with great pride Mr. Adams said: “This is the ‘Old House.’”

Adams drew her attention to the entrance, and reminded her that “Presidents of the United States, ecclesiastical as well as secular scholars, presidents of Harvard, political leaders, neighbors, and personal friends had crossed this threshold since 1788 to be greeted by four generations of Adams ladies.” He then walked Harris around the property, describing in detail the important features of the house, the gardens, the trees, and the orchard. These history lessons continued unabated for the next seven years.⁵⁹

Brooks Adams’s impulse to share these stories reflected his fears about the fate of the property and his family’s legacy, which had grown more acute since his brother Henry’s death in 1918. Adams took great pleasure in teaching Harris about his family’s history and the history of the Old House.⁶⁰ He described in detail the different rooms and the many precious family heirlooms contained therein, from the furniture, rugs, and paintings to the silver and porcelain collections. He also shared with her extensive details and anecdotes about the garden, greenhouse, orchard, and trees. Harris dutifully committed these details to memory. As she learned more about the history of the Old House, she, too, began to feel invested in its future. She later recalled:

The long association of the family with the Old House began to take on new meaning for me. Mr. Adams recalled playing hide-and-seek with his sister Mary up the 1731 stairway and down the 1800 stairway, climbing the fruit trees and eating cherries. His reminiscing [became] even more interesting as I became acquainted with those who had passed from the scene. He reviewed his childhood days with pleasant memories of his parents. He thought his father had

⁵⁸ Marianne Peak, phone interview with Laura Miller, January 24, 2020.

⁵⁹ Details in this section are from Wilhelmina S. Harris, “Furnishings Report of the Old House: The Adams National Historic Site, Quincy, Massachusetts,” Volume I (1968), 115–125; Friedlaender, “Brooks Adams ‘En Famille,’” 82; and Harris, *Adams National Historic Site: A Family’s Legacy to America*, 2.

⁶⁰ “Living Monument to a Family,” *Christian Science Monitor*, undated newspaper article, in Superintendent’s Clipping File, Box 1, Folder 17 (ADAM).

sympathy, ambition, and understanding for his children. He recalled his mother as devoted to her children and dedicated to her husband. At the table, he identified for me some of the porcelain as having been his parents’ and sons as from his earlier forbears—all of it, for the most part, associated with their diplomatic services abroad. Mr. Adams was able to evoke the parts each played in American history as if he had been actually present.⁶¹

Harris also observed as Brooks Adams explored avenues of preserving the Old House as a museum, including his inquiries to different museum professionals about its potential as a memorial to the Adamses.⁶²

Brooks Adams’s vision for a museum proved prescient. He was remarkably successful in shaping the family’s historical narrative for decades to come. This process continued with Henry (“Harry”) Adams II, his sister Elizabeth (“Elsie”) Ogden Adams, and cousin Abigail Adams (“Hitty”) Homans carrying the torch from their Uncle Brooks after his death in 1927. Over the next two decades, Harry, Elsie, and Hitty worked closely with their relatives to create the Adams Memorial Society and open the Old House as a historic house museum. Harry Adams would also write a narrative history of the Old House based on his own research into the history of the family and the property, which he published in 1929 (followed by a revised edition in 1935).

After the Adams Memorial Society gifted the Old House to the National Park Service in 1946, the Adams descendants encouraged NPS leadership to hire none other than Wilhelmina Sellers Harris—the same Wilhelmina Harris who had diligently committed Brooks Adams’s recollections of the Old House to memory, and who now lived in her own home across the street from the Old House. Harris was quickly promoted to park Superintendent and would, in turn, incorporate Brooks Adams’s memories into her interpretation of the house. This interpretation focused on celebrating the many achievements of the four generations who lived in the Old House, and studiously avoided dwelling on (or even discussing) the darker chapters in the Adams family history. She also sought to give Brooks the respect she felt he deserved; future Superintendent Marianne Peak recalled that Harris “would always elevate his importance and defend Brooks. Henry [Brooks’ brother, Henry Adams] was the one who naturally got attention, and Brooks was the homebody, keeping the home fires burning and concerned about the [family’s] legacy.”⁶³ Harris would go on to document these reminiscences in publications and her exhaustive ten-volume furnishings report for the Old House, thereby cementing Brooks Adams’s interpretive

⁶¹ Wilhelmina S. Harris, “Furnishings Report of the Old House: The Adams National Historic Site, Quincy, Massachusetts,” Volume I (1968), 152.

⁶² Harris, *Adams National Historic Site: A Family’s Legacy to America*, 17.

⁶³ Marianne Peak, phone interview with Laura Miller, January 24, 2020.

framework of his family’s history.⁶⁴ She served as a bridge between the Adams Memorial Society and the National Park Service—someone who knew the family and property history intimately before it became a National Park. Throughout her several decades at the helm of the Historic Site, she would foster and maintain close ties to the Adams family. In the process, the family was able to keep a close eye on, and sometimes even influence, the park’s interpretation and development.

Brooks Adams could not have imagined a better outcome.

Incorporating the Adams Memorial Society

Henry (Harry) Adams II, the son of Charles Francis Adams Jr., made regular visits to the Old House to spend time with his Uncle Brooks in his final years. Wilhelmina Harris recalled that these visits inspired Harry to grow more invested in the property. Although initially he “was not familiar with the Old House,” she noted, “it was interesting to see how rapidly the place became a part of him.” Unmarried and unemployed, Harry Adams had not only the inclination, but also the time to invest in learning about the family property. Brooks took to teaching his nephew about the history of the Old House, much as he had done with Harris. They spent time exploring the house room by room, with Brooks regaling them with stories from his family’s past. The experience had its intended effect on Harry. Harris observed that “Though Henry Adams, II never attributed his interest in the Old House to his Uncle Brooks, it was very apparent to me, at least.”⁶⁵ Harry’s cousin Hitty also checked in on her Uncle Brooks regularly, having Sunday night suppers with him every week.⁶⁶ Together with “Miss Sellers” and Elsie, the four likely learned a great deal from their hours passed at the Old House with Brooks Adams.

These family visits seem to have reassured Brooks Adams, too. Harris recalled that one day, a family celebration hosted at the Old House suddenly eased his mind about the future of the Old House: “I will not fret longer about the Old House, the library, and

⁶⁴ These publications included Wilhelmina S. Harris, “The Brooks Adams I Knew,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 80 (1968): 102; and Wilhelmina S. Harris, *Adams National Historic Site: A Family’s Legacy to America* (Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1983). Harris described many of these details recounted to her by Brooks Adams in her “Furnishings Report of the Old House: The Adams National Historic Site, Quincy, Massachusetts,” Volume I, 114–125.

⁶⁵ Wilhelmina S. Harris, “Furnishings Report of the Old House,” Volume I, 159–161.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Henry Adams II Diary, January 24 and January 26, 1927. Henry Adams diaries, 1890–1951, MS N-1776 Adams 5th Gen. HA2, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA. A notebook at the park from the 1960s includes handwritten notes of Harris’s recollections, dictated to an unknown writer. I suspect it was Helen Nelson (Skeen). The author took meticulous notes of Harris’s recollections, which included that “Mrs. Homans” was a regular visitor, coming each week for Sunday night supper. See notebook in ADAM Resource Management Records, Box 14, Folder 4, “Interpretive Tour of Old House [c. 1962].

garden; my family has always met its responsibilities,” he said.⁶⁷ He knew that there was now a devoted and reliable group of guardians who would ensure its preservation after he was gone.

Brooks Adams died at his home in Boston on the morning of February 13, 1927. Evelyn had passed away only a couple of months earlier, in December 1926. Harry Adams observed Brooks’s passing in his diary, concluding “The end was expected and it is a relief from suffering. He has gone to his rest. It is best but I miss him.”⁶⁸ His funeral was held at the UFPC in Quincy, and he was buried in the Mount Wollaston Cemetery. Brooks Adams made sure his relatives and the Old House’s staff were amply provided for in his will. Harry Adams recorded in his diary, “His house and all the family portraits go to the Homans [his cousin, Abigail “Hitty” Homans and her husband, Robert Homans]. The rest of us are all remembered equally. I am glad that Miss Sellers is well cared for. She deserves a bit.”⁶⁹ The *Boston Daily Globe* reported the amounts: Harris (Sellers) received \$30,000, coachman John Manning \$20,000, gardener Martin Hyland and maid Ellen Ring each received \$10,000, and Francis McCormick and two other maids, Mary Dayton and Norah Schofield, received \$5,000. The astonishing amount left for Harris (adjusted for inflation, more than \$430,000 in 2019), suggests how close and dear she became to Brooks Adams in his final years.⁷⁰ It may also help explain, in part, her thorough commitment to Brooks Adams’s vision for the Old House when it became a National Historic Site two decades later.

Brooks Adams was right to trust that his nieces and nephews would “[meet] their responsibilities” in caring for the Old House. They wasted no time fulfilling his dream of turning it into public memorial. On March 14, just over a month after Brooks Adams’s death, Harry had lunch with his older sister Elsie at her home to plan for the preservation and future care of the Old House. “We must find money to do it some way,” he mused in his diary.⁷¹

Just over a week later, on March 22, the Adams descendants established the Adams Memorial Society. The purpose of the corporation was to acquire the Old House and its accompanying land and buildings,

and to restore, preserve and maintain said premises when so acquired . . . as a place of historic and public interest and as an educational exhibit and not for profit, and with the purpose of fostering civic virtue and patriotism; and to these ends to acquire by purchase or otherwise personal effects and property of

⁶⁷ Wilhelmina S. Harris, “The Brooks Adams I Knew,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 80 (1968), 108.

⁶⁸ Henry Adams II Diary, February 13, 1927, Henry Adams diaries, 1890–1951, MS N-1776 Adams 5th Gen. HA2, (Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA).

⁶⁹ Henry Adams II Diary, February 17, 1927.

⁷⁰ “Employees Benefit By Adams Estate,” *Boston Daily Globe*, March 5, 1927. 2019 dollars calculated using the Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator: https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

⁷¹ Henry Adams II Diary, March 14, 1927.

historic value or other value or interest and place the same in and about the said premises, and in general to do all things which may be necessary or proper to preserve said premises and the buildings now built thereon and the personal property which may from time to time be placed therein or thereon.

The corporation’s bylaws stated that members were descendants of John Quincy Adams’s son, Charles Francis Adams (who died on Nov. 21, 1886) who were over the age of 21, and the corporation could also elect any other members it deemed fit. The founding officers were: President Abigail Homans; Vice President Louisa Catherine Perkins; Treasurer Henry Adams; Secretary Henry Adams; Trustees Charles Francis Adams, John Adams, Elizabeth Ogden Adams, Arthur Adams, and Dorothy Quincy Nourse.⁷² Henry Adams’s diaries provide a valuable glimpse into the early years of the Memorial Society, and also his feelings of obligation to the cause. In characteristic gloomy fashion, he noted the incorporation in his diary, and concluded, “I suppose I must contribute but I would rather save my money against old age.”⁷³ Despite his grudging tone, his actions suggest that he was a much more willing participant. He became one of the family members most devoted to the Old House.

On March 28, the Adams Memorial Society acquired formal title to the property, which was owned and donated to the Society by the Adams Manuscript Trust (whose co-trustees were Charles Francis Adams III and Henry Adams II).⁷⁴ Members promised to contribute \$1,000 yearly for the Old House’s maintenance—an amount that, by 1929 and in the wake of the Great Depression, was reduced to \$500.⁷⁵ Even then, some members were more reliable than others in their contributions.⁷⁶ Maintaining a healthy bottom line would be a recurring challenge for the Memorial Society in the coming years. The Old House’s upkeep and repairs, as well as the nation’s economic depression and war put a relentless strain on the Society’s finances.

⁷² Louisa Catherine Perkins and Elizabeth Ogden Adams were Henry Adams II’s sisters; John Adams was his twin brother. Their other sibling was Mary Ogden (“Molly”) Adams. AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder “1927 By-Laws, Articles of Incorporation, Charter,” AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁷³ Henry Adams second diary, March 22, 1927.

⁷⁴ Malcolm Freiberg, “From Family to Nation: The Old House Becomes a National Historic Site,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 98 (1986), 62–64. Freiberg’s article provides a detailed overview of the AMS’s stewardship of the Old House.

⁷⁵ “From Family to Nation,” 64. AMS, “Minutes of the Annual Meeting of The AMS, Inc.,” March 4, 1929, Record Carton 1, Folder 1929 Minutes/Annual Report, AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁷⁶ Freiberg notes that, “In practice, the voluntary contributions came only from the eight original subscribers, and not all of those who participated at the outset kept up their contributions later.” “From Family to Nation,” 64.

Making the Old House a Museum

From the beginning, siblings Elsie and Harry were the family members most committed to preserving the Old House. Historian Malcolm Freiberg described Harry as the Memorial Society’s “principal worrier.” Elsie, in turn, could be considered its most generous benefactor.⁷⁷ Both were unmarried, perhaps giving them more time and space to devote to the immense task ahead of them. Together with their cousin Hitty and their sister Louisa Catherine Perkins (“Lulu”), the group dedicated themselves to turning the Old House into the memorial that Brooks Adams had envisioned.



Figure 10. Adams family members in 1929.

Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

The family members worked diligently to prepare the house for its public opening. It was a daunting task. Thomas Boylston Adams (son of John Adams III), remembered that “Harry and Elsie Adams almost lived there sorting over the accumulations of more than a century. . . . There were mountains of rubbish to clear out. . . . Books were

⁷⁷ Freiberg offered a succinct description of their commitment: “Bachelor status, combined with an abiding interest in the Old House, made them its foremost guardians in their generation of Adamses.” “From Family to Nation,” 63.

stacked in the closets of the house, on the floor of the library, on the ladder to the gallery. The contents of Henry Adams’s Paris apartment filled the stable.” He recalled Harry “at work, dust covered and muttering through his teeth ‘Wish I could burn the damn place down.’”⁷⁸

Harry Adams’s diary entries support this recollection. He dutifully recorded each day’s work in his diaries, as well as much of Hitty and Elsie’s work, too. The entries provide a window into the seemingly endless tasks that the group faced before they could open the Old House to the public. Between April and June, Harry’s varied tasks included investigating fire protection options for the Old House, discussing burglar alarm systems with an A.D.T. representative, paying the workers who were still employed at the Old House (presumably handyman Francis McCormick and gardener Martin Hyland), inventorying Brooks Adams’s property, meeting with a carpenter to discuss railings, and handling tax matters. Adams, McCormick, and Hyland painted the barriers for the Old House-turned-museum with linseed oil and mahogany stain. Harry was certainly not alone in these chores. In addition to help from the Old House’s remaining employees, he regularly met with Elsie, Hitty, and Lulu at the Old House to clean, make repairs, and plan for the public opening. Even when they were not working on the Old House, they were frequently engaged in the public rituals of memorializing their ancestors. On April 19, the family attended the unveiling of a tablet commemorating John Adams and John Quincy Adams in Quincy’s Merrymount Park. “We can at least do honor to those who came before us,” Harry Adams wrote in his diary the day before.⁷⁹ Honoring his ancestors turned out to be a full-time job.

The members of the Adams Memorial Society held a special meeting on Monday, April 25 in Room 1025 of 84 State Street in Boston to plan for the Old House’s opening.⁸⁰ The order of business was brief. The members voted to spend \$180 to purchase 12 fire extinguishers for the Old House, and voted to deny requests from “patriotic or other Societies” to use the Old House for their own purposes. Presumably the Adams Memorial Society had already begun to receive such requests (or anticipated that they would be forthcoming), much as Lily Titus had requested the family’s permission to use the John Adams birthplace as a Daughters of the Revolution meeting space and presidential memorial three decades earlier.

⁷⁸ Thomas Boylston Adams, “John Quincy Adams (1922–1987),” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 99 (1987): 177. Boylston Adams incorrectly refers to them as “unmarried cousins.” Harry and Elsie Adams were siblings.

⁷⁹ See for example the following entries from Henry Adams II diary in 1927: April 12, 13, 15, 18, 19, and 22; May 2, 23, 24, and 31; June 1, 10, 11, and 13; and July 5.

⁸⁰ AMS, “AMS Special Meeting,” April 25, 1927, Record Carton 1, Folder 1927 By-laws, Articles of Incorporation, Charter, AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

Cleaning and preparing for public presentation was only half the battle. The historic house museum needed interpretation, too. The members of the Adams Memorial Society decided that the house should be preserved to reflect the many layers of family history, rather than restoring it to a particular moment in time. Harry Adams later wrote,

Although with the material at its disposal the Society might have made the Old House over into a pleasing example of an early American dwelling, this would not have been advisable, for, being the history of four generations of a family each of which wrote its part by leaving something, the Old House should not be typical of any one person or period. . . . Everything, therefore, has been allowed to remain where it was left, the only changes made being to replace where they had been when in use a few obsolete pieces of furniture, like the cradle, that were stored away.

“The interest of the Adams Mansion lies not in its beauty,” he concluded, “but in its history and ownership.”⁸¹ Despite their best intentions, the members of the Memorial Society strayed from these sentiments, making decisions to bring in new objects, remove others, and install exhibit cases for items for public display. This was well within the purview of the Society’s mission; the Articles of Incorporation included the ability to acquire historic objects for display in the Old House, much as Brooks Adams had done before them. But, as Janice Hodson noted in her 2006 Historic Furnishings Assessment of the Old House, the Adams Memorial Society (and later, the NPS) overlooked the reality that this approach “conflicted with the Society’s often-stated goal of maintaining the interiors as they had been at [Brooks Adams’s] death.”⁸²

As opening day neared, Harry Adams began researching the Old House’s history. His recollections of Brooks’ memories were not enough to go on. On May 27, he went to the Boston Athenaeum to begin researching the history of the Vassall family and the house. “Wish I could find out more about the Old House,” he wrote in his diary. His return visits similarly yielded little information about the house’s past. Although he grew frustrated, he continued to work diligently on his history in the coming weeks, painstakingly piecing together a narrative of the property and important events that took place there. As opening day neared, he changed his tune: suddenly there was *too much* information to sort through. On July 10 he wrote, “Spent whole day writing in my study on the history of the Old House. So much to see and so hard to sift the grain from the chaff.”⁸³

⁸¹ Henry Adams II, *The Adams Mansion: The Home of John Adams and John Quincy Adams, Presidents of the United States* (Quincy, MA: AMS, 1935).

⁸² Hodson, “Historic Furnishings Assessment: Old House, Adams National Historical Park,” 12.

⁸³ See Henry Adams II diary entries for the following dates in 1927: May 27; June 6, 12, and 15; July 7, 10–14, 16 and 17.

By July 18, Harry had completed his historical narrative, just in time for an opening reception being held the next day. When he arrived in Quincy that afternoon, he was pleasantly surprised by the transformation of the Old House, which he found bustling with members of the press. He recorded in his diary,

To the office in the Ford. Then to Quincy. Hitty, Lulu, and Elsie very busy. They have brought the atmosphere of my grandmothers time back to the Old House. Give Hitty my History. She passed it on to a reporter there. House full of photographers and newspaper men.

The next morning Harry was up and out early to prepare for the opening reception. The event was invitation-only—the public opening would be held later in the month. At four o’clock, people began streaming in. They stayed for two hours socializing in the Old House and Stone Library. Attendees included Quincy Mayor Thomas J. McGrath, Congressman Louis Adams Frothingham, Senator Henry L. Kinkaide, city council members, and members of local patriotic societies including the Colonial Dames of Massachusetts, the Paul Revere Post of the Grand Army of the Republic, the Quincy Post of the American Legion, the Adams Chapter of the Daughters of the Revolution, and the Abigail Phillips Quincy Chapter of the Daughters of the Revolution. Word of the event also made its way to one of Brooks Adams’s former Old House employees, William Gavin, who to Harry Adams’s surprise, showed up as well: “Billy Gavin turned up and we gave him a welcome. He wanted to see the kitchen and laundry where he used to work,” he noted.⁸⁴ The *Boston Daily Globe* journalist Reverend Daniel Munro Wilson reported that the Adams family members divided the reception’s labor along gendered lines: “Tea was served in the library building this afternoon by Miss Mary Adams and Miss Mary Abbott, while the male members of the Adams family showed the invited guests through the various rooms.”⁸⁵ Harry was no doubt eager to share his accumulated historical wisdom about the Old House with their distinguished guests.

Although the invite-only gathering was over, there was still work to do. In the final, frantic days leading up to the public opening, the four family members most committed to the endeavor—Elsie, Hitty, Lulu, and Harry—worked nonstop. Harry Adams continued on with his own preparations, driving around buying things for the Old House (“I never realized it would take so long,” he complained), before returning to find Lulu and Elsie still hard at work. Hitty joined in with Lulu and Harry to plan for opening day, and Harry and Ogden Abbott put up rope barriers and moved tables.

⁸⁴ Henry Adams II diary, July 18 and 19, 1927.

⁸⁵ “Brooks Adams House As National Shrine,” *Boston Daily Globe*, July 20, 1927. Mary Ogden Abbott, 33 years old at the time, would later in life become one of the family members most devoted to the Old House under the National Park Service’s stewardship.

On July 23, the exhausted group was rewarded with a surprise guest who showed up two days before the opening. Miss Elsie Johnson of nearby Milton, Massachusetts, wandered by “and asked if she might come in.” Harry recorded that the group obliged, and “arranged desk and blotter for signing.”⁸⁶ It was a terse account of what must have been a tremendously exciting moment for the family members: their first paying customer.

Opening the Adams Mansion to the Public

“House thrown open,” Harry Adams recorded in his diary on July 25, 1927. The Old House was officially opened to the public. Adams left Lincoln for Quincy early in the morning at 7 a.m., where he was joined by Elsie and Mary. The group anxiously awaited their first visitors, who did not arrive until late in the day. While they waited, Harry occupied himself by going “over the house bit by bit with the custodian.” This was likely Margaret McCormick, a former employee of Brooks Adams who was both the caretaker and tour guide of the Old House. Finally, at 3:30 p.m., 17 women, girls, and one man (“nice people”) stopped in. His assessment of their visit was brief, but positive. “Every thing went very well,” he wrote.⁸⁷ Visitation was much better the next day, when 27 visitors toured the Old House.

Visitors were charged 25 cents each, and the house was open from April 19 to October 31, 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. every day.⁸⁸ The property was closed in the winter, because the cost of heating the Old House and keeping employees on the payroll would have cost more than they were able to bring in through admissions fees.⁸⁹ Gray Line bus tours were critical to visitation at the Old House in these years; in 1928, almost half the visitors to the site came by bus, and Harry Adams was confident that it would be an even greater source of tourists the following year.⁹⁰ In 1929, he reported that there was indeed an increase in admissions thanks to the influx of bus tours. Admissions numbers were further bolstered by printing and distributing 5,000 advertising cards, which “have gone widely over the United States.” Adams noted: “The increase in transient visitors is good. There should from now on be more transient tourists stopping here as the Old House gets better known. The cards and

⁸⁶ Henry Adams II diary, July 21.

⁸⁷ Henry Adams II diary, July 25, 1927 and Freiberg, “From Family to Nation,” 65.

⁸⁸ Freiberg, “From Family to Nation,” 64–65.

⁸⁹ “AMS Report for the year ending December 31, 1928,” Record Carton 1, Folder “1929 Minutes/Annual Report,” MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁹⁰ “AMS Report for the Year Ending December 31, 1928.”

pamphlets passing from hand to hand and the cards distributed from the information bureaus of the hotels is the only advertising done; but it is the most effective for its cost.”⁹¹

True to form, however, Harry worried about the house’s popularity from the very start. At the end of the house’s first month open, he was already fretting:


Off to Quincy to help out at the Old House. Very few people came in for Saturday. At the end of the day there were only 49; not so good as Wednesday when there were 51. I do not understand it. Perhaps there may be more later when it gets known.⁹²

Just like his Uncle Brooks before him, Harry’s worries about the Old House were seemingly endless. Unfortunately, world events combined with his personal anxieties ensured that these worries would not subside in the coming years.

⁹¹ “Minutes of Annual Meeting of the AMS, Inc.,” December 31, 1929, Record Carton 1, Folder “1930 Minutes/Annual Report/Corr,” MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁹² Henry Adams second diary, July 26 and July 30, 1927.

President
JOHN ADAMS



President
JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

ADAMS MANSION
Quincy, Mass.

Home of Presidents John Adams and John Quincy Adams.
135 Adams St. (Road to Plymouth), at the bridge over railroad. Route 135

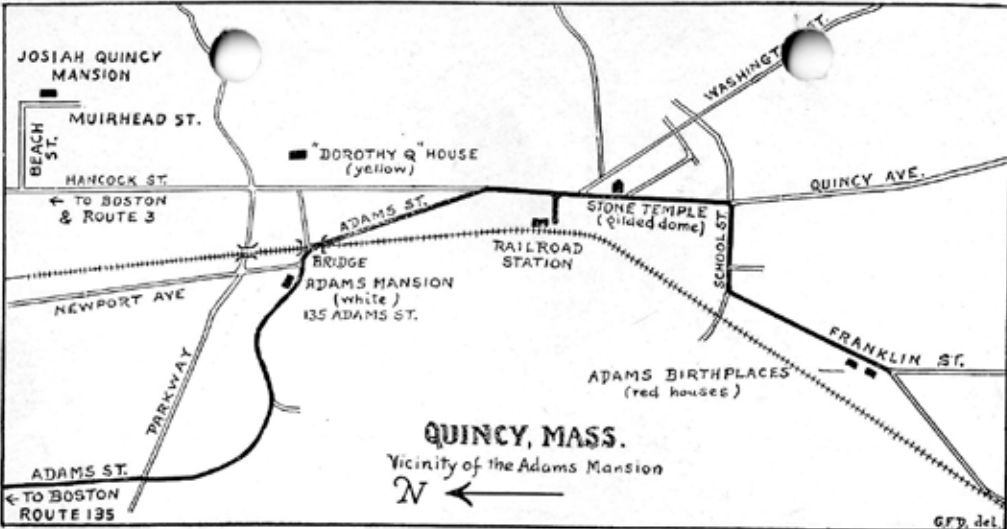
OCCUPIED till 1927 by descendants of the Presidents. Since then a memorial to them kept by the family as left. In it are:—the family portraits, furniture, and books—John and Abigail Adams' bedroom, with the family cradle, and bed in which Abigail died — John Adams' study, and chair in which he died — John Quincy Adams' study-desk and chair, and desk in Congress at which he fell — also much more belonging to their home life. In the garden is Abigail Adams' Yorkist rose bush. In the granite library the books of John Quincy Adams. All kept as when the family was there. John and Abigail Adams died in this house.

Open April 19th to October 31st, 9 to 6, daily, including Sundays and holidays.
Admission 25 cents.

Tel. President 1177

(over)

Route 135



QUINCY, MASS.
Vicinity of the Adams Mansion

Near the Adams Mansion are—the red farmhouses, where the Presidents were born—the Stone Temple with gilded dome, containing their tombs—just over the bridge the "Dorothy Q. House"—and a mile toward Boston, Hancock Street, turning right at Beach to Muirhead Street, the old Col. Josiah Quincy Mansion.

ADAMS MEMORIAL SOCIETY
135 Adams St., Quincy, Mass.
Tel President 1177.

ADAMS MANSION
135 Adams St., Quincy, Mass.
Tel. President 1177

(Over)

Figure 11. Advertising card (front and back) for the Adams Mansion when it was run by the Adams Memorial Society.
Images courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.



Figure 12. Photograph of the Old House under the stewardship of the Adams Memorial Society by Leon Abdalian, October 10, 1929. Abdalian was a well-known photographer in the Boston area.
Courtesy of the Leon Abdalian Collection, Boston Public Library.



Figure 13. The Old House with the garden in the foreground and the Stone Library at left. Photograph taken when the house was under the stewardship of the Adams Memorial Society by photographer Leon Abdalian, October 10, 1929. Courtesy of the Leon Abdalian Collection, Boston Public Library.

Weathering the Great Depression

As was to be expected for a house built in the 1700s, the Old House required a relentless stream of expensive repairs. The Memorial Society’s expense report from April through December 1927 indicated that with the exception of the new heating plant, they expected these repair costs to remain consistent over time. They were unlikely to subside: “The House is old and necessary repairs will take the place of those that will not occur again. At this rate, it will cost \$4,000 per year to maintain the place. Subscribers have agreed to give this amount.”⁹³ Larger repairs were reliant on the generosity of the Memorial Society’s members, and some members were more forthcoming than others. Elizabeth (Elsie) Ogden Adams was perhaps the most generous. In 1927, she gave the Adams Memorial Society \$1,030 to install its new heating system, and in 1928 she provided \$300

⁹³ “AMS Report for 9 Months, April 1st, to December 31, 1927,” Record Carton 1, Folder 1928 Minutes/Annual Report/Corr/Proceedings, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

for new plumbing in the Old House, as well as proceeds from a \$20,000 fund for the Society to use as needed.⁹⁴ But she could not carry the repair expenses alone, and her fellow Memorial Society members had no illusions about the ongoing repairs that the house would require.

In 1930, the Memorial Society members were coming to terms with the continued outlays of money necessary to keep the house open. They installed a burglar alarm system in the Old House and Library, repaired and painted the gates, and fixed the roof. Henry Adams noted in his Treasurer’s Report that although the Society’s cash on hand had increased from the previous year, it would all go to the care and repair of the home:

the roof is in constant need of repairs; the South Portico is showing decay; and the doors of the Library let the rain seep in in Winter. For improvements; copies should be made of the portraits for safety; the Library, which has many valuable books, should be catalogued and sorted, and if kept up to date in its relation to the family, should have copies placed in it of recently published family letters and books about the family.⁹⁵

The financial stresses were relentless, and were compounded by the Great Depression. By 1931, the Memorial Society was grappling with the effects of the economic crash. Fewer tourists were coming to visit the Old House (about one-third fewer than the previous year), and there was a noticeable decrease in bus tours. Harry Adams tried to remain optimistic: “When the country recovers from the present depression the admissions should be greater than any previous year as the Old House gets known,” he wrote. He lamented that Quincy did not have a “school history association like Concord, Lexington, Bunker Hill, and Plymouth—names that are familiar to every one,” and so the Old House “must acquire a reputation of its own.” People *were* finding the Old House through word of mouth. Although admissions were down, the Old House was faring better than many of its counterparts in the area. Henry Adams concluded that the Depression, not “lack of interest,” was to blame for the poor showing.⁹⁶

It would take several years for historic house museums like the Adams Mansion to recover from the Great Depression. By 1933, Harry Adams was increasingly pessimistic about the Old House’s future. That year, the tour bus lines stopped completely. This was particularly painful for the Adams Memorial Society; even though the numbers of tourists who came to the Old House on their own remained constant (“the only cheerful sign,” he noted), the absence of bus tours resulted in a dramatic decrease in paying visitors. Ticket

⁹⁴ AMS, “Minutes of the Annual Meeting of The AMS, Inc.,” March 4, 1929.

⁹⁵ “AMS Report for the Year Ending December 31, 1930,” Record Carton 1, Folder “1931 Minutes/Annual Report,” MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁹⁶ “AMS Report for the Year Ending December 31, 1931,” Record Carton 1, Folder “1932 Minutes/Annual Report/Members List,” MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

sales in 1933 were \$573.21, compared to \$2,181.91 only three years earlier.⁹⁷ The twenty-five cents admission fee was not enough to manage the property, especially in light of the dramatic decline in sales. The family began looking for ways to cut costs, and prepared for worst case scenarios. In 1934, they approved sending books from the Stone Library to the Boston Athenaeum for safekeeping. Years later, Thomas Boylston Adams described the reasoning behind the decision:

They were moved to the Athenaeum in the depths of the depression when it looked as though the Old House might be sold, given away to some society of inadequate means, or otherwise allowed to crumble into ruin. At that time the Memorial Society was losing money hand over fist, and the government showed no real interest in the place as a historical monument. The books in the library were utterly neglected.⁹⁸

That same year, Harry Adams also suggested that the family consider discontinuing the insurance policy on the contents of the house and library, as well as the fire alarm in the library, to save money. They voted in 1935 to cancel the insurance policy.⁹⁹

At mid-decade, there were glimmers of hope. Bus tours resumed in 1935, and individual admissions (separate from bus tours) increased. Both developments were cause for optimism, but even with these improvements, their situation was still financially precarious. In 1936, Harry recorded that “The expenses would have been no larger than last year if it had not been for \$1400.00 spent in extraordinary repairs,” including chimney and roof repairs, repairs to the walls of the stone library, painting, and more. The problem was that such “extraordinary repairs” were not so extraordinary after all. The repairs were starting to seem downright routine, and were coming in at a faster pace than the family was eager to admit.¹⁰⁰

The federal government was beginning to take notice of the property. In 1936, the Old House and Gardens were documented for the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS). The Survey, established in 1933, was a program to survey and document historically significant American architecture through drawings, historical reports, and photographs.¹⁰¹ The remarkably detailed HABS drawings provide a window into the Old House and grounds under the stewardship of the Adams Memorial Society. The drawings also

⁹⁷ “AMS Report for 1933,” Record Carton 1, Folder “1934 Minutes/Annual Report/Corr,” MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁹⁸ Cited in Hodson, “Historic Furnishings Assessment: Old House, Adams National Historical Park,” 14.

⁹⁹ Meeting Minutes, AMS, March 13, 1935, Record Carton 1, Folder “1935 Minutes/Annual Report,” MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

¹⁰⁰ “AMS Report for 1936,” Record Carton 1, Folder “1937 Minutes/Annual Meeting,” MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

¹⁰¹ “American Place: The Historic American Buildings Survey at Seventy-Five Years,” 1. <https://www.nps.gov/hdp/habs/AmericanPlace.pdf>

include an acknowledgment that Harry Adams "gave much valuable assistance in obtaining historical data" for the property. Perhaps this is when the NPS first began to see the property as a potential acquisition. The reverse may also have been true: that the family members began to see the federal government as a potential steward for the struggling historic property.

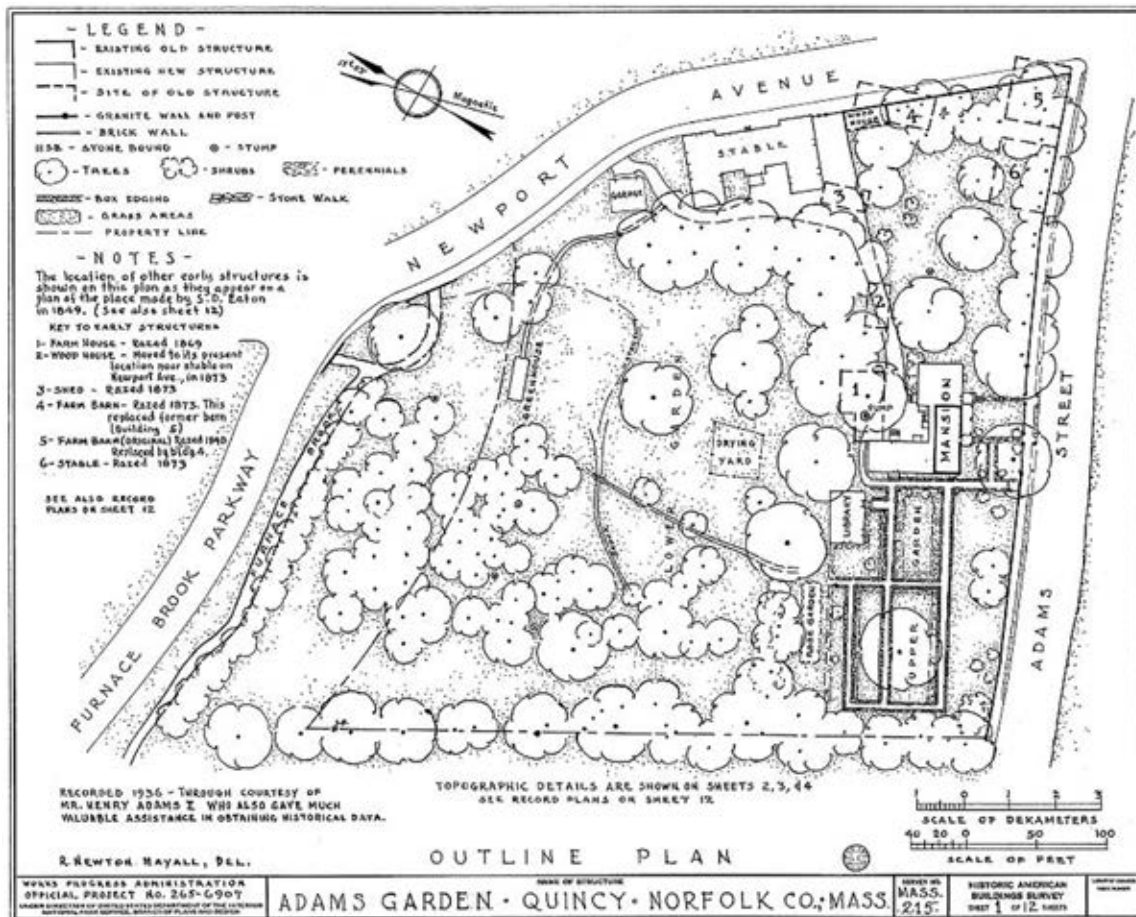


Figure 14. HABS outline plan of the "Adams Garden" at the Old House, 1936.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

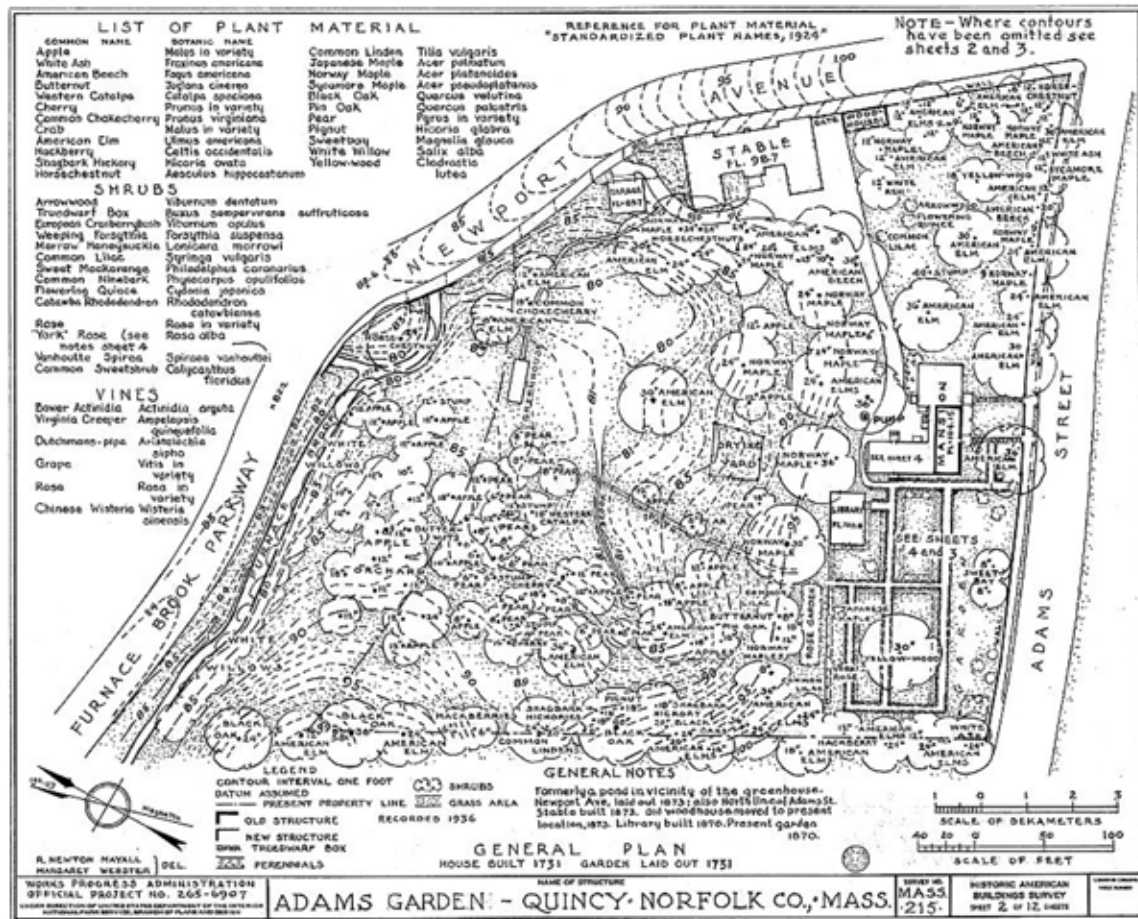


Figure 15. HABS general plan of the "Adams Garden" at the Old House, 1936.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

An Uncertain Future

In his report detailing the Adams Memorial Society's expenses in 1939, Harry Adams lamented that the success of Memorial's brief existence had been tarnished by circumstances beyond their control. "The past thirteen years have been uncertain. In '27, '28, '29, '30—the years of prosperity and the Centennial year—the House was unknown; the ten years since have been years of depression." He noted that the house had fared better than "similar places," and remained convinced that as the house became better known, the admissions fees would go up—not enough to make a profit, of course, but "not a heavy burden, provided the estimate is correct."¹⁰² The members of the Adams Memorial Society were also getting older; Dorothy Quincy Nourse passed away in 1939, leaving the Society without "one of the family most interested in the preservation of the old mansion."

¹⁰² "Report of Adams Mansion For Year Ending December 31, 1939," Record Carton 1, Folder "1940 Minutes/Annual Report," MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

Another founding member, Arthur Adams, died in 1943. The remaining members began to worry about whether the next generation would take up the mantle of caring for the Old House.¹⁰³ These challenges were compounded by the onset of World War II, which ensured that the strain on visitation—and thus, museum income—would continue.

Adams Memorial Society trustees began to entertain the idea of seeking new partners to maintain their family’s historic properties. In 1940, Charles Francis Adams III polled the Society members about whether they would support giving the John Adams and John Quincy Adams birthplaces to the City of Quincy. The Society members voted (with seemingly no objections) to approve the gift, as long as they were maintained as memorials to the two presidents.¹⁰⁴ The Adams Real Estate Trust transferred the birthplaces to the City in 1941, with the hope that it could better provide for their care. By 1944, after several more years of disappointing numbers, the trustees decided they needed to find a new guardian for the Old House, too.

¹⁰³ “Report of Adams Mansion For Year Ending December 31, 1939.”

¹⁰⁴ Meeting Minutes, AMS, May 6, 1940, Record Carton 1, Folder “1940 Minutes/Annual Report”, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

CHAPTER TWO

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ADAMS MANSION NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

On the morning of Tuesday, March 27, 1944, Adams Memorial Society members Louisa C. (Adams) Perkins (Lulu), Abigail (Adams) Homans (Hitty), Charles Francis Adams III, Henry Adams II (Harry), and John Adams met for the Society's annual meeting at 15 State Street, Room 102, in Boston.¹⁰⁵ They gathered with a singular focus: the future of the Old House. The aging group had long been concerned about what would happen to the property after their deaths, and had been discussing transferring it to the City of Quincy or to the federal government since at least 1942.¹⁰⁶ They were struggling to keep the site afloat, due to inconsistent contributions from Society members, limited income from admissions, and a seemingly never-ending stream of budget-busting repairs to the house. Those gathered knew that the Old House's future would be even more tenuous after the eight founding members of the Society had passed away: "The younger generation look on the place as a curio heap," Henry Adams recorded in his diary in 1942. "They never visit it and never do any work in connection with it."¹⁰⁷

The Society's assembled members had finally come to an agreement about their next steps. Secretary Henry Adams recorded in the meeting minutes:

It was the unanimous belief of those present that with the death of the present subscribers the property must be destroyed unless it is passed into the hands of others who would care for and be competent to maintain the property as the family have done and who could be relied on to the perpetuate the family sentiment for it because of those who have lived in it.¹⁰⁸

The notion of destroying the property was likely a dramatic flourish; at the very least, it was not their preferred option. Following some discussion, the members voted that Harry

¹⁰⁵ At the time the State Street property was owned by the Adamses; it is now owned by the National Park Service.

¹⁰⁶ Malcolm Freiberg, "From Family to Nation," 60–77. Freiberg's article provides a thorough overview of the transfer of the property to the National Park Service, with a particular focus on Adams family members' correspondence related to the property and its donation to the federal government. Freiberg quotes Henry Adams writing on August 18, 1942 that "There is no doubt . . . we must take steps to give this place to the City of Quincy or the US"

¹⁰⁷ Henry Adams II diary, April 22, 1942, quoted in Freiberg, "From Family to Nation," 67, Footnote 14.

¹⁰⁸ AMS, "AMS 1944 Annual Meeting," Record Carton 1, Folder 1944 Minutes/Annual Report, AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS, (MHS).

Adams should compose a letter addressed to all members of the Memorial Society, “voicing the sentiment of this meeting and requesting that the transfer of the Old Mansion to the National Government or any other organization when the Trustees think it is advisable be approved by each member.”¹⁰⁹ They saw the NPS as the ideal steward of the property because of its growing acquisition of historic sites of national interest at the time, and their belief in the historic and civic significance of the Old House.

In the letter to his fellow Memorial Society members (several of whom were not present at the 1944 annual meeting), Harry Adams elaborated on the group’s decision. He also put it in financial and familial context, noting that the Society was paying \$4,000 a year to keep the Old House in operation, while admissions at best had resulted in half that amount, and had recently trickled to a meager \$600—a decrease, no doubt, due in part to wartime disruptions. Not only was the Memorial Society not making enough money to cover the necessary maintenance expenses, but younger Adams family members had shown little interest in taking it over: “none of the younger generation can take the trouble or bear the expense of maintaining the place,” he wrote.¹¹⁰

The Adams Memorial Society members approved of the idea, and they began investigating how to transfer the property to the federal government. Charles Francis Adams III took the first step. Charles Francis was well-connected in local and national politics, having served as Quincy Mayor from 1896–1897, and as the United States Secretary of the Navy from 1929–1933 under Herbert Hoover. He wrote to Massachusetts Congressman Richard B. Wigglesworth in mid-December 1944, describing the family’s interest in giving the property to the federal government and requesting the Congressman’s guidance.¹¹¹

Soon after, on January 5, 1945, Congressman Wigglesworth sent a letter to NPS Director Newton B. Drury to inquire whether the Park Service would be interested in acquiring the site under the National Historic Sites Act. Historic preservation came under the purview of the NPS in 1933, and was reaffirmed by the Historic Sites Act of August 21, 1935, which created “a national policy to preserve for public use historic sites, buildings and objects of national significance for the inspiration and benefit of the people of the United States.”¹¹² The Act authorized the Secretary of the Interior and the NPS to acquire

¹⁰⁹ “AMS 1944 Annual Meeting.”

¹¹⁰ Henry Adams to AMS members, April 12, 1944, Record Carton 1, Folder 1944 Minutes/Annual Report, AMS Records (MHS).

¹¹¹ Freiberg, “From Family to Nation,” 70.

¹¹² Barry Mackintosh, Janet A. McDonnell, and John H. Sprinkle, Jr., *The National Parks: Shaping the System*, 4th ed. (Hancock, MI: George Wright Society, 2018), 33. [Published as a special issue of *The George Wright Forum*, vol. 35, no. 2].

historic properties, and created a Secretary's Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments to help assess potential sites. The Old House certainly qualified as nationally significant. Wigglesworth's letter read in part:

As you perhaps know the Adams family owns the old house in Quincy, Massachusetts, where John Quincy Adams, President of the United States, lived during most of his life. The House was subsequently owned and occupied by Charles Francis Adams, Minister to Great Britain most of the Civil War.

The house at present is open as a museum during part of the year. Its surroundings are ample and contain a stone library near the main house with an interesting collection of books and papers.

The family is interested in giving the property to the United States to be maintained for the benefit of the public under some satisfactory arrangement.

Would you be good enough to advise me if this suggestion can be considered under the National Historic Sites Act or otherwise?¹¹³

Interestingly, Wigglesworth made no mention of John and Abigail Adams's life and death in the Old House, focusing instead on the next two generations of Adamses to inhabit the home. A mere eleven days later, Drury responded:

Although the National Park Service, at the request of the President, has deferred, for the duration of the war, all activity looking toward the acquisition of the proposed historic sites in order that the greatly reduced staff of the Service may contribute as fully as possible to the war program, the President has asked that specially important cases be brought to his attention.

In view of the tradition of statesmanlike public service, and the rich intellectual and cultural tradition bequeathed to the Nation by the successive members of the Adams family who dwelt in the house, it is possible that the President may be willing to consider the preservation of the Adams Mansion an exceptional case. I am, therefore, sending a copy of your letter to Secretary Ickes [Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes] with the request that he ask the President

¹¹³ R. B. Wigglesworth to Newton B. Drury, January 5, 1945, Box 3020, Folder O-346 "Adams Mansion (Massachusetts)," RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Central Classif. Files, Proposed Historical Sites, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD (hereafter NACP). Also reprinted in Appendix 7 ("Some Government Documents, 1945-46") of Charles E. Peterson, *The Adams Mansion, Quincy, Massachusetts (Now the Adams National Historic Site): A Reconnaissance Report Sketching the Physical History of the House, with Some Notes on Its Grounds and Dependencies for the US National Park Service*, revised (Washington, DC: Ross & Perry, 2003), 208.

whether he desires us at this time to enter into negotiations with the trustees of the property with a view to considering the feasibility of designating the Adams Mansion as a national historic site.¹¹⁴

Although the wartime acquisition of new NPS historic sites had been put on hold, Drury recognized the particular historical significance of the property. Drury and Acting Chief Historian Charles W. Porter III acted accordingly.

Porter reached out to two of his associates, Alvin P. Stauffer, Jr. and Edwin W. Small, for advice on the possible federal acquisition of the Adams Mansion. Stauffer and Porter had previously worked together in the NPS's Branch of Historic Sites office in Washington, DC; Stauffer as supervisor of the Historic Sites Division's Research and Survey Section, and Porter as supervisor of the Planning and Interpretative Section. Small had been working for the NPS since 1935 as the regional historian for New England, and became superintendent of Salem Maritime National Historic Site in 1938. Porter deeply trusted Small; he was well-versed in the region's history, and had written a Historic Sites Survey for New England for the Advisory Board in 1937. Small had even made several visits to the Old House—including a stop with the Advisory Board in 1938.¹¹⁵ Small replied quickly with a thorough assessment of and effusive praise for the property as a potential national historic site. "From a national standpoint I consider it the most important historic house in New England and very likely unsurpassed elsewhere in the country," he wrote. More to the point, he was confident that "if you can get it. . . the jackpot has been struck."¹¹⁶

With this ringing endorsement in hand, Department of the Interior and NPS leadership were prepared to act. Secretary of the Interior Ickes wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt relaying the correspondence between Wigglesworth and Drury, and recommended that Roosevelt authorize negotiations with the Adams family to acquire the historic home, which he described as "undoubtedly one of the most historic in New England."¹¹⁷ (He clearly took Small's words to heart.) Roosevelt approved the recommendation, enabling negotiations between the two parties to commence.

¹¹⁴ Newton B. Drury to Richard B. Wigglesworth, January 16, 1945, Box 3020, Folder O-346 "Adams Mansion (Massachusetts)," RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Central Classif. Files, Proposed Historical Sites, NACP. Also Reprinted in Appendix 7 of Peterson, *The Adams Mansion*, 209–210.

¹¹⁵ Joan Zenzen, *Bridging the Past: Minute Man National Historical Park Administrative History* (National Park Service Northeast Region History Program: July 2010), 33–34.

¹¹⁶ Charles W. Porter III to Dr. Alvin P. Stauffer, Jr., January 17, 1945; Porter to Lt. Edwin W. Small, January 17, 1945; and Small to Porter, January 22, 1945; all in Box 3020, Folder O-346 "Adams Mansion (Massachusetts)," RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Central Classif. Files, Proposed Historical Sites, NACP.

¹¹⁷ Harold L. Ickes to Franklin D. Roosevelt, January 24, 1945, Box 3020, Folder O-346 "Adams Mansion (Massachusetts)," RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Central Classif. Files, Proposed Historical Sites, NACP. Also reprinted in Appendix 7 of Peterson, *The Adams Mansion*, 211–212.

It is worth considering the factors that may have driven Roosevelt's eagerness to jump at the offer. The wartime context likely played a role. Securing the home of a founding father would be a feather in the cap of the NPS at a high point of patriotism in the nation's history. As historian Patricia West has argued, the designation of a house as a museum changes the function of the structure; the "function is shaped by the exigencies of the period in which the museum is founded, in particular by the political issues so meaningful to those defining its public role."¹¹⁸ Until the 1920s, historic house preservation efforts had been largely led by women's voluntary organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. The "hypernationalistic" years after World War I were a turning point in the movement, when it was increasingly dominated by male professionals who, although "less flowery in their definitions of the social value of old houses . . . were no less motivated by the ideological expediency of charismatic 'historic' settings than were their nineteenth-century predecessors."¹¹⁹ World War II again saw revived claims about the patriotic and civic value of historic house museums, and the history of the Old House's acquisition certainly reflects these impulses. Here, too, male NPS professionals played a central role in the establishment of the house as a National Historic Site.

The NPS's growing interest in historic house museums also made the acquisition of the Old House property highly desirable. *A Report to the Secretary of the Interior on the Preservation of Historic Sites and Buildings* commissioned by Ickes in 1935 urged the federal government to get in the business of acquiring and interpreting historic house museums, noting that the government had a minimal presence in a thriving field of tourism which drew millions of visitors every year. After Roosevelt missed his chance with Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, he remained keen for the government to acquire historic house museums of national significance.¹²⁰

In the words of historian Malcolm Freiberg, "Franklin Roosevelt was hardly the friend of any Adams, past or present," but "knew a historic house when he saw one and was quite aware that the Adams family home in Quincy was such a property."¹²¹ The addition of the Old House to the NPS would help fill the void left by the missed opportunity of Monticello, and could also lend legitimacy to the NPS's growing history program. It would become part of a wave of sites honoring US presidents added to the system in the 1930s and

¹¹⁸ Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 1999), xi.

¹¹⁹ West, *Domesticating History*, 93–94.

¹²⁰ Roosevelt sought, and failed, to acquire the historic house museum in Charlottesville, Virginia for the United States government. In 1944, he requested that Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes investigate the possibility of adding Monticello to the National Park system (an idea that had been in the air for a decade), telling Ickes, "I think the property should be in the Federal Government for all time." This did not come to pass. West, *Domesticating History*, 131.

¹²¹ Freiberg, "From Family to Nation: The Old House Becomes a National Historic Site," 71.

1940s, which included the Thomas Jefferson Memorial in Washington (authorized in 1934, completed in 1943), the Andrew Johnson National Monument (1935), the Home of Franklin D. Roosevelt National Historic Site (1945), and the Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park (a natural park established in 1947, today known as the Theodore Roosevelt National Park).¹²²

What set the Old House apart was the multiple generations of Adamses who had inhabited it. In a letter to Drury, the American Council of Learned Societies' Waldo G. Leland, who made an informal survey of the house for the NPS, said that the Old House and its contents "represent a continuity of family existence and experience that is rarely encountered in America." Unlike other historic sites, he wrote, "[T]hey represent not a single period or person but a period longer than the history of the United States, and a long line of persons who have been distinguished in our history."¹²³ That the property had been home to two United States presidents, first ladies, diplomats, historians, and writers made it a unique historical resource.

The Initial Assessment

By July 1945, negotiations were in full swing. That month, the Assistant Chief and head of the Branch of Historic Sites' Historic Sites Division, Francis S. Ronalds (who was also the Superintendent of Morristown National Historical Park), traveled to Quincy to see the property, and to Boston to meet with Harry Adams, Charles Francis Adams, and their lawyer. Ronalds wrote a long memorandum for the NPS Region One Regional Director about the visit, gushing, "Were I to elaborate on my enthusiasm for the Adams Mansion, this memorandum would drag out to such a length that it would be a real chore to wade through it." The memo was still an impressive five pages long. He apologized for its length, saying "I can assure you that this over-lengthy memo was twice as long again in rough draft."¹²⁴

Ronalds spent two days exploring the buildings and grounds with Harry Adams. In the process, he identified several challenges that the government would face in taking on the property. His observations would prove prescient. First, he questioned whether or how they would inventory and acquire the Old House's many objects and paintings; the

¹²² Mackintosh, McDonnell, Sprinkle, Jr., *The National Parks*, 35.

¹²³ Waldo G. Leland to Newton B. Drury, July 10, 1945, Box 3020, Folder O-346 "Adams Mansion (Massachusetts)," RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Central Classif. Files, Proposed Historical Sites, NACP.

¹²⁴ Francis S. Ronalds, "Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One," July 23, 1945, ADAM Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 1. For additional information about the Branch of Historic Sites and Ronalds' position, see Harlan D. Unrau and G. Frank Williss, *Expansion of the National Park Service in the 1930s: Administrative History* (Denver: National Park Service Denver Service Center, 1983), Chapter 5, Section J, https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/unrau-williss/adhi5j.htm.

furnishings belonged to many different Adams family members, and the NPS might not have the means to properly care for them. He wondered whether it was wise to ask Abigail (Hitty) Homans for original paintings—many of the paintings in the house were copies of the originals—“knowing full well the difficulties you will encounter in obtaining sufficient funds to properly care for the property.”¹²⁵ Ronalds then went on to note that many of the objects in the house were loaned by different members of the family, and their acquisition would likely need to be arranged with each individual owner. In a follow-up memorandum, Ronalds elaborated on his conversations with Harry Adams about these items, which informed a rough sketch in the memorandum of many of the objects in the various rooms of the home (furniture, paintings, books, and more). Ronalds concluded, “The Adams Memorial Society’s goal has been, ‘Nothing removed—nothing brought in.’”¹²⁶ (This mantra would be repeatedly tested, and ignored, in subsequent decades. Although things were generally not removed, they *were* regularly acquired.)

Ronalds also identified several maintenance and structural challenges that the NPS would have to address if it acquired the property. Because the Old House had been primarily a summer home for the family, the older portions of the building were still heated by fireplaces. Only the north wing added by Charles Francis Adams was heated by a furnace. Under the Adams Memorial Society, the home had been closed to visitors in the winter. Heating was also an issue in the Stone Library, which was warmed by a stove. The thousands of volumes in the library posed another challenge. Although Ronalds felt “very strongly” that the library books should stay with the house, “I do know that we must consider how this library is to be properly maintained. The books should be properly catalogued by a trained librarian.”¹²⁷

There was also the question of the property’s existing staff. Ronalds noted that Margaret L. McCormick had been the custodian and docent of the home for the Adams Memorial Society since it was first opened to the public. The widowed McCormick and her three children (two sons and a daughter) lived in the former servant’s wing of the house (added by Charles Francis Adams). Her deceased husband, Francis R. McCormick, had been assistant gardener and night watchman for Brooks Adams. Ronalds recommended that McCormick be allowed to remain on the property with her children under a special use permit: “Mrs. McCormick seems really to be a fixture of the house, knows it well and appears to love the place. If such an arrangement could be worked out, it would be

¹²⁵ Ronalds, “Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One,” July 23, 1945, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM).

¹²⁶ Ronalds, “Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One,” July 26, 1945, reprinted in Appendix 7 of Peterson, *The Adams Mansion*, 228.

¹²⁷ Ronalds, “Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One,” July 23, 1945, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM).

infinitely more economical than any other scheme we could devise.”¹²⁸ In short, McCormick would be an asset both in terms of her deep knowledge of the property, and her affordability as personnel. In a later memorandum to Region One Director Thomas J. Allen, Ronalds added that keeping McCormick on the payroll “seems like the decent thing to do.”¹²⁹

Negotiating an Ongoing Relationship with the Adams Memorial Society

Early in the Adams Memorial Society’s negotiations with the federal government, Henry Adams planted the seeds of a continued relationship between the NPS and the Adams family once the transfer was complete. In April 1945, Congressman Wigglesworth called NPS Associate Director A. E. Demaray to tell him that Adams was visiting Washington DC and would like to meet with him. Demaray recounted their meeting in a memorandum to Drury:

Mr. Adams is a very interesting elderly gentleman. He is deaf and wears a hearing device. He said that he wanted to contact some of the National Park Service people so that he would know personally someone that he would be dealing with. He wanted to know when a representative of the Director’s office would call on him and Charles Francis Adams [III] at 15 State Street, Boston, about negotiations looking toward the transfer of the Adams Mansion to the Federal Government as a National Historic Site. Apparently, they are very anxious to go ahead with whatever is necessary on their part. He wanted to know whether there was some way whereby the family society might possibly continue after the transfer to cooperate with the National Park Service. I told him of the Washington Association at Morristown and said I thought that some plan could easily be worked out to continue the interest and cooperation of the Adams family society [emphasis added].¹³⁰

Early on, Harry Adams signaled that he hoped the family would establish and maintain close ties with the federal government in its management of the prospective National Historic Site. His efforts set the tone for a close relationship between the family and the park that continues to the present day.

¹²⁸ Ronalds, “Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One,” July 23, 1945, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM).

¹²⁹ Ronalds, “Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One,” November 29, 1945, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM).

¹³⁰ A. E. Demaray, “Memorandum for The Director,” April 17, 1945, reprinted in Appendix 7 of Peterson, *The Adams Mansion*, 214.

It was not always clear, however, that such a continued relationship would be realized. Only a few months later, in his July 1945 meeting with Ronalds in Quincy, Harry Adams seemed to have changed his tune. Ronalds suggested that the relationship between Morristown National Historical Park and the Washington Association of New Jersey could serve as a model for continued collaboration between the Memorial Society and the NPS:

However, neither Mr. Charles Francis nor Mr. Henry Adams seemed much impressed with the idea. Mr. Charles Francis was quite frank in saying that they were only willing to give up the house because they felt there was no one after them who really cared for the place as they did. I sensed that they were afraid there might be some danger that the house be sold and its contents distributed after their deaths.

Ronalds was caught off guard by Adams' apparent change of heart, and seemed certain that there was the possibility of continued cooperation between the Adams Memorial Society and the Park Service after the transfer: "I feel sure that Mr. Henry Adams himself would like to do this, but he appears to have little faith in the family, as such, having the interest or inclination to be of much assistance to us."¹³¹ Harry Adams clearly had more affection for the property than his older cousin. In retrospect, it seems more likely that he was deferring to Charles Francis Adams III's opinions, because Harry would remain actively involved with the property for the rest of his life. (We get a hint of Charles Francis Adams' feelings in a 1943 letter in which Harry noted that his cousin "wants to get rid of the Old House at any cost, and I agree with him.")¹³²

Ronalds rightly suspected that Charles Francis and Harry Adams were worried about what would happen after their deaths. At the time of their meeting in July 1945, the Society's longtime president, Elizabeth Ogden Adams ("Elsie") was very ill. Her declining health could not have been far from their minds. Elsie's death on October 19, 1945 was a tremendous loss to the members of the Adams Memorial Society. In their March 1946 annual meeting, they voted to enter their "deep sorrow" at Adams's death in the record:

Since the Society was chartered she had taken a deeper and more active interest in the preservation of the Adams Mansion than any other member and contributed much more than anyone to funds necessary for its maintenance. As she was one of the few members who knew the Adams Mansion when Charles Francis Adams, the Minister to England, was alive and as a little girl was at his golden wedding anniversary, no one after her generation can have the close association with the 'Old House,' as it was then called, that she had.¹³³

¹³¹ Ronalds, "Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One," July 23, 1945, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM).

¹³² Freiberg, "From Family to Nation," 70.

¹³³ "AMS, 1946 Annual Meeting," Record Carton 1, Folder 1946 Minutes/Proxies/Correspondence/Bill of Sale, AMS Records (MHS).

Elsie's death undoubtedly seemed like another sign that it was time for the Memorial Society to let the Old House go. Their conversation then turned to discussing the ongoing negotiations with the Department of the Interior.

By July of 1946, negotiations between the Adams Memorial Society and the NPS, and the associated administrative tasks necessary to transfer the property, were finally nearing their conclusion.¹³⁴ Ronalds spoke by phone with the Memorial Society's attorney, Albert Wolfe, who related that Henry Adams was in conversation with his family members about personal possessions in the house, and whether they should be given to the government. He reported:

It appears that various members of the family want more assurance that the objects will always be kept at the Site. Their point of view is that the whole idea of giving the property to the Government is to preserve the house as a unit, as it is their feeling that if this is not done then the gift is a failure and the family would much prefer to keep it even if it had been necessary to divide the property up. The house is not a representation of one man or one generation; it is the representation of the lives of four generations of Adamses and what each of them has done should remain unchanged.¹³⁵

Following the family's wishes, the Park Service agreed to keep the contents of the house as-is.

The NPS and the Adams Memorial Society also came to an agreement about their continued relationship, which remains intact today. In June 1946, Newton B. Drury wrote to the Society to state that the NPS, "will, in continuation of the custom of the Society, permit wedding and funeral ceremonies for lineal descendants of the Charles Francis Adams who died in 1886 to be conducted at the Site, upon request of the Society or the persons concerned." He continued:

The National Park Service is hopeful that the members of the Society will see fit to continue its existence, and will be glad to cooperate with the Society and its members in all matters of common interest, and to have the Society hold its meetings at the site at times that are mutually convenient.¹³⁶

The relationship between the two parties would grow much stronger in the coming years, and Adams family members would remain deeply invested in the Old House.

¹³⁴ Freiberg, "From Family to Nation," 71–72.

¹³⁵ Ronalds, "Memorandum for the Director," July 8, 1946, Box 3020, Folder O-346 "Adams Mansion (Massachusetts)," RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Central Classif. Files, Proposed Historical Sites, NACP. Also reprinted in Appendix 7 of Peterson, *The Adams Mansion*, 229.

¹³⁶ Newton B. Drury to AMS, Incorporated, June 21, 1946, Record Carton 1, Folder 1946 Minutes/Proxies/Correspondence/Bill of Sale, AMS Records, MHS.

“So this is Done”: Transferring the Old House to the Federal Government

National Park Service photographer Abbie Rowe and a fellow photographer arrived in Quincy on September 17 to document the Old House for use in NPS publications. It was the last hurrah for the Old House under Harry Adams’s watchful eye. He wrote to Ronalds to express his gratitude that two photographers “were very courteous and showed an unusual interest in the place and the work they were doing.” “I was sorry to have them go,” he added wistfully.¹³⁷ Their presence may have cemented the reality that caring for the Old House would soon be out of his hands. Less than a week later, the Adams Memorial Society members gathered to approve the property transfer.

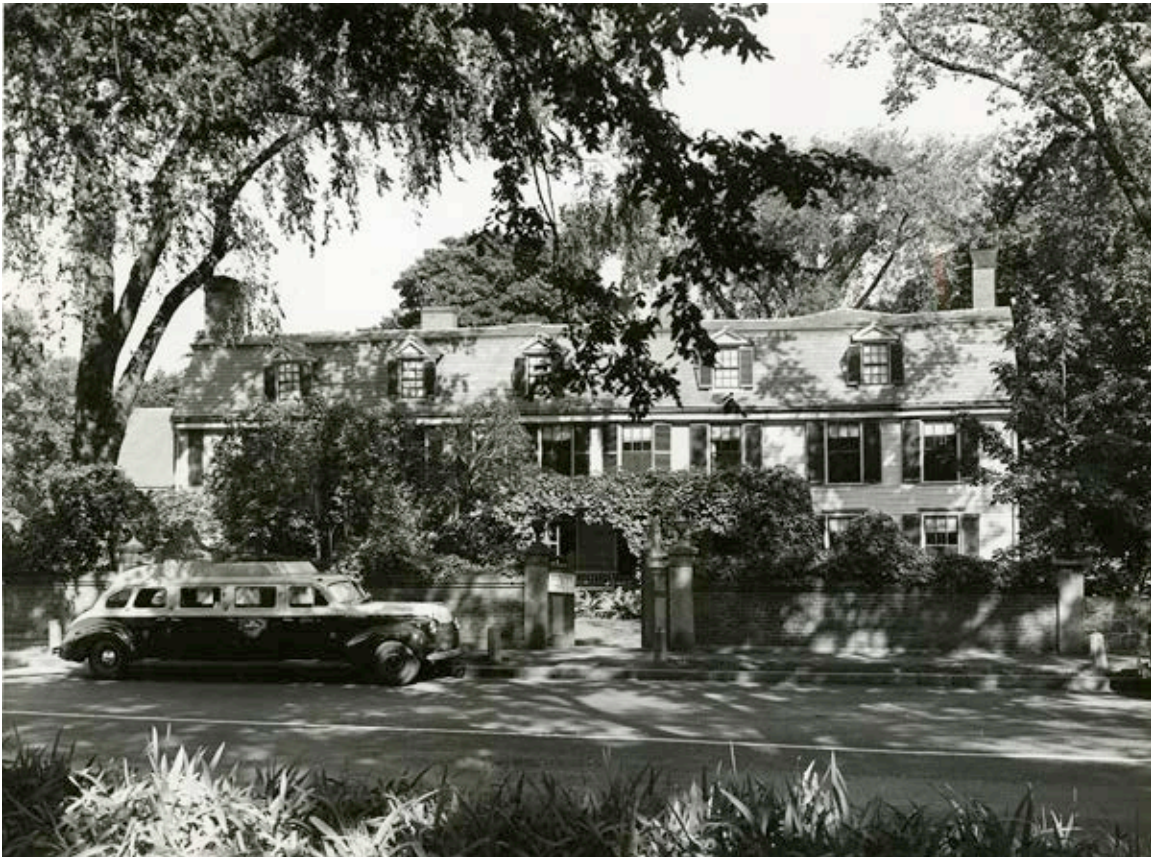


Figure 16. Photograph of the Old House by Department of the Interior photographer Abbie Rowe, September 1946. A Gray Line sightseeing bus is parked on the street. Courtesy of the US National Archives Collections.

¹³⁷ Henry Adams to Francis S. Ronalds, September 18, 1946, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 2 (ADAM)

Harry Adams, as Adams Memorial Society Secretary, called for a special meeting of Society's Trustees to be held on September 23, 1946 at 15 State Street in Boston.¹³⁸ At 10:30 that morning, President Louisa (Lulu) Catherine Perkins, Secretary and Treasurer Henry (Harry) Adams, Charles Francis Adams, John Adams, and Charles Francis Adams, Jr. met to approve the transfer of the property to the federal government. All members but one approved of the proposed donation. (The exception was Mrs. R. Lewis Teague, who failed to respond to Henry Adams's request for input.) A deed and bill of sale from the Memorial Society to the United States was presented at the meeting, and the gathered members voted to authorize President Louisa Catherine Perkins to sign, seal, and deliver the Bill of Sale. The deed of gift indicated that the site should "perpetuate the memory of the four generations of the Adams family who occupied the Old House from 1788–1927," "foster civic virtue and patriotism," and preserve the property to the way it looked when it was owned by its final occupant, Brooks Adams.¹³⁹ Harry Adams later recorded his version of the day's events:

To Boston on 8.43 train. At 10.30 we had the Meeting of the Adams Memorial Society. I had papers for 12 of the 14 trustees. Of the 14 there were present Louisa C. Perkins, C. F. Adams Sr. C. F. Adams Jr. Henry Adams, John Adams. John Abbot came in just as the meeting adjourned. We approved the deed and bill of Sale of the personal property, and Lulu [Louisa C. Perkins] as President signed them. Mr Wolfe our attorney conducted the Meeting and will draw up the Minutes. So this is done, and the Old House that has been in possession of the family since 1788 is now no longer ours."¹⁴⁰

Coordinating Superintendent Ronalds spent the next day in Boston working on legal matters related to the property transfer. He began the morning by meeting with Harry, his brother John Adams, and the Adams Memorial Society's lawyers, and they drove to Dedham, Massachusetts to record the deed. Ronalds and lawyer Albert Wolfe then continued on to Quincy, where Ronalds inspected the property and signed the remaining paperwork enabling the government to take possession of it, which was then sent to the Director for submission to the Solicitor.¹⁴¹ The NPS's bureaucratic gears turned quite slowly, however, and the transfer to the National Park Service was not official until more than two

¹³⁸ Henry Adams to AMS Trustees, September 13, 1946, Record Carton 1, Folder 1946 Minutes/Proxies/Correspondence/Bill of Sale, AMS Records (MHS).

¹³⁹ Katharine Lacy, *Cultural Landscape Report: Adams National Historic Site, Quincy, Massachusetts, Illustrated Site Chronology*, Cultural Landscape Publication 13 (Boston, MA: Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, National Park Service, 1997), 61.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Freiberg, "From Family to Nation," 72.

¹⁴¹ Ronalds, "Memorandum for the Director," and "Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One," September 25, 1946, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 2. (ADAM) See also Appendix 7 of Peterson, *The Adams Mansion*, 231.

months later. On December 9, 1946, an “Order Designating the Adams Mansion National Historic Site Quincy, Massachusetts” was finally signed by Secretary of the Interior J. A. (Julius Albert) Krug.¹⁴² Krug issued a press release later that month:

This gift memorializes the high type of public service which has been characteristic of generation after generation of the Adams family. There is probably no other home in the United States which has so long an association with American history and those who had an important part in shaping it.¹⁴³

The Arrival of Custodian Raymond H. Corry

Finding a custodian for the new historic site was the crucial next step. A series of letters between Regional Director Thomas J. Allen and Coordinating Superintendent (and Morristown Superintendent) Francis S. Ronalds provide some hints as to what both men were looking for in the new hire. Whereas Ronalds thought they should consider an NPS historian for the job, Allen believed that a “good administrator” was key: “Region One has suffered and is still suffering from the appointment of men as custodians just because they were good historians.” Ronalds, for his part, was more concerned about personability. He replied, “At least until we get well organized there, the most important single attribute for the custodian will be his ability to get along well with people and make a good impression for the Service.”¹⁴⁴ Although unspoken, Ronalds must have been concerned about how the person would get along with members of the Adams family, and Harry Adams in particular.

Their choice, Raymond H. Corry, came close to fitting both men’s preferred criteria. Corry was a 33-year-old World War II veteran who came from Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park, where he worked as a Junior Historical Aide.¹⁴⁵ He came enthusiastically recommended by that park’s Assistant Historical Technician, George Emery. Corry did not have any administrative experience, however, and Acting Regional Director Elbert Cox noted that he would require “special assistance in setting up the office

¹⁴² Henry Adams to AMS Trustees, March 28, 1947, Record Carton 1, Folder 1947 Minutes/Annual Report, AMS Records (MHS); a copy of the Krug’s 1946 Order designating the Adams Mansion National Historic Site is attached to a letter from Superintendent Marianne Peak to Charles Francis Adams, March 20, 1992, in Unprocessed Resource Management Records (ADAM).

¹⁴³ Quoted in Freiberg, “From Family to Nation” 73.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas J. Allen to Francis S. Ronalds, June 26, 1946, and Ronalds to Allen, June 27, 1946, both in ADAM Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 2.

¹⁴⁵ John C. Paige and Jerome A. Greene, *Administrative History of Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park* (Denver, CO: Denver Service Center, National Park Service, 1983), https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/chch/adhiag.htm. From Appendix G, “National Park Service Senior History Personnel.” Some personal details about Corry can also be found in his obituary in the *Poughkeepsie Journal*, January 9, 1969. Available online, <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/16869014/rhc/>.

at Adams Mansion and in getting acquainted in the community.”¹⁴⁶ But he proved himself to be an able administrator and was a personable fellow who worked well with the Adams family members. He also arrived in Quincy just in time. In a letter to Ronalds in early April, Salem Maritime Superintendent Edwin Small noted, “it is clear Mr. Adams is getting anxious. I think it is high time someone showed up there to take charge.”¹⁴⁷

Custodian Corry arrived at Adams Mansion National Historic Site late in the afternoon on April 19, 1947. It was Patriots’ Day in Massachusetts, as well as the Site’s opening day, following the custom of the Adams Memorial Society and other area historic sites. Corry was greeted by Chief Clerk Paul H. Heaton of Morristown National Historical Park; the Site would be supervised by Francis S. Ronalds, who would serve as Coordinating Superintendent. Margaret McCormick, the Old House’s longtime custodian, was also there to meet Corry. NPS leadership heeded Ronalds’ advice, allowing McCormick to continue her employment and live with her family in their Old House quarters. They likely also decided to keep McCormick on the payroll because she had a firm understanding of the Old House’s quirks and maintenance needs, of which there were many.¹⁴⁸ Together, Heaton and McCormick oriented Corry to the site and also, Corry noted cryptically in his first monthly report, to “the problems of the area.”¹⁴⁹

Corry’s first few weeks were particularly cold, snowy, and rainy for late April. It was undoubtedly a jarring New England welcome. He spent his days learning about the property and the Quincy area and settling into administrative work. He attended several meetings and conferences related to his new position, including a meeting with Harry Adams and Coordinating Superintendent Francis S. Ronalds in Boston, and a meeting with Superintendent Edwin Small of the Salem Maritime National Historic Site. On May 5, he left for an NPS meeting at Gettysburg National Military Park with historians and others working on interpretation in the parks.¹⁵⁰ Despite that meeting’s focus, however, he had little time in his first few months to think about historical interpretation. His days were instead consumed by the maintenance and repair work necessary to get the Old House in order. This was his priority, and there was a substantial amount of work to do.

Corry’s monthly narrative reports and correspondence with Coordinating Superintendent Francis S. Ronalds suggest that the house required more maintenance than they anticipated to bring it into a condition worthy of a National Historic Site. Hodge J. Hanson, a Park Service landscape architect from the Region One office, visited the site

¹⁴⁶ Elbert Cox, “Memorandum for the Coordinating Superintendent, Morristown National Historical Park,” April 1, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 6 (ADAM)

¹⁴⁷ Edwin Small to Francis S. Ronalds, April 6, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 6 (ADAM)

¹⁴⁸ Reprinted in Appendix 7 of Peterson, *The Adams Mansion*, 218.

¹⁴⁹ Corry, “May 1947 Monthly Narrative Report for Adams Mansion National Historic Site,” June 2, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 13 (ADAM).

¹⁵⁰ Corry, “May 1947 Monthly Narrative Report.”

before Corry's arrival to inspect the property, and drew up preliminary estimates for the many necessary repairs and upgrades. His list included a fresh coat of paint for the house and a new heating system, but in reality, it barely scratched the surface of pressing maintenance work.¹⁵¹ Corry's first monthly report for May 1947 hints at the humbling task ahead of him, which included many other projects necessary to get the house and landscape in order:

The inventorying, cataloguing, and repairing of the furnishings, an estimated 18,000 books, and countless pamphlets, presents a serious problem of proper care and maintenance.

In addition, the area has four acres of lawns and field, and an Eighteenth Century garden with approximately 1500 feet of English boxwood borders which necessitates constant maintenance.

These challenges were compounded by the fact that Corry and McCormick were the site's only staff. Corry concluded, "It is hoped that within a short time a permanent laborer-gardener will be employed."¹⁵² In the meantime, they had their work cut out for them.

By the end of May, Corry had a better grasp on the site's staffing needs. He wrote to Coordinating Superintendent Ronalds with items to be included in the site's 1949 appropriation estimate. He indicated that a temporary, one-year curator would be needed to inventory the property's furnishings and objects, as well as a temporary, one-year librarian to check the library volumes against the card catalog and document any missing items, clean and preserve the books, and create a card catalog for Brooks Adams' uncataloged library. He also requested that the Park Service hire a permanent, full-time laborer who could serve as a gardener for the property. And finally, the Site was in need of a historical aide, presumably to help with interpretation and giving tours to visitors.¹⁵³

While Corry waited for these staffing needs to be realized, he became a jack of all trades. He mowed the lawns outside of his regular work hours in the absence of a laborer, gave tours to visitors, and more.¹⁵⁴ He kept in regular contact with Harry Adams, who remained attentive to the progress (and occasionally, the perceived lack thereof) at the house. On one occasion, a "particularly anxious" Adams requested that a sign be placed at the corner of Newport Avenue and Adams Street. "He thought a temporary sign simply saying 'Home of John Adams' would be better than none at all," Corry recorded. "I shall

¹⁵¹ Corry, "May 1947 Monthly Narrative Report."

¹⁵² Corry, "May 1947 Monthly Narrative Report."

¹⁵³ Raymond H. Corry to Coordinating Superintendent, Morristown National Historical Park, May 30, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 13 (ADAM).

¹⁵⁴ Corry, "June 1947 Monthly Narrative Report for Adams Mansion National Historic Site," July 3, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 10 (ADAM).

make an attempt to get something up. How, I do not know.”¹⁵⁵ Corry dutifully erected a new sign for the property at the requested corner. He also began a process of maintenance triage; in a June memorandum to Ronalds, he noted that the shortage of staff and lack of funds meant that he was unable to begin the much-needed rehabilitation of the Stone Library. The work was urgent, however. He had discovered insects in the Library—silverfish and “another insect resembling a very large ant with wings”—and emphasized that he felt that “some emergency treatment in the library is necessary to prevent the destructive work of these insects.”¹⁵⁶

For his part, Harry Adams was also keeping in regular contact with Coordinating Superintendent Ronalds. On May 19, a month after the site’s opening, he wrote to express several concerns with Corry’s management of the site. First, he registered his displeasure that Corry was “using temporarily the family dressing room and bath room next to Abigail Adams’s room,” because those rooms were “used by the living members of the family when they stop at the house, bring friends there, or have family observances.” Adams also objected to the idea of using the kitchen as NPS office space, and noted that McCormick and her children were exceeding their forty-hour work weeks. (If Corry’s punishing work schedule was any indication, this was a particularly valid complaint.) Adams’s conclusion revealed deeper concerns—“I am greatly afraid that bringing into the house these administrative employees and equipment will change the atmosphere we have tried to maintain.”¹⁵⁷ Of course, he was free to make these complaints, but the Old House was no longer the family’s property. He struggled to adjust to this reality. Corry nevertheless continued to curry Adams’s favor by giving him the courtesy of responding to his requests and concerns, and working diligently to keep the house in order.

Corry was blunt about his limitations, inserting regular reminders in his reports and memoranda that the Site was in desperate need of a laborer. When Harry Adams offered to have the Adams Memorial Society pay for lawn mowing for the site, Ronalds instructed Corry that the NPS could not accept such services, and he would have to wait for approval of the rate schedule.¹⁵⁸ Corry was clearly frustrated by these restrictions. In describing his work to maintain the grounds, he noted that the boxwood “certainly ought to have some professional attention soon. If it is allowed to get out of hand now, it will

¹⁵⁵ Corry to Coordinating Superintendent, Morristown National Historical Park, June 10, 1947, Resource Management Records Box 4, Folder 9 (ADAM).

¹⁵⁶ Corry to Coordinating Superintendent, Morristown National Historical Park, June 15, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 9 (ADAM).

¹⁵⁷ Henry Adams to Francis S. Ronalds, May 19, 1947, ADAM Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 5.

¹⁵⁸ Ronalds, “Memorandum for the Custodian, Adams National Historic Site,” May 28, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 5 (ADAM).

cause misery later getting it back to the size of the winter coverings.”¹⁵⁹ In June, he offered several of these reminders: “As yet no laborer has been authorized for this area. So far the custodian has been able to keep the extensive lawns mowed by working during off-hours,” he wrote. And in describing the visit of the Region One Topographical Engineer George G. Martin to create a topographic survey of the area, he wrote, “Due to the total lack of a laborer for the area, it was necessary for the custodian to assist Mr. Martin as rodman and chainman, in addition to his regular work.”¹⁶⁰

It was well-known to Park Service leadership that Corry’s workload far exceeded his capacity. Director Newton B. Drury indicated as much in his 1948 annual report for the NPS. “[U]se outruns development” at several of the newer NPS sites, he wrote. This included Adams Mansion, he said, where “public use is pushing far ahead of provision for it.” This staffing and funding shortage was not limited to Adams Mansion, however. These were Park Service-wide issues in the immediate postwar years; one historian has described the period from 1942 to 1956 as “The Poverty Years” in the NPS’s history.¹⁶¹ Drury noted that despite the vast increase in Americans traveling to the national parks, there was a personnel shortage that grew worse each year, with no end in sight: “The Service obviously is not staffed to serve the public in a manner that permits the fullest enjoyment of the areas it administers,” and “as during preceding years, employees have contributed uncompensated overtime to an extent deeply appreciated by all those in authority in the Service, but little understood by the visiting public.” Gratitude would only go so far, however, when there were boxwoods to trim, insects to eradicate, signs to erect, and cordial relationships with overly-attentive Adams family members to maintain.¹⁶²

One of Corry’s immediate priorities was repainting the Old House. It had not been repainted since 1935, and even then, was only given a single coat of white paint. Corry and the Adams descendants spent a great deal of time determining what color to paint the house.¹⁶³ Harry Adams had made the family’s color preferences known: they wanted it “painted like Mrs. Harris’s house across the street.” This meant “The body of the house . . .

¹⁵⁹ Corry to Coordinating Superintendent, Morristown National Historical Park, June 10, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 9 (ADAM).

¹⁶⁰ Corry, “June 1947 Monthly Narrative Report.”

¹⁶¹ See Lary M. Dilsaver, ed. *America’s National Park System: The Critical Documents* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), Chapter 4, “The Poverty Years: 1942–1956.” https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/anps/anps_4.htm

¹⁶² *Annual Report of the Director of the National Park Service to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1948*, 320, 326–327. Available online: <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofdi4650nati/page/n91>. Ethan Carr also discusses these strains on NPS sites in the postwar period in Mission 66: *Modernism and the National Park Dilemma* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 33.

¹⁶³ Henry Adams originally told Corry that the AMS desired that the house be “painted like Mrs. Harris’s house across the street”: “The body of the house to be light gray; the edges white; blinds dark green; chimney gray like house with top tiers of bricks black.” Henry Adams to Raymond Corry, May 29, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 5 (ADAM).

light gray; the edges white; blinds dark green; chimney gray like [the] house with top tiers of bricks black.” They requested this color scheme because it matched an 1849 oil painting of the Old House by G. N. Frankenstein that hung in Henry Adams’s office.¹⁶⁴ Despite their desire to paint the house in a close approximation to its mid-nineteenth century self, however, Corry emphasized to Ronalds that Harry Adams recognized that it was an imperfect science. “I am certain that Mr. Adams does not wish to make of the Mansion a period house. He has stated that he does not feel that the exterior colors could be exactly duplicated even if they were known.”¹⁶⁵

The family’s wishes, and their research into what would be appropriate colors to paint the house, were given serious consideration. On June 26 and 27, Corry and Superintendent Edwin W. Small from Salem Maritime National Historic Site investigated the historic colors of the house by scraping the exterior with a razor blade and sandpaper. They discovered that the house had been painted gray, with white trim and green shutters, a color scheme that they confirmed by comparing it to the 1849 painting of the house and a daguerreotype from the same year. They concluded that this “color scheme . . . [was] in keeping with that used when the house was occupied by historically prominent members of the Adams family,” and decided to proceed with repainting the house in those hues.¹⁶⁶ The final color choices, then, were light gray exterior walls, white exterior trim, medium colonial green shutters and doors, slate gray porch floors and steps, light gray brick masonry to match the exterior walls, and black chimney tops. In a kind gesture that betrayed a hint of lingering mistrust, Harry Adams lent his painting of the Old House to the site. He requested that Corry hang it in the Old House while the exterior was being repainted.¹⁶⁷ Perhaps he hoped it would provide Corry and the painters with appropriate inspiration for the daunting task ahead.

¹⁶⁴ Ronalds, “Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One,” April 24, 1947; Henry Adams to Raymond Corry, May 29, 1947. Both in Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 5 (ADAM).

¹⁶⁵ Corry to Coordinating Superintendent, Morristown National Historical Park, June 27, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 9 (ADAM).

¹⁶⁶ Corry, “July 1947 Monthly Narrative Report for Adams Mansion National Historic Site,” August 4, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 10 (ADAM).

¹⁶⁷ Corry, “July 1947 Monthly Narrative Report.”



Figure 17. Painting of the Old House by G. N. Frankenstein, 1849.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

Painting the exterior of the house was finally completed in early August, but progress on maintenance and essential historical work at the site continued to move at a painfully slow pace. In August, Corry noted that “The problem of maintenance remains the foremost problem of the area. A great deal of rehabilitation work is needed, particularly on the interiors, before the area can be maintained in accordance with the standards of the Service. An able-bodied, full-time laborer is sorely needed for the area.” Two oil-burning furnaces were installed in the Old House basements in August, and tree work was carried out, which Corry judged to be an improvement to the grounds. But there were also Japanese Beetles and Dutch Elm Disease affecting trees in the Quincy area.¹⁶⁸

On August 6, Coordinating Superintendent Ronalds and Museum Curator J. Paul Hudson visited Adams Mansion from Morristown, and came bearing two exciting deliveries: a newly assigned Historical Aide, Ethel N. Bassett, and a new Ford station wagon for the site. It was the first day of work for Bassett, whose work was to focus on inventorying furnishings and other museum-related tasks. While Ronalds and Corry discussed the broader challenges at the site, Hudson and Bassett discussed the inventory and museum

¹⁶⁸ Corry, “August 1947 Monthly Narrative Report for Adams Mansion National Historic Site,” September 2, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 10 (ADAM).

work.¹⁶⁹ Despite her stated responsibilities, however, Bassett's first month was devoted primarily to leading visitors on tours through the house—approximately 150 tours, with some 345 visitors. Only later in the month was she able to begin inventorying furnishings.¹⁷⁰ The labor issue remained, however. In September, Corry described the Sisyphean task of maintaining the grounds by himself. He wrote:

The grass grew rapidly and it was quite a problem to keep the lawns mowed. Grass and weeds got a firm upper hand in the garden plots. Mowing is nearly at an end for the year, but leaves are beginning to fall and the problem of raking presents itself. Soon the flower beds must be cleared off and the boxwood hedges covered for the winter. A general clean-up of the Mansion, the Library, and the stables is badly needed.

He ended wistfully, "Perhaps a laborer will be employed in the near future and some progress can be made in these directions."¹⁷¹

Visitors and Publicity

In the decades after World War II, Americans were eager to hit the road and they took family vacations in record numbers. Many of these travelers sought out historic sites which inspired patriotism and inculcated a sense of American identity both in themselves and, more importantly, in their children. According to historian Susan Sessions Rugh, heritage tourism boomed in the postwar decades because "The linkage of education, democratic values, and travel reassured Americans of their superiority as they dealt with the insecurity of cold war politics." Adams Mansion National Historic Site joined a growing number of "patriotic shrines" that welcomed these pilgrims.¹⁷² Despite the ongoing maintenance and funding challenges in its first NPS season, the Historic Site immediately began welcoming eager visitors hoping to draw inspiration from the illustrious Adams family's history. Visitors were charged twenty-five cents plus five cents tax, with children

¹⁶⁹ Corry, "August 1947 Monthly Narrative Report."

¹⁷⁰ Ethel N. Bassett, "Monthly Report of Historical Aide Ethel N. Bassett for August 1947," September 4, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 12 (ADAM).

¹⁷¹ Corry, "September 1947 Monthly Narrative Report for Adams Mansion National Historic Site," October 5, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 10 (ADAM).

¹⁷² Susan Sessions Rugh, *Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 42.

under 16 allowed in free.¹⁷³ Corry and McCormick welcomed 111 visitors for a tour of the house, library, and garden in the twelve days the park was open in April 1947, and 354 visitors in May. Tourists came from around the country, including Massachusetts, California, New York, Illinois, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.¹⁷⁴

By June, tourists were visiting from all over the country, a fact that led Corry to beam: “Truly, the Adams Mansion is a *National* Historic Site.”¹⁷⁵ That month, the house received a boost from an article in the June 23, 1947 issue of *LIFE* with a headline that announced, “Home of a historic family is now a national shrine filled with relics of its famous sons.” It was a brief article—a page of text describing the history of the home and its occupants, plus several interior and exterior photographs of the site and portraits of Adams family members. It assured readers that although the house was architecturally “a good but not distinguished specimen of eighteenth century American style,” its real value was its past: “Historically it is one of the few truly great American houses.”¹⁷⁶ Custodian Corry judged the article to be “an excellent presentation” of the site.¹⁷⁷ The article seems to have given the site a further boost: there were 1,768 visitors in July, with 393 guided tours. This was a dramatic improvement from previous years. The Adams Memorial Society’s records, Corry noted, indicated that in the previous July, the Society welcomed only 923 visitors. This meant that July 1947’s visitation numbers were an increase of 91 ½ percent over the previous year.¹⁷⁸

Visitors during the site’s first summer as a federally-owned property also included a number of important NPS figures. In July, the park received a visit from NPS Chief Historian Ronald F. Lee (later Regional Director in Philadelphia) and his wife, and on August 19, NPS Director Newton B. Drury made his first visit to the site, accompanied by Regional Director Thomas J. Allen, Coordinating Superintendent Ronalds, and Salem Maritime National Historic Site Superintendent Edwin W. Small.

¹⁷³ The latter decision was a point of contention for Henry Adams, who argued that “large groups of children going through the House did a great deal of damage. They are on a pleasure excursion and are uncontrollable.” Henry Adams to Francis S. Ronalds, March 6, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 6 (ADAM). In a letter the next month, Adams made his point again: “There is an idea that the place has an educational effect on children, but I never noticed it when they come in groups.” Henry Adams to Francis S. Ronalds, April 10, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 5 (ADAM).

¹⁷⁴ Corry, “May 1947 Monthly Narrative Report.”

¹⁷⁵ Corry, “June 1947 Monthly Narrative Report.”

¹⁷⁶ “Adams House,” *LIFE*, June 23, 1947, 76–78.

¹⁷⁷ Corry, “June 1947 Monthly Narrative Report.” See also correspondence between *LIFE* Researcher Katherine Carrig and Francis S. Ronalds, February 28, March 3, March 4, April 7 and 9, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folders 6 and 7 (ADAM).

¹⁷⁸ Corry, “July 1947 Monthly Narrative Report.”

Although there was a steady stream of tourists visiting the site in the summer of 1947, Corry did not have park promotional materials to orient them to Old House and its surroundings until July. In that month, Harry Adams located a stash of guide cards that the Memorial Society had once handed out for free to visitors, which included a description of the house and a map of Quincy. He promptly donated them to the NPS. As a short-term fix for the lack of promotional and educational material to distribute, Corry found that stamping “Adams Mansion National Historic Site” over “Adams Memorial Society” was an adequate temporary solution until the Site’s official twofold leaflet was created.¹⁷⁹ By August, these cards were almost completely exhausted, and the supply ran out entirely in early September.¹⁸⁰ That month, Corry and Ronalds sent text and photographs to the Government Printing Office for the creation of a new brochure. In the meantime, however, the Site was again left without any literature to hand out to visitors.¹⁸¹

Despite a few hiccups, visitors from near and far seem to have overall been pleased with the site. In August, the Quincy *Patriot Ledger* newspaper ran a front page article about the Old House and the nearby Adams birthplaces, which Corry noted, “commented favorably on the recent repainting of the exterior.” The article also quoted an enthusiastic tourist from Virginia, who described the Old House as

the most impressive historic site I’ve ever visited. Washington’s home in Mount Vernon is . . . so much more formal. Here you half expect to come upon some member of the family sitting in his favorite chair reading a book. It’s almost as though you were intruding in a private home.¹⁸²

For the Adams family, this would have been a compliment of the highest order.

Meeting the Neighbors

In addition to tackling the extensive maintenance and administrative work required to get the Historic Site up and running, Corry also began the more delicate work of building relationships with other local historical institutions, park supporters, and stakeholders. In June, he visited Concord, Massachusetts, where he was “particularly impressed” by the Concord Antiquarian Society’s exhibits. He invited them to visit Adams Mansion in turn. That same month, he was invited to a luncheon of the Quincy Chamber of Commerce’s Publicity Committee, which was planning a Historic Day for Quincy to promote the city’s

¹⁷⁹ Corry, “July 1947 Monthly Narrative Report.”

¹⁸⁰ Corry, “September 1947 Monthly Narrative Report.”

¹⁸¹ Corry to Henry Adams, January 19, 1948, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).

¹⁸² Corry, “August 1947 Monthly Narrative Report.”

historic sites. The new NPS Historic Site was an important addition both to the Committee's program and the Quincy tourism scene. Corry's participation was welcome and essential to building a relationship between the NPS and the local community. Corry promised that the Committee would receive the NPS's full cooperation in their planning efforts.¹⁸³

Corry also began meeting individuals with close ties to the Adams family and the Old House. Perhaps most significant was Wilhelmina Sellers Harris, former social secretary to Brooks Adams and future Park superintendent. Harris was also the site's next door neighbor, residing at 156 Adams Street. She began making regular visits across the street. Corry first recorded her visiting the Old House in late June 1947, and she continued to drop by regularly in the ensuing months.¹⁸⁴ In a 1962 oral history interview, Harris provided her own perspective on Corry's arrival at the Old House, and described her efforts to bring him up to speed on the history of the property. She recalled that Corry arrived at a time (both weather- and maintenance-wise) when "everything was bleak and difficult." She said:

He knew nothing about the area and he went in to see Henry Adams 2nd, and Mr. Adams said, 'Well, if you go across the street and speak to Mrs. Harris maybe she'd be of some help to you.' So, the following summer, I'd passed much of the time with Mr. Corry, discussing the house as it had been when I lived in it and orienting him, as it were.

Harris had basically taken on Brooks Adams's role as educator, and found a willing student in Corry. She continued,

his interpretive tour was more or less what I had outlined to him, incorporating what I knew about the house. However, I don't want to downgrade Mr. Corry because he was a tremendous reader about the Adamses and took his job very seriously and I think did a swell job. He was here in the difficult days when they didn't have a gardener because Martin Hyland had become too old to work with Mrs. McCormick in the house who kept everything locked up and only allowed him just to go around in certain spots. She had no one to really clean the house. . . . The house was very very dirty and Mr. Corry had no one to do anything of that type. Sometimes you could find him early in the morning before the area was open to the public, scrubbing the floor. He had a very hard time.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Corry, "June 1947 Monthly Narrative Report for Adams Mansion National Historic Site," July 3, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 10 (ADAM).

¹⁸⁴ Corry, "June 1947 Monthly Narrative Report."

¹⁸⁵ Appendix 5: Recollections of the Adams Mansion from 1920 by Wilhelmina Sellers Harris (four transcribed interviews), in Peterson, *The Adams Mansion*, 183–184. Corry's name is misspelled as "Corey" in Peterson's book, and McCormick's name is misspelled as "McCormack"; I have corrected both spelling in the above quotes to avoid perpetuating further confusion.

In a separate oral history interview with historian Polly Welts Kaufman, Harris said that she spent time with Corry every week teaching him about the house, “until finally it turned out I was going there daily.”¹⁸⁶

In September, on the recommendation of Henry Adams, another important visitor dropped by: 86-year-old Martin Hyland, the former gardener of the Old House and employee of Brooks Adams.¹⁸⁷ Hyland provided Corry with important information about the garden, and drew Corry’s attention to both omissions, and improper additions, to the flower beds: violets had run rampant across flower beds, the snapdragons were missing, and zinnias were introduced—“which were never allowed by Mr. Brooks Adams.” He even drew a sketch of the garden that showed where the different flowers were planted.¹⁸⁸ Hyland continued to make repeated visits to the Site, with three more trips on November 4, 18, and 26.¹⁸⁹

Together, Harris and Hyland carried with them a deep reserve of knowledge about the Old House’s history, including what the property looked like when Brooks Adams was in residence. They became invaluable resources for Corry in the Historic Site’s critical first year.

Winding Down the First Season

By September, the Site was finally beginning to feel like an (almost) fully functional NPS unit. Corry had learned to manage Harry Adams’s generally innocuous, but rather consistent stream of complaints, and the two men developed a genial rapport. When Adams lamented, “Why couldn’t that Old House have burned?,” for example, Corry would assure “him that we had recently received twelve fire extinguishers of the most-approved type.”¹⁹⁰ Corry regularly passed along such gems to Ronalds to keep him apprised of the situation, but he had grown accustomed to Adams’s mood swings and seemed generally unconcerned about them.

¹⁸⁶ Wilhelmina Harris, interview by Polly Welts Kaufman, March 29, 1985, NPS Oral History Collection (HFCA 1817), NPS History Collection. In this interview, Harris’s account varies slightly, with Charles Francis Adams suggesting Corry get help from Harris.

¹⁸⁷ Corry, “September 1947 Monthly Narrative Report.”

¹⁸⁸ Corry, “December 1947 Monthly Narrative Report for Adams Mansion National Historic Site,” January 3, 1948, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).

¹⁸⁹ Corry, “Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One,” October 10, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 4 (ADAM) ; Corry, November 1947 Monthly Narrative Report for Adams Mansion National Historic Site,” December 3, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 10 (ADAM).

¹⁹⁰ Corry, “Memorandum for the Coordinating Superintendent, Morristown National Historical Park,” September 1, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 8 (ADAM).

On September 5, a 60-foot steel flag pole, painted white, was put up on the property. This was despite grumblings from Adams, who objected to its massive size and repeatedly remarked to Corry: “The Marines have landed. The situation is well in hand. John Adams is no more.”¹⁹¹ Five days later, the American flag was raised for the first time in an “informal ceremony” that garnered a photo in the Quincy *Patriot Ledger*. A massive 9' x 16' flag, loaned by the commander of Quincy’s Naval Air Station, was hoisted for the occasion. Corry noted that its replacement, a “small flag, which was received later, appeared quite lost at the top of the 60-foot pole after the use of the larger flag.”¹⁹²

In October, there were two major developments at the Site. First, the coordinating responsibility was shifted from Morristown to Salem Maritime National Historic Site, with Edwin W. Small now serving as Adams Mansion National Historic Site’s Coordinating Superintendent. The move made sense because of Salem’s proximity to Quincy, and Small’s longtime interest in the NPS acquisition of the Old House.¹⁹³ Second, Corry’s greatest administrative wish was granted when David S. Forrester, a 30-year-old World War II veteran, was hired as a temporary laborer. On the latter development, Corry was thrilled. Forrester was able to handle both grounds-keeping and mechanical work with ease. Between his arrival on October 20 and the end of the first week in November, Forrester had already made a major dent in the maintenance backlog:

Two rooms of the carriage house have been cleaned, one for storing garden implements and tools and the other for a workroom. Leaves from the grounds, which were a fire hazard, have been carted off and work started toward putting the garden in condition for winter. After the ground work ceases to be a problem, there are numerous repair and maintenance projects which could occupy several men all winter.

Forrester’s arrival, Corry concluded, “brightens the maintenance picture at Adams Mansion.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Corry, “Memorandum for the Coordinating Superintendent, Morristown National Historical Park,” September 7, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 4 (ADAM).

¹⁹² Corry, “September 1947 Monthly Narrative Report for Adams Mansion National Historic Site,” October 5, 1947, Box 4, Folder 10 (“Correspondence by Mr. Corry, Custodian’s Monthly Narrative Reports, 1947”), Resource Management Records, I. Central Park File, B. Superintendent Records, 1. Correspondence, (ADAM).

¹⁹³ Small was described in the 1993 Salem Maritime NHS administrative history as a “New England ambassador for the Park Service, visiting and reporting on potential sites for acquisition.” Pauline Chase-Harrell, Carol Ely, and Stanley Moss, “Administrative History of the Salem Maritime National Historic Site,” (National Park Service, North Atlantic Regional Office: 1993), 77. See also Seth Bruggeman’s forthcoming administrative history of Boston National Historical Park for more about Edwin’s Small’s NPS career in New England. His administrative history will be turned into a book, which is under contract with UMass Press.

¹⁹⁴ Raymond H. Corry, “October 1947 Monthly Narrative Report for Adams Mansion National Historic Site,” November 7, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 10 (ADAM).

In December 1947, former gardener Martin Hyland gave Forrester a great deal of information about the property and gardens, and Harry Adams also judged Forrester satisfactory, saying that he was “favorably impressed with him.”¹⁹⁵ It was Hyland’s final visit to the Old House; he passed away on December 13. Corry later wrote, “As head gardener at Adams Mansion for more than forty years, Mr. Hyland was closely associated with and deeply devoted to the area. . . . His help will be sorely missed here next spring.” On December 16, they flew the flag at half-mast during his burial.

The NPS had originally planned to keep the Old House open during the winter, a move that would have been a break with tradition from the Adams Memorial Society. But Corry was forced to close the Site for the season in mid-November because of poor heating, and the house’s condition. The furniture was covered and furnishings were put in storage for the winter. The Quincy *Patriot Ledger* ran a front page article on December 6 about the closing which noted, “It appeared as though the Adams family also had a heating problem, for only the family of John Adams ever spent the winter in the Quincy house.”¹⁹⁶ A “Closed for the Winter” sign was hung on the Site’s gates, but that did not stop visitors from arriving in hopes of receiving a tour (Corry noted that even these “unusually interested visitors” had to be turned away).¹⁹⁷ In all, 1947 was a successful season—between April 19 and November 16, there were 6,809 visitors to the house, almost all taking tours. Harry Adams confirmed that this was the largest number of visitors in the 21 years that the house was open to the public, from 1927 to 1948.¹⁹⁸

At the close of the first season, Corry once again faced the prospect of the site being woefully understaffed. Bassett was placed on leave without pay in November, and then terminated because of lack of funding. Margaret McCormick abruptly resigned from her position in mid-November, with intentions of leaving her quarters by early December. Her unexpected departure caused some confusion and frustration for both McCormick and Corry. Corry later learned that her resignation came as a result of a conversation she had with Harry Adams, in which Adams inquired whether she and her family had a place to live if her position with the NPS was terminated. Presumably, Adams knew that understaffing and tight personnel budgets were a fact of life at Adams Mansion, and he wanted to make

¹⁹⁵ Corry, “Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region one,” December 9, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).

¹⁹⁶ Corry, “December 1947 Monthly Narrative Report for Adams Mansion National Historic Site,” January 3, 1948, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).

¹⁹⁷ Corry, “December 1947 Monthly Narrative Report.”

¹⁹⁸ Corry, “November 1947 Monthly Narrative Report for Adams Mansion National Historic Site,” December 3, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 10 (ADAM).

sure she had a contingency plan in place. In response, McCormick notified the tenants of a home she owned in Wollaston that they would need to vacate the premises, because she was leaving her position and her living quarters at the site.¹⁹⁹

McCormick's impending departure troubled Corry. He believed that for the Old House's protection, it was essential for the servants' quarters to be occupied and to have someone on-site to operate the fire and burglar alarm systems. With her impending departure, the only two remaining employees were Corry and Forrester. Corry proposed that Forrester, his wife, and two children be allowed to move into McCormick's living quarters, rent free, both because the quarters were in such poor condition and because their presence was needed as a protective measure for the property.²⁰⁰ In a memorandum later that month, he was more blunt: the kitchen and bathroom could not be used in cold weather, he noted, and "Frankly, due to the present condition and inconveniences of the quarters, I doubt whether most Service personnel would live in them free of charge. It would take free quarters and a sizeable bonus to induce me to live there."²⁰¹ In early December, McCormick finally gave Corry written notice of her family's impending departure. She wrote that she and her family were leaving before Christmas because of the lack of clarity about her future and job security at the Historic Site. "We very carefully reconsidered the situation from all angles, and come to the conclusion that it would be best for all concerned, to carry out our decision," she wrote.²⁰² In a follow-up letter to the Coordinating Superintendent, Corry indicated that McCormick and her family had finally left on December 7. "In spite of the temporary inconvenience," he wrote, it is my opinion that Mrs. McCormick's leaving is best for the area."²⁰³ He did not explain why he felt this way.

Corry and Forrester trudged ahead with their reduced staff reality once again. They spent much of the month of December on maintenance work, which was made more challenging by persistent snow and rain. With a "snow shovel and elbow grease" they did their best to keep the entrances to the Old House clear; but the rains resulted in a leak in a second-floor passage caused by an ice jam in the gutters. They repainted the trim around the Stone Library's door and French windows tobacco brown and colonial green; repaired and repainted some of the long blinds; repainted two of the Old House's storm doors, and

¹⁹⁹ Corry, "Memorandum for the Coordinating Superintendent, Morristown National Historical Park," December 9, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).

²⁰⁰ Corry, "Memorandum for the Coordinating Superintendent, Morristown National Historical Park," November 16, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).

²⁰¹ Corry, "Memorandum for the Coordinating Superintendent, Morristown National Historical Park," November 29, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).

²⁰² Margaret F. McCormick to Raymond H. Corry, December 6, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).

²⁰³ Corry, "Memorandum for the Coordinating Superintendent, Morristown National Historical Park," December 9, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).

improved the recently-vacated quarters in which Forrester and his family now lived. They secured the wisteria vines on the Stone Library, pruned the wisteria, ornamental grape and Dutchman's pipe vines on the Old House, pruned shrubs, and removed tree limbs from Norway maples that had been damaged in a storm. Corry also completed some administrative tasks, preparing reports for the Region One office that documented the Old House's plumbing needs and the protective systems used in the Old House and Stone Library.²⁰⁴ He had significant help from Forrester, but Corry remained frustrated by the many challenges they faced despite nearly a year of nonstop work on the property.

Establishing "Good and Cooperative Feelings" with the Adamses

With the relentless staffing turmoil at the Historic Site in its first year, it is perhaps unsurprising that Corry's time at the park would also soon come to an end. On December 9, he wrote to the Regional Director requesting release from the NPS in order to take up a position at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York.²⁰⁵ Despite his impending move, in his final weeks he devoted his attention to the Historic Site and to building a relationship with the Adams family members. These efforts would prove to be another of Corry's lasting legacies, despite his brief tenure at the Historic Site.

²⁰⁴ Corry, "December 1947 Monthly Narrative Report."

²⁰⁵ Corry, "Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One," January 24, 1948, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).



Figure 18. Raymond Corry (right) with Eleanor Roosevelt Memorial Foundation Director Hyman Bookbinder and Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Director Elizabeth Drewry, October 1963. Corry left Adams Mansion National Historic Site for a position at the FDR Library. Photograph courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum. Photo ID 72-171(1).

In late December, Corry sent a memorandum to the Region One Regional Director in which he related some thoughts about the possibility of acquiring additional historical objects from the family. He wrote,

I should preface my remarks by saying that I believe there exists here a rare opportunity of doing one of the best—I believe the best—job of historical preservation in this country. I believe that it is possible to have returned to Adams Mansion a great many of the valuable historic objects which have been removed, as well as other items associated with important members of the Adams family which may have never been part of the Mansion. But it will take some tact and more effort.

This belief stemmed from a December 18 visit to the Mansion by Mary Ogden Abbott. Abbott, who Corry described as “an artist, a lady of great charm and a fine sense of humor,” was Harry Adams’ niece and the granddaughter of Charles Francis Adams. Like Henry Adams, she shared a sense of devotion to and affection for the Old House. Now in her 50s, she was an accomplished equestrian, markswoman, artist, and world traveler; like Harry before her, however, she shared a sense of devotion to and affection for the Old House. During her visit, she told Corry that when the house was first opened to the public in 1927, Adams Memorial Society members decided to remove possessions of Henry Adams and Brooks Adams because they did not see the brothers as significant historical figures. They “were so close to this generation of the family and knew them so well that

they could not bring themselves to look upon them as historical.”²⁰⁶ Abbott told Corry that since that time, she and other Adams family members had a change of heart and were interested in returning many of these items to the Old House. Abbott also mentioned that her aunt, former Memorial Society president Elizabeth Ogden Adams, “left a bequest to the Mansion”—\$10,000 for the Old House—when she died in 1945. The Society was still interested in using the money for these purposes, she told him.²⁰⁷ Corry again suggested the possibility of establishing an arrangement between Adams Mansion National Historic Site and the Adams Memorial Society along the lines of that of the Washington Association and Morristown National Historical Park. He concluded:

With a sincere and candid approach, I feel that much can be accomplished through members of the Adams family in the interests of this area. In spite of the fact that some may seem crotchety at times, I believe they are far above the average in seeing one’s point and possess a loyalty and disinterestedness which is rare in these times. While I have not been aggressive in my relations with members of the Adams family and have accomplished little or nothing in a tangible way, I do feel that I shall leave this area with members of the family with good and cooperative feelings toward the National Park Service. I sincerely hope that much more will be accomplished in the next few years.²⁰⁸

Despite the NPS’s slow allocation of resources to the site, Corry seems to have succeeded in gaining the Adams family members’ trust. They may not have yet been fully convinced that the NPS would do right by the Old House, but with a trusted steward at the helm—which they would also have in Corry’s successor—they could see its potential.

²⁰⁶ Corry, “Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One,” December 30, 1947.

²⁰⁷ Freiberg, “From Family to Nation,” 63.

²⁰⁸ Corry, “Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One,” December 30, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).



Figure 19. Photograph of Mary Ogden Abbott, date unknown.
Courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

Corry was leaving with such good feelings, in fact, that he was invited to spend Christmas night with Harry Adams and Mary Ogden Abbott, who lived together in Concord. During his visit, Abbott and Adams gave Corry an inscribed copy of Charles Francis Adams' autobiography and a colored woodcut of the Old House.²⁰⁹ Corry followed up with a note to Harry Adams, thanking him for "the gracious hospitality shown me by you and Miss Abbott last evening. I have never had a more pleasant Christmas evening." In his final letter to Corry dated January 31, 1948, Henry Adams gave Corry what amounted to high praise: "You have taken a closer interest in it [the Old House] than any one I have had to do with. I am very sorry you are leaving but it cannot be helped."²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Corry, "Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One," December 30, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).

²¹⁰ Henry Adams to Raymond Corry, January 31, 1948, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 13 (ADAM).

In addition to leaving the family with good feelings, Corry left the NPS on a positive note as well. Upon leaving his post, he donated fourteen books to the Site that ranged from titles by Adams family members (including Brooks Adams's *The Law of Civilization and Decay* and Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams*), to Elise Lathrop's *Historic Houses of Early America* and Stewart Mitchell's edited volume, *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1786–1801*.²¹¹ And in a memorandum to the Coordinating Superintendent, he offered some suggested reading for future historical research on the Adams Mansion that could be taken up by his successors.²¹² In his final monthly narrative report, Corry wrote, "In leaving the National Park Service, the custodian carries with him a host of pleasant memories. He will always be a friend of the Service with a deep interest in its great work of natural and historical conservation."²¹³ On February 9, 1948, Corry became the Museum Historian with the National Archives at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.²¹⁴ No immediate replacement for his position was named, so Coordinating Superintendent Small took care of administrative responsibilities and Forrester continued on as the property's caretaker and laborer. Forrester remained employed at the Site until his position was terminated in October 1948.

Corry's time at Adams Mansion National Historic Site, although brief, was critical to getting the Site up and running. He performed essential maintenance work and upgrades to the home and grounds, both structural and aesthetic. He frequently carried the burden of this work with very little help. Corry also built a foundation of goodwill and trust with the members of the Adams Memorial Society, and Harry Adams and Mary Ogden Abbott in particular. Even if, as he said, he "accomplished little or nothing in a tangible way" in regards to the NPS's relationship with the Adams descendants, he was correct in believing that his efforts would serve the Site well in coming years. His work contributed to the ease with which the next steward of the Adams Mansion National Historic Site, Wilhelmina Harris, was able to grow the relationship between the two parties. In turn, the site's collection of priceless family heirlooms would grow as well.

²¹¹ Corry, "Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One," January 28, 1948, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).

²¹² Corry, "Memorandum for the Regional Director, Region One," January 30, 1948, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).

²¹³ Corry, "January 1948 Monthly Narrative Report for Adams Mansion National Historic Site," February 4, 1948, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 14 (ADAM).

²¹⁴ Mary C. Lethbridge, "News Notes," *The American Archivist* 11, No. 4 (October 1948), 380.

CHAPTER THREE

WILHELMINA HARRIS RETURNS TO THE OLD HOUSE

Subsequent to custodian Raymond Corry's departure in January 1948, Coordinating Superintendent Edwin Small and Temporary Laborer David Forrester worked to keep Adams Mansion National Historic Site afloat in the absence of an immediate replacement. An engineer and mechanical engineer inspected the house and grounds in January, leaving Small with more things to worry about. Not only were there immediate repairs that needed to be made to the house, but there was also a pressing need for long-term planning.²¹⁵ In March, Forrester began making "enthusiastic preparations for maintaining the lawns and family flower garden during the approaching season." He stocked up on fertilizer and pesticides, applied fertilizer to the property's lawns, and started flower seeds in the greenhouse.²¹⁶ Staffing problems continued to plague the site. They were still operating with a single caretaker, and a Coordinating Superintendent who was based at another park but made routine visits to Quincy. It was a bare-bones operation. In his April 1948 narrative report, Small revealed a glimmer of hope: "Plans materialized for the employment of much-needed additional personnel which will be entered on duty during May."²¹⁷ In May, those plans were unveiled.

On May 3, 1948, Small reported:

Mrs. Wilhelmina S. Harris entered on duty . . . as Historical Aide, SP-6. Mrs. Harris brings to the job a great fund of knowledge of the Mansion as it was during the last years it was occupied by members of the Adams family. Mrs. Harris was personal secretary to Mr. Brooks Adams from 1920 to 1927 and lived in the Mansion much of the time during that period.²¹⁸

In the year after Brooks Adams's death, Harris married Colonel Frank E. Harris. Colonel Harris was a friend of Brooks Adams, and Adams introduced the pair to each other. It was Colonel Harris's second marriage; he was a West Point artillery officer who was 28 years

²¹⁵ Edwin W. Small, February 1948 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report, March 5, 1948, Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folder 18 (ADAM). See Box 4, Folder 15 for the two engineers' evaluations.

²¹⁶ Small, March 1948 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²¹⁷ Small, April 1948 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²¹⁸ Small, May 1948 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

her senior, and he retired from the military a year after their marriage, in 1929.²¹⁹ The couple had three sons, Frank, George, and Brooks, and lived at 156 Adams Street in Quincy, across the street from the Old House; Wilhelmina Harris sold stock that she inherited from Brooks Adams to purchase the home.²²⁰ Between 1938 and 1948, Harris had worked as a piano teacher in Quincy, and was the founder of the Quincy Junior Concert Orchestra.²²¹ Beyond these small details, however, information about Harris's life in Quincy is sparse; she was a private person who kept her home life to herself. But she was about to take on a more visible role in the city. After Frank's death in 1947, Harris—now a young widow—leapt at the opportunity to return to the Old House as an employee of Adams Mansion National Historic Site.

²¹⁹ Harris was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1868. A US passport application from his first wife, Philadelphia-born Marie B. Harris, indicates that Frank Harris “was born in Warsaw of American parents.” See Marie B. Harris passport application, December 12, 1916, US Passport Applications, 1795–1925, Roll 0337, Certificate 41641; and “Interment in the Arlington National Cemetery” form for Frank E. Harris, March 10, 1947, in US National Cemetery Interment Control Forms, 1928–1962, Ancestry.com.

²²⁰ Marianne Peak, phone interview with Laura Miller, January 24, 2020.

²²¹ Biographical details are from the 1930 Federal Census, Norfolk County, Quincy, Massachusetts, Ancestry.com; as well as a biographical sketch for *Newsletter* profile, October 3, 1967, Unprocessed Resource Management Records (ADAM); and “‘Superwoman’ Wilhelmina Harris,” *Courier*, March 1984, Resource Management Records, Central Park Files, Box 57, Folder 10, “Articles About Mrs. Harris” (ADAM).



Figure 20. Colonel Frank E. Harris and Wilhelmina Harris with their three sons (from left to right) Brooks, George, and Frank Jr., ca. 1940.

Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

The availability of work at the Historic Site was a mutually beneficial arrangement. It gave Harris stable government employment (with, she recalled, a salary of \$2,400 a year), and the site gained an employee with deep knowledge of the Old House and grounds. In her 1985 oral history interview with Polly Welts Kaufman, Harris recalled how she came to the position:

I went over [to the park] one morning and he [Corry] said, "When I got out of the service, I asked for government employment." . . . he said, "I asked for a library, and because the Adams library is here, they sent me to Quincy, but now I have been invited to come to Franklin D. Roosevelt's and have charge of his museum, so I would like to go. Would you like to take my place?" I said, "Well, I don't know how the Adamses would feel," so he telephoned, and they said that they would be delighted if I return, and with that, I filled out the form, took no examination at all because I was a veteran's widow, and entered the government service.²²²

The Adamses were delighted at the thought of Harris returning to the Old House, and advocated vigorously on her behalf. In a letter to the NPS's Thomas J. Allen, Charles Francis Adams III wrote that Harris "would be a fine custodian of the Old House. It would be satisfactory to all the members of the Adams family if she was given this position."²²³ Harry Adams followed up with Allen a few days later, and emphasized Harris's deep understanding of the history of the Old House and the generations of Adamses who had lived there. During her time working for Brooks Adams, he wrote:

Mrs. Harris saw much of the family, managed the house and grounds efficiently, and being continually with Brooks Adams acquired not only an intimate knowledge of all the furniture of the house, now transferred with it, but also a recognition of the strong attachment the descendants of the two Presidents, now members of the Adams Memorial Society, have for the place. I feel strongly that her appointment would do much toward continuing that family association and interest which the National Park Service feels is so desirable in cases like this for it creates an atmosphere not that of a museum but of a house in which the owners are still living. I am sure all the Adams descendants feel as I do in this.²²⁴

²²² Wilhelmina Harris, interview with Polly Welts Kaufman, March 29, 1985, NPS Oral History Collection (HFCA 1817), NPS History Collection.

²²³ Cited in Freiberg, "From Family to Nation," 75.

²²⁴ Freiberg, "From Family to Nation," 75. Henry Adams also wrote to Francis Ronalds to express his regret that Corry was leaving the Park, and his belief that Wilhelmina Harris would be an ideal replacement. See Adams to Ronalds, December 18, 1947, Resource Management Records, Box 1, Folder 2 (ADAM).

The family's stamp of approval made hiring Harris an easy choice for the NPS leadership. They were no doubt eager to secure the Adams family's continued cooperation with the agency in the decades to come.

In the mid-twentieth century, leadership positions in the NPS were almost entirely the purview of men. Yet it was Wilhelmina Harris who dramatically shaped the history of Adams National Historical Park for the next several decades. Harris was a bridge in more ways than one. Her approach to the Superintendent's role reflected an earlier era in which women were the primary stewards of historic house museums, inflected with Harris's own brand of southern gentility and filiopietism. She came to lead the park, however, at a time when the NPS and the museum field more broadly were being professionalized by men. She was also a bridge between the Old House and its last occupant, Brooks Adams, and its new life as a National Historic Site. In these roles, Harris adeptly negotiated boundaries and fostered ties between the Park Service and the Adams descendants. Luckily for the Park Service, the family already had their full trust in her. This also meant that she approached the job with a certain amount of willingness to bend or break NPS protocol, if she felt it was in the best interest of the Old House and the Adams legacy.

Problems and Progress

After Harris was hired, Edwin Small continued to handle the park's administrative tasks. Forrester remained in residence at the Old House, and was responsible for maintaining the property and gardens. A temporary laborer, Ruth E. Hayward, was hired to handle maintenance inside the Old House during the height of the summer tourist season.²²⁵ Even with Harris's appointment as a permanent Historical Aide, however, the park's staff still struggled to keep the property afloat. Small noted that Chief Historian Lee visited the Site, "and had a first-hand opportunity to become acquainted with the many problems besetting the very limited amount of personnel attempting to maintain and interpret the Site."²²⁶ ("Problems" had become the preferred term for the variety of pressing tasks facing the staff.) Looking back on the site's early days, Harris offered a blunt assessment. She recalled, "the first day I reported to work, I found that I didn't see there was much I could do. The house was in utter disrepair, and I wasn't a carpenter, and they were making some slow repairs, but the government doesn't work too fast, so that it was not making much progress."²²⁷

²²⁵ Hayward was first mentioned in Small's monthly narrative reports in November, but he noted that she worked at the Site "during the travel season." November 1948 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²²⁶ May 1948 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²²⁷ Wilhelmina Harris, interview with Polly Welts Kaufman.

Given Corry and Forrester's extensive maintenance work to stabilize the Old House and its grounds (and Harris's lack of carpentry skills), she turned her attention to interpretation and improving visitors' experiences at the site. In this sense, things were already looking up: not only did the staff now include an individual with deep knowledge of the Old House and grounds, but it finally had a NPS-produced brochure to provide to visitors, published in 1948. The detailed brochure offered brief biographies of John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and Charles Francis Adams, as well as a section focused on "The Fourth Generation"—John Quincy Adams Jr., Charles Francis Adams, Jr., Henry Adams, and Brooks Adams—and a family tree. The brochure described the Old House, its origins, how it came to be owned by the Adamses, and additions to the house. It also included this note on the furnishings:

The continuity of life in the house is best shown by the furnishings, as the various objects are of successive periods—each generation contributed something of itself and each generation is remembered by what it left. The house is not a "period piece" but a house which from 1788 to 1927 clearly shows the ever-changing style and taste of its occupants.²²⁸

Following the lead of the Adams Memorial Society, the NPS presented the Old House as a reflection of generations of Adams family occupants, rather than a period house preserving a single moment in time.

²²⁸ Park brochure, Box 57, Folder 20 ("Park Brochure: Adams Mansion National Historic Site Massachusetts, 1948"), Resource Management Records (ADAM).

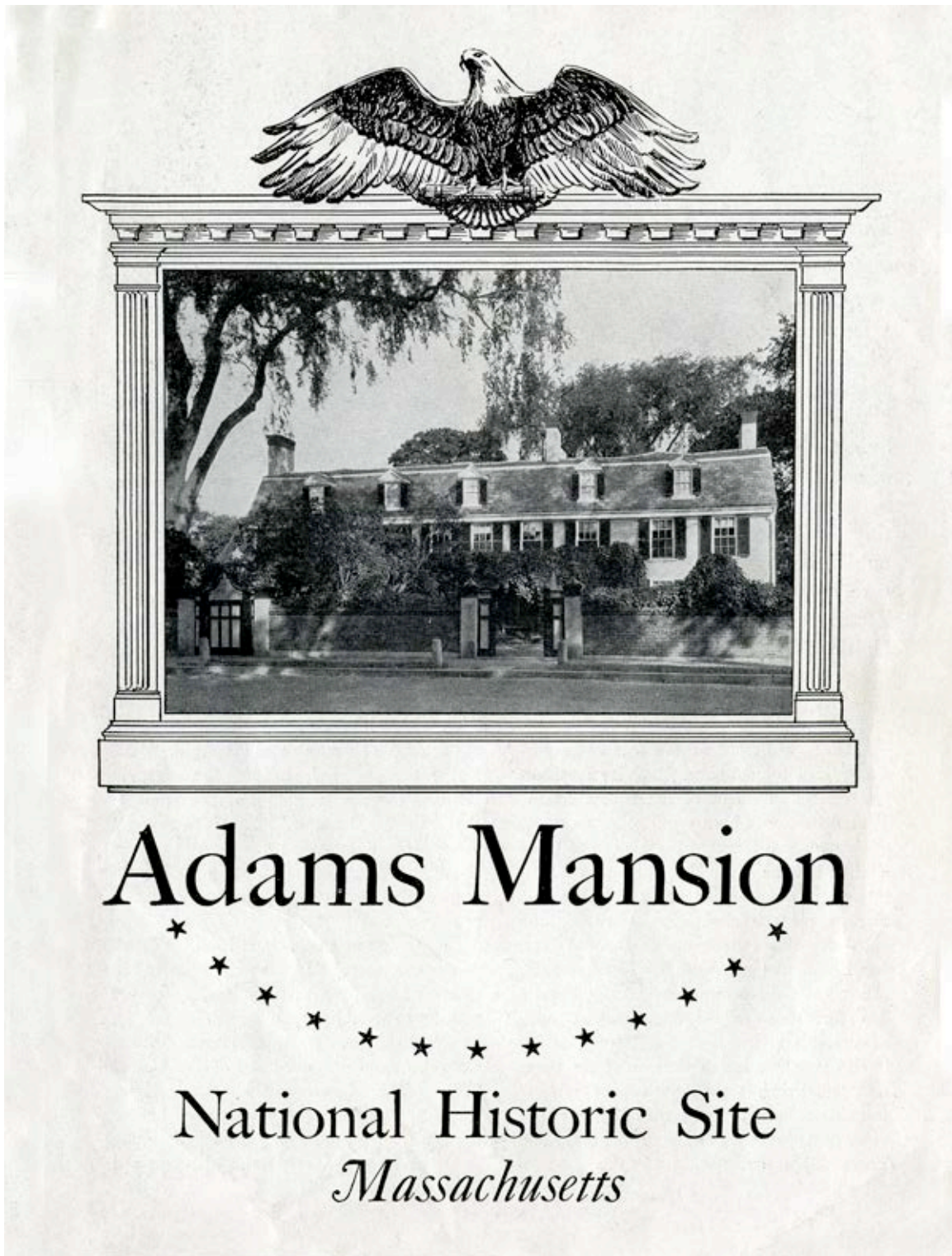


Figure 21. Cover of the first NPS-produced brochure for ADAM, 1948.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

Harris began her work in earnest, and played a critical role in developing interpretation at the site. She based that interpretation primarily on her firsthand knowledge of the property's history and its former inhabitants. She prepared an "excellent" (in Small's words) narrative to train summer seasonal historical aides that included "a number of facts not previously revealed about the furnishings of the Mansion."²²⁹ The details of that narrative are unknown; it was, however, the first reference in the park's archives to staff creating a standard narrative to present to visitors to the Old House.

In June and July, two Historical Aides arrived—on June 27, Carolyn McLay began work, and on July 7, college student Sylvia Hall joined. Both women had been given Harris's narrative in advance of their arrival, and reported to work "already well prepared to interpret the house to visitors."²³⁰ With Hall's arrival, the site was finally adequately staffed for the summer tourist season. Small noted in his July Monthly Narrative Report that:

The necessity of having two seasonal aids in addition to Mrs. Harris was well demonstrated by the type of visitation received during the month. The daily arrival of sightseeing busses, often two at a time, leaves no doubt about the vital need of having at least two aids in attendance every day the Mansion is open during the summer. Visitation by children from camps, teachers' tours and other groups show the necessity of having sufficient personnel on hand to cope with the problem of handling large groups whenever they come.²³¹

These groups included children from local YMCA and YWCA camps, a group of sixty teachers from the National Teachers Association in Chicago, and teachers sponsored by the National Education Association.²³² By the conclusion of the 1948 season, Small was certain that the successful season had demonstrated that having "adequate interpretive personnel" was essential to the Site's proper functioning.

One of Harris's tasks was to improve the Old House's interpretation and the display of family heirlooms. She was asked to arrange the furnishings and objects in the house to match how it looked when she lived there as Brooks Adams' secretary. She recalled that she "was delighted" to take on this job, and "had a very good time doing that, because Mr. Brooks Adams had made a practice of daily telling me something about each room and why there were certain things in certain places." Harris also consulted with Harry Adams and Mary Ogden Abbott on one of their regular visits to the Old House, "to help me remember where every object was that we had."²³³ Sometimes Harris's changes to the Old House showed up in Small's monthly reports. In August 1948, for example, she supervised the

²²⁹ Small, May 1948 Monthly Narrative Report

²³⁰ Small, June 1948 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²³¹ Small, July 1948 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²³² Small, July 1948 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²³³ Wilhelmina Harris, interview with Polly Welts Kaufman.

return of furniture to the attic (third floor) maid's room and the cleaning of the books and furniture in the two rooms over the study to reflect how they looked in Brooks Adams's time. Small reported that her work ensured that "The attic is now in shape to be presented to anyone seeking a more thorough knowledge of the Mansion and its furnishings than is provided in the rooms normally open to visitors."²³⁴ (Harry Adams, for one, was very pleased with this decision). In October, Harris supervised the moving of furniture and arrangement of furnishings in Brooks Adams' bedroom using the same approach. Small was again vocal about his satisfaction with Harris's efforts: "As a result of the rehabilitation of this room, the exhibition value of the Mansion is further enhanced."²³⁵

Harris believed her work with Harry Adams and Mary Ogden Abbott was "how it [the Old House] became so authentic": "I had lived there six summers, and they had been brought up to come home often, or at least to visit their uncle often, so that between us we got it all . . . that is the way the house was put in order as it used to be."²³⁶ Of course, this focus on authenticity hides the curatorial decisions the trio made. Harris was also continuously acquiring new items donated by the Adams family, and displaying them as she and the members of the Adams Memorial Society saw fit.²³⁷ In the coming years, Harris made a number of changes to the Old House that belied her claims that the house was "unchanged" from Brooks Adams's era. Janice Hodson documented these changes at length in her 2005 *Historic Furnishings Assessment* of the Old House, and her conclusion merits quoting here: "the Old House interiors reflect a more complicated and subtle process of alteration, replacement, and reinterpretation by the later generation of Adams family members who made up the Memorial Society and by those in the National Park Service who were closely associated with it."²³⁸ The supposed authenticity was often based on their memories of Brooks Adams's time in the Old House, and Harris's recollections of his stories two decades after his death. It was an uneasy foundation upon which to claim authenticity.

In her first season at Adams Mansion National Historic Site, Harris accomplished a great deal in terms of interpretation and improving the visitor's experience of the Old House. This made her Corry's ideal successor. Despite perennial staff shortages, relentless repairs to the Old House, and many unexpected surprises in the Site's first two years, Corry and Harris did an admirable job of getting the Historic Site up and running.

²³⁴ Small, August 1948 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²³⁵ Small, October 1948 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²³⁶ Wilhelmina Harris, interview with Polly Welts Kaufman.

²³⁷ In the words of historian James M. Lindgren, museum "curators endlessly make decisions not only about preserving a building or an artifact but displaying and interpreting it to the public." *Preserving Historic New England: Preservation, Progressivism, and the Remaking of Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

²³⁸ Janice Hodson, "Historic Furnishings Assessment: Old House, Adams National Historical Park" (Northeast Museum Services Center: National Park Service, May 2005), 2, https://pubs.etic.nps.gov/Etic/ADAM_386_130113_0001_of_0068.pdf.

Promotion to Superintendent

By the 1949 season, park personnel were finding their groove. Maintenance work was now humming along, with the approval to hire two WAE laborers (“when actually employed,” or employed “on call” to work as needed) and one WAE charwoman. The laborers hired were John Iacovelli and Samuel DiSalvo, who began in March and April, respectively. Charwoman Margaret Leel began working at the park in May. Following DiSalvo’s arrival, Small reported favorably, “the Site is more completely staffed for the work required than at any time since the Site was established. Improvements in the general situation have been instantaneous.”²³⁹ With Leel’s arrival on May 3, Small noted that the site’s WAE maintenance crew was complete, and the quality of their work was reflected in the buildings and grounds of the Historic Site.²⁴⁰ Harris’s efforts, too, had greatly impressed NPS leadership. On an inspection trip to the site, the Regional Historian effused, “It is hard to imagine how Mrs. Harris could do more or better in taking care of the Adams Mansion area with her present funds and personnel.” But, he observed that the park’s funds were also being supplemented from an outside source: Harris herself. She was known to buy supplies with her own money, and “frequently pays money out of her own pocket to keep the laborers working an extra day a week than that allowed by the per diem schedule on which they operate officially.” He recommended that the site’s budget be increased and additional staff members added instead.²⁴¹

As the park approached something of a smooth operation, Harris set her sights on bigger aspirations. She began expanding her network of connections of individuals and organizations who could be useful to the site in various ways. Over time, it would become clear that promotion and networking were two of her greatest talents. She was extremely effective at drawing scholars, politicians, and other luminaries to visit the park, as well as building relationships with local organizations, including schools, historical societies, women’s clubs and garden clubs. And she was not afraid to lean on her local neighborhood connections in service of the site’s needs. She pursued this network-building with gusto. Collectively, her efforts succeeded in drawing new visitors, increasing publicity, and even protecting the Old House from Quincy’s rapid urban development in the postwar period.

Harris sought to expand the reach and publicity of Adams Mansion National Historic Site. She continued building a relationship with the Quincy Chamber of Commerce, an effort begun by Corry. In November 1949, she invited the Chamber’s Publicity Committee to meet in the Stone Library for a conversation about how to better

²³⁹ Small, April 1949 Superintendent’s Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁴⁰ Small, May 1949 Superintendent’s Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁴¹ Regional historian to regional director, “Inspection Trip—Adams Mansion National Historic Site,” September 8, 1949, ADAM Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 12.

publicize Quincy area historical attractions, including the Old House and the Adams birthplaces. The group agreed to investigate the feasibility of getting a sightseeing bus to run daily from Boston to Quincy in the summertime.²⁴² She also began offering public programs about the Old House and its gardens. Harris's files in the park archives reveal a regular stream of requests for talks to local organizations, especially in the park's early years. In June 1949, she spoke to 35 members of the Hingham Garden Club; in February 1950, she showed slides of the site and other NPS Sites to 300 members of the Quincy Women's Club; and in April 1950, she gave a talk to 60 members of the Wollaston Garden Club about "the ever-blooming features of the old-fashioned garden."²⁴³ On August 13, 1950 the Site celebrated the 143rd anniversary of the birth of Charles Francis Adams by inviting residents of Quincy and the surrounding areas to visit the Old House's garden and the Stone Library. Harry Adams was on hand to welcome visitors, and more than one thousand came. The Quincy *Patriot Ledger* devoted several news items and photos to the event. Although Small did not report that Harris organized the event, it seems fair to assume that she was the primary driver of the occasion. It had all the hallmarks of the events she would organize throughout her tenure at the park.²⁴⁴

All these efforts to promote and strengthen the site did not go unnoticed, and Harris was rewarded with a major promotion. On November 27, 1950, she was named Superintendent of Adams Mansion National Historic Site. The promotion would make her only the second woman Superintendent in the NPS, a very significant recognition at a time when women were generally not considered for such roles. As historian Polly Welts Kaufman has noted in her history of women in the NPS, however, this was unfortunately not precedent-setting for the Park Service. Both women "were selected outside traditional channels"; the first woman superintendent was Gertrude Cooper, who was appointed superintendent of Vanderbilt Mansion National Historic Site by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.²⁴⁵ As the field professionalized in the early twentieth century, "the role of women as stewards of historic house museums was being eclipsed by "museum men."²⁴⁶ NPS leadership would not push for more female leadership in the agency until the 1970s. For two decades, from 1950 to 1971, Harris was the only woman superintendent in the Park Service.

²⁴² Small, November 1949 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁴³ Small, June 1949 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report; Small, February 1950 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report; and Small, April 1950 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁴⁴ Small, August 1950 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁴⁵ Polly Welts Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman's Voice: A History*, Updated edition (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 149.

²⁴⁶ West, *Domesticating History*, 50.

Expanding the Historic Site's Reach

Harris worked hard to educate herself about the NPS and her place within the vast government bureaucracy. She regularly attended NPS regional and national conferences, and took every chance she had to meet with and learn from NPS colleagues. In February 1950, she went to the Region One Office's Interpretive Personnel Conference, where she found that the opportunity "to discuss and compare mutual problems with personnel from other areas proved to be most beneficial."²⁴⁷ In September 1952, she participated in the Area Operations Meeting at Glacier National Park in Montana, and was able to visit some of the nearby national parks. "Each one of these areas was so impressive that I was all the more proud to be a part of the NPS," she wrote. Harris found that although the topics discussed at the operations meeting were not always relevant to her work, it was nevertheless helpful to hear about the work at other national parks and to meet fellow Park Service employees.²⁴⁸

The procedural and administrative work that had once been handled by Salem's Coordinating Superintendent Edwin Small was now in Harris's hands. In a January 18, 1951 letter, Small took the opportunity to educate her on the formalities of monthly narrative reports, covering everything from page margin size to official NPS terminology and job titles. The minutiae of NPS administrative procedures were not Harris's forte, nor did she always seem interested in getting them right. The park's archives include superintendent's correspondence which document Harris's ongoing exchanges with NPS administrators in the 1950s. Peppered throughout these folders are letters regarding Harris's use of the wrong salary tables, missing timesheets, unpaid bills, incomplete information on travel expense vouchers, and other administrative missteps. On September 17, 1952, she sent an apologetic, if somewhat exasperated, note to the Superintendent of Morristown National Historical Site: "We are sorry to trouble you in this matter but we have no way of learning except by asking," she wrote. She *did* want to learn, to an extent. But throughout her tenure as Superintendent, Harris demonstrated a willingness to ignore, or at least not fuss over, certain bureaucratic rules and obstacles. The NPS leadership, in turn, let many of her missteps—intentional or unintentional—slide. In just one example, she stopped wearing the Park Service uniform on the orders of Abigail

²⁴⁷ Small, February 1950 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁴⁸ Wilhelmina S. Harris, September 1952 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

Adams Homans (“They were terrible looking things,” she recalled).²⁴⁹ Perhaps this lenience was because Harris was extraordinarily adept at networking, promotion, and handling the public-facing aspects of her work.²⁵⁰

Harris’s promotion to Superintendent gave her the authority and confidence to pursue new opportunities for the site with gusto. Her ideas came at a dizzying pace. In June of 1951, she put a notice in the *Boston Herald* that they were temporarily opening the Old House’s garden for free to visitors, and keeping it open until 8:00 at night, so that they could enjoy the perennials “at their height of beauty.” She did this, she said, “as a step toward increasing contact with the public,” and it was enormously successful. The event brought people from all around the Boston area to view the flowers. The idea garnered praise from the Region One Regional Director, who complimented Harris on her efforts to raise the public’s interest in the gardens—and, we can assume, in the house as well.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ In a 1985 oral history, Harris recalled that initially, “Yes, I wore a park service uniform. They had a white blouse and a skirt. Mrs. Robert Homans, who was an Adams, came out, and I met her at the door in full uniform. She said, ‘My God, what have they done to you?’ She’d say, ‘Take that thing off and put your clothes on,’ so that I haven’t worn a uniform since then. I decided to obey her, and nobody said anything about it. The uniforms are much more attractive now, but ... [at the time] they were terrible looking things.” Wilhelmina Harris, interview by Polly Welts Kaufman, March 29, 1985, NPS Oral History Collection (HFCA 1817), NPS History Collection, 7.

²⁵⁰ See Resource Management Records, Box 4, Folders 1–3 (ADAM).

²⁵¹ Harris, June 1951 Superintendent’s Monthly Narrative Report; and Regional Director, Region One, to Superintendent, Adams Mansion National Historic Site, July 16, 1951; both in ADAM Resource Management Records Box 4, Folder 22.



Figure 22. Undated clipping from a local newspaper advertising keeping the gardens open late for the public.
Image courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

Harris organized a particularly ambitious event in July 1951, when General Douglas MacArthur and his wife Jean visited the Old House. They came on the personal invitation of Harris, who encouraged him “to visit the mansion as General Lafayette had done in 1824.”²⁵² In 1824, John Adams invited the Marquis de Lafayette to join him in at the Old House, writing, “I pray you to appoint a day when you will do me the honour to pass the day with me in my cottage in our lapidary town of Quincy, with a few of your friends.”²⁵³ Lafayette happily obliged, and the two revolutionaries reunited in the Old House, while excited spectators assembled outside.²⁵⁴ Harris hoped MacArthur’s visit would have the same effect. She also drew on a personal connection to MacArthur in making the invitation. In an article in one of the local newspapers entitled “Old Comrade’s Widow to

²⁵² Harris, July 1951 Superintendent’s Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁵³ John Adams to Marquis de Lafayette, August 22, 1824, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-7912>

²⁵⁴ McCullough, *John Adams*, 637.

Welcome MacArthur,” Harris was described not only as the park’s superintendent, but also “the widow of Col Frank E. Harris, West Point graduate formerly in charge of Boston Harbor fortifications at Fort Banks and an associate of Gen MacArthur during 41 years in the United States Army.”²⁵⁵ Harris saw MacArthur’s visit as an opportunity to bring tremendous publicity and fanfare to the National Historic Site.

MacArthur, in turn, saw the visit as an opportunity for a much-needed public relations boost. President Harry Truman had recently fired MacArthur as commander of the United Nations forces defending South Korea, after the general publicly criticized Truman’s foreign policy and handling of the Korean War. Truman relieved MacArthur of his command on April 11, noting in a public statement that “I have concluded that General of the Army Douglas MacArthur is unable to give his wholehearted support to the policies of the United States Government and of the United Nations in matters pertaining to his official duties.”²⁵⁶ On April 19, MacArthur gave a farewell address to a Joint Meeting of Congress in which he urged the country to take a stronger stand against Communist China in the Korean War. The address became famous for its final lines, in which MacArthur quoted an army ballad: “‘Old soldiers never die—they just fade away.’ And like the old soldier of that ballad, I now close my military career and just fade away—an old soldier who tried to do his duty as God gave him the light to see that duty.”²⁵⁷ In the coming months, rather than fade away, MacArthur traveled the country making public appearances and speeches. This included his well-publicized visit to Quincy.²⁵⁸

MacArthur was certainly cognizant of the political value of a photo op at the Old House. He capitalized on the promise of a warm public reception and the legitimacy bestowed by being welcomed to Quincy’s revered National Historic Site. Many Americans still considered MacArthur an American hero, and this was a prime opportunity for the five-star general to boost his own image in the wake of his firing. MacArthur’s visit also brought significant publicity to the Old House. Visitors began gathering hours in advance of his arrival, and members of the Navy drilled on the grounds of the property before lining up outside the gates of the Old House for crowd control. Harris greeted the MacArthurs outside, and John Iacovelli gave Jean MacArthur a bouquet of flowers from

²⁵⁵ “Old Comrade’s Widow to Welcome MacArthur,” undated newspaper clipping, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, N.D.-1979, Box 1, Folder 6 (ADAM).

²⁵⁶ “Statement and Order by the President on Relieving General MacArthur of His Commands,” April 11, 1951, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, Independence, MO. <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/77/statement-and-order-president-relieving-general-macarthur-his-commands>.

²⁵⁷ Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s “Old Soldiers Never Die” address to Congress, April 19, 1951, Douglas MacArthur Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mcc.034/>.

²⁵⁸ See, for example, “Vast City Turnout Seen for M’Arthur,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1951; “M’Arthur Repeats Ban on Public Life,” *New York Times*, April 28, 1951; “Fear is Our Enemy, M’Arthur Asserts,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1951; “MacArthur Visit Calls for Texas Biggest Welcome,” *Madera Tribune*, June 12, 1951, California Digital Newspaper Collection. <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=MT19510612.2.104&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-----1>

the Old House's garden. The MacArthurs did not tour the house, and stayed outside for the brief event. Nevertheless, the occasion drew substantial publicity in the local newspapers. Harris estimated that approximately 2,000 people showed up to witness their visit. Harris made sure to mention in her monthly NPS report that the event also succeeded in bringing more visitors *into* the Old House: "After the General and his party had gone many people came into the Mansion, and many more visited the garden. By volunteer help from our staff the Mansion remained open for visitors from 9:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. We had more than double the normal paying admissions, with many hundreds more on the grounds."²⁵⁹ There is no archival record of how NPS leadership responded to the visit. If they were at all uneasy about the National Historic Site being used for such political purposes, they did not commit their concerns to paper.



Figure 23. General Douglas MacArthur visiting the Old House, Quincy *Patriot Ledger*, July 26, 1951. Clipping from RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Administrative Files, 1949–1971, NACP.

²⁵⁹ July 1951 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.



Figure 24. Crowds in Quincy welcoming General Douglas MacArthur, Quincy *Patriot Ledger*, July 26, 1951. Clipping from RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Administrative Files, 1949–1971, NACP.

Through these efforts and others, Harris sought to broaden publicity and visitation at Adams Mansion National Historic Site. Her work was paying handsome dividends. In the Historic Site's 1951 Master Plan Development Outline, Harris recorded that in the five years since the park opened to the public, visitation had increased steadily each year. In 1947, there were 6,635 visitors; by 1951, there were 12,720.²⁶⁰

In July 1951, Harris met with members of the Quincy Chamber of Commerce to discuss increasing publicity for the area's historic sites. The group agreed that they should begin by focusing on working with schoolchildren. By September, it looked like this effort was a success, with three times as many school groups visiting the site as in the previous year. That summer, they also welcomed a fairly diverse group of summer campers to the

²⁶⁰ "Master Plan Development Outline, Adams Mansion National Historic Site, Massachusetts: Interpretation," ADAM Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 11.

Old House, including all the children from Quincy's Jewish Community Camp, and thirty-six African American children from the Sunshine Camp in Boston.²⁶¹ By January 1956, Harris decided to "experiment" with illustrated lectures at North Quincy High School to 7th and 12th graders, giving four lectures, three days a week that month. She also wanted to have 4th graders visit the Old House, so that they would be introduced to the Old House and the Adams family in three separate grades. In her mind, the civic value of the Old House remained paramount: "It is my belief that we will eventually have an informed group of citizens in Quincy by this process."²⁶²

The growing number of school groups did start to take their toll on the house and the staff. By June of that same year, Harris's enthusiasm for school groups was waning. Her June 1956 monthly report included a dash of sarcasm, noting: "We had scout, school, and church groups in quantity. 1020 youngsters saw the house and grounds in June. I do not share the view that the benefit they received was equal to the wear they inflicted upon the Old House, but for those who crave group visitation, we can report an excellent showing for June."²⁶³ Nevertheless, she appreciated when students appeared to benefit from and enjoy the house and grounds. For example, in June 1959 she recounted:

We have had interesting groups of Negro children from Richmond and Atlanta, Georgia. These children were very responsive, well mannered, and seemed to get quite a lot from the visit. We also had an unusual group of school children from Roxbury, Massachusetts. Perhaps this group was unusual because the teacher was unusual. She took them for a visit to the meadow and allowed them to explore for wild flowers and finally told them they might run around on the path which circles the meadow. She remarked that they lived in very crowded districts, and she was so glad to seize the opportunity for them to enjoy the open space. It is a pleasure when the teacher really gives the area the time it requires for the children to become oriented.²⁶⁴

At such times, Harris was pleased with the visitation of young guests. They were welcome as long as they displayed what she deemed to be appropriate and respectful behavior.

Collectively, Harris's monthly reports provide a window into her thoughts on the many different visitors to Adams National Historic Site. Her mentions of African American children from Virginia and Georgia, and the "unusual group of school children" from Boston's Roxbury neighborhood, suggest that people of color and people from poor inner-city neighborhoods were infrequent visitors to the Historic Site. It seems unlikely that these visitors would have fallen under her classification of "important visitors." In her

²⁶¹ Harris, August 1951 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁶² Harris, January 1956 Superintendent's Monthly Report.

²⁶³ Harris, June 1956 Superintendent's Monthly Report.

²⁶⁴ Harris, June 1959 Superintendent's Monthly Report.

July 1954 report, she offered this definition: “Important visitors are always difficult for us to report because important to us means visitors with a cultural background sufficient to enjoy and appreciate the Site.” Her staff members, she added, observed that a growing number of “informed Americans” were visiting the site each year.²⁶⁵ Although Harris did not explain what she meant by “cultural background,” it seems likely from the examples provided in her monthly reports that these were predominantly white, educated, and affluent visitors. That Harris made special note of people of color who visited the Site suggests that their visitation was rare and therefore worthy of note in her mind.

There was another important attribute that made someone important in Harris’s view: pre-existing knowledge of the Adamses. In subsequent years, she offered this elaboration: “We have had many distinguished visitors, but by this we do not mean well-known names; to us a distinguished visitor is one who knows and enjoys the Adamses. We have had many of this quality of guest.”²⁶⁶ Harris sometimes expressed frustration with visitors and attendees at her lectures who were unfamiliar, or barely familiar, with the Adamses and the NPS. In recapping several public lectures in December 1955 she remarked, “The adult groups seem extremely interested in the Adams National Historic Site and also seem singularly uninformed about the Area and the Park Service.”²⁶⁷ After several lectures in September 1958, she observed:

It appears that the public generally knows little, if anything, about the National Park Service, and nothing about the Adams National Historic Site. In the question period, the interest seems to be on where the various members of the Adams family were born, and people recall the various rooms with the comment, ‘That furniture wasn’t the original, was it?’

Some visitors’ questions, it seems, withstand the test of time.

Harris used these judgments to size up visitors and make spur-of-the-moment decisions about which version of her tour of the Old House to give. Although the average tour of the house and grounds took 45 minutes, bus groups that were large in size or short on time were given an abbreviated, 25-minute version. Particularly interested visitors were treated to what park staff dubbed her “grand tour,” which only Harris delivered.²⁶⁸ In August 1954, Harris described the visit of the Assistant Secretary of the Interior Lewis: “We drove past the Old North Church and then to Quincy. He seemed so very interested in the Old House that I immediately launched off into what the Tour Leaders term ‘the grand

²⁶⁵ Harris, July 1954 Superintendent’s Monthly Report.

²⁶⁶ Harris, September 1959 Superintendent’s Monthly Report.

²⁶⁷ The talks were to the Quincy Public Library’s Senior Citizens Club, the MIT Faculty Club, and the Daughters of the American Revolution in Marshfield. December 1955 Superintendent’s Monthly Report.

²⁶⁸ “Master Plan Development Outline, Adams Mansion National Historic Site, Massachusetts: Interpretation,” December 1951, ADAM Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 11.

tour.”²⁶⁹ Another time, Harris reported giving a tour to a couple that “seemed very interested, which always inspires a more deluxe tour.”²⁷⁰ Harris estimated that she gave this version to 75 people at most each season, because most tourists were not interested in such detail. “A general impression is what the average visitor wants to have,” she noted.²⁷¹

Nurturing Ties with the Adams Memorial Society

Harris picked up where Corry left off in fostering a close relationship with the Adams Memorial Society members. Soon after she began working at the Site, on June 14, 1948, Harris treated twenty-five members of the Society representing three generations of Adams descendants to a private showing of the Old House. Edwin Small seemed somewhat surprised by their “general satisfaction” with the state of the property: “Far from expecting vast developments and changes, senior members of the family expressed the hope that the Mansion and Garden might continue to be kept in as good condition as they are at present.”²⁷² Harris kept in touch with members of the family, and many—above all, Harry Adams—continued to pop in regularly at the Old House. Harris was always there to welcome them with open arms and news of improvements to the property.

Harris’s goodwill gestures produced many important donations of family artifacts for the Historic Site. One early offer came from Harry Adams, on behalf of the Adams family, to donate the family’s collection of manuscripts. Park Service leadership politely declined, saying that they were not in a position—nor was it within their scope—to properly preserve and maintain the collection. Small followed up with a visit to Harry Adams at his Boston office to further explain the Park Service’s decision.²⁷³ Apparently, there were no hard feelings, and in a few years the family would donate the collection to the MHS in Boston instead. It is clear, however, that by this point the Adamses were starting to move beyond their early mantra of “Nothing removed—nothing brought in” to the Old House.

Other family donations that were more in keeping with the Site’s mission were graciously accepted. Some were objects that the family had removed from the property before turning it over to the NPS. They had apparently been holding them until the NPS staff demonstrated that they would be responsible stewards of the family’s heritage. With Harris back at the Old House, that time had come.

²⁶⁹ Harris, August 1954 Superintendent’s Monthly Report.

²⁷⁰ Harris, May 1959 Superintendent’s Monthly Report.

²⁷¹ Wilhelmina S. Harris to Regional Director, Region Five, “MISSION 66,” September 7, 1955, ADAM Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 13.

²⁷² Harris, June 1948 Superintendent’s Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁷³ Harris, January 1950 Superintendent’s Monthly Narrative Report.

In March 1950, murmurs of an important donation made their way to Small and Harris. They learned that at the Adams Memorial Society's March 20 meeting in Boston, the members discussed returning "certain important family portraits and other items which were reserved when the Mansion was donated to the Government in 1946."²⁷⁴ The nature of this donation became clear in May, when the Society offered to return three important portraits to the Old House: a portrait of Edward Boylston, and two Edward Savage portraits of George and Martha Washington. The Savage portraits had long hung in the dining room of the Old House, from John and Abigail Adams' time in residence until right before the property was turned over to the NPS. The NPS enthusiastically accepted the Society's offer. Small noted that "This offer represents the first of several worthwhile objects that may eventually be returned by the Society and individual members of the family to enrich further the association values of the Mansion."²⁷⁵

On June 8, a large contingent of Adams family members gathered at the Old House to celebrate the portraits' return. Small noted that the family was "afterwards invited to have supper on the lawn through the kind hospitality of Mrs. Wilhelmina S. Harris, Historical Aid in Charge, to whom full credit for the success of the occasion is due."²⁷⁶ The success of this event no doubt helped cement Small's belief in Harris's ability to not only lead the Historic Site, but also manage the Site's relationship with the Adams descendants. Her promotion to Superintendent came only a few months later.

²⁷⁴ Harris, March 1950 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁷⁵ Harris, May 1950 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁷⁶ Harris, June 1950 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.



Figure 25. The three portraits returned to the Old House's Dining Room in 1950 by the Adams Memorial Society.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

A Farewell to Henry Adams II

The next year, Adams Mansion National Historic Site lost one of its key champions with the passing of Henry Adams II, who died on April 26, 1951 in Concord at the age of 76. Adams' twin brother, John Adams, called Harris and asked if the Old House could be used for the funeral, and Harris agreed gladly. The funeral was held in the Long Room, and drew family, friends, and local dignitaries, including Quincy Mayor Thomas S. Burgin, City Manager William J. Deegan, Jr., Quincy Historical Society president N. Gorham Nickerson, Quincy historian William C. Edwards, and others.²⁷⁷ Harris put a small bouquet of violets from the garden in his casket as a parting gift from the Old House, so "that his body might not leave the house for the last time without taking a token of the place for which he cared so much." Harris recorded his passing:

²⁷⁷ "Services Held For Henry Adams At Family Mansion," Quincy *Patriot Ledger*, April 30, 1951, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, N.D.-1979, Box 1, Folder 6, ADAM.

For members of the staff of the Mansion this occasion was a sad one. Mr. Adams was faithful in his devotion to the Mansion. He gave of his time and interest without reservation. He was warm in his appreciation of the Park Service, and he was considerate and courteous to all of the employees. We shall miss his visits. We are genuinely sorry that we will not again be privileged to hear him say upon leaving, 'If I can be of any help at any time, just let me know.'

The Old House once again had lost one of its most dedicated champions, and it was unclear which Adams descendants might fill that void. Harry Adams' passing also seems to have spurred family members to speed the pace of donations to the NPS. The next day, Abigail Homans gave an indefinite loan of a portrait of Nathaniel Gorham, the president of the Continental Congress in 1786.²⁷⁸ In the coming months, family donations continued to stream in.

In the years after Harry Adams's death, Harris noticed that "The interest of this new generation of the Adams Family is increasing."²⁷⁹ In a memorandum to the Regional Director, she indicated that the members of the Adams Memorial Society were considering making a \$60,000 gift to the Old House, and also that they requested that a room in the servant's ell be used to display objects donated by Harry Adams's estate. The room was currently being used by NPS staff as office space, but Harris happily obliged. "In view of this magnificent cooperation" she wrote, "I feel it would be well if they were allowed to do what they care to in preparing the display of these objects."²⁸⁰

The resulting room, referred to as the "Adams Memorial Room," included a cabinet designed and carved with an oak leaf and acorn design by Mary Ogden Abbott. The cabinet displayed several family heirlooms, including Louisa Catherine Adams's silver tea service, John Adams's gold watch, and Abigail Adams's father's silver tankard.²⁸¹ The Adams Memorial Society continued to have some influence over how and where objects were displayed, and were content with changes being made in the Old House as long as they had some say in the process. Harris seems to have made a calculation that by giving the family leeway to shape the interpretation and display of family objects, they would continue to donate their treasured family heirlooms.

²⁷⁸ Harris, April 1951 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report. This portrait was ultimately donated to the Park.

²⁷⁹ Harris, January 1952 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁸⁰ Wilhelmina S. Harris to Regional Director, Region One, "Suggestion from AMS," January 24, 1952, Resource Management Records, Box 3, Folder 10 (ADAM).

²⁸¹ Harris, June 1952 and Harris, April 1953 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Reports.



Figure 26. The Adams Memorial Room in the Old House.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.



Figure 27. The Adams Memorial Room in the Old House.

Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

Harris's calculation paid off. Donations again picked up after the death of Charles Francis Adams III in June 1954, when some items from his estate were distributed to the NPS. In November of that year, Mary Ogden Abbott worked with Harris to incorporate some new family memorabilia, and Abbott and the Adams Memorial Society arranged to have a servants' room on the third floor of the house painted so that it could be displayed to visitors.²⁸² In the process, Abbott picked up where Harry Adams had left off. She remained intensely committed and attentive to progress at the Site, offering constant advice about the arrangement of furniture and the interpretive program, and often paid for work on the Old House.²⁸³ There were also several more rounds of donations to the park in the

²⁸² Harris, November 1954 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁸³ December 1954 and Harris, January 1955 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Reports.

coming years, which delighted Harris. In her October 1956 monthly report, she enthused: “There seems to be no end to the things kept and cherished by the descendants of John Adams.”²⁸⁴

Wilhelmina Harris was the Adams family’s greatest champion, and the Old House’s fiercest protector. Her return to the Old House, and her promotion to Superintendent of Adams Mansion National Historic Site in 1950, had an incalculable impact on the Park in its formative decades. A self-styled defender against progress, she would push back against any NPS efforts to modernize the Park in the coming decades. She also worked tirelessly to curate and interpret the home and its collections in a way that reflected Brooks Adams’s early vision for the Old House as a memorial to four generations of Adamses. As a bridge between the fourth generation of Adamses and the Old House’s new life as an NPS unit, and a close family confidante, Harris confidently asserted her authority in making these decisions. This was no small feat at a time when the nearly all-male NPS leadership was developing new methods of interpretation and historic home preservation that were often at odds with Harris’s approach.

²⁸⁴ See Harris, October 1956 Superintendent’s Monthly Narrative Report. Additional donations from the family during these years included: a portrait of Charles Francis Adams painted by William Morris Hunt, the original seals that John Adams used to sign the Treaty of Paris in 1783, and a Highboy used by John Adams (donated in August 1956); as well as additional objects donated and loaned in October 1956 and May 1957.

CHAPTER FOUR

MATTERS OF INTERPRETATION, 1949–1959

By the early 1950s, Adams Mansion National Historic Site enjoyed the stability of a new Superintendent, Wilhelmina Harris, who was deeply invested in the Old House. It also benefitted from the confidence of members of the Adams Memorial Society, who placed their full trust in Harris's decisions. These developments opened up space to consider issues beyond the stability and preservation of the house. How to protect the Old House's boundaries and viewshed, interpret the Old House, the historical narratives conveyed to visitors, the kinds of events that would be held there, and even the name of the site were all up for debate. The site's various stakeholders—above all, the NPS's historians, Superintendent Wilhelmina Harris, and the members of the Adams Memorial Society—often had conflicting perspectives on these matters.

Development Threats and Boundary Changes

Not long after Adams Mansion National Historic Site was established, NPS staff were forced to confront questions about urban development in Quincy and its potential impact on the site. The dramatic late-nineteenth century development around the Adams birthplaces was never far from their minds, and they were eager to prevent the same thing from happening around the Old House.²⁸⁵ This was no easy task in a rapidly growing city. From the beginning, park staff were dogged by issues regarding property boundaries, eminent domain, and the preservation of the Site's open space and viewshed. Wilhelmina Harris's status as not only park superintendent, but also Quincy resident, homeowner, neighbor, and Adams confidante was undoubtedly an advantage in the park's formative years. She was always in the loop about city development plans, actively participated in community meetings, stayed in close contact with the Adams Memorial Society, and was doubly invested in preserving the character of the neighborhood surrounding the Old House.

²⁸⁵ Katharine Lacy, *Cultural Landscape Report: Adams National Historic Site, Quincy, Massachusetts, Illustrated Site Chronology*, Cultural Landscape Publication 13 (Boston, MA: Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, National Park Service, 1997), 72–83.



Figure 28. Adams Street to the Southeast of the Old House. Photograph by Abbie Rowe, September 1946. US National Archives Collections, National Archives Identifier 51460221.

Quincy's population continued to grow in the decades after World War II, with more than 87,000 people by 1960.²⁸⁶ The city's shipbuilding industry was in decline, but other commercial properties and manufacturing plants were moving in, and it was being reshaped by improved highway and rail transportation networks between Boston and Quincy.²⁸⁷ These changes were welcomed by many local residents, but it also put open space—including the land surrounding the Old House—at a premium.

One of the earliest signs that the city's development might encroach upon the Historic Site came in January 1949. That month, Coordinating Superintendent Edwin Small recorded that Harris received "a disturbing report" that the City was seeking to acquire the neighboring Beale property by eminent domain to build a public school and playground. The Beale estate had once been home to three generations of the locally prominent Beale family, and included a late Georgian/early federal style home and a

²⁸⁶ Marilyn S. Johnson, *The New Bostonians: How Immigrants Have Transformed the Metro Area since the 1960s* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 96–97.

²⁸⁷ These postwar changes are well-documented in Kirsten Holder's *Cultural Landscape Report for Adams Birthplaces, Adams National Historical Park* (Boston: National Park Service, 2014), 97.

carriage house. By this time, it was owned by three women doctors (Merry E. Pittman, Dorothy K. Schiedell, and Esther E. Bartlett) who used the house as a home and office space.²⁸⁸ The Beale property abutted the Historic Site on the western edge, and provided an important buffer to the Old House’s viewshed in that direction. Small noted that “Resistance to the plan from all private property holders in the vicinity”—undoubtedly including Harris, who lived across the street—“has been instantaneous.” In response, the school board quickly began reviewing “alternative locations that are less objectionable both from the standpoint of the Site and private owners.” The next month, Small met with the Quincy Chamber of Commerce’s Publicity Committee to discuss the plan. He reported that the group was fairly confident that the school board had backed off the plan for good.²⁸⁹

It was a momentary reprieve, and just the first of several scares the park would face related to the Beale property. NPS leaders quickly realized that this would be an ongoing issue. In February, Regional Director Thomas J. Allen wrote to Edwin Small and suggested that Small reach out to the Beale Estate’s current owners:

I make the assumption, although it may not be warranted by the facts, that Drs. Pittman, Bartlett, and Scheidell all are maiden ladies and do not have any direct heirs. Should this be the case, it might be advisable to explore their views as to ultimate disposition of the property in question.

[...]

Should the present owners decide to work out an agreement with the National Park Service by which the property would be deeded to the Federal government for use in connection with administering the Adams Mansion National Historic Site on their death, reserving a life interest in the meantime, it might be desirable to encourage such a plan.²⁹⁰

Allen saw an opportunity for the federal government to eventually acquire the property from the three doctors. He also recognized that the Beale Estate’s desirability as both a blank canvas for potential city development and, conversely, as a buffer of open space around the Old House, ensured that its fate would be a recurring worry for park staff. Although it took a few decades to come to fruition, Allen’s plan was precisely the approach that the NPS took to acquire the property.

²⁸⁸ Details about the Beale house’s ownership are from Maureen K. Phillips, *Beale House Historic Structure Report, Adams National Historic Site* (Boston: Cultural Resources Center, Building Conservation Branch, National Park Service North Atlantic Region, 1993 draft), 26.

²⁸⁹ Edwin W. Small, January and February 1949 Monthly Narrative Reports.

²⁹⁰ Thomas J. Allen, “Memorandum for the Superintendent, Salem Maritime National Historic Site,” February 2, 1949, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 12 (ADAM).

Ongoing concerns about the park's boundaries spurred the NPS to preserve what land it could around the Old House. The same year, in October 1949, Coordinating Superintendent Small met with the Metropolitan District Commission in Boston to discuss the possibility of transferring to the NPS a piece of the Commission's property on the Historic Site's northern boundary where it met Furnace Brook Parkway.²⁹¹ In the coming months, Small and Harris worked closely with the Commission to bring the plan to fruition. The Park Service formally petitioned the Metropolitan District Commission to convey this strip of land to the federal government, which, they argued, was "needed to round out a natural boundary on Furnace Brook."²⁹² The Commission ruled that they could not deed the property to the federal government; it would either require an act of the Massachusetts Legislature, or the federal government to pay the actual value of the property (it had sought to purchase the land for one dollar).²⁹³ The Metropolitan District Commission Engineering Office drew up a plan for the property's transfer to accompany the request to the Massachusetts Legislature, and on January 17, 1951, Senator Charles W. Hedges formally requested that the Massachusetts Legislature Committee on Metropolitan Affairs transfer the tract of land to the federal government.²⁹⁴ Harris gave a presentation briefly outlining why the strip of land should be made part of the National Historic Site, and the Metropolitan District Commissioner, William T. Morrissey, made no objections. It was finally approved, and on November 26, 1952, the Acting Secretary of the Interior gave an order designating the additional .72 acres as part of the Site.²⁹⁵

In 1952, concerns increasingly shifted to the Site's southern boundary, Adams Street, where Harris became preoccupied with the city's proposed plan to widen Adams Street and turn it into a major traffic thoroughfare. NPS officials worried that the change would impact the boundaries of the Historic Site, and that the resulting heavy traffic could threaten the Old House's structural integrity.²⁹⁶ Harris again mobilized her connections as both Superintendent and neighboring homeowner to rally against the plans. In January, she reported:

²⁹¹ Small, October 1949 Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁹² Small, January 1950 Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁹³ Small, May 1950 Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁹⁴ See Small, July, September, October, and November 1950 Monthly Narrative Reports.

²⁹⁵ See Harris, 1951 Monthly Narrative Report. See also undated 1951 *Patriot Ledger* clipping, "Legislature Asked to Allow MDC To Cede Land For Adams Site," and "Adams Memorial Gets More Land," unidentified newspaper, March 12, 1951, both in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, N.D.-1979, Box 1, Folder 6, (ADAM). Katharine Lacy, *Cultural Landscape Report: Adams National Historic Site, Quincy, Massachusetts* (Boston: National Park Service, 1997), 63.

²⁹⁶ See, for example, Elbert Cox, Regional Director, to Superintendent, Adams Mansion National Historic Site, "Widening of Adams Street," January 16, 1952, Resource Management Records, Box 3, Folder 2 (ADAM), and other letters in this folder pertaining to the street-widening proposal. See also NPS Director's annual report, 1952, p. 360. <https://archive.org/details/annualreportofdi5254nati/page/n11>

The proposed widening of Adams Street took more and more of a realistic form. Surveyors for the Commonwealth have been working on the street. The Superintendent did public contact work most of the month on this project. The result to date is that everyone in public office denies he initiated the idea. While that is purely academic we do interpret it to mean that the idea has not met with the response that was expected. The only hope to defeat it lies with the Quincy City Council when they meet to vote on land taking. There is some talk that a corner of the Mansion Grounds should be included in this land taking.²⁹⁷

She kept up the pressure for several months, organizing members of the homeowner-led Adams Street Association, creating a petition against the proposal, attending meetings on behalf of the Historic Site, and drawing in new allies whenever possible. Other staff members even joined in to help with the petitioning: summer employee Marjorie Cole and gardener John Iacovelli worked after hours to collect signatures.²⁹⁸ (Whether they did this out of their own concerns for the property, or were cajoled into it by Harris is unknown.) Secretary of the Interior Oscar L. Chapman wrote directly to Massachusetts Governor Paul A. Dever and Quincy City Manager William J. Deegan, Jr., to express his concern about the plans.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ Harris, January 1952 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

²⁹⁸ Wilhelmina S. Harris to Regional Director, Region One, "Widening of Adams Street, Adams Mansion National Historic Site," February 9, 1952, Resource Management Records, Box 3, Folder 2 (ADAM).

²⁹⁹ Oscar L. Chapman to William J. Deegan, Jr., March 4, 1952, and Oscar L. Chapman to Paul A. Dever, March 4, 1952; both in Resource Management Records, Box 3, Folder 2 (ADAM).



Figure 29. Adams Street outside Adams National Historical Park in 1946, taken by Department of Interior Photographer Abbie Rowe. US National Archives Collections, National Archives Identifier 51460214.

In March, Harris hosted a meeting at her home with Adams Street Association members and engineers working on the project to review the street-widening plans. In Harris's telling, the Adams Street residents were outraged. In a memorandum to the Region One Director, she quoted the President of the Barbour Welting Company, Perley Barbour, as saying, "This is the most nefarious project I ever saw. You will destroy a section of the City to use up public money."³⁰⁰ Harris reported that the reaction was "unanimous" among the street's residents. She concluded by saying that although state officials "are anxious to preserve the setting," "our main difficulty seems to be locally." Whether she believed the difficulty was local officials, or public support more broadly, is unclear.

The Quincy City Council held a public hearing on the widening of Adams Street on May 13, 1952 that drew a number of interested parties. Edward Zimmer, the Assistant Regional Director of Region One represented the NPS at the meeting. He made an official statement on behalf of the NPS, asserting that widening Adams Street would "immeasurably and adversely affect public appreciation of this national shrine." His statement further

³⁰⁰ Harris to Regional Director, Region One, March 19, 1952, Resource Management Records, Box 3, Folder 1 (ADAM).

cited concerns about the removal of trees across from the site which “would alone harmfully change the setting of the old house,” and about the potential for structural damage from the vibrations caused by increased traffic. In short, the NPS had both structural and aesthetic concerns about the proposed plans.³⁰¹

In her monthly reports, Harris described the intense behind-the-scenes organizing underway: “Much underground work had been done by the Adams Street Association, various societies interested in the preservation of historic places, by the Advisory Board of the NPS, and by the Secretary of the Interior.”³⁰² (Of course, Harris was likely the principal organizer and driving force behind the Adams Street Association.) The Council voted to set aside the project and draw up new plans that would largely keep the present street width intact. Zimmer reported to the Regional Director that he was well-received by the local politicians, who “were impressed that the NPS considered the proposed Adams Street widening so disastrous that a representative was sent all the way from Richmond to oppose the project.” The project was not dead, however. In the coming months, the plan was repeatedly revived and thrown out again, and other development schemes always seemed to be waiting in the wings.³⁰³ The question of how to best preserve the boundaries around the Old House, and its pastoral landscape, would plague management and staff for decades to come.

Mansion or Farmhouse? Renaming the Historic Site

The next question facing the site was a more ambiguous one: was the Old House a mansion, or a farmhouse? The answer was open to interpretation. On February 14, 1952, Thomas Boylston Adams wrote to NPS Director Newton Drury to discuss the name of Adams Mansion National Historic Site. His letter read in part:

As a member of the Adams family which gave the old family house in Quincy to the government in 1946, I have a continuing interest in this National Historic Site. I would like to call your attention to the fact that the house is misnamed the “Adams Mansion.” The house has always been known as the ‘Old House’ by the family. This appellation goes back at least 100 years; and I think if I went into the family manuscripts I could prove that it was so called as far back as 1800. . . . I feel that the name, “Adams Mansion” is most inappropriate.

³⁰¹ “Statement of the National Park Service to the City Council of Quincy, Massachusetts,” May 13, 1952, Resource Management Records, Box 3, Folder 1 (ADAM).

³⁰² Harris, April 1952 and Harris, May 1952 Superintendent’s Monthly Narrative Reports.

³⁰³ Edward S. Zimmer, Assistant Regional Director, to Regional Director, Region One, “Adams Street Widening,” May 22, 1952, Resource Management Records, Box 3, Folder 1 (ADAM). See also Harris, June 1952 Superintendent’s Monthly Narrative Report.

“Mansion” indicates an establishment of size and grandeur far beyond the means of most of the members of the family who ever lived in it. Compared to the real Mansion of Colonial Days, it is little better than a farmhouse.

He concluded: “May I suggest to you that you seriously consider correcting this misnomer and restore the proper name to the old place—‘The Old House,’ and call it if you will, ‘Home for 140 years of the Adams Family.’”³⁰⁴ Mary Ogden Abbott concurred. A month later, she wrote in support of Thomas Boylston Adams’s request, stressing that the name “has always not only offended me but actually embarrassed me. I never heard the family call it so and I can never refer to it by that name without feeling pretentious and silly.”³⁰⁵

Were the Adams descendants’ assertions accurate? Although generations of Adamses had referred to the home as the “Old House,” Charles Francis Adams Sr. referred to it as a “mansion” more than once in his diary.³⁰⁶ He was of course responsible for some of the additions to the Old House and property that made it even more expansive and mansion-like, including the construction of the Stone Library and Carriage House. Henry (Harry) Adams II used “Old House,” “Adams Mansion,” and “Old Mansion” interchangeably in his correspondence and his diary, as well as using the term in an article for the *Bulletin of the SPNEA*.³⁰⁷ And perhaps most glaringly, the Adams Memorial Society’s own information cards for the historic house before it was a National Historic Site used the name “Adams Mansion” in advertising (see figure 11). The term “mansion” was clearly one of many names the Adams family used to describe the home. For his part, the NPS’s Edwin Small felt no particular attachment to the name. In a March 1952 memorandum, he said “we had no part in the designation of the Site by the present title in 1946, nor do we have any occasion to defend the choice of a title that was made at that time. Nevertheless, we feel that the use of the term ‘Adams Mansion’ was a plausible and logical one for the Service to adopt.”³⁰⁸

This might seem like an odd point of contention for the Adams descendants, but it was not merely a matter of semantics for Thomas Boylston Adams and Mary Ogden Abbott. As two of the family’s primary stewards of the Adams legacy and public image in the postwar decades, the Historic Site’s name was of genuine concern to them. The Adamses were once again about to be in the spotlight: the Adams Manuscript Trust came to

³⁰⁴ Thomas Boylston Adams to Newton B. Drury, February 14, 1952, Resource Management Records, Box 5, Folder 1 (ADAM).

³⁰⁵ Mary Ogden Abbott to Newton B. Drury, March 15, 1952, Resource Management Files, Box 1, Folder 2 (ADAM).

³⁰⁶ Diary passages referring to the Old House as a mansion are quoted in Marc Friedlaender, “Brooks Adams ‘En Famille,’” 78–79.

³⁰⁷ Freiberg, “From Family to Nation,” 61.

³⁰⁸ Small to Coordinating Superintendent, Adams Mansion National Historic Site, “Changing name of ‘Adams Mansion National Historic Site,’” March 7, 1952, Resource Management Files, Box 1, Folder 8 (ADAM). Malcolm Freiberg also discusses this name change in Freiberg, “From Family to Nation,” 61n1, 76.

an agreement with the MHS in 1954 to release and microfilm the Adams Papers. (Boylston Adams would also serve as president of the MHS from 1957 to 1975.) Considered in this light, the name change request suggests that the Adamses were once again mindful of their image with the impending publicity from the release of the family's papers. The family, like Wilhelmina Harris, was eager to present earlier generations of Adamses as fiery, yet humble New England patriots.³⁰⁹ These regional distinctions were likely intended to draw a contrast between the Adamses and early Presidents from the South like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson; the latter's papers were also preserved in part at the MHS. Thomas Boylston Adams likely sought to underscore this difference, and subtly influence public perception of the Adams family, past and present.³¹⁰ In image-management terms, the Adams descendants found a farmhouse much more appealing than a mansion.

The Park Service complied with the family's request. They toyed with a few rather clunky possibilities including "Adams Home National Historic Site," and "Home of Adams Family National Historic Site," and "Old House, Homestead of the Adams Family." Wilhelmina Harris sent these options to the Adams family for their input. On November 25, 1952, the Park Service's decision was made through a Secretarial Order, which dropped "Mansion" from the name. It would now be known as Adams National Historic Site.³¹¹

This would not be the final name change for the Site; it would change to Adams National Historical Park in 1998. By taking the word "Mansion" out of the name, however, subsequent additions to the park were more easily justified, including the acquisition of the John Adams and John Quincy Adams birthplaces in 1979.³¹² Importantly, the change also underscores the fact that there was little daylight between the family's wishes and Harris's wishes when it came to how the Adams family story was interpreted at the Old House.

³⁰⁹ It should also be noted that this portrayal of the family was particularly important for Boylston Adams—Lawrence Gall, who worked as a historian at the Site in the 1970s, described Adams as a "sort of Lincoln farmer Adams," who would come to AMS meetings in the 1970s in "an aging VW station wagon and I swear the only thing keeping the fenders on were 'Tom Adams for Congress' stickers." Boylston Adams ran for congress in 1966 as a Democrat on an anti-war platform. The distinction may have been less important for Charles Francis Adams IV, who was on "the republican side" of the family: "conservative, buttoned up, just the sort of wealthy old Yankee stock that you would imagine," who would come to meetings in his green Bentley, "impeccably dressed." Lawrence Gall, interview with Laura Miller, September 13, 2019.

³¹⁰ Thank you to Sara Georgini, Series Editor of the Papers of John Adams at the MHS, for her help in thinking through why this name change was important to the Adams family. For more information about the Thomas Jefferson Papers at MHS, see the online description here: <https://www.masshist.org/thomasjeffersonpapers/about/>.

³¹¹ E. W. Lisle to Superintendent, Adams Mansion National Historic Site, "Changing name of 'Adams Mansion' National Historic Site," March 4, 1952, Resource Management Records, Box 1, Folder 8, (ADAM); Hillory A. Tolson, memorandum, "Name Change of Adams Mansion National Historic Site," February 2, 1953, Resource Management Records, Box 1, Folder 8 (ADAM); Regional Director to The Director, March 12, 1952, "Changing name of 'Adams Mansion' National Historic Site," Resource Management Records, Box 1, Folder 8 (ADAM). See also "The Old House Becomes a National Historic Site," *Patriot Ledger*, December 18, 1952.

³¹² Freiberg, "From Family to Nation," 76.

The “Adams Story” Versus the “Park Story”

The debate over the Historic Site’s name underscored a larger issue lurking just beneath the surface. In the absence of a strong historical research program, or even a park historian for that matter, most of the knowledge about the history of the Old House and its contents came from Wilhelmina Harris’s recollections and the recollections of members of the Adams Memorial Society. As we have seen, Harris and the family regularly worked hand-in-hand on various aspects of interpretation and display of family artifacts. Harris also had a particular story that she wanted to tell about the four generations of Adamses who lived in the Old House. Perhaps this was out of a sense of loyalty to Brooks Adams, who Harris saw not only as her onetime employer, but also her mentor and teacher. As current Superintendent Marianne Peak described it, Harris “was never one to talk about any imperfections in the Adams family.” In her eyes, “There were none.” As Superintendent, Peak said, Harris became “the teacher that Brooks Adams was to her,” imparting her knowledge of the Adams family to visitors.³¹³

The interpretive section of the site’s 1951 Master Plan Development Outline gives us a glimpse into the sources Harris relied on for interpretation. The first source she listed was Henry (Harry) Adams II’s 1935 history of the Old House; this was followed by Anne Royall’s *Sketches of History* (1824) and *The Black Book* (1828); two secondary sources edited by M. A. DeWolfe Howe, *Figures of the Past* (1926) and *The Articulate Sisters* (1946); and letters from Brooks Adams to Henry Adams at Harvard University’s Houghton Library. The final two sources Harris listed were “Inventory compiled in 1911 by Brooks Adams,” and “Personal recollections of the Superintendent during her occupancy of the Mansion 1920–1927.”³¹⁴ With the exception of the unspecified letters from Brooks Adams to his brother Henry, the remainder of the source material was secondary literature, and recollections of the home and its contents from Harris and Harry Adams. Their recollections *were* valuable historical knowledge, but this was not a robust foundation for the documentation and interpretation of the home.

Although NPS leadership at the regional and national level were pleased with much of the progress at Adams National Historic Site, it is unsurprising that they became concerned with Harris’s interpretive approach and the sources it relied on. In the postwar period, the NPS experienced what historian Seth Bruggeman has described as “a veritable interpretive renaissance.” The agency’s renewed and expanded attention to interpretation

³¹³ Marianne Peak, phone interview with Laura Miller, January 24, 2020.

³¹⁴ “Master Plan Development Outline, Adams Mansion National Historic Site, Massachusetts: Interpretation,” December 1951, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 11 (ADAM).

was spurred on by Freeman Tilden's influential 1957 book, *Interpreting Our Heritage*.³¹⁵ In the coming years, the NPS dramatically expanded its interpretive training efforts. Harris's approach, by contrast, harked back to an earlier era of historic house interpretation.

Regional Director Elbert Cox first tentatively broached the issue in July 1954. Cox wrote to Harris to "air a couple of things that have concerned me for some time." First, he began with flattery. He noted that the NPS recognized Harris's invaluable knowledge of the property and of later generations of Adamses. He wondered if she would consider committing her memories to paper or audio recording, and added that interviews with members of the Adams family would also be welcome. "Details, incidents relative to every object, every piece of furniture, need to be set down for the record. Details as to 'living' at the Old House, too. Legends, even." Cox then turned to the state of historical research on the Old House and its property. Beyond Harris's memories, he noted, there was a need for scholarly research about the Old House, and he suggested that perhaps a graduate history student at Harvard might be interested in writing about the history of the site.³¹⁶ In her reply, Harris noted that she had been writing down her memories of the Old House and Brooks Adams, but that her sons had read her writing and "felt that it left much to be desired in sentence structure and general literary attainment." ("Further effort was slowed up while I recovered from this frank appraisal," she joked.) But she intended to continue on with the project, and also suggested that Cox write to a young Harvard graduate student from New York, Martin Duberman, who was her son's roommate. She thought that Duberman might be interested in conducting research on the Old House, and she indicated an openness to generating more research on the property to strengthen the Historic Site's interpretation.³¹⁷

The next month, NPS discussions about interpretation at Adams National Historic Site were in full swing. But the focus of those discussions began with the question of whether interpretation would be improved through the creation of a museum at the site to exhibit and preserve the home's priceless historic objects (and any potential future acquisitions from the family). Harris seems to have supported the idea, at least initially. The Chief of the Museum Branch, Ralph H. Lewis, advised restraint, suggesting that the NPS should first conduct a study of the interpretive needs of the site to determine whether a museum would

³¹⁵ Seth C. Bruggeman, *Here, George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 179. See Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 4th ed., edited by R. Bruce Craig (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

³¹⁶ Elbert Cox to Wilhelmina Harris, Memorandum, "Research and writing on the Adams Mansion and Family," July 27, 1954, Resource Management Records, Box 9, Folder 10 (ADAM).

³¹⁷ Wilhelmina Harris to Elbert Cox, Memorandum, "Research and writing on the Adams Site and Family," July 31, 1954, Resource Management Records, Box 9, Folder 10 (ADAM). Duberman did not end up working for the NPS on this project. But he did, of course, go on to research and write about the Adamses, and has had a very distinguished career as a historian. He earned his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1957, and published a Bancroft Prize-winning biography, *Charles Francis Adams*, in 1961, and has written more than 20 books on topics from ranging from Charles Francis Adams to Paul Robeson, Lincoln Kirstein, and the Stonewall Riots, among many others.

in fact be an asset.³¹⁸ Regional Director Elbert Cox suggested Historian Herbert Olsen, from Saratoga National Historical Park, for the temporary assignment. Olsen was given the job in January 1955.

Olsen's report, "A Report on Museum Materials at Adams National Historic Site," wasted little time in shooting down the idea of a museum:

Can it be said . . . that those materials and possessions which can not now be adequately displayed in the Old House or which may one day be acquired are, *per se*, of greater significance and value and deserving of more adequate care and protection than that which is or should be given to the Old House and its furnishings? . . . it hardly seems possible to justify the building of a fireproof structure solely to house what, with the exception of some unacquired portraits and a few other items, is essentially a rather meagre collection of memorabilia.³¹⁹

Moreover, Olsen continued, the "lack of basic research at the Site" made it extremely difficult to evaluate the significance of any of these historic objects. This brought him to an even larger question. "The absence of basic research raises an important question in the writer's mind: What is the 'park story?'" Should the narrative focus on the history of the Adams family members "in the political, diplomatic, literary, and intellectual history of the nation?"

Or is the "park story" the more *unique* one of the lives of the Adamses *at the Old House and in Quincy*, to which should be added only the barest of details of the "Adams story" necessary for the visitor to place the Adamses in proper historical perspective?

Olsen came down on the side of the latter, seeing this as the narrative that the Park Service was best positioned to present to the public: "this is a story which the Service *alone* has to tell and can tell effectively." He argued that it was not the Adams story *per se*, but the Adams story *in context* that made the site compelling to visitors. That four generations of Adamses walked the floorboards of the home, shared the same views of the surrounding landscape, and participated in Quincy's (and earlier, Braintree's) civic life was as important as the objects contained in the Old House. Without in-depth historical research, however, this more intimate and local story could not be told effectively.³²⁰ He noted that Lyman Butterfield's historical research and his work as editor of the Adams Papers *would* make an essential contribution to telling this history, but it alone would not suffice. Before a muse-

³¹⁸ Chief of Museum Branch Ralph H. Lewis to Chief of Interpretation, August 12, 1954. Box 1192, Folder D6215, RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Administrative Files, 1949–1971, NACP.

³¹⁹ Herbert Olsen, "A Report on Museum Materials at Adams National Historic Site," May 17, 1955, Box 1192, Folder D6215, RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Administrative Files, 1949–1971, NACP.

³²⁰ Herbert Olsen, "A Report on Museum Materials at Adams National Historic Site," May 17, 1955, Box 1192, Folder D6215, RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Administrative Files, 1949–1971, NACP.

um could even be considered, the Park needed this basic historical research to help shape its interpretation.

Harris responded with an unfailingly polite letter (calling his report “very sincere and intelligent”), but she clearly took umbrage with much of it. She was particularly frustrated by his assertion that the Old House contained a “rather meagre collection of memorabilia.” She was a student of Brooks Adams, after all, and Brooks regarded the collection as “one of the most valuable and curious, if not the most valuable and curious, in the world.” John Adams’s coat buttons and Abigail’s curling irons may not have had “world shaking significance,” she wrote, but “to me they indicate that the Adams family was not unlike any other family. . . . They were pleased with the simple things.” Like Thomas Boylston Adams, she articulated a vision of the home that she would return to time and time again—it was “an informal country place,” and this was part of its appeal to the public. That being said, Harris argued that visitors to the Old House preferred that this simple country home be connected to the larger “Adams story” (in Olsen’s words):

for example, on some occasions when a visitor is looking at the portraits of George and Martha Washington I say that the paintings are not here because John Adams had any great fondness for Art but that these portraits for which he paid “forty six and two thirds dollars” indicated the esteem in which he held Washington. It recalls the confidence he had in Washington when he nominated him for Commander in Chief of the Continental Army.

This was, of course, a compelling example. She suggested that the “Park Story,” by contrast, was limited because “this was the spot where the Adamses went to enjoy family life, and be free of all burdens of public service.”³²¹ Importantly, Harris left unstated that there was a dearth of historical research about the Old House and the time the Adamses spent there. With such an intense focus on the Park’s collections, much of the “Park Story” that Olsen was advocating for was yet unknown.

Shortly after Olsen submitted his report on May 17, 1955, NPS Historian Frank Barnes made his own visit to the historic site. Barnes echoed many of Olsen’s sentiments, but took on the site’s interpretive challenges more directly. Adams National Historic Site, he said, suffered from a “basic ‘interpretive’ problem”:

The Interpretation Section of the Master Plan Development Outline for the area reveals a lamentable lack of solid, scholarly information with regard to the Old House, and the life of the Adamses while there.

³²¹ Wilhelmina Harris to Regional Director, Region One, “Report on Museum Materials at Adams NHS,” June 10, 1955, Box 1192, Folder D6215, RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Administrative Files, 1949–1971, NACP.

Without meaning to disparage Mrs. Harris' or Miss Cole's efforts, it must be admitted that it seems unfortunate (in the long view) that visitor interpretation is almost entirely dependent on personal memory and sporadic reading.

The "personal memory," of course, was Harris's, which drew on her long association with Brooks Adams and other Adams descendants. "[W]hat is needed," Barnes continued, "is sustained, logically-ordered research directed to Park Service ends including the preparation of interpretive literature."³²² In short, the park needed a historian. Equally important, although left unsaid by Barnes, was that a historian at Adams National Historic Site would need access to the Adams family papers at the MHS. The members of the Adams Manuscript Trust had kept them closed to the public and in a holding pattern for decades.

These exchanges reveal a transitional moment for both Adams National Historic Site and the NPS's history program more broadly. Harris's approach to interpretation relied heavily on her own knowledge of the family, oral tradition, and her authority as a direct connection to Brooks Adams. It also reflected an earlier generation of historic house museum guides who worried less about meticulously researched narratives, and more about the values their institutions promoted—above all, civic engagement and patriotism. Or, taken a step further by historian Carter L. Hudgins, "in the tension between accuracy and indoctrination, the latter won more than the former."³²³ Harris leaned more toward the latter impulse.

Barnes, by contrast, developed a reputation within the Park Service as someone who "abhors superficiality in interpretation and what he feels is a lack of respect by interpreters for the substance of history." In a 1974 essay about Barnes, a colleague described him as being "as quick to praise as he was to criticize, and he did both without inhibition" out of "an intense desire for a high quality of interpretation."³²⁴ Harris's approach flew headlong into the efforts of this new generation of professional historians like Barnes who demanded more intellectual rigor in Park Service interpretive programs.

Remarkably, Harris seems to have kept her own tour script largely consistent in the coming decades, even as new historical research expanded Park staff's understanding of the Old House and the Adamses themselves. She would also begin to document her knowledge of the family's collections in the massive *Furnishings Report* which drew on her own

³²² Frank Barnes report on Adams site visit, May 30–31, 1955, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 12 (ADAM).

³²³ Hudgins, "Mount Vernon and America's Historic House Museums," 198. A similar division was playing out within the Park Service in the early twentieth century, between historians who worked freely with historical societies and patriotic organizations at the local level, and historians who took a more scholarly approach and turned their noses up at the "provincialism" of such locally-engaged historians. See Denise D. Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 100.

³²⁴ Bill Everhart, "Thoughts on a Retiring Personality," "In Touch," Number 2, June 1974. Available online, <http://npshistory.com/newsletters/intouch/n2v1.pdf>.

memories and knowledge of the Old House passed down to her by Brooks Adams, as well as relevant details from the Adams family papers. Harris took the critiques of Barnes and Olsen, and inverted them, making a case that “personal memory” and oral tradition were valid sources, and worthy of historical documentation—ten volumes-worth, in fact.

Collaborating with the Massachusetts Historical Society

Late in life, Henry Adams II (called Harry) came around to the idea of opening the Adams family manuscripts to researchers; in July 1950, he wrote in his diary “We must put the manuscripts in the hands of an institution soon, they should be more available to historians.”³²⁵ After his death in April 1951, the Adams Manuscript Trust gained two new trustees: Thomas Boylston Adams and John Quincy Adams. In August 1952, they met in the Stone Library to establish a plan for the massive collection of family papers. Malcolm Freiberg succinctly described their proposal, the partnerships that were forged, and the scholarship that immediately began to flourish as a result:

What the trustees proposed was to microfilm the entire body of Adams Papers for the 250 years from 1639 to 1889 and to sell sets of the film to major research libraries at home and abroad in a self-sustaining project. In 1954, Harvard University Press offered to publish selections from the papers of the Adams statesmen—John, John Quincy, and Charles Francis Adams—under its Belknap Press imprint; Time, Inc., offered editorial funds in return for permission to serialize selections from edited copy in *LIFE* magazine; and the Massachusetts Historical Society became the sponsor of the editorial undertaking, with working offices being set up late in 1954 and with Lyman H. Butterfield becoming first editor in chief of the enterprise. In 1959, the film edition reached a successful conclusion in 608 reels, with sets now distributed worldwide. In 1961, the first four volumes of *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* appeared to enthusiastic appraisal in the *American Historical Review* written by the young occupant of John Adams’s former house in Washington, President John F. Kennedy.³²⁶

This series of events, after years of hand-wringing by the family, would have a tremendous impact on the Adams National Historic Site. The agreement would result in a rich and long-lasting collaboration between the site’s staff, the MHS, and the first editor of the Adams Papers, Lyman Butterfield.

³²⁵ Henry Adams II diary, cited in Freiberg, “The Adams Manuscript Trust, 1905–1955,” 125. Freiberg’s article provides a detailed look at the history of the Adams Manuscript Trust.

³²⁶ Freiberg, “The Adams Manuscript Trust, 1905–1955,” 126.

As the MHS geared up to make the Adams Papers public, Wilhelmina Harris developed a close working relationship with Butterfield. Since 1952, she had been going to the MHS with the Memorial Society's permission to read the family diaries for "fresh material" to add to the Historic Site's interpretive programming.³²⁷ In turn, Butterfield shared little tidbits of information about the Adamses for the staff's edification with every visit to the site. He assured Harris that he would in time share his copious notes with the site, as well as copies of relevant supporting documents.³²⁸ Harris relished these anecdotes, from a description of the diplomatic uniform worn by Charles Francis Adams in London in 1861, to a description of Mary Adams Quincy's 1877 wedding held in the Long Room, written by Susan Boylston Adams Treadway ("We have not had anything more descriptive of life in the Old House"). "I am happy that we have such a close relationship with these Adams Papers," Harris concluded.³²⁹

This relationship between Harris and Butterfield was a mutually beneficial one. Harris gained knowledge about the Adams family that could be used in interpretation for the Old House, informal advice about the site's collections, and an important connection in Boston's historical circles. It was also in Butterfield's interest to foster a close relationship with Harris. She not only had very close ties to the Adams descendants, but also led a Historic Site that held many books and artifacts of value to his own work. In the coming years, Butterfield made repeated trips to the Old House. On March 27, 1957, he came with MHS librarian Stephan Riley and a microfilm expert; the three men spent the whole day in the Stone Library evaluating the Library's contents, and Harris noted that they had discovered "several things of interest from an interpretive standpoint."³³⁰ She also received free advice about caring for the Stone Library's collections, and an appraisal of some of the books. "Mr. Riley . . . told me that there were really a great many significant books in our Library. There were three or four volumes which he said should be under glass lest some accident befall them."³³¹ The next month, Butterfield and Riley returned twice to continue their survey, and Butterfield came armed with source material that referenced the Old House. The Adams family, the NPS, and the MHS continued to work closely together in the subsequent years.³³²

³²⁷ Harris, November 1952 and January 1953 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Reports.

³²⁸ Harris, April 1956 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

³²⁹ Harris, February 1957 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

³³⁰ Harris, March 1957 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

³³¹ Harris, March 1957 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

³³² Harris, April 1957 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report. In just one example of continued connections, in May 1958, Charles Francis Adams, III paid a librarian, Lloyd A. Brown, to spend two months creating a bibliography of the books in the Stone Library. The MHS then employed him to finish cataloguing. See Harris, May 1958 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report, and Harris, November 1959 and Harris, December 1959 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

In March 1958, the Eastern National Park and Monument Association, a nonprofit association which supports the NPS, voted to give the site a microfilm edition of the Adams Papers. The announcement generated considerable excitement among staff, who recognized that the Papers would be an invaluable and sorely needed source of interpretive material. The first installment of microfilm arrived in May, and soon after, staff members began reading the papers in search of references to the Old House.³³³ In October 1958, Ranger Anna Boyer started combing through Charles Francis Adams's diary. She began in 1847, just before Adams moved into the Old House. The papers proved to be a treasure trove of information. Harris reported that Boyer "has come up with a good many interesting references. Her notes are full and will provide extensive background material for employees in the future." The references were generally brief—noting the planting of shade trees, building the stone wall, moving the stable, and removing stones from the meadow, for example—but they helped paint a fuller picture of his life on the property. It was a tantalizing glimpse into the value of sustained archival research. They planned for Boyer to spend one day a week during the winter months making her way through the microfilm.

The opening of the Adams Papers to the public, and the gift of the microfilm to the Historic Site, marked the beginning of an improved interpretive program based on historical scholarship as Frank Barnes had advocated for. By February 1962, Harris could proudly announce in her monthly report: "There is more activity in this department [historical research] at the Adams National Historic Site than ever before." She thanked the Eastern National Park and Monument Association, saying, "The inspiration of the early Adamses and the feeling for the area which can be gleaned from reading these microfilms is tremendous."³³⁴

Above all, the publication of the Adams papers successfully generated new enthusiasm for the history of the Adams family thanks to, in Freiberg's words, the "publication explosion relating to Adamses" that resulted.³³⁵ It amounted to free advertising for the Historic Site, and ensured that new generations of Americans would continue to learn about the Adams family's history, and seek out the Old House and Adams birthplaces for a tour.

³³³ Freiberg, 126; Harris, March and May 1958 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Reports; "Adams Papers Microfilms To Be Stored In Quincy," newspaper clipping from unnamed newspaper in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, N.D.-1979, Box 1, Folder 9 (ADAM).

³³⁴ Harris, February 1962 Superintendent's Monthly Narrative Report.

³³⁵ Freiberg, "The Adams Manuscript Trust, 1905–1955," 126.

Public Outreach and Media Attention

Thanks to Harris's relentless efforts to publicize Adams National Historic Site, public outreach efforts were thriving in the 1950s. Harris gave talks about the Adamses and Old House to local organizations and institutions, primarily in the off-season. Harris noted that at an October 1954 talk to the Congregational Church in Wellesley Hills, she discovered that most people knew relatively little, if anything, about the NPS: "Out of the group of 75 or 80 persons present I am certain more than half of them never heard of the NPS. I felt like a real pioneer."³³⁶ (She certainly was, in more ways than one.) In the coming years, she gave talks to a wide range of audiences, from the Quincy Senior Citizens Club, to the MIT Faculty Club, Quincy public school groups, and several Daughters of the American Revolution chapters and garden clubs throughout the Boston area. She hoped that her talks would help draw more attention to and appreciation of both the Adams National Historic Site and the Park Service more broadly.³³⁷ Her efforts to publicize the site and the NPS on the lecture circuit were bolstered by the publication of the Adams Papers and the 1955 Ford Foundation *Omnibus* five-part TV series about the Adams family, which drew even more attention to the history of the family. Combined with Harris's extensive and innovative public programming efforts, the site was more popular than ever.

Harris effectively used several forms of media to promote the site. In June 1956, she reported that the Quincy *Patriot Ledger* was a particularly "cooperative" partner, and running several articles about the site "which provoked considerable favorable comment." That same month, she was featured in two Independence Day broadcasts about the history of Quincy; one on CBS in Boston, and the other an hour-long radio program and panel discussion on the WJDA radio station. She made sure to note that "my family listening in said the Old House fared very well."³³⁸ In December of that year, WB2 Radio in Boston's *American Heritage* program included an episode which focused on the Historic Site and included interviews with Harris, and in January 1957 WBZ-TV in Boston included a program about US Presidents from New England which featured a live telecast from the Stone Library. Harris spoke about the NPS Site and the Stone Library, and Thomas Boylston Adams discussed the library's books. The TV station set up its broadcast equipment in the Old House's attic and on the roof of Harris's house across the street.³³⁹

³³⁶ Harris, October 1954 Superintendent's Monthly Report.

³³⁷ See, for example, Harris, December 1955, Harris, February 1956, Harris, November 1956, and Harris, April 1957 Superintendent's Monthly Reports.

³³⁸ Harris, June 1956 Superintendent's Monthly Report.

³³⁹ Harris, December 1956 and Harris, January 1957 Superintendent's Monthly Reports.

As we have seen, Harris had a flair for organizing events that would garner significant media coverage. When the site celebrated its tenth year as a National Park in September 1956, she made sure to put on a good show: “We had a ten tier cake representing the 10 years of the Site as a National Park. The cake was topped off with a lovely cardboard model of the house done by the Office of Design and Construction.” Harris brought in three children, Mary Treacy of Quincy, Barry Wolfert from Braintree, and Gunhan Inalcik, visiting from Turkey, to cut the cake. The children symbolized, she said, the youth of America, the original Adamses, and children outside the US. The celebration, held on September 22, featured a speech by Abigail Adams Homans, the daughter of John Quincy Adams II and niece of Brooks Adams. It was, of course, televised.³⁴⁰



Figure 30. Wilhelmina Harris and children celebrating the Old House’s ten-year anniversary as a National Park on September 22, 1956. Photograph courtesy of the Quincy Historical Society.

³⁴⁰ “Speech by Mrs. Robert Homans, Sept. 22, 1956 on the tenth anniversary of the Adams NHS,” Resource Management Records, Box 55, Folder 6 (ADAM). See also 1956 newspaper clipping with photo of birthday cake and caption with the names of the children, newspaper unknown, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, N.D.-1979, Box 1, Folder 8 (ADAM).

Act First, Seek Forgiveness Later

In the fall of 1959, Harris began planning for Adams National Historic Site's Christmas program. It was perhaps her most ambitious project yet. The event required community participation—and funding—well beyond what could the federal government could provide. She began soliciting donations of time and money from people in the area well in advance. Plans included preparing a Christmas meal for display in the kitchen, with gardener John Iacovelli volunteering to cook a goose for the occasion (this was later changed to a duck *and* a turkey). In an October letter soliciting donations from the President of the Quincy Coal and Oil Company, J. Everett Robbie, Harris indicated that they hoped to donate the food to the Salvation Army, although it is unclear if this ever came to pass. She asked Robbie to write the check to her directly, promising that it would be tax-deductible.³⁴¹ In September, she reported that “Several citizens have expressed their desire to help in this Christmas endeavor.” One of the site's (and Harris's) neighbors, Delcevere King, donated \$100 to help light the grounds with Christmas lights. Dr. Theodore A. Ferris from Boston's Trinity Church offered to record bible passages to be read at the site. Robbie ultimately gave \$50 to the cause.³⁴²

Harris's penchant for fundraising, however, ran headlong into the rule-bound NPS bureaucracy. On October 13, she received a letter from Acting Regional Director George A. Palmer notifying her that although superintendents were allowed to accept donations, they had to do so within Park Service protocols. He went on to list the proper procedure: first, Harris needed to send the donation check and letter of tender, as well as a copy of her letter accepting the gift, to the to the regional office. The regional office would in turn report the donation to the Washington office, and only then would the money be allotted to the site. Harris replied with a mildly apologetic—and very shrewd—letter. She put some of the blame on her neighbors: “This is the first time we have been even willing to accept outside contributions at the Adams National Historic Site, but because there was pressure from our neighbors to do this, and I could not possibly imagine that the United States Government would pay for food, I expressed the opinion that these extraordinary items would have to be paid for by interested citizens.”³⁴³ This was a fair assessment of the situation.

³⁴¹ Wilhelmina S. Harris to J. Everett Robbie, October 3, 1959, Resource Management Records, Box 6, Folder 5 (ADAM).

³⁴² September 1959 Superintendent's Monthly Report; Delcevere King to Wilhelmina Harris, September 30, 1959; Harris to Theodore P. Ferris, September 23, 1959; Harris to Regional Director, Region Five, “Donations for Special Christmas Celebration at Adams NHS,” October 24, 1959; all in Resource Management Records, Box 6, Folder 5 (ADAM).

³⁴³ George A. Palmer to Wilhelmina S. Harris, “Accounting for Donations,” October 13, 1959; Harris to Palmer, “Donations for Special Christmas Celebration at Adams NHS,” October 24, 1959; both in Resource Management Records, Box 6, Folder 5 (ADAM).

By most accounts, the event was a dazzling success. Harris's report is worth quoting at length, as it gives a sense of the elaborate display put on by the park's staff:

On December 20, we had our Christmas open house. This was the first time the local citizens had ever seen the house opened at this time of the year. Most of the fourteen hundred people were enthusiastic and appeared to enjoy very much the experience.

We had the cooperation of the Little Singers of the Wooden Cross, who sang Christmas carols while standing on the front piazza. Miss Winnifred Elliot from Boston played the Irish harp in the Long Room. This instrument was chosen because of its association with Louisa Catherine Adams. The dining room table was set for Christmas dinner, using largely the china, silver and linen which had belonged to Abigail Adams. At one end of the table was a large turkey and at the other end a tureen of fish chowder. The guests saw the rooms upstairs, came down to the kitchen where vegetables, pies, nuts and fruit, and a roast duck were displayed on the kitchen table ready to be served in the dining room. As the guests went out the side door the children and many adults were given a small cellophane packet of mixed hard candies tied with red, white and blue ribbon.

Most of the people were strangers and did not know their way around. Not all of them got to the library, but those that did could listen as long as they wished to a Bible reading by Dr. Ferris of Trinity Church in Boston. There was a display of prints relating to Christmas in the windows of the Carriage House which were specially lighted for the occasion. The meadow was lighted with a display of red, white and blue bulbs in the trees. There was a Christmas tree in front of the house, and from the trees on the lawn we had floodlights focused on the house and to give general illumination. Many people suggested that the area should be open each Christmas. This was a very encouraging comment, but the expense involved would not allow this very often.³⁴⁴

Lest we think that Harris was inclined to exaggerate her account, the *Quincy Patriot Ledger* provided its own assessment. An article published the next day, "Past Relived at Adams House," featured a large photo of Adams descendant Mary Ogden Abbott carving a turkey at the dining room table, with Harris looking on in the background. The article noted that an estimated 1,000 people came to see the display.³⁴⁵

Harris was right to assume that the NPS could not afford such an elaborate affair. She reported that the "expenses which could not be met with government funds ran to \$225 and were paid in cash by the Superintendent as the emergency arose." Adjusted for inflation, this would have been more than \$1,900 in 2018 dollars—an astonishing

³⁴⁴ Harris, November/December 1959 Superintendent's Monthly Report.

³⁴⁵ "Past Relived At Adams House," *Quincy Patriot Ledger*, December 21, 1959, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, N. D. - 1979, Box 1, Folder 10 (ADAM).

contribution out of Harris's pocket. Harris, always looking for ways to leverage her efforts at the Old House, assessed this to be a worthwhile expense. In addition to generating enormous goodwill with the local community and positive press for both the Old House and Harris, it also inspired promises of more donations from some of the Adams family members in attendance: "You see the Adams' generosity and the Adams' belongings returned by former occupants of the House never seem to run out," she reiterated.³⁴⁶

Harris's hard work and shrewd fundraising paid off. Acting Regional Director Palmer followed up with a letter that indicated the NPS's support for the event:

All of us here who read about the Christmas open house in your December report are of the opinion that it is doubtless one of the finest and most appropriate special events of its kind held anywhere—inside or outside the Service. Not only was your account of it read with great interest, but the opinion was unanimous that it should, indeed, be an annual affair, and at no expense to yourself.

Accordingly, if next fall, when you begin to plan it (if you do decide to), please let this office know how much will be needed for what. Then, in the event that appropriated funds are insufficient or cannot legally be expended for one purpose or another, we shall use our good offices to see if our major cooperating association, the Eastern National Park and Monument and Association, will not fund the balance.

Again, our congratulations on what must have been a truly special open house.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁶ Harris, November/December 1959 Superintendent's Monthly Report.

³⁴⁷ George A. Palmer to Wilhelmina S. Harris, "Christmas Open House," January 8, 1960, ADAM Resource Management Records, Box 6, Folder 5.



Figure 31. The 1967 Christmas Open House, with NPS Regional Director Lon Garrison, Park Technician and future Superintendent Marianne Peak, and Wilhelmina Harris. Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

Harris’s “act first, seek forgiveness later” approach was highly effective in making decisions that NPS leadership might not have otherwise authorized. It was also highly problematic. Much like her approach to interpretation, her methods often made them uneasy, but many people were charmed by the end result. She carried these lessons with her in the decades to come.

CHAPTER FIVE

“FIGHT THE TRENDS”: THE 1960s AND 1970s

In 1955, Adams National Historic Site was chosen to be a pilot study for Mission 66, the NPS’s ten-year modernization and expansion program under Director Conrad Wirth. Mission 66 was an ambitious effort to address challenges which had plagued the Park Service since World War II, including budgetary constraints, staff shortages, and in the postwar years, soaring visitation to the National Parks. Wirth’s proposal for Mission 66 was embraced by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who favored public works spending to kick start the economy in the postwar period. The program was intended to lead up to the NPS’s fiftieth anniversary in 1966 (hence the name).³⁴⁸

The Mission 66 pilot areas were chosen because they reflected the diverse range of sites managed by the NPS. Adams National Historic Site joined seven other parks in the pilot program: Mt. Rainier, Yellowstone, Chaco Canyon, Mesa Verde, Shiloh, Everglades, and Fort Laramie. Each area developed a “prospectus” which included a plan for how the site would be protected, interpreted, developed, and operated. Wirth instructed Mission 66 pilot areas to “disregard precedent and give full play to imagination in an effort to arrive at new approaches to old problems” when writing their prospectuses.³⁴⁹ The postwar challenges facing the NPS called for creative and ambitious solutions, and he wanted each park’s staff to be bold and forward-looking in envisioning their future.

As an understaffed park, Adams National Historic Site was slated to receive assistance from the Mission 66 Committee in writing its prospectus. Harris was late in submitting her own draft, and by the time she mailed it in, the Committee had already drafted a prospectus of their own. Their prospectus recommended, among other things: “An aggressive program of public service in collaboration with the public schools of the Boston Metropolitan area,” improved bathroom facilities, expanded parking, a possible

³⁴⁸ Ethan Carr, *Mission 66: Modernism and the National Park Dilemma* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 10.

³⁴⁹ Conrad Wirth to Washington Office and All Field Offices, “Mission 66, Progress and Procedures,” Memorandum No. 3, June 27, 1955, Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 13 (ADAM).

“orientation-museum room” for visitors (if additional land could be acquired), the sale of publications and other items, wayside exhibits, a permanent historian and librarian, and a plan to open the house year-round.³⁵⁰ The Committee’s version was certainly ambitious.

Harris, who had always been conservative in her approach to caring for and interpreting the Old House, was less than enthusiastic about this vision for the Site. She opposed to the idea of development at the park in any form, including development within their own boundaries. She responded to the Committee with a memorandum that led with a few points of agreement, followed by a much longer section of disagreements and factual errors in the Committee’s prospectus. She concluded with a “summary” that presented a sweetly-worded yet scathing critique of the Committee’s ambitions for the site:

I am aware of the beautiful museums, the exquisite dioramas, the modern devises [sic] for interpretation and the impressive administrative offices.

But the Adams National Historic Site is like a person. We can’t each be President or Chief Justice or an artist like Copley or a scholar like Einstein or a spiritual leader like Luther. God made us all different and the person who can follow the natural pattern is indeed rare. Perhaps the modern devises [sic] should by pass the Old House and let this fabulous house and grounds speak of the glorious past—untouched by progress, undeveloped by organization and efficiency. Let the Old House be important not because thousands march through it but because its quiet dignity is a mecca for those who are in search of that ‘Supreme Experience’ which Mr. Drury so happily expressed. Let the United States have one Area preserved with every skill of the engineer and architect but free to speak, in its own way, for the illustrious citizens for whom it stands. The American public love it as it is.³⁵¹

At a time when Wirth was encouraging NPS staff to look forward, Harris was making the case for a historic site frozen in time, and “untouched by progress.”

Harris believed that overzealous government bureaucrats eager to “improve” the site were as threatening to its integrity as Quincy’s encroaching urban sprawl. After so many years of struggling to finance even the park’s most basic needs, however, she was not about to pass up deeper federal investment in the Old House. In her own draft Mission 66 Prospectus, Harris suggested improvements that focused primarily on restorations: restorations of the wood shed, the cow stalls, the orchard, and the duck pond and meadow. Further down the list were reproducing wallpaper for the Long Room, recovering the Louis XV chairs and sofa, the short-term assignment of a historian, architectural research, cataloguing the library books, and installing central heating in the library. She also

³⁵⁰ “Mission 66: Prospectus for Adams National Historic Site,” draft, July 21, 1955, Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 13 (ADAM).

³⁵¹ Wilhelmina S. Harris to Regional Director, Region Five, “MISSION 66,” September 7, 1955, Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 13 (ADAM).

prioritized acquiring the Beale Estate on the property’s western edge and the vacant lot on the south side. Here, too, preservation—not modernization—was Harris’s goal: “it is also our considered opinion that insuring the natural atmosphere of the Site is more important than any consideration of an Administration Museum Building, central heating or any other improvement now contemplated.”³⁵² Her words call to mind Brooks Adams’s commentary on his mother’s Victorian renovations. Harris, like Adams before her, did not want the Old House to be “*improved* almost out of recognition.” His teachings were undoubtedly in the back of her mind as she negotiated these improvements with the Mission 66 Committee.

In a January 23, 1956 letter to the Region Five Regional Director, Conrad Wirth noted that the Mission 66 staff’s prospectus for the park was approved. The Mission 66 committee fixed the factual errors pointed out by Harris, but it was otherwise left as-is. Wirth did add, “In preparing supplemental data for work and development programs, I know you will be guided by the very fine comments made by Superintendent Harris in her memorandum.” In early February, Harris followed up to the Mission 66 staff with a “Philosophy and Accomplishments” memorandum, emphasizing that the site’s philosophy “should be to maintain and preserve the Area with as few changes as possible.” She again reiterated that the site’s “greatest need” was for advice from engineers and architects about how to best preserve the historic structures: “the success of the interpretive program hangs on the preservation of what we have.”³⁵³ It was a shrewd reminder that she had not forgotten the NPS historians’ concerns about interpretation, but she could only deal with them after her own priorities were addressed.

This was not the end of the Mission 66 saga for the Historic Site. In late April, Harris submitted her version of the final prospectus, which deviated from the approved 1955 version. NPS Associate Director E. T. Scoyen wrote to Regional Director Daniel J. Tobin to say that the Washington Office’s version was more in line with Mission 66 objectives. Tobin responded in support of Harris, offering a point by point explanation of why Harris made the revisions she did. These included the omission of a second historian for the site (“we seriously question the need,” he wrote), and a downward revision of yearly visitation estimates (Harris had no desire to bring more wear and tear to the Old House). He also wanted to omit mention of a Visitor Center on the adjacent Beale Estate property. Announcing the NPS’s intention to acquire the land “would seriously endanger the possibility of ever” getting it. The parties agreed to continue the conversation in person, but no

³⁵² Wilhelmina S. Harris to Regional Director, Region Five, “Prospectus for MISSION 66,” August 3, 1955, Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 13 (ADAM).

³⁵³ Conrad Wirth to Regional Director, Region Five, “MISSION 66 Prospectus for Adams National Historical Site,” January 23, 1956, Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 13 (ADAM); and Wilhelmina S. Harris to Mission 66, “MISSION 66—Philosophy and Accomplishments,” February 4, 1956, Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 13 (ADAM).

archival record of those discussions exists.³⁵⁴ The final prospectus may never have been approved; the paper trail at the National Archives ends with a July 1958 letter from Tobin to NPS Director Wirth indicating that the prospectus was still being delayed with the hope “that a compromise solution on the treatment of the area could be reached.”³⁵⁵

Mission 66 *did* guide the Historic Site’s development in the coming decades. It did not, however, bring about the drastic, modernizing changes Harris feared. Her goals for restoration of the Old House bore fruit in the summer of 1964. On June 11, George L. Wren, III, an NPS architect who helped write the Historic Structure Report, gave a public lecture about the architecture of the Old House and the Park Service’s plans for its preservation and restoration. The park received more than \$100,000 to carry out this work, which included addressing dry rot throughout the house and strengthening the foundation and beams.³⁵⁶ The Stone Library and the greenhouse also received much-needed attention. A decade later, Harris still expressed her content with these restorations in the park’s draft 1975 Historic Resource Management Plan: “The National Park Service can look with pride at the success of the rehabilitation of the Old House in 1965–1966,” she wrote.³⁵⁷ Mission 66 actually helped further her goals for the Site, including hiring new staff, acquiring the Beale Estate and the Adams birthplaces, and better preserving the property’s structures.³⁵⁸

Building a Robust Staff

Adams National Historic Site experienced a surge of publicity in these decades which had a tremendous impact on the park. Unlike Mission 66 planning, this was something Wilhelmina Harris actively fostered and welcomed. A series of highly publicized events brought great fanfare and accolades to the site, including a 1967 visit to the park by

³⁵⁴ Associate Director E. T. Scoyen to Regional Director, Region Five, “Adams National Historic Site Final Prospectus,” July 18, 1956; Regional Director Daniel J. Tobin to Director, “Adams National Historic Site Final Prospectus,” September 26, 1956; Scoyen to Tobin, “Adams National Historic Site Final Prospectus,” October 11, 1956; Assistant Regional Director George A. Palmer to Director, “Conference on Adams MISSION 66 Prospectus,” January 24, 1957; all in Box 0731, Folder “A98 Prospectuses Reg. 5,” RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Administrative Files, 1949–1971 (NACP).

³⁵⁵ Regional Director Daniel J. Tobin to Director, “Mission 66 Prospectuses and Briefs, Region Five,” July 11, 1958, Box 0731, Folder “A98 Prospectuses Reg. 5,” RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Administrative Files, 1949–1971 (NACP).

³⁵⁶ “Adams Mansion Reconstruction To Begin,” June 12, 1964, newspaper unknown, in Superintendent’s Clipping File, 1965–1966, Box 1, Folder 14 (ADAM).

³⁵⁷ “Adams National Historic Site: Historic Resources Management Plan,” May 1975, Resource Management Records, Box 8, Folder 4 (ADAM).

³⁵⁸ As historian Seth Bruggeman has noted, Mission 66 also “introduced leagues of trained professionals into the agency who have since improved the quality of interpretation throughout the park system.” The impact of these myriad cultural resource management professionals was felt at Adams National Historic Site as well. Bruggeman, *Here, George Washington Was Born*, 177.

Lady Bird Johnson, the 1976 Bicentennial of the American Revolution, and the 1979 Massachusetts constitution bicentennial. This publicity was accompanied by the release of several television series, films, and publications (including the first four volumes of the Adams papers in 1961), the 1961 taping of *The Adams Family: An American Dynasty* by CBS at the Old House, and the 1976 *The Adams Chronicles* series. Collectively, this publicity increased the interest in the history of the Adamses and helped drive up visitation at the site for decades to come.

This increased attention came at a moment when the NPS was looking to hire more women, and a growing number of women were eager to join the workforce. In 1960, the NPS released a statement emphasizing its goal of

employ[ing] in its uniformed positions the best qualified men and women available. . . . Participation by women employees in lecture programs, guided tours, museum and library work, and in research programs would be entirely appropriate and very helpful in many Parks. Increased attention may also be given to children's programs in some Parks and to extension work to schools for which women interpretive employees may be even more effective than men.³⁵⁹

It was an admirable goal, but this statement also reinforced the belief that women were particularly suited to particular roles, such as leading tours, caring for libraries, and working with children. Women who sought NPS positions during these decades found that they were largely relegated to interpretive tasks at historic sites. Historian Kathy Mengak observes that “These positions seemed acceptable for women, who were often stereotyped as adept social hostesses who were comfortable with repetitive tasks common in housekeeping and liked to talk and share information.”³⁶⁰ Wilhelmina Harris's appointment underscores this point, despite the fact that her high-level position was unheard of for a woman. She was the consummate social hostess, and the circumstances under which she was hired made her a non-threatening choice for the job.

This same context enabled Harris to hire an impressive staff of women (as well as a few men) to conduct historical research, lead tours, and carry out the site's administrative duties. Considering her emphasis on welcoming visitors into the Old House as “guests” of the Adams family, she likely saw women as ideally suited for the hostess roles, harking back to a time when women were the primary stewards of historic house museums and tour guides of domestic interiors. Harris built a staff of smart, dedicated women who played an essential role in the site's development in its formative years.

³⁵⁹ Rogers W. Young, “Ladies Who Wear the Uniform of the National Park Service,” *Planning and Civic Comment*, March 1962, Vol. 28, No. 1. Available online: <https://archive.org/details/planningciviccom30natirich/page/n5>.

³⁶⁰ Kathy Mengak, *Reshaping Our National Parks and Their Guardians: The Legacy of George B. Hartzog Jr.* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 69. See also Barry Mackintosh, *Interpretation in the National Park Service: A Historical Perspective* (Washington, DC: History Division, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, 1986), 74.

Several important women joined the staff of the Adams National Historic Site in the 1960s and 1970s. Marianne Peak, née Potts, began working at the site in August 1960 as a clerk-stenographer.³⁶¹ Peak quickly built her skills as an administrator who was eager to understand how the NPS operated and share that knowledge with her colleagues. She educated herself on office procedures through visits to the Northeast Regional Office, and attended a series of workshops run by the General Services Administration (GSA).³⁶² She became Harris’s right-hand woman and, nearly three decades later, her successor as Superintendent. In September 1961, Helen Nelson, a recent graduate of Wheaton College, was hired as the site’s first Historian.³⁶³ Nelson’s time at the Old House was brief but critical. She conducted essential historical research for the site, which had gone for too long without a historian’s guidance.³⁶⁴ In the late 1960s, Patricia Shaheen began working with Wilhelmina Harris on her extensive *Furnishings Report*. She was then hired as Park Ranger in the early 1970s, and was quickly promoted to Supervisory Park Ranger. All three women became integral members of the park staff in the 1960s and 1970s.

³⁶¹ Harris, July and August 1960 Superintendent’s Monthly Report.

³⁶² Harris, October 1962 Superintendent’s Monthly Report and Harris, May 1963 Superintendent’s Monthly Report.

³⁶³ Harris, May 1961 Superintendent’s Monthly Report, and Harris, June 1961 Superintendent’s Monthly Report, and Harris, July Superintendent’s Monthly Report. See also the article about Nelson in the Quincy *Patriot Ledger*, September 28, 1961.

³⁶⁴ For a short stint in the winter and spring of 1958, the Park hired a Historian named Philip R. Smith Jr.; Harris’s correspondence with NPS regional leadership indicated that she felt Smith was not skilled enough in historical research for the task. Although he was given special training in historical research at Harper’s Ferry, he apparently did not last long in the job. See Resource Management Records, Box 9, Folders 10–11 (ADAM).



Figure 32. The women of Adams National Historic Site in the 1960s.
Left to right: Helen Nelson Skeen, Anna E. Boyer, Marianne Potts Peak, and Wilhelmina S. Harris.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

It was an exciting time to be working at Adams National Historic Site. Staff and scholars were churning out extensive research on the history, architecture, and furnishings of the Old House and later, the Adams birthplaces. Nelson hit the ground running, researching and writing a historical report that would inform that decade's rehabilitation of the Old House.³⁶⁵ Harris was very pleased with her “outstanding” research efforts, noting in her October 1962 monthly report that “She is rapid in her manuscript reading and has shown initiative in the areas outside the manuscripts where she has found important historical information.” Nelson's report, “Structural History of the Old House: Adams National Historic Site,” was completed in the summer of 1963.³⁶⁶ Harris and NPS leadership were so pleased with her work that when she married and

³⁶⁵ Park historian [Helen Nelson] to superintendent, Adams NHS [Wilhelmina Harris], “Progress Report of the Historian,” October 2, 1961, Resource Management Records, Box 10, Folder 4 (ADAM).

³⁶⁶ Harris, October 1962 Superintendent's Monthly Report. Helen L. Nelson, *Structural History of the Old House: Adams National Historic Site*, (unpublished report for the National Park Service, 1963).

moved out of state, they hired her to continue working on some projects remotely. Harris argued that Nelson—now Helen Skeen—had done such an impressive job on the “Structural History” that it would be a shame for her accumulated wisdom about the Old House and grounds go to waste. Skeen completed a documentary narrative of buildings on the Site’s Historic Base Map from her new home in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1965.³⁶⁷

Research and writing about the site flourished in other ways, too. In addition to Skeen’s work as Historian, Ranger-Historian Anna Boyer continued her review of the Adams Papers microfilm, focusing on Charles Francis Adams.³⁶⁸ Ronald Lee requested that Architectural Historian Charles E. Peterson write a reconnaissance report sketching the physical history of the Old House for the NPS, which was published in 1963.³⁶⁹ And of course, Harris was writing her ten-volume furnishings report, which she compiled with her successor in mind. She was nearing retirement (or so she thought), and she felt that it was imperative to “leave behind a record for those who come after me so that they can familiarize themselves with what is here.”³⁷⁰ Harris recognized that she was in many ways the keeper of the Historic Site’s institutional memory, and she needed to document her knowledge of the house’s history and contents.

Just as Brooks Adams had once inspired a deep respect for the Old House in a young Wilhelmina Harris, Harris now sought to inspire the same feelings in her staff. Both Marianne Peak and Patricia Shaheen had fond memories of staff coffee breaks in the carriage house. Peak recalled drinking black coffee—something she learned to do from Harris—while listening to her “pontificate.” Shaheen said, “When you went for coffee, often Mrs. Harris would be there awaiting whoever came in. She would be there to chat, and it was always welcoming—she made the best coffee. . . . I never drank coffee in my life until I started working there.” Both women were eager to learn from Harris. Peak emphasized that during these years, “She was the teacher and I was the student.” Patricia Shaheen remembered that Harris liked to say “My duty here is to stand in the way of progress.” She continued, “At first I thought, ‘This is crazy,’” but over time she found that “the more you were there and the more you saw what it was and how much it [the Old House] interpreted itself on its own just because of the way it was kept, you understood what she was saying. Because when you stepped through those gates off that sidewalk, you

³⁶⁷ See extensive correspondence about Nelson’s work on the narrative in Resource Management Records, Box 9, Folder 11 (ADAM).

³⁶⁸ Harris, November 1962 Superintendent’s Monthly Report.

³⁶⁹ Peterson, *The Adams Mansion, Quincy, Massachusetts*.

³⁷⁰ “Adams Mansion Contents Catalog Compiled By Retiring Official,” *Patriot Ledger*, March 21, 1969, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 17 (ADAM).

stepped from the twentieth, now twenty-first century into a different world.”³⁷¹ Harris’s lessons inspired a tremendous sense of reverence for the Old House that Peak, Shaheen, and other interviewees still emphasized several decades later.

“Good Taste, No Pretension”: Visiting Adams National Historic Site

Visitors to Adams National Historic Site in the 1960s and 70s entered through the front gates and were greeted at the 1731 door of the Old House by a friendly and gracious ranger who welcomed them in as if they were “a personal guest at [their] own home.”³⁷² Tours began at 9 a.m., and the house was open until five o’clock, with tours lasting approximately 45 minutes. Admission was 50 cents, unless visitors were under the age of 16, or if they held a Golden Age or Golden Eagle Passport, in which case their admission was free.³⁷³ The staff tried to keep tour groups to a maximum of twelve visitors at a time, which “allowed the tours at Adams NHS to be more meaningful and personal.” Many visitors arrived with some knowledge of the Adams family, thanks in part to the burgeoning body of Adams-related literature and television programs that emerged alongside the publication of the Adams Papers.³⁷⁴

The contours of rangers’ tours are preserved in several documents: a brief version in the park’s 1951 Master Plan interpretive document, a tour script circa 1962 preserved in the park’s archives, and in various contemporary newspaper articles about the Old House. Rangers began with an introduction to the Old House and the Historic Site. Their first stop was the Paneled Room, and then visitors were brought across the hall to the dining room. In these rooms, guests learned about the house, built for Leonard Vassall in the eighteenth century, and then the four generations of Adamses that followed. Rangers then discussed the establishment of the Adams Memorial Society, and the Society’s donation of the home to the NPS. The remainder of the tour adhered to the basic narrative that Harris had followed since her arrival at the park, focusing on the lives of the generations of Adams

³⁷¹ Marianne Peak, phone interview with Laura Miller, January 24, 2020; and Patricia Shaheen, phone interview by Laura Miller, October 10, 2019.

³⁷² Even if visitors showed up for a tour at 4:45, Harris noted, “*you must not turn them away!* You may give them a slightly abbreviated tour, but it would be unfortunate for someone to have traveled many miles and perhaps gotten lost and then be disappointed and told; ‘Sorry, you are too late.’” “Policies and Procedures of the Superintendent Wilhelmina S. Harris,” [no date, ca. 1973], Resource Management Records, Box 57, Folder 16 (ADAM). The information in this section is from this document unless otherwise cited.

³⁷³ For a history of visitor fees in the National Parks, see Barry Mackintosh, *Visitor Fees in the National Park System: A Legislative and Administrative History* (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 1983), https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/mackintosh3/index.htm.

³⁷⁴ Wilhelmina S. Harris, “Superintendent’s Annual Report—1974,” March 31, 1975, Resource Management Records, Box 5, Folder 11 (ADAM).

family members who had lived in the Old House. Guests visited the Long Room, where they learned about the three golden wedding anniversaries celebrated in the Old House by John and Abigail Adams, John Quincy and Louisa Catherine Adams, and Charles Francis and Abigail Brooks Adams. They were then escorted upstairs to the study to learn about the home’s use as the Summer White House, and John Adams correspondence with Thomas Jefferson in his later years, and then to the President’s bedroom, followed by Brooks Adams’s bedroom, and then returning downstairs to see the Adams Memorial Room and Kitchen. Throughout the house, rangers made sure to point out important portraits, pieces of furniture, china, and glassware.³⁷⁵

After the house tour, guests made their way to the Stone Library. If time permitted and it was a quiet day at the Site, they would then continue the tour in the Carriage House. After the tour was completed, guests were encouraged to walk through the garden and orchard. Rangers joined them whenever possible to engage in conversation and provide details about the flowers. The gardens were no small part of the visitors’ experience—the flowers, meticulously tended to by gardener John Iacovelli, were a major draw for the Historic Site.

Rangers made sure to emphasize that the house was not furnished to a particular period, and that the furnishings were original to the home. Harris reminded them to note that “The Old House has never had an architect or interior decorator; it merely grew with the needs of the family.” The underlying message was that this was no Monticello or Mount Vernon, nor did it aspire to be. Harris liked to emphasize that the Adamses were “not interested in keeping up with the Joneses.” “They bought simple things that could be used not just for one generation,” she stressed, and “their selection of furniture was durable and without pretension. I think that was the type of persons they were too.” The point was summed up succinctly in the headline of a 1973 Quincy *Patriot Ledger* article (always a friendly news outlet for the Historic Site): “Adams Mansion Combines Good Taste, No Pretension.”³⁷⁶ In Harris’s interpretation, the Adamses were sensible, even frugal, down-to-earth New Englanders who were “blessed by not having too much money to spend on expensive furnishings.”³⁷⁷ Her interpretation was also in-line with the Adams family’s own mid-century image-management efforts.

Harris expertly deflected criticisms about the decision not to interpret the house to a specific time period, but rather as a multi-generational historic home. Early in her tenure at the Historic Site, in March 1960, Harris gave a talk to the New England Historic

³⁷⁵ See ADAM Resource Management Records, Box 14, Folder 4, “Interpretive Tour of Old House [c. 1962]”; “Adams Mansion Combines Good Taste, No Pretension,” *Patriot Ledger*, undated but ca. 1973, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 19; an earlier (and much less detailed) version of the tour was described in “Master Plan Development Outline, Adams Mansion National Historic Site, Massachusetts: Interpretation,” December 1951, Resource Management Records, Box 2, Folder 11 (ADAM).

³⁷⁶ “Adams Mansion Combines Good Taste, No Pretension,” *Patriot Ledger*, undated but ca. 1973.

³⁷⁷ “Antiques: ‘Fabulous Clutter’ of the Adams Mansion,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1975.

Genealogical Society in Boston—“a distinguished audience,” she noted. She was approached after the talk by “a well-dressed, elderly lady” who walked up to the podium in a huff. Harris recounted the woman scolding her: “That is the most *dreadful* house I ever saw; no taste! No correct period! And yet you seemed so fond of it. So strange!! I am Mrs. Robert Cushman of Mt. Vernon Street, and I want you to come see my house; it is *correct* to the *last* detail.” Harris, of course, graciously accepted the invitation: “I’ll come with pleasure. Tomorrow, perhaps?” A snowstorm delayed Harris from visiting until a week later, when she received Mrs. Cushman’s own “deluxe” tour of her home. It lasted from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., with a luncheon in the middle. Harris reported that the visit was “an instructive day, as she knows much about furniture and china,” and that the house “reflected considerable wealth, the period 1820, and was very, very English.”³⁷⁸ In her eyes, it was everything the Old House was not—to the Old House’s credit.

The Tour Leader’s Experience

Adams National Historical Park’s archives also offer a glimpse into rangers’ day-to-day work at the Old House during these decades. They were expected to be to work by 8:45 a.m. to open the house: “put up the shades, unlock the library and other doors in the house, put out the sign, open the gates, put up the flag and bring up the money and tickets to the front desk.” All this was to be completed in time for the first visitors at 9 a.m. Two tour guides were on duty at all times, so that one could be available to greet new visitors while the other led a tour group through the house.³⁷⁹ All this was done under Harris’s watchful eye, of course.

There were hazards—physical and emotional—of leading tours. As visitors were shown around the Old House, rangers made sure to point out potential dangers facing the inattentive tourist. There were narrow stairwells, obtrusive light fixtures, and tripping hazards galore. If an accident occurred, guides were instructed to refrain from apologizing. They also had to contend with rude visitors in an “agreeable and pleasant” manner, no matter how unpleasant they may be. Harris offered an example that undoubtedly drew on her own experiences, and reflected her own idea of the worst kind of tourist: “if someone says that the house looks cluttered with all the furnishings; don’t get angry or agree, simply say that there is an abundance of furnishings because of four generations of family who

³⁷⁸ Harris, March 1960 Superintendent’s Monthly Report.

³⁷⁹ “Policies and Procedures of the Superintendent Wilhelmina S. Harris,” [no date, ca. 1973], Resource Management Records, Box 57, Folder 16 (ADAM).

lived in the house, each one adding their own personal touches. We show the Old House as a home, not an art gallery.” Harris expertly reframed such situations, and remained unfailingly positive in the face of criticism. She expected the site’s rangers to do the same.³⁸⁰

In 1962, Harris instituted a weekly half hour staff meeting on Mondays during the tourist season for staff to demonstrate and discuss proper interpretive practices, and share historical research and NPS information with their colleagues. The women took their work very seriously. In her June and July 1962 Monthly Report, Harris described a couple of these meetings:

Mrs. [Anna] Boyer was assigned to demonstrate a full and deluxe tour of one room in the house so that the new personnel and the Park Historian could get some idea of what we think is good interpretation. On another occasion the Park Ranger Historians were assigned special topics to report on. Mrs. [Alma J.] Dixon discussed ‘Abigail Adams in France’ and Miss [Joyce] Leavens discussed ‘Abigail Adams in England.’ The following week Miss [Marianne] Potts gave a talk on what she knew about the Administration of the National Park Service in Washington, Philadelphia and at the Adams National Historic Site. Miss [Helen] Nelson has been asked to give an account of John Quincy Adams in Russia. At this time the Superintendent will describe Louisa Catherine Johnson’s journey from St. Petersburg to Paris.³⁸¹

In their down time, staff could also peruse a bulletin board divided into two sections: half for a rotating display of research findings related to different rooms in the Old House, and half for “informative material on the National Park Service.”³⁸² To Harris, staff breaks presented a perfect opportunity for them to learn more about the Adamses.

By the 1970s, the interpretive staff was trained and monitored by either Historian Lawrence Gall or Supervisory Park Ranger Patricia Shaheen, who worked with the tour leaders to strengthen the content and delivery of their tours.³⁸³ Gall recalled that there was no formal script for the tour. New employees were expected to read Harris’s furnishings report, as well as relevant background reading on the Adamses, and a site brochure. Seasonal rangers then followed Gall or other experienced tour guides around the house as

³⁸⁰ “Policies and Procedures of the Superintendent Wilhelmina S. Harris,” [no date, ca. 1973], Resource Management Records, Box 57, Folder 16 (ADAM).

³⁸¹ Harris, June and July 1962 Superintendent’s Monthly Report. “Mrs. Dixon” was Alma J. Dixon, and “Miss Leavens” was Joyce Leavens. Both were seasonal employees at the Historic Site.

³⁸² Harris, June and July 1962 Superintendent’s Monthly Report.

³⁸³ “Policies and Procedures of the Superintendent Wilhelmina S. Harris,” [no date, ca. 1973], Resource Management Records, Box 57, Folder 16 (ADAM).

if they were visitors until they felt comfortable with the material.³⁸⁴ The atmosphere of sharing new information and learning from each other continued even as the staff grew, if Harris’s Superintendent’s Reports are to be believed. In 1974 she reported,

Everyone who works at the area soon becomes enormously interested in research. There was a time when the staff liked to read current material, such as newspapers, magazines, etc. between tours. Now that difficulty has passed because each of the interpretive staff enjoys reading about the history of the Adamses and their experiences while living in the Old House. The staff has also become exceedingly interested in John Quincy Adams’ library, and little by little we are accumulating more knowledge about the material in the Stone Library. This additional data about the Site pleases the visitors. The staff studies the catalogue cards of the contents of the Old House and is able to vary each tour as the visitor shows special interest in different objects.³⁸⁵

Shaheen’s own recollections also supported this impression of a highly engaged and supportive staff devoted to their work: Harris “knew how to build a team,” she said. “We were a team. When you think about whatever the event was, it took all of us working together to make it happen.”³⁸⁶

Even with Shaheen and Gall supervising the tour leaders, Harris continued to assert her authority as superintendent. A “Policies and Procedures” document for the staff included several stern, and excessive, warnings: “Everything is historic! You cannot at any time change the placement of any of these objects, either a chair or a vase. They have been placed in these positions for generations and the appearance of the house is checked each year by an Adams Memorial Society Committee.” Only she had the authority to cut flowers from the garden, “unless for some special reason I designate someone else.”³⁸⁷ She saw herself not only as the park’s Superintendent, but also an authority on the Old House’s previous life (and its owner, Brooks Adams), and a close ally of the Adams family descendants.

Tour leaders also had to work within the constraints of Harris’s interpretation of the Old House. When asked how much of the tour was based on Harris’s recollections, Lawrence Gall said, “I would say that all of it was.” After a pause, he continued,

³⁸⁴ Lawrence Gall, interview with Laura Miller, September 13, 2019.

³⁸⁵ Harris, 1974 Superintendent’s Annual Report, Resource Management Records, Box 5, Folder 11 (ADAM).

³⁸⁶ Patricia Shaheen, phone interview by Laura Miller, October 10, 2019.

³⁸⁷ “Policies and Procedures of the Superintendent Wilhelmina S. Harris,” [no date, ca. 1973], Resource Management Records, Box 57, Folder 16 (ADAM).

There were bits and pieces of things that were filled out by others, I tried to do a little of the filling out myself, where it didn't threaten Mrs. Harris's conceptions of what the story was that should be told. They crept in here and there. But look, the story that was told was mostly an old-fashioned filiopietistic story. You could not cast a shadow on any of the Adamses.³⁸⁸

Harris's *Furnishings Report*, which rangers were encouraged to read as part of their training, was also problematic in this regard. Even though Harris tried to draw on outside expertise, the Adams papers, and other sources where possible, the report still relied heavily on her recollections of information passed on to her by Brooks Adams in the 1920s.³⁸⁹ Despite agency historians' push in the 1950s to generate and incorporate new historical research into the site's interpretation, tours remained largely unchanged.

Resisting Retirement

Harris's time as Superintendent of Adams National Historic Site was supposedly coming to a close; she faced age-based mandatory retirement in March 1966.³⁹⁰ For several years, the Park Service sought to keep her in some capacity at the park; whether this was because of their need, the Adams family's request, or her own insistence (or some combination of the three) is unclear. There was a continual back and forth in the coming years between Harris and NPS leadership, as they debated whether or not she would continue to have a role at the park. In 1965 she became a “Reemployed Annuitant in Superintendent Capacity,” and then in January 1968, Park Service leadership hired a woman named Betty Gentry to replace her.³⁹¹ Gentry was one of the first women rangers in the NPS, and she was certainly qualified for the position. Perhaps the fact that the park was already led by a woman superintendent made it easier for NPS leadership to envision another woman in charge there. Harris, however, could not envision leaving.

³⁸⁸ Lawrence Gall, interview with Laura Miller, September 13, 2019.

³⁸⁹ Curator Kelly Cobble noted that even with the ten-volume report, “the lack of documentation that we were actually left with” for the collections is a major challenge. “Mrs. Harris was really doing the best that she could by getting it from the closest source that she could [Brooks Adams] ... I think 90% of what she got from Brooks was pretty accurate, it's just that some of it we just never would've known because they [the Adams descendants] wouldn't have known.” Kelly Cobble, phone interview with Laura Miller, October 17, 2019.

³⁹⁰ Wilhelmina Harris to Charles Francis Adams, July 22, 1964, Resource Management Records, Box 5, folder 16 (ADAM).

³⁹¹ Wilhelmina Harris biographical sketch in Unprocessed Resource Management Records, (ADAM). Gentry would later become superintendent at Pea Ridge National Military Park. See Mengak, *Reshaping Our National Parks and Their Guardians*, 82, and Polly Welts Kaufman, “Women in the National Park Service,” *Ranger: The Journal of the Association of National Park Rangers* 1, No. 4 (Fall 1985). Available online: <http://npshistory.com/centennial/0916/article.htm> (accessed April 23, 2019).

Gentry wrote to Harris to express her excitement about “the opportunities and the challenge of the job,” and to request logistical information about moving to the area—apartments, Massachusetts driver’s licenses, and the like. Harris, however, did not seem to know that Gentry had been hired to replace her. Harris responded with a fairly curt letter that offered little helpful information and a great deal of vented frustration. She wrote that she was

a little shocked at this whole procedure because on January 26, 1968, I received a Notification of Personnel Action that my position as Superintendent had been extended until December 31, 1969. . . . I think it is unfortunate to have you assume duties under confused circumstances because this area is so historically important, so filled with precious objects and requires such constant loving care that you will need a pleasant atmosphere to begin your duties.

She concluded, “I will cooperate with you to some extent but not to the extent that I had hoped to be able to do because the National Park Service has bundled [sic] this transition to such a degree that I am out of sympathy with the entire business.”³⁹² After that, the paper trail in the park’s archives ends. Gentry appears to have been assigned elsewhere, and Harris continued on as Superintendent. Gentry would become superintendent of Pea Ridge National Military Park in Arkansas nearly a decade later, in 1977.³⁹³

Harris’s reluctance to support Gentry’s promotion through the NPS system is not as unusual as it might seem. Harris had spent years proving that she deserved her position. In a 1996 interview, George Hartzog, the National Park Service’s Director from 1964 to 1972, told historian Kathy Mengak that the NPS “had to take her [Harris] with the property” when it acquired Adams Mansion National Historic Site.³⁹⁴ Of course, this was blatantly untrue—when the site was established, Harris was working as a piano teacher. She came to the role after proving invaluable to the Site’s first custodian, Raymond Corry. The Park Service and the Adams Memorial Society judged Harris’s past role as social secretary to Brooks Adams, and her knowledge of the Adamses and the Old House, to be valuable assets that made her worthy of federal employment. The fact that Hartzog repeated this unfounded claim decades later suggests that Harris likely spent her entire career battling the perception that she was awarded the role, in a sense, on a technicality. Mengak also noted that “women did not always support others of their gender rising in the ranks” and “the Park

³⁹² Betty Gentry to Wilhelmina Harris, January 28, 1968; and Wilhelmina S. Harris to Betty T. Gentry, February 2, 1968, both in Unprocessed Resource Management Records (ADAM).

³⁹³ Christopher J. Huggard, *Pea Ridge National Military Park: An Administrative History*, ca. 1997, <http://npshistory.com/publications/peri/adhi.pdf>

³⁹⁴ This quote is from a May 12, 1996 interview of Hartzog by Kathy Mengak; quoted in Mengak, *Reshaping Our National Parks*, 84.

Service presented an inhospitable environment” for women seeking support and friendship from other women in the NPS in the 1960s.³⁹⁵ Seen in this light, we can better understand Harris’s unwillingness to relinquish her position to Gentry.

The will-she-or-won’t-she retirement talk between Harris and NPS leadership continued for several years, and undoubtedly left more than one potential successor frustrated. By 1969, Harris was given the title of Special Assistant to the Regional Director, which freed up some time to work on her lengthy furnishings report. She told Charles Francis Adams that the role included “public relations for the Regional Director,” although the exact work this position entailed is unclear.³⁹⁶ During this brief period, William G. Gray was appointed Management Assistant at the site, from February to July 1969, but there are no details about this appointment in the National Archives or the Park’s archives.³⁹⁷ The only reference I could find to his tenure at the park was in a series of letters written nearly a decade later, in September and October 1977, between Mary Ogden Abbott, Frank E. Masland, Jr., and NPS Director William J. Whalen. Masland, a longtime friend and close confidante of Mary Ogden Abbott, was a well-connected environmentalist and preservationist who served on the Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments from 1956 to 1962. He chaired the board between 1959 and 1961.³⁹⁸ Abbott wrote to Masland expressing her “personal apprehensions about the future of the ‘Old House.’” She continued, “Mrs. Harris cannot last much longer and who will succeed her! It ought to be another woman. The brief tenure of a man was most unsatisfactory. He cared nothing about the House except as a stepping stone, which, as I recall, got him nowhere.”³⁹⁹ Masland dutifully wrote to Whalen on Abbott’s behalf, suggesting that the NPS appoint another woman in Harris’s place: “Some years ago, because of age, the Park Service sought to retire her and appointed a man in her place. He was a disaster.” “The result was,” Masland noted, “that Mrs. Harris was re-appointed.”⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁵ Mengak, *Reshaping Our National Parks and Their Guardians*, 71.

³⁹⁶ Wilhelmina Harris to Charles Francis Adams, April 10, 1969, Resource Management Records, Box 5, Folder 16 (ADAM).

³⁹⁷ Historic Listings of National Park Service Officials: Superintendents of National Park System Areas, <http://npshistory.com/publications/tolson/histlist7.htm>

³⁹⁸ *Historic Listings of National Park Service Officials: Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments*, https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/tolson/histlist5.htm; see also Frank E. Masland, Jr. precis, <http://www.masland.org/wp-content/uploads/FRANK-E-Jr-activities.pdf>.

³⁹⁹ Mary Ogden Abbott to Frank E. Masland, Jr., September 14, 1977, Box 8, Folder 8B, Frank E. Masland Jr. papers, MC 2009.4 (Dickinson College Archives and Special Collections, Carlisle, Pennsylvania).

⁴⁰⁰ Frank E. Masland, Jr., to William J. Whalen, October 10, 1977, RG 79, Box 4, Folder A-6435; National Park Service North Atlantic Region Program and Subject Files 1962-1977 (National Archives at Boston, Waltham, Massachusetts).

In 1975, it seemed that Harris might once again be nearing retirement. Lawrence Gall, a Ph.D. student in modern Russian history at Harvard University, received the Adams family’s stamp of approval to be her successor. Harris hired Gall in 1972 as a seasonal Park Technician at Adams National Historic Site. In discussing his hiring, Gall recalled with a laugh that “I realized I think the main reason I was hired was because Mrs. Harris’s sons all went to Harvard and she thought it would be *wonderful* to have a Harvard grad student.” Of course, Gall was amply qualified for the position, and it was a mutually beneficial appointment: Harris “took a shine to me very early on and she invited me to various things like lectures at the Mass[achusetts] Historical Society, which was really very nice. I got to hear some of the distinguished historians of the day, and even speak with them a little bit.” The Adams family arranged for him to do research at the American Antiquarian Society, and he also was able to conduct research in the MHS’s collections. The research, which focused on John Quincy Adams’s role as Minister to Russia, benefitted both Gall’s graduate school studies and the Historic Site.

Harris began advocating for Gall to succeed her as superintendent. This process required him meeting Charles Francis Adams IV for an interview at Raytheon’s headquarters in Lexington, Massachusetts. Gall noted that it made sense that Adams would want to interview any potential successor; he was “obviously . . . in communication with the Secretary of the Interior, being the CFO of Raytheon, Raytheon being an important defense contractor . . . he being the Republican Adams, it made a whole lot of sense.” It was an unforgettable interview:

I had an appointment to go see him, and I went out and I had the experience of walking through the executive offices, and the closer I got to the CFO’s office the more notice people were taking of me, you know? . . . To make a long story short, I was ushered into his office, which was an enormous, big—it was [in] a modern building. One wall looked out, it was all windows, [and] the other side was mahogany panels. He invited me to take a seat in front of his desk, which I did, and he said, “would you care for some coffee?” And I said, “yes thank you, that would be wonderful.”

Now I am not making this up, this is like something out of a movie. He presses a button on his desk, a panel slides open, and a Filipino houseboy in a starched white jacket comes out with silver service [laughs]. And when I picked my jaw up off the floor—see, C. F. Adams was a navy guy, his father had been secretary of the navy of the Hoover administration, he was a sailor and he’d been in the navy in World War II, and all these naval officers had Filipino servants, and he had one. So he brings out the service [laughs]. So it was nice, and then we chatted a little bit about my background and my interests, not a whole lot, and

then I found out later that he had written this letter and apparently he said I was a wonderful candidate. . . . I didn't say anything and I just listened politely and interestingly. Something told me, don't be chattering. [Laughs]⁴⁰¹

The interview was a success. Charles Francis Adams wrote to Secretary of the Interior Rogers Morton to recommend that the NPS hire Gall as Superintendent. “As I contemplate the next move,” Adams wrote,

I find myself fearful that the man who has appropriate seniority in the National Park Service to succeed to Mrs. Harris's job might, while admirably qualified to administer Yellowstone Park, be a bit wide of the mark for the next job which we in the family feel needs to be done, namely, to study and catalog the two Presidents' books.

Adams requested that “Mrs. Harris's successor be primarily a scholar rather than an administrator, and that you consider a candidate from outside the ranks.”⁴⁰² (The letter is striking not only for Adams's assumption that the successor would be a man, but also for how confident he was about influencing the decision.) Morton replied to say that Gall's status as a temporary employee would make such an appointment difficult, and the Civil Service Commission's competitive process would further complicate the effort. He did say that the Park Service was “prepared to seek his appointment with the hope that he could be in a position to succeed Mrs. Harris when she retires.”⁴⁰³

That day would not come for another twelve years. Harris had been grooming Gall to be her successor, and the Adamses fully supported his appointment. But she was once again unable to relinquish the position. Gall, who had by this time become the site's Historian, offered his own perspective on what transpired next:

I think she was so ambivalent. I mean, the understanding was that she had talked to me about the idea that I would come on after her. . . and I had the impression that she was thinking about retiring in a couple of years. But after a couple of years went by what I noticed was that there was a sort of subtle change in our relationship. And I came to the conclusion that she resented me there, almost as if I was waiting for her to die. You know? I think the reality was that she didn't want to retire. She just didn't want to retire. One part of her knew that eventually she'd have to retire, but this place was so much a big piece of her life that she just couldn't bear the idea. And I was right about that.

⁴⁰¹ Lawrence Gall, interview with Laura Miller, September 13, 2019.

⁴⁰² Charles F. Adams to Rogers C. B. Morton, March 31, 1975, Record Carton 1, Folder “1975 Correspondence,” AMS Records (MHS).

⁴⁰³ Rogers Morton to Charles F. Adams, April 28, 1975, Record Carton 1, Folder “1975 Correspondence,” AMS Records (MHS).

Gall’s sense of the timing lines up with the archival record. More than two years later, in October 1977, Mary Ogden Abbott wrote to Frank E. Masland, Jr. with praise for Gall:

The nice young man’s name is *Lawrence Gall*. He has been at the Old House in *Quincy*! For some time. . . . Larry Gall, as he is known to the present family, is very well liked, he has beautiful manners and I believe is genuinely interested in the house. It seems to me desirable that the family should keep up its interest and find the ‘curator’ congenial. If someone was put in charge that treated us as outsiders it would be most unfortunate I think. We like to feel at home there and we like to feel the presence of our ancestors as many of us do, when we enter the door.

But, Abbott also noted Harris’s reluctance to let go:

Mrs. Harris is not enthusiastic but Mrs. H. is very jealous of her prerogatives and I think would not approve the Angel Gabriel. She has given he[r] life to the Old House since she has been in charge and has done more for it than anyone else would do. It has been a consuming interest. I hope that when she must retire she will move away from across the street. It makes an impossible situation for her successor—she flatters herself that she does not interfere.⁴⁰⁴

In September 1977, a month before Abbott penned this letter to Masland, Harris wrote to North Atlantic Regional Director Jack E. Stark requesting an extension of her responsibilities. There was no further mention of Gall as her successor. Stark replied with assurances that the NPS intended to keep her at the Old House: “Managing Adams National Historic Site without your presence is a task that I certainly do not envision taking on so long as I am Regional Director.”⁴⁰⁵ Gall said he “got the message eventually and I thought well, you know, if you’re going to do something, make a career out of this, you better look elsewhere.”⁴⁰⁶ He decided to leave for a position at Lowell National Historic Park in 1979, and became Superintendent of Minute Man National Historical Park a decade later, in 1989.⁴⁰⁷ Despite several close calls, Harris managed to hold on to the position and would remain the park’s Superintendent until her actual retirement in 1987, at the age of 91.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁴ Mary Ogden Abbott to Frank E. Masland, Jr., October 22, 1977, Box 8, Folder 8B, Frank E. Masland Jr. papers, MC 2009.4, (Dickinson College Archives and Special Collections, Carlisle, Pennsylvania).

⁴⁰⁵ Wilhelmina S. Harris to Jack E. Stark, September 6, 1977, and Stark to Harris, September 13, 1977, RG 79, Box 4, Folder A-6435, National Park Service North Atlantic Region Program and Subject Files 1962–1977, National Archives at Boston, Waltham, Massachusetts.

⁴⁰⁶ Lawrence Gall, interview with Laura Miller, September 13, 2019.

⁴⁰⁷ Joan Zenzen, *Bridging the Past: Minute Man National Historical Park Administrative History* (National Park Service Northeast Region History Program: July 2010), 258.

⁴⁰⁸ Biographical notes in Unprocessed Resource Management Records (ADAM).

A final anecdote provides one more glimpse into Harris’s perception of the male-dominated world of the NPS leadership. In June 1971, Harris wrote to Carol A. Martin, a new woman superintendent for Tuzigoot National Monument in Arizona to congratulate her on her appointment. She wrote, “For about twenty years I was the only woman Superintendent in the Park Service and became convinced that there would never be another woman appointed. The NPS has always seemed to be a man’s organization.”⁴⁰⁹ Perhaps this realization motivated Harris to resist retirement and hold on to her own position as long as she could. It was unclear when there would be another woman like her.



Figure 33. Photograph of Wilhelmina Harris (front row) posing for a photograph with some of her male NPS colleagues. Details about this photo are, unfortunately, unknown, but it gives a sense of the “man’s organization” that Harris referred to in her 1971 correspondence with Tuzigoot National Monument’s new Superintendent, Carol A. Martin. Courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

⁴⁰⁹ Wilhelmina S. Harris to Carol A. Martin, June 4, 1971, Unprocessed Resource Management Records (ADAM). Mengak notes that Tuzigoot was known “as a place where recalcitrant superintendents who needed some ‘reconditioning’ were sent. With such a placement, however, he could promote a woman to a superintendency while minimizing objections from men who had their eyes on more prestigious parks.” *Reshaping Our National Parks*, 84.

“A Watch Dog over the Old House”: A New Generation of Adamses

As the Adams descendants grew more distant from firsthand knowledge of the family’s life in the Old House, Harris worked to familiarize the younger generations with this history. In the 1960s and 1970s, the site’s staff spent a growing amount of time devoted to the task. The next generation of Adamses, particularly Thomas Boylston Adams, Charles Francis Adams IV, and Mary Ogden Abbott, worked very closely with—and kept a close eye on—the park in these decades.



Figure 34. Wilhelmina Harris with members of the Adams Memorial Society in the Stone Library, date unknown.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

Mary Ogden Abbott was particularly mindful of goings-on at the Old House. Harris was sometimes a bit frustrated with Abbott’s demands, but always treated her with respect and with some degree of deference. In September 1962, Abbott (now in her late 60s) gifted a sign she created in collaboration with Harris for the Historic Site, featuring carved autographs of John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Charles Francis Adams, Henry Adams,

and Brooks Adams.⁴¹⁰ Harris hosted a ceremony at the Old House to formally accept it. Approximately 150 people attended the event, which was accompanied by a special exhibit of Abbott’s carvings and watercolors in the Carriage House.⁴¹¹ Assistant Secretary of State Edwin M. Martin was on hand for the occasion, and he gave a speech lauding the Adams family’s diplomatic contributions to the United States. Although Harris was thrilled with the event, Abbott was not. She wrote to Harris to register her displeasure that the sign “slipped in the frame” (exactly how is unclear), and her concern that the sign would be exposed to the elements and vandals outside.⁴¹² Harris followed up with an apologetic, yet firm letter, writing: “let me express my regret that the occasion which we thought was so successful was from your point of view, a great failure.” There were no hard feelings, however, and Abbott quickly recovered from the incident. The next month, she brought an authority on harnesses to meet with Harris and advise her on how to properly hang them in the Carriage House: “It was Miss Abbott’s opinion that our harness should be rehung as would be correct from the point of view of an authority on such matters,” Harris noted. Abbott was an accomplished equestrian, so Harris rightly accepted her as an authority on the subject. Harris also made assurances that she would have the harness cleaned and hung with care for display the next season.⁴¹³

Harris fostered the family’s continued investment in the Old House, recognizing that they were an asset that only elevated the Site’s status. She kept in regular correspondence with individual family members, and regularly rallied them to important events. In 1967, Harris arranged a luncheon with First Lady Lady Bird Johnson, who was embarking on a tour of New England. Marianne Peak noted that Harris “favored the republican viewpoint,” “and was not so engaging or indulging toward the Johnsons and Kennedys.”⁴¹⁴ Nevertheless, she dutifully accommodated the visit. Charles Francis Adams took the lead on organizing the family and hosting the event. Harris, in turn, was preoccupied with making the necessary arrangements and managing the occasionally frustrating whims of

⁴¹⁰ Mary Ogden Abbott also carved elaborate teak doors (the “Western Gates,” also known as the “Indian Gates”) and donated them in 1973 to the US Department of the Interior. They hang at the entrance to the Secretary of the Interior and Director’s Offices on 18th Street in Washington, DC See David W. Look and Carole L. Perrault, *The Interior Building: Its Architecture and Its Art* (US Department of the Interior, National Park Service Preservation Assistance Division, 1986), 140.

⁴¹¹ *Christian Science Monitor*, September 7, 1962 and *Patriot Ledger*, September 8, 1962, Superintendent’s Clipping File, 1965–1966, Box 1, Folder 12 (ADAM).

⁴¹² Today (in 2020), the sign hangs inside in the back pantry of the Old House, safe from inclement weather and potential vandalism.

⁴¹³ May and September 1962 Superintendent’s Monthly Reports; Program for Presentation of Carved Area Sign, Resource Management Records, Box 57, Folder 3 (ADAM). Newspaper articles regarding the sign dedication include *Patriot Ledger*, September 5, 1962; *Christian Science Monitor*, September 7, 1962; and *Patriot Ledger*, September 8, 1962. Mary Ogden Abbot to Wilhelmina Harris, September 9, 1962, and Harris to Abbott, September 11, 1962, Resource Management Records, Box 5, Folder 16 (ADAM). A discussion of the harness is in Harris’ October 1962 Superintendent’s Monthly Report.

⁴¹⁴ Marianne Peak comments on the first draft of this book, January 2020.

Mary Ogden Abbott, who played an active, yet grudging role. Tensions flared as Abbott and Harris disagreed over which finger bowls to set out for the occasion—Harris wanted to use what had been used in the house, and Abbott wanted to use silver finger bowls purchased by her grandfather in Egypt. “However, when you disagree with Miss Abbott on some point,” Harris wrote to Charles Francis Adams, “she seems all the more determined to carry her point of view.” Harris also had to keep the enthusiasm of Quincy residents at bay, which led to some strange interactions: a woman wanted to know what food was being served for the occasion so that she could include the recipes in her next cookbook; a local florist showed up offering to replant the garden with geraniums; and Quincy residents upset about local zoning laws wrote letters appealing to Mrs. Johnson for help, which they brought to the Old House for delivery to the first lady. Harris assured Charles Francis Adams, “We have returned both the mail and the plants!”⁴¹⁵

By all accounts, the luncheon was a success. Johnson was accompanied by Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall and his wife Lee. Harris gave Johnson a tour of the Old House—presumably the “deluxe” version—which was followed by a carefully orchestrated luncheon. First, there was a sherry hour in the Long Room with pretzels, followed by a meal of bouillon, lobster with stuffed tomatoes, croissant roles, and cranberry ice and ginger wafers. The table was laid out with place cards featuring the seal used by John Adams when he signed the Treaty of Paris, on the tablecloth and with the napkins used by John and Abigail Adams at the White House. The guests ate from Adams family porcelain. Lunch was followed by a coffee hour in the Stone Library.⁴¹⁶ Johnson was gifted a cutting of the Abigail Adams’s White Roses of York—a well-received suggestion from Mary Ogden Abbott.

⁴¹⁵ Wilhelmina Harris to Charles Francis Adams, May 31, 1967. AMS records, Folder 1967 Correspondence (MHS).

⁴¹⁶ Harris script of the day’s events in Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 7 (ADAM).



Figure 35. Lady Bird Johnson walking in the garden during her 1967 visit to the Old House.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

Everything went off without a hitch, but the headline stealer was Abigail Adams Homans (“Hitty”), the 88-year-old matriarch of the family who had helped establish the house as a museum in 1927. The *New York Times*’s humorous account of the luncheon merits quoting at length:

Mrs. Homans began by breaking an antique sherry glass and saying, “Hell, I hope it isn’t historic,” in a loud, foghorn voice before the President’s wife. The First Lady was obviously delighted. She confessed, as did some other Adamses, that she was petrified she might break something priceless. . . .

The short, wiry Mrs. Homans waved her cane about imperiously, said she was a registered Republican “but that doesn’t mean much,” pretended she couldn’t remember whether she had voted for President Johnson in 1964 and dismissed the first Abigail as a “very extravagant woman” who bought too many things.

She bade guests to address themselves more closely to her hearing aid so she would miss nothing and said the Adamses had to “sweat blood to get money to fix anything in this house” before the Interior Department took it over in 1946. In short, she dominated the gathering.⁴¹⁷

The First Lady’s roll-with-the-punches attitude and sense of humor even won over a skeptical Mary Ogden Abbott, who found her charming. She wrote to Charles Francis Adams, “Whatever one may think of her husband—and I am beginning to think he is our best bet if he can stay the course—he certainly was a good picker when it came to wives.” She also noted that Harris “was in a real flap at the number of free loaders you were entertaining,” in reference to the massive entourage of photographers, reporters, secret service, and police that accompanied the first lady on the visit and camped out by the Duck Pond. “We innocent country people would never, and did Mrs. expect a Royal Progress in the manner of Queen Elizabeth I. If Mrs. J. [Johnson] had not been so nice it would have been unendurable.”⁴¹⁸ For Abbott, this counted as high praise.



Figure 36. Lady Bird Johnson’s luncheon in the Old House, 1967.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

⁴¹⁷ *New York Times*, June 10, 1967, Superintendent’s Clipping File, 1965–1966, Box 1, Folder 15, (ADAM).

⁴¹⁸ Undated letter from Mary Ogden Abbott to Charles Francis Adams, Folder 1967 Correspondence (MHS).

Abbott’s relationship with Harris and the NPS reflected what she felt was her responsibility to the Old House. In a striking letter to Charles Francis Adams on December 6, 1969, Abbott told Adams that the Adams Memorial Society “is an organization only perpetuated as a watch dog over the Old House (most important as you know!).” Soon after, Abbott became President of the Adams Memorial Society. Although she kept a watchful eye on the property, she and the other family members respected Harris, and deeply trusted her judgment in caring for the property. In May 1971, they invited her to become an Honorary Member of the Adams Memorial Society.⁴¹⁹ In retrospect, that particular honor may have been part gratitude, part peace offering. Harris had just received upsetting news from Charles Francis Adams.

On the morning of April 28, 1971, Harris received a letter from S. Herbert Evison of the NPS. Evison wrote to Harris to tell her that Charles Francis Adams had met with J. Carter Brown, Director of the National Gallery, and that both men thought Harris should record her recollections of the Old House and the Adams family for posterity. The letter devastated Harris—not because she was unwilling to record her memories, but because she knew why Adams and Brown had met. Though it was unspoken in Evison’s letter, she deduced that this meant they were discussing a future home for Gilbert Stuart’s 1815 portrait of John Adams.⁴²⁰ She wrote immediately to Charles Francis Adams:

My nervousness is caused by the supposition that Mr. Carter Brown must have written you in regard to the portrait of John Adams in his 88th year. Naturally just the thought of it going anywhere other than the ‘Old House’ throws me into a mental tizzy. I am not prying into why you and Mr. Brown are corresponding but if it was in regard to your magnificent portrait please let me repeat, ‘Please don’t forget the Old House.’⁴²¹

Her worst fears were confirmed. Charles Francis Adams responded on May 19, 1971:

[I]n regard to the portrait of John Adams, I am sorry to cause you concern. Over a period of years, I have given a great deal of thought to its ultimate disposition. . . . the value of this painting by Gilbert Stuart as a work of art, as well as its historic significance must be taken into account. On the first count it rates very high, perhaps as the best work of one of our greatest portrait painters, and this to me is a very compelling argument for it going to the National Gallery of Art. In discussing this with Carter Brown on my own initiative, I sought confirmation that it could be expected to remain on exhibition when many other Stuarts

⁴¹⁹ The exact year she became president is unclear from the AMS’s records. The first reference to her as president is in 1970.

⁴²⁰ The portrait can be seen on the National Gallery of Art website: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.42933.html>.

⁴²¹ Wilhelmina S. Harris to Charles Francis Adams, April 28, 1971,” Record Carton 1, Folder “1971 Correspondence,” MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

might be consigned to storage. With this as well assured as such things can be when one cannot commit future generations, it seemed to me that here other considerations should then govern, first its safety from fire, theft, damage, etc., and second the number of people who would be able to see it. On both of these counts, the gallery came ahead of The Old House. On the other side were the arguments that it belongs in John Adams's house, and that it is there that it should be viewed, in the very place where it was painted. This has been a very difficult decision to make, and one which has troubled me greatly. I assure you that it has not been arrived at without due consideration of your very strong views. The fact is that a codicil to my will now leaves the picture to the National Gallery of Art.⁴²²

Adams's reasoning was quite sound, but Harris was devastated. As with all bumps in the road with the Adams Memorial Society members, however, she took the blow in stride.

Just as Harris was willing to use the Adams family to further her own plans for the Historic Site, so too were the Adamses willing to use the NPS site to their own ends. Harris made several arrangements with family members that reflected her desire to keep the family invested in the park. They displayed an exhibit of watercolors and wood carvings by Mary Ogden Abbott in the summer of 1960, highlighting the continued contributions of Adams descendants to American arts and culture. In December 1961—the park's off-season—Harris opened the house so that Susie Homans, granddaughter of Abigail Homans, could treat 23 of her classmates from the Buckingham School in Cambridge to a tour of the Old House.⁴²³ Harris also welcomed family members to give lectures about Adams history at the park. The 1976 public television series *The Adams Chronicles* prompted some family members to embark on a new image-management effort. On June 24, 1976, Thomas Boylston Adams gave a 45-minute talk, “The Truth and Television,” to approximately 200 guests who crammed into the Carriage House. Part of the Historic Site's weeklong bicentennial lecture series, Adams came to critique the television series which, he argued, misrepresented or outright fabricated events in the family's history.⁴²⁴ Thomas Boylston Adams, who had served as president of the MHS from 1957 to 1975, had become his generation's keeper of the family reputation. His desire to give a public talk on the subject was undoubtedly part of these efforts.

⁴²² Charles Francis Adams to Wilhelmina S. Harris, May 19, 1971, Record Carton 1, Folder “1971 Correspondence,” MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁴²³ Harris, July and August 1960 Superintendent's Monthly Reports; and Harris, December 1961 Superintendent's Monthly Report. Marianne Peak noted that Susie Homans would go on to work as a seasonal park ranger at the Old House when she was in college. Later in life, she donated personal belongings such as Brooks Adams's shoe horn, a Bible for the birthplaces, and a tall clock exhibited in the Beale House. Peak comments on first draft of this book, January 2020.

⁴²⁴ “TV Seen Distorting Adams Story,” *Patriot Ledger*, June 25, 1976, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 22 (ADAM).



Figure 37. Thomas Boylston Adams and his wife Ramelle Cochrane in 1996.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

By the late 1970s, Harris showed occasional frustration at how time-consuming the family had become. In 1977, she wrote “The Adams Memorial Society had their annual meeting at the Adams National Historic Site. It was the opinion of the Superintendent that we did a great deal of entertaining of the Adams Memorial Society, but we had a request from some members that we have more frequent meetings so that the younger members of the family (that is, those under the age of ten) might grow up with a familiarity of the house. We will endeavor to carry out this suggestion.” The members of the Adams Memorial Society *were* showing a renewed interest in the Old House. The next year, in 1978, they created a “Committee that Visits the Old House.”⁴²⁵ Now, in addition to their annual family gathering, a group of Adams descendants would make regular visits “to insure that the covenants of the September 23, 1946, AMS bequest to the United States of America are fulfilled by the National Park Service,” as well as to “foster an on-going appreciation and understanding of the Old House by successive Adams generations.”⁴²⁶ Although it required more work on the part of the Site’s staff, Harris willingly obliged. In fact, the Committee

⁴²⁵ Harris, 1977 Superintendent’s Annual Report, Resource Management Records, Box 5, Folder 11 (ADAM). “AMS Annual Meeting of Members, May 25, 1978,” Record Carton 1, Folder “1978 Minutes/Correspondence,” MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁴²⁶ “AMS Annual Meeting of Members,” May 25, 1978, Record Carton 1, Folder “1978 Minutes/Correspondence,” MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

may have been created at Harris’s suggestion—after the death of Diana Abbott in 2001, Nancy M. Adams recorded that “before retiring as superintendent, Wilhelmina Harris became very concerned about the future of the Old House and the family connection to it, and at her request Diana was the first to lead our Committee.”⁴²⁷ Whether the suggestion came from the Adamses or Harris, one thing was certain: another generation of Adamses would feel invested in the Old House, and would continue to donate their time and family heirlooms to the NPS.

Acquiring the Beale Estate

The Beale estate on the western boundary of Adams National Historic Site was historically significant because of the Beale family’s association with three generations of Adamses, from John and Abigail and through Charles Francis and Abigail Brooks Adams. More importantly, it was critical to Harris’s efforts to “impede progress” as a buffer to encroaching development. The NPS sought maintain the same unobstructed views around the Old House that Adams family members would have seen from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century.⁴²⁸ The Site’s revised Master Plan, updated for Mission 66 in 1962, asserted that acquiring the Beale property was essential: “To do less will make it impossible for the area to adequately fulfill its very reason for existence—that future generations may learn of their heritage and be inspired with greater pride in our country.” This statement was perhaps a bit exaggerated. Would nearby development really prevent the Site’s staff from educating and inspiring visitors? But the Master Plan’s next point was not: if visitation at the site increased dramatically, the park would need to find ways to accommodate additional parking, rest rooms, and other facilities for a growing number of tourists.⁴²⁹ This, rather than the capacity for inspiring future generations, was a more pressing challenge facing the increasingly popular Historic Site. It was also a more compelling reason to acquire the property next door.

⁴²⁷ Report of the Committee Who Visit the Old House,” September 8, 2001, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder “2001 Minutes,” AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁴²⁸ Maureen K. Phillips, *Beale House Historic Structure Report, Adams National Historic Site* (Boston: Cultural Resources Center, Building Conservation Branch, National Park Service North Atlantic Region, 1993 draft), 3–4.

⁴²⁹ See “Master Plan for the Preservation and Use of Adams National Historic Site,” Volume I, Chapter 1: “Objectives and Policies,” approved by A.C. Stratton, March 12, 1963, 5, in Resource Management Records, Box 20, Folder 20 (ADAM). The Park’s 1993 Statement for Management indicates that a Master Plan was approved in 1968, but I was unable to locate a 1968 version of the Master Plan in the Park’s archives. A February 1975 Park Review indicated that the Master Plan was neither current nor approved. Acting Regional Director, North Atlantic Region, “Park Review—Adams National Historic Site,” February 25, 1975, RG 79, Box 2, Folder A-5427 ADAMS 74-76, National Park Service North Atlantic Region Program and Subject Files 1962-1977, National Archives at Boston.



Figure 38. The Beale house. Date unknown, likely ca. 1960s.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.



Figure 39. The Beale estate, at left, with the Adams estate in the background.

The image illustrates the viewshed that the Beale estate helped to protect around Adams National Historical Park. Date unknown, likely ca. 1960s. Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

Serious discussions between the Department of the Interior and the owner of the Beale Estate, Dr. Esther E. Bartlett, began in 1962. In February, Historian Helen Nelson wrote a thorough and meticulously footnoted report that highlighted historical references to the Beale property, and documented the relationship between the Beales and the Adamses. Harris used this report, along with a Beale family genealogy compiled by Beale descendant Mrs. George Bonsall, to justify the NPS’s acquisition of the property: “To me, the compelling reason for the acquiring of the Beale property is to protect the west boundary from encroachments and to maintain the atmosphere of one continuous piece of property.”⁴³⁰ (Nelson wrote a similar report for the property on the southern boundary of the property, but the NPS decided ultimately to focus the agency’s efforts only on the Beale

⁴³⁰ Park Historian, Adams NHS to Superintendent, Adams NHS, “Historical References to the Property on the West Boundary of the Adams National Historic Site,” February 21, 1962, and Superintendent, Adams NHS to Regional Director, Region Five, “Report on the Property on the West Boundary of the Adams National Historic Site,” February 21, 1962; both in Box 1613, Folder ADAM L1417 Pt. 1, 1-1-62 to 12-31-63,” RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Administrative Files, 1949–1971 (NACP).

Estate.) In August, the Interior Department requested that Congress enlarge Adams National Historic Site. Democratic Congressman James A. Burke filed legislation to authorize the acquisition of the Beale Estate, with the bill indicating that “Pressures are increasing to allow modified residential or commercial development on the land adjoining the site on the west.”⁴³¹ This first attempt was unsuccessful, but the Park Service continued to pursue the property in the coming decade.

By the early 1970s, Harris and NPS leadership felt that acquiring the Beale Estate was an urgent priority. This was further underscored in April 1971 when the Norfolk County Commissioners sought to purchase the lot across the street from the Historic Site, which had recently been rezoned to “Residence C” to allow the construction of a parking lot. This was not the first time that the NPS worried about the plot; it was offered to the federal government by Earl Bestick on behalf of owner Mortimer N. Peck in 1959. The NPS did not have the funds available to purchase it, however, and Acting Associate Director Jackson E. Price suggested that perhaps the Mayor and the city of Quincy should do their part to preserve the site across from the Old House.⁴³² A little over a decade later, the NPS was again forced to confront the site’s future.

Harris was vehemently opposed to the lot, and had hoped that the NPS would eventually be able to purchase the land for preservation. She called it an “awful shame”: “A parking area is out of the historic theme,” and “It just makes me ill to think about desecrating land which someday could be a part of this area, and which should add to Quincy’s beauty.” Eleven members of the Quincy Citizens Association filed a petition to rezone the lot to Open Space. Parking *was*, however, an issue for the tenants of the building, who were desperate to find more places nearby to leave their cars. As the petition was being recorded, the owner of the property, Dr. Edward Maltzman, moved ahead with breaking down the stone retaining wall built by Charles Francis Adams and clearing the plot of land. Despite objections from some city residents, the NPS, and even Adams Papers Editors Marc Friedlaender and Lyman Butterfield, the resistance was unsuccessful. The Old House now looked out on a parking lot for Maltzman’s apartment building.⁴³³

⁴³¹ *Patriot Ledger*, August 8 and 16, 1962, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 12 (ADAM).

⁴³² Jackson E. Price to Regional Director, Region Five, “Mortimer N. Peck Property, Adams National Historic Site,” December 15, 1959, Box 1613, Folder “L1417 1-1-54-,” RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, General Records, Administrative Files, 1949–1971 (NACP).

⁴³³ *Patriot Ledger*, March 31, April 6, 7, 26, and May 5, 1971, all in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 18 (ADAM). Today, it is a condominium.



Figure 40. The intersection of Adams Street and Newport Avenue next to the Old House.

Photograph by Abbie Rowe, September 1946.

To the left, you can see the offending apartment building and the open lot before it was razed to create a parking lot.

US National Archives Collections, National Archives Identifier 51460213.

In September 1971, the MBTA's Red Line was completed, ensuring that traffic and development would continue unabated in the city. As Harris and others grew more worried about preserving the remaining open space around the property, the National Park Foundation stepped in and purchased the Beale Estate for \$120,000 on November 20, 1971. It held the property until Congress authorized its purchase by the NPS. The sale agreement allowed the former owner, Dr. Esther E. Bartlett, to remain in the home until her death, which came in 1989.⁴³⁴ After years of hand-wringing and near misses, Adams National Historic Site finally acquired the 3.68 acre Beale Estate on the western boundary of the park on April 11, 1972. The Adams Memorial Society hosted a reception in honor of Congressman Burke on June 9, 1972. Adams Memorial Society President Mary Ogden Abbott noted that the Burke's efforts were critical to acquiring the property, and added,

⁴³⁴ "US Buys Beale Estate Next to Adams Mansion," December 21, 1971, newspaper unknown, in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 18 <https://www.patriotledger.com/blogs/20170908/architectural-gems-of-quincy-tour-sept-23>

“refreshments will be served in the garden where we can safely enjoy the prospect of open fields instead of the threat of ‘development.’”⁴³⁵ The acquisition ensured that the property would retain its rural atmosphere in the midst of a rapidly developing city.

The park’s archival record is understandably skewed toward its own priorities, and by extension the priorities of the neighboring homeowners on Adams Street. A memorandum from Harris to the Northeast Region’s Regional Director from March 1966 underscores the reality that although Harris was interested in preserving the land around the site for historic preservation reasons, she was also one of many affluent homeowners in the neighborhood who did not want to see their stretch of Adams Street developed. In the memorandum, she notes that several of her neighbors, including “Mr. Johnston who owns a large house at 310 Adams Street,” and “Mr. Roydon Burke,” bought up land surrounding their homes to protect their property and prevent the subdivision of the land around them. She added that Dr. Bartlett had made known her displeasure with the government’s slow progress on acquiring her property, and was planning to have it surveyed for development. This was distressing to Harris as both the Superintendent of the Historic Site, *and* as a resident of the neighborhood. She warned that “Unless the Government protects the Adams National Historic Site by additional land, the country atmosphere will be gone within the next decade.”⁴³⁶

The park’s archives offer fewer glimpses into community members who may have favored such development. But we know that to preserve the historic view surrounding the Old House, the Park Service and the local homeowners association sought to fend off the construction of an elementary school, resisted the Eventide nursing home, and a parking lot for the residents of the large apartment building next door.⁴³⁷ In addition to those who sought to profit from the development of open land on Adams Street, there were Quincy residents who believed the space was ideal for education, social services, and housing and parking needs—all legitimate desires for residents of a growing city.

In his essay, “Selling Heritage Landscapes,” historian and geographer Richard Francaviglia suggests that heritage landscapes, like that the landscape at Adams National Historical Park, are best understood in the context in which they were created. By the 1970s, Quincy was dramatically different than it was in 1927, the year that Brooks Adams died. It had grown in population, opened a new MBTA line, welcomed new immigrants, and developed extensively. At the same time, distressing national events, from the civil

⁴³⁵ “Notice of Meeting of Members,” May 4, 1972, Record Carton 1, Folder “1972 minutes/correspondence,” AMS Records (MHS).

⁴³⁶ Wilhelmina S. Harris to Regional Director, Northeast Region, Memorandum, “Master Plan,” March 28, 1966, Resource Management Records, Box 8, Folder 2 (ADAM).

⁴³⁷ Historian James Lindgren suggests that “the lure of old-time New England does have commercial and psychological appeal, but such marketplace, antimodern values have distracted preservationists from presenting—indeed sometimes accepting—an unvarnished image of the everyday life of diverse New Englanders past and present.” *Preserving Historic New England*, 178.

rights movement, to urban unrest, and the Vietnam War, were all at the forefront of Americans’ minds. Francaviglia reminds us that heritage landscapes “are more than the past preserved; in fact they are artifacts of active preservation efforts” that often reflect contemporary anxieties about social and cultural transformation.⁴³⁸ The view enjoyed by Abigail and John Adams might be preserved, but the city would continue to grow and change around it.

Wilhelmina Harris’s conservative approach to the stewardship of Adams National Historic Site focused on preserving the Site’s landscapes, structures, and the objects contained therein so that the visitor “be permitted to experience that he is there, very much as the guest of the Family.”⁴³⁹ She worked tirelessly to ensure that “progress” did not get in the way of these aims, whether those plans came from urban developers in Quincy or from the NPS. Her goal for the park, she told interviewer Polly Welts Kaufman in 1985, was to “fight the trends.”⁴⁴⁰ Despite her best efforts, however, the site was dramatically transformed by the end of the 1970s. She *did* manage to bring these changes about at a measured pace, so they were barely perceptible to visitors and staff.

⁴³⁸ Richard Francaviglia, “Selling Heritage Landscapes,” in *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America*, eds. Arnold R. Alanen and Robert Z. Melnick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 49, 53.

⁴³⁹ George A. Palmer to Conrad Wirth, “MISSION 66 Information Statement for Adams National Historic Site,” February 16, 1956, Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 13 (ADAM); “Mission 66 Prospectus,” April 21, 1956, Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 13 (ADAM).

⁴⁴⁰ Wilhelmina Harris, interview by Polly Welts Kaufman, March 29, 1985, NPS Oral History Collection, HFCA 1817, NPS History Collection, Harpers Ferry Center for Media Development (Harpers Ferry, WV), 7.

CHAPTER SIX

ANNIVERSARIES, BICENTENNIALS, AND BIRTHPLACES

On April 11, 1975, a multi-year string of anniversary and bicentennial celebrations kicked off in Quincy. That night, more than 800 people gathered for an evening of festivities to celebrate Quincy 350th birthday with a cocktail hour and gala dinner dance held at the Chateau de Ville in Randolph, Massachusetts. Quincy Mayor Walter J. Hannon gave a speech that provides a striking glimpse into the social and political climate of the 1970s. The *Patriot Ledger* reported that Hannon “set the tone for the evening when he paid tribute to the people ‘whose names are not Adams or Hancock’”:

‘Let us pay tribute to the taxpayers, the people who built the schools and the roads, to the Jews and Gentiles, the Scots and Italians who made our city great.’

In a poignant moment the mayor also remembered the dead from two world wars and Vietnam. ‘Let us humbly give thanks to those whose dying allows us to enjoy this celebration,’ he said.

In just a few sentences, Hannon disrupted the customary emphasis on Quincy’s revolutionary history and its ties to the founding fathers. Instead, in a speech finely tuned to the political moment, he seized on popular mistrust of the federal government and highlighted instead the work of ordinary, taxpaying Americans.

Hannon’s speech must have been slightly uncomfortable for Raytheon executive Charles Francis Adams IV, who was also in attendance. The *Patriot Ledger* reported that Adams made his own remarks and, perhaps a bit on the defensive, “said that although no Adamses now live in Quincy the family has not deserted the city. He explained that different members of the family were drawn away from the city by their personal interests and added he was pleased his company was able to build a large plant in the city.”⁴⁴¹ Whereas Hannon gave a nod to both the city’s white ethnic constituencies and a growing suspicion of elite families who had long been entrenched in local and national life, Adams in turn revealed his family’s insecurities about leaving their ancestral home and the struggles the city was now facing.

⁴⁴¹ “Quincy Officially Kicks Off 350th,” *Patriot Ledger*, April 12, 1975, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 21 (ADAM).

Quincy was struggling economically in the 1970s, alongside the American economy as a whole. The decade marked the moment when city leaders increasingly looked to tourism in their quest to give the city an economic boost, while at the same time divesting the city of its responsibility for one of its primary tourist attractions, the Adams birthplaces. This downturn coincided with Quincy's 350th, the 1976 Bicentennial, and the bicentennial of the Massachusetts Constitution in 1979, all of which provided the city's residents with multiple opportunities to celebrate local history while promoting heritage tourism. These celebrations also came in the midst of a tumultuous historical moment for the nation, which was being torn apart by racial and ethnic conflict, the costly and brutal war in Vietnam, and the Watergate scandal.⁴⁴² Historian John Bodnar has argued that the 1976 Bicentennial celebration was "very much a product of the turbulent times that immediately preceded it":

it was intent on reaffirming the status quo, the authority of existing institutions, and the need for loyalty to the nation-state itself. But it was also a tremendous expression in both design and achievement of local pride and perceptions of a local past.⁴⁴³

The tension on display for Quincy's 350th birthday celebration, a push and pull between local and national politics, was always just beneath the surface of Quincy's anniversary and bicentennial celebrations in the 1970s.

The United States Bicentennial

In this uneasy historical moment, Adams National Historic Site's staff helped generate local pride—and tourist dollars—through their participation in Quincy's commemorative events. The Historic Site was chosen by the NPS to be one of 23 national bicentennial sites.⁴⁴⁴ Harris did not let the NPS dictate how the Site would observe the occasion, however. Lawrence Gall, at the time the site's Historian, shared a humorous recollection:

At the time of the bicentennial, the park service did a series of posters of the bicentennial sites and they did one for Adams. They hired a sculptor to do . . . [a poster of] John and Abigail Adams, nose-to-nose profiles. So a big box of these comes, a couple thousand copies. Mrs. Harris takes one look at these and says,

⁴⁴² Tammy S. Gordon, *The Spirit of 1976: Commerce, Community, and the Politics of Commemoration* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 8.

⁴⁴³ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 229.

⁴⁴⁴ "Adams Site Noted for Bicentennial," *Patriot Ledger*, September 1973 [exact date unknown], Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 19 (ADAM).

“This is hideous. I will not have this shown anywhere here.” So she had them put in the basement. I got a call from the chief of interpretation in the region, who used to call me because he was afraid of talking to Mrs. Harris, and he said, “Larry, you think you could send us some of these posters? We’re going to put the posters up in the regional office.” I said “I could probably do that.” So I sent them. And I discovered later that what she did with the posters is she felt that the first floor in the carriage house was a little chilly in the winter, so she put the posters under the rug—she lined the floor with those posters [laughs]!

Gall’s story matches the general tenor of the archival record of the site’s Bicentennial events. That record is surprisingly thin, and the documents that do exist suggest that Harris was rather unenthusiastic about participating. This is striking when compared to the many of the other public events she enthusiastically hosted over the years. The site’s first Bicentennial event was not for the public at all; they hosted a visit from a group of ten English Lords, who met with Charles Francis Adams and his wife Bea and enjoyed a luncheon in the Stone Library.⁴⁴⁵

Harris was more excited about the site’s weeklong 1976 lecture series, which featured talks that were free and open to the public. The series kicked off on Monday, June 21 with Historian Lawrence Gall speaking on “Mr. and Mrs. John Quincy Adams in St. Petersburg.” In the subsequent days, lectures included a talk about historic preservation by F. Ross Holland Jr.; “John Adams, Legalist as Revolutionist” by Adams Papers editor in chief Robert J. Taylor; a critique of *The Adams Chronicles* TV series by Thomas Boylston Adams; and a discussion of the science of art preservation by the Museum of Fine Arts Boston’s William J. Young. The concluding lecture, co-sponsored with and held at the UFPC, was a lecture with pictures by the American Association of Museums’ director, Richard McLanathan.⁴⁴⁶ Harris was particularly pleased with this final talk, which focused on the history of the Arts and Crafts movement in the United States and drew an audience of 300 people. She reported to the Acting Regional Director that “if we had only that one lecture, I think our Bicentennial series would have been a great success.”

On July 14, the NPS’s North Atlantic Regional Office sponsored an outdoor play, *The Contrast*, by Royall Tyler in Merrymount Park. The *Quincy Sun* noted, “It will be a sort of a Bicentennial homecoming for Tyler, a 1776 graduate of Harvard, who was once engaged to John Adams’s daughter, Abigail.”⁴⁴⁷ Harris mentioned the event in her annual report, but made it abundantly clear that it was sponsored by the Regional Office, not the park. She wrote, “The audience was distressingly small and the cast was largely substitutes.

⁴⁴⁵ Wilhelmina S. Harris, “Superintendent’s Annual Report—1976,” Resource Management Records, Box 5, Folder 11 (ADAM).

⁴⁴⁶ *Quincy Sun*, June 17, 1976. Available online, https://archive.org/details/Quincy_Sun_1976_Jan-Dec/page/n687.

⁴⁴⁷ *Quincy Sun*, July 8, 1976.

The staff at Adams enjoyed the production.” (Her recap sounded an awful lot like an “I-told-you-so.”) The final Bicentennial event, held in September to celebrate the site’s thirtieth anniversary as a National Park, was a lecture about the history and preservation of Adams National Historic Site. This, Harris emphasized, brought in a massive contingent of Adamses (more than 75 were in attendance), featured a performance by the Quincy Symphonette, and welcomed roughly 300 guests.⁴⁴⁸ In all, Harris seems to have channeled her energy into events that were directly relevant to the site itself, and decidedly more highbrow—the annual lecture series, and a celebration of an important milestone for the Old House.

Local pride and fanfare was more evident a few years later, when Quincy celebrated the bicentennial of the Massachusetts Constitution. Unlike the 1976 Bicentennial, this was not an event that needed to be shared with the rest of the country. John Adams authored the Massachusetts Constitution in his law office in 1779, in the John Quincy Adams birthplace. The document is the oldest functioning written constitution in the world, and in the words of historian David McCullough, it is “one of the great, enduring documents of the American Revolution,” and also “one of the most admirable, long-lasting achievements of John Adams’s life.”⁴⁴⁹ In celebrating that achievement two hundred years later, the “City of Presidents” and Adams National Historic Site would be front and center. And with the Adams birthplaces about to be incorporated into the park, the event offered an opportunity to highlight the National Historic Site’s newest acquisitions.

Acquiring the Adams Birthplaces

On June 6, 1974, George E. Breen of Farmington, Connecticut wrote to Adams descendant Charles Francis Adams IV to express his disappointment with the sorry state of “the John Adams house at Quincy.” He had recently visited with his son, and the experience left them uninspired. He acknowledged the efforts of the “ladies of the historical society” (who he said “had done their best, I am sure”), which indicates that he had in fact visited the John Adams and John Quincy Adams birthplaces, not the Old House. Breen lamented that the buildings were in disrepair and that there were no “authentic” furnishings in the houses. And as patriotic “shrines,” he found them sorely lacking: “Veneration of our Washingtons, Lincolns, Adams, and others has provided a strong, psychological

⁴⁴⁸ Wilhelmina S. Harris to Acting Regional Director, “Bicentennial Activities Report,” August 30, 1976, in Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 2 (ADAM). Harris, “Superintendent’s Annual Report—1976,” Resource Management Records, Box 5, Folder 11 (ADAM).

⁴⁴⁹ McCullough *John Adams*, pages 225 and 220 (respectively).

foundation for many millions of American boys and girls.” These houses, he suggested, did no such thing: “We should have walked away from these houses in some awe, instead of dampened spirits.”⁴⁵⁰

In his reply, Charles Francis Adams suggested that Breen was confused about which site he had visited. “If you had been to the Adams National Historic Site,” he chided, “filled as it is with John Adams’s belongings as well as those of two succeeding generations, I find it hard to believe that you would have commented as you did.” Adams recommended that in a future visit, Breen make sure to take a trip to the Old House instead.⁴⁵¹

As Breen’s letter suggests, the belief that the Adams birthplaces could shape a child’s character and provide them with a “strong, psychological foundation” remained compelling as the nation approached its bicentennial. In his edited volume *Born in the U.S.A.: Birth, Commemoration, and American Public Memory*, historian Seth C. Bruggeman reminds us that “birthplace monuments have only made sense for as long as we have been used to believing that how and where we are born shapes who we become.” Several forces drove the preservation and commemoration of the Adams birthplaces at the turn of the twentieth century, when they were first opened as historic house museums. This was a historical moment, Bruggeman notes, when “collisions between new and old immigrants intensified conversations about birthplace and character.” At the same time, Progressive reformers placed an increasing emphasis on the importance of childhood development, driving “a perfect storm of cultural and historical intersections.”⁴⁵² In the 1970s, as American citizens convulsed through crisis after crisis, historic birthplaces still managed to hold such an appeal for some visitors. Tourists like Breen still sought comfort in the veneration of America’s second and sixth presidents, and the patriotism imbued in these historic shrines.

Breen was not the first person to notice that the Adams birthplaces were in embarrassing shape. In the years leading up to the nation’s bicentennial, they had become a sore spot for Quincy. Many local residents believed that the city was inadequately caring for the houses, which paled in comparison to the meticulous preservation of the Old House under the NPS’s—and Wilhelmina Harris’s—watch. In 1975, David M. Hart, Director of Consulting Services at the SPNEA, conducted an extensive study of the birthplaces and their preservation needs. He found that the birthplaces would require approximately \$14,550 to be stabilized, with repairs including masonry, structural repairs, carpentry, insect extermination, roofing, painting, and electrical and heating work. The houses also

⁴⁵⁰ George E. Breen to Charles F. Adams, June 6, 1974, Record Carton 1, Folder “1974 Correspondence,” AMS Records (MHS).

⁴⁵¹ Charles Francis Adams to George E. Breen, June 14, 1974, Record Carton 1, Folder “1974 Correspondence,” AMS Records (MHS).

⁴⁵² Seth C. Bruggeman, ed., *Born in the USA: Birth, Commemoration, and American Public Memory* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 5–6, 10–11.

needed fire and burglar alarms to be protected, which were not included in the estimates.⁴⁵³ Members of Quincy's Historic Places Committee sought to use the reports to persuade the City Council to act. Quincy Heritage Director John R. Graham reported the details to Mayor Walter J. Hannon and the Quincy City Council, noting that "there is substantial support for the preservation and protection of the Birthplaces." He included a sharp reminder that these politicians served at the will of Quincy residents: "Certainly, city officials would be open to severe criticism if the Birthplaces experienced any disaster which could have been averted."⁴⁵⁴ Advocates for the birthplaces used the nation's bicentennial, a time when Quincy boosterism was already running high, to keep their cause in the spotlight.

In 1977, Quincy Historical Society President William O'Connell proposed that the sites be transferred to the NPS. It was his second time proposing the takeover; he first suggested it, unsuccessfully, in the mid-1950s.⁴⁵⁵ Former Society president and local historian Hobart Holly was firmly against the move. In an article in the *Patriot Ledger*, he argued that several years earlier, a special committee appointed by Quincy Mayor Amelio Della Chiesa had determined that the potential transfer "would be neither feasible nor possible," without saying how or why they reached this conclusion. Holly believed that Quincy residents were obligated to maintain "local control" of the birthplaces, which were a "unique and valuable asset" that should not be "allowed to deteriorate or be reduced in value to the people of Quincy."⁴⁵⁶ Unfortunately, that ship had already sailed—they *were* being allowed to deteriorate on the city's watch.

Advocates for a NPS takeover found an important ally in City Councilor Paul D. Harold, who had given guided tours of the birthplaces as a high school student. In January 1978 Harold invited House Interior Committee Chair Morris K. Udall to tour the houses. Harold had served as a campaign manager for Udall's 1978 presidential primary campaign, and used his inside connection to bring federal attention to the properties. At the tour's conclusion, Udall announced his support for adding the birthplaces to the NPS, saying that he was "impressed by the broad base of support" for the move and was "committed to helping the good people of Quincy preserve their heritage."⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵³ Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, "Specifications for Preservation and Repairs: John Quincy Adams House" (July 1975) and "Specifications for Preservation and Repairs: John Adams House" (July 1975), folder "Adams Birthplaces—Preservation Reports 1975," (Quincy Historical Society).

⁴⁵⁴ John R. Graham, Quincy Heritage, to Mayor Walter J. Hannon and The Quincy City Council, "Repairs on the Birthplaces of the Presidents," December 4, 1975, folder "Adams Birthplaces—Preservation Reports 1975," (Quincy Historical Society).

⁴⁵⁵ Gall, *The Adams Birthplaces*, 15–16.

⁴⁵⁶ *Patriot Ledger*, July 16, 1977, Superintendent's Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 20 (ADAM).

⁴⁵⁷ Gall, *The Adams Birthplaces*, 19. January 29, 1978, newspaper unknown, Superintendent's Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 23 (ADAM).

Meanwhile, the Park Service's regional architect, E. Blaine Cliver, conducted his own study of the birthplaces. Cliver estimated that preservation costs would run to \$500,000. That estimate, as Lawrence Gall put it, "probably helped any city councilors with lingering doubts about Harold's project to overcome those doubts."⁴⁵⁸ A subsequent city hearing also showed tremendous public support for the takeover. In April 1978, Representative James A. Burke solicited feedback from Quincy officials about legislation enabling the NPS to acquire the birthplaces.⁴⁵⁹

It was clear that the cost of maintaining the houses and their much-needed repairs were too much for the city. The caretaker of the houses, William P. Van Riper (who occupied the John Adams birthplace with his wife), said that the problem was "economics." "It takes a lot of money to do historic restoration the right way, and the City of Quincy just doesn't have it." City Councilor Paul D. Harold worked to facilitate the transfer to NPS with Representative James A. Burke and Senator Edward M. Kennedy. Their efforts had the full support of the Adams Memorial Society's members, too. In a statement on the family's behalf, Thomas Boylston Adams said "The City of Quincy and the Quincy Historical Society have done their best, but they simply do not have the funds to keep the buildings up. In another five years they are going to tumble down."⁴⁶⁰

The perception that the City was neglecting the houses was further underscored in August 1978, when several objects were stolen from the John Quincy Adams birthplace including, most significantly, a brocaded silk vest believed to have been worn by John Adams on his wedding day. The thief broke a couple of panes of glass to get into the house, which did not have a security system, and was seen climbing out of a window in the house early in the morning.⁴⁶¹ Quincy Historical Society House Committee Chair Margaret O'Connell mused to a *Quincy Sun* reporter that "The only reason I can think of is that some young person took it." "You know how they dress these days, the vests they wear," she added.

The objects were found bundled in a rug by two cousins, eight-year-old Jonathan Brooks and nine-year-old Robert Kilnapp. The pair had been playing in the woods behind the Alpine Cafe just a short walk from the Adams birthplaces when they found the stolen items. The vest was recovered, albeit with considerable damage. Paul Harold wasted no

⁴⁵⁸ Gall, *The Adams Birthplaces*, 19.

⁴⁵⁹ "Comments Sought On Acquisition Of Birthplaces," *Patriot Ledger*, April 17, 1978, Superintendent's Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 23 (ADAM).

⁴⁶⁰ "Adams Homes Transfer Near," newspaper unknown, July 13, 1978; "The Adams Birthplaces: Endangered Species?," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 12, 1978; both in Superintendent's Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 23 (ADAM).

⁴⁶¹ *Patriot Ledger*, August 28, 1978, and *Quincy Sun*, August 17, 1978; both in Superintendent's Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 23 (ADAM).

time drawing a straight line between the robbery and the proposed NPS takeover of the birthplaces. He told the *Patriot Ledger* “This whole incident points up—almost dramatizes—the need we have to have the properties taken over by the Park Service.”⁴⁶²

The transfer moved rather quickly after that. The Quincy Historical Society’s members voted in support of the property transfer, and Congress passed the legislation to acquire the homes on November 10, 1978. The birthplaces were officially acquired by the NPS on April 20, 1979, and a formal transfer ceremony was held at 11 a.m. on May 1. The boys, Brooks and Kilnapp, were honored with citations from the City presented by Mayor Arthur Tobin, and \$10 each from Charles Francis Adams. And the birthplaces became part of Adams National Historic Site.

⁴⁶² *Quincy Sun*, August 31, 1978 and *Boston Globe*, August 28, 1978; both in Superintendent’s Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 23 (ADAM).



Figure 41. Left to right: Edward Moore, Aide to Congressman Brian Donnelly; Margaret O'Connell, Chair of House Committee; Thomas Boylston Adams; Quincy Mayor Arthur Tobin; Wilhelmina Harris; Charles Francis Adams; Jack E. Stark, National Park Service Regional Director; City Councilor Paul Harold. Photograph by Stephen M. Grochowski. Photograph courtesy of the Quincy Historical Society.



Figure 42. Wilhelmina Harris speaking at the birthplaces ceremony.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.



Figure 43. Congressman James A. Burke (center) and Quincy Mayor Arthur Tobin (right) give the deed to the Adams birthplaces to NPS Regional Director Jack E. Stark (left) on May 1, 1979.
Photograph by Stephen M. Grochowski. Photograph courtesy of the Quincy Historical Society.



Figure 44. At the birthplaces ceremony, Charles Francis Adams thanked cousins Jonathan Brooks and Robert Kilnapp for finding the artifacts stolen from the John Quincy Adams birthplace, and presented them each with \$10.
Photograph by Stephen M. Grochowski, courtesy of the Quincy Historical Society.

Wilhelmina Harris's role in these discussions is conspicuously absent from the archival record, leaving us to wonder how she felt about Adams National Historic Site's newest acquisitions. Lawrence Gall suggested that she had mixed emotions: "I think she wanted it—would like to take it on in the sense that it would be better under her control than the historical society, but I don't think it ranked in the hierarchy of things that were closest to her heart." Shaheen said that Harris "put her heart and soul into it. I mean, if it was going to be Park Service and it was going to be affiliated with the Adams, it was going to be the best it could be given its situation."⁴⁶³ Both emphasized that although the birthplaces might never equal the Old House in her eyes, she still approached them with the same sense of duty that she always brought to her work.

Restoring and Furnishing the Adams Birthplaces

The Adams birthplaces were acquired in 1979, but they were not immediately opened to the public. Park staff, in collaboration with staff from the NPS North Atlantic Historic Preservation Center (NAHPC), first had to document, stabilize, and spruce up the properties. The Adams birthplaces underwent significant renovations between 1979 and 1984. The houses were suffering both structurally and cosmetically as result of poor maintenance and repairs, as well as inappropriate attempts at restoration over the years. Harris decided that the houses should be restored to 1807, the last year that John Quincy Adams lived there. The NAHPC staff's stabilization and restoration work proceeded in three phases, and included painting the exteriors, reroofing the houses, restoring the historic floorplans and finishes, installing a drainage system, and re-grading the property. Park staff furnished the interiors and landscaped the property. Visitors could only tour the outside of the buildings, not the interiors, during these years.

In January 1979, NAHPC Chief E. Blaine Cliver assigned Architectural Conservator Carole Perrault to research and write a Historic Structures Report (HSR) on the Adams birthplaces to guide the treatment and use of the structures. Perrault would soon take on more responsibilities while continuing her HSR work, and saw the project through several different phases. She was tasked with writing specifications, acting as project supervisor on contracts, and collaborating with the project exhibit specialist in prescribing treatment for

⁴⁶³ Patricia Shaheen, phone interview with Laura Miller, November 7, 2019.

the properties, among other responsibilities.⁴⁶⁴ The project's Exhibits Specialist, Michael Fortin, supervised the crew of NPS carpenters, masons, plasterers, and laborers. Perrault and Fortin worked diligently with an NPS crew to stabilize, preserve, and restore the birthplaces before their public opening.⁴⁶⁵

When the men and women of the Quincy Historical Society and the Daughters of the Revolution restored the John Quincy Adams and John Adams birthplaces in the late 1800s, they made several restoration choices that were unacceptable by 1980s preservation standards. Perrault recalled that her work on the Adams birthplaces came at a time when “the field of historic preservation was undergoing a transformation and the Boston area preservationists were leading the way.”⁴⁶⁶ Preservationists increasingly brought science, technology, and hands-on analyses of building materials into their work, approaching the restorations with investigative tools that would have been unimaginable to their nineteenth-century predecessors. Architectural conservators like Perrault increasingly focused on, in her words, “asking the building for clues to how it evolved,” rather than relying solely on documentary evidence of stylistic trends. They used a variety of technologies—from microscopes to x-ray equipment and borescopes, among others—to research and document a structure's evolution over time.⁴⁶⁷ Perrault and her team used this approach to guide many of their decisions on the restoration of the birthplaces.

The first phase of the Adams birthplaces' work, which ran from March 1979 to January 1982, included research and documentation of the birthplaces (including HABS measured drawings), upgrading protection and electrical systems, and contract work including archaeology, repointing, reroofing, and exterior painting. In July and August 1979, the team turned their focus to the first floor of the John Quincy Adams birthplace,

⁴⁶⁴ Kirsten Holder, *Cultural Landscape Report for Adams Birthplaces, Adams National Historical Park* (Boston: National Park Service, 2014), 109. See also Carole L. Perrault, “Adams National Historic Site, Quincy, Massachusetts Completion Report C1600-9-0063, Exterior Painting, Reroofing and Related Repairs to the Adams Birthplaces,” November 1980,” Unprocessed Resource Management Records (ADAM). Perrault also emphasized that there are extensive records of the three phases of work at the Historic Architecture, Conservation and Engineering Center (HACE), in Lowell, MA. See, for example, Carole L. Perrault, “A Chronicle of the Research and Stabilization/Restoration Process 1979–1980,” *Completion Report for the John Adams Birthplace, 1990*. Unprocessed HSR Records (HACE).

⁴⁶⁵ According to Carole Perrault, “Superintendent Wilhelmina Harris was very supportive of the methodology of the NAHPC and she wished to be kept directly informed of the progress of the work. She especially sought out the advice of NAHPC Historical Architect of Orville W. Carroll, relating to matters concerning both the Old House and the birthplaces. The Chief of the NAHPC was Historical Architect, E. Blaine Cliver, whose professional advice she respected. She and her curatorial staff had a cadre of go to specialists for furnishings.” Perrault email correspondence with author, May 20, 2020.

⁴⁶⁶ I am grateful to Carole Perrault for the time she put into writing a detailed summary and her recollections of the restoration of the birthplaces. See Carole Louise Perrault, “Interview: Q&A,” July 2020, 8. This document with Perrault's responses has been provided to Adams National Historical Park to be archived with her permission.

⁴⁶⁷ Perrault was one of the first individuals to hold this new professional title, architectural conservator. Carole Perrault, interview with Laura Miller, September 13, 2019.

which was being readied to host the Massachusetts Constitution bicentennial in September 1979 (the event is described in greater detail in the next section). Working with a small crew from the Longfellow National Historic Site in the evenings and under considerable time constraints, they stripped non-historic wallpaper, replastered walls, made repairs, and repainted the interior with the existing colors. Without time to do more thorough research, Perrault said, they focused on “refurbish[ing] it so it would be in good order” for the celebration. NAHPC Historical Architect Orville Carroll helped Wilhelmina Harris design a special case to house the Massachusetts Constitution, and Perrault put together an exhibit of photographs and historical documentation for visitors who came to see it. Perrault remembered the event being “extremely well attended and crowded. It was exciting to see the document arrive in Quincy with all the protection and fanfare it garnered. . . . It was my experience that the citizens of Quincy take great pride in being the ‘City of Presidents.’”⁴⁶⁸

Once the Constitution celebration was over, the restoration team returned to work on both birthplaces, which continued in phases over the next several years. The second phase of work focused on the interior of the John Quincy Adams birthplace, including removing and restoring historic plaster on the walls and ceilings, removing non-historic trim and installing historically-accurate replacements, restoring historic finishes and hardware, updating plumbing, electrical, security, and fire detection systems, and more. The third phase addressed both the interior and exterior of the John Adams birthplace included repairing the chimney and roofing, restoring the historic floor plan, repointing the cellar foundation, restoring windows, installing a drainage system around both houses, and updating plumbing, electrical, security, and fire detection systems.⁴⁶⁹

One of their most noticeable decisions—to the public, at least—was to change the birthplaces’ exterior paint colors. “There was pressure to get it right,” Perrault recalled. The houses had been painted red since, in the words of the *Quincy Sun*’s Bernie O’Donnell, “as long as anybody can remember, at least since the late 1800s” (1897, in fact).⁴⁷⁰ Perrault’s examination of nails, clapboards, and a paint analysis, revealed that red was an inaccurate, late nineteenth-century choice. To remedy this, they painted the John Quincy Adams birthplace a stone color—a grayish color that matched the hue that Abigail Adams

⁴⁶⁸ Carole Louise Perrault, “Interview: Q&A,” July 2020, 8.

⁴⁶⁹ Perrault noted that they recommended that a Phase IV be undertaken to address the exterior restoration of the John Quincy Adams birthplace, but that has yet to come to fruition. Perrault, email correspondence with author, May 20, 2020. These lists of repairs are illustrative, but not exhaustive—both properties underwent extensive restoration work.

⁴⁷⁰ See Kirsten Holder, *Cultural Landscape Report for Adams Birthplaces, Adams National Historical Park* (Boston: National Park Service, 2014), 77. “Adams Birthplaces Changing Colors,” *Quincy Sun*, August 14, 1980, in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, 1980-1987, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM). See also untitled article in the *MCSS Newsletter*, February 1981, in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, 1980-1987, Box 2, Folder 2 (ADAM).

requested the house be painted in 1800.⁴⁷¹ The trim was painted off-white and the doors yellow ochre. The John Adams birthplace was furnished with unpainted clapboards. Local (non-expert) reviews of the new exterior colors were mixed. One article noted that “several generations of Quincyites had grown up ‘knowing’ that red was the proper color.” Quincy Historical Society member Doris S. Oberg added her own thoughts on the color question. After Perrault gave a talk at the Adams Lecture Series, Oberg sent her a note praising the work that they were doing on the birthplaces:

I have lived in Quincy since 1913, I’ll admit at that time I wasn’t very observant, but in a few years when we used to drive to Plymouth to visit one of my father’s classmates we would go by the little houses. I don’t remember them as red. Perhaps I am wrong but the ‘always’ has me bothered.

Oberg was confident that the birthplaces were in good hands. “‘My’ Birthplaces are certainly having tender loving care,” she assured Perrault.⁴⁷² It seems that most Quincy residents grew to appreciate the change. The *Quincy Sun* reported that the John Quincy Adams birthplace’s new stone color was so popular that Perrault was receiving regular inquiries from homeowners looking for a paint match.⁴⁷³ Reflecting back on the many decisions the team made to restore the birthplaces, Perrault concluded, “We gave it our all. We really looked at every piece of evidence that we had at the time and made the best decisions we could.”⁴⁷⁴

Superintendent Wilhelmina Harris’s approach to furnishing the birthplaces was quite a contrast to the NAHPC’s exacting scientific methods. While she did draw on historical research, she also leaned heavily on her own intuition in making furnishing decisions. She decorated both buildings with a mix of period pieces and reproductions modeled on furniture and objects from the Old House and the family’s collections. In a 1985 oral history interview, Harris recalled that “I was at a loss to know what to do with John Quincy Adams’ birthplace, and then I happened to think back when Mr. Brooks Adams used to say, ‘Well, the things that are under the kitchen, stored, used to be at the birthplaces.’ So I went

⁴⁷¹ In correspondence with the author, Perrault noted, “Traces of that color paint were found on beaded-clapboard artifacts from the house. A period recipe for stone-colored paint proved the traces of color on the clapboards were indeed stone. In the lab of the NAHPC the color was mixed according to the period recipe and then custom-matched to that of a commercial paint manufacturer’s paint.”

⁴⁷² Note from Doris Oberg to Carole Perrault, no date, in Perrault’s personal papers. Quoted in Carole Louise Perrault, “Interview: Q&A,” July 2020, 21.

⁴⁷³ Asphalt roofing was removed from the houses, and father-daughter team Nathalee Marsh and Vance Pratt, of Marsh’s Cedar Mill in Guilford, Maine custom made new cedar shingles. *Quincy Sun*, August 14 and September 25, 1980, and *Piscataquis Observer*, August 13, 1980, in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, 1980–1987, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM). In her Completion Report for the birthplaces’ repairs carried out between November 1979 and October 1980, Perrault noted that the “contract suffered from poor contractor management,” with several “unacceptable conditions found during the final inspection,” including leftover masonry debris, poor caulking and painting, an incorrectly sloped gutter, and other items.

⁴⁷⁴ Carole Perrault, interview by Laura Miller, September 13, 2019.

down and pulled out those things.” Because those items could not be moved out of the Old House, she had reproductions made. For the John Adams birthplace, Harris said that they were reviewing “official papers” that mentioned furnishings: “Exactly what they look like, we don’t know, but we are doing it according to the period. If they had high-back chairs at that time, we looked at a picture and decided that that would be alright, and we are going to have them reproduced.”⁴⁷⁵ Staff conducted research, including reviewing a 1761 inventory of Deacon John Adams, to support some of these decisions. Laurel Racine has demonstrated, however, that Harris’s furnishing decisions often went against NPS policy at the time. In particular, Harris ignored the NPS’s recommendation “advising against furnishing buildings in the absence of original objects.” In her *Historic Furnishings Report*, Racine quotes curatorial staff member Judith Curtis, who told her:

Rather than study a period and then make selections, Mrs. Harris would say ‘This is what I want.’ We would then have to research the objects she suggested to see if they actually fit the time period. If they didn’t we would tell her and she would come up with other suggestions. The process would begin again until suggestions and period agreed.⁴⁷⁶

Harris also spent some of her own money on the reproductions to ensure that the birthplaces were furnished to her liking. Whereas the birthplaces’ exteriors had been restored to the NPS’s exacting professional and scientific standards, Harris’s approach to furnishing the interiors was much less empirical.

Harris’s approach to furnishing the birthplaces reveals that she was grappling with the thorny challenge of authenticity. Patricia Shaheen noted that unlike the Old House, which was filled with furnishings original to the property,

[there were] so many changes to the birthplaces that there wasn’t much original. I think that was one concern she [Harris] had. . . .she always used to say, “It’s like the Plymouth Rock that wasn’t the rock, and maybe there was never a rock. Who knows about the rock, but everybody goes to look at the rock in Plymouth.” She didn’t want it to be like that. I think she wanted it to be an honest depiction of what was there now and have it be a reference point for the lives that were lived there and less about the buildings themselves.

⁴⁷⁵ Wilhelmina Harris, interview by Polly Welts Kaufman, March 29, 1985, NPS Oral History Collection, HFCA 1817, NPS History Collection, Harpers Ferry Center for Media Development (Harpers Ferry, WV).

⁴⁷⁶ Quoted in Laurel A. Racine, *Historic Furnishings Report: The Birthplaces of Presidents John Adams and John Quincy Adams* (National Park Service Northeast Museum Services Center: April 2001), 1, 8, 67, and 69.

Lawrence Gall also noted the distinction that Harris made between the birthplaces and the Old House: “I don’t think [they] ranked up there with the Old House, because she was so focused on the *things* in the Old House, too, every one of them had a story behind it.” This was a particularly important distinction for Harris, because most of those stories had been recounted to her directly by Brooks Adams.

Put another way, the Old House was deeply bound up in Harris’s own sense of identity. In Gall’s words, “She *was* the park.” (In fact, he noted, “They used to call her Mrs. Adams sometimes.”⁴⁷⁷) By contrast, she had no direct connection to the birthplaces and their furnishings. Harris made this evident in a letter to the North Atlantic Regional Director, in which she enclosed a rough draft of interpretive material for the birthplaces. She wrote, “in all my readings of the Adamses and in all the family traditions passed down to me by Mr. Brooks Adams, I have never heard any reference to the type of furnishings used by the family in either of these birthplaces.” She went on to offer educated guesses about their furnishings:

I like to think that the furnishings of the John Adams Birthplace would have been simple but fine since Deacon John Adams was married to Susanna Boylston, a young woman from a prominent and wealthy background. As for the furnishings of the John Quincy Adams house . . . my instinct is that the furniture may not have been extensive but well chosen because of Abigail’s aristocratic background.

She concluded, “It is my impression that these homes were sparsely furnished, but that everything was neat and well chosen.”⁴⁷⁸ Harris’s choice of words is striking. She opened by establishing her authority as the person Brooks Adams’s entrusted with his recollections, but then hedged with phrases such as “I like to think,” and “my instinct,” and “my impression.” This underscores the reality that she had a meager record to go on; indeed, the Park Service’s policy of not furnishing a property without original objects was likely intended to avoid this very problem. Harris actively resisted this NPS policy, and relied instead on the interpretive strategy that she knew best: using objects to tell stories about the Adamses. She seems to have concluded that furniture reproductions—based on educated guesses, but bolstered by historic research—were critical to talking about the lives that were lived in these houses.

The next challenge for park staff was how to interpret the homes for visitors. What would a tour script for the birthplaces look like? For this task, Helen Nelson Skeen was brought back on board to conduct additional historical research. Skeen’s deep dive into

⁴⁷⁷ Lawrence Gall, interview with Laura Miller, September 13, 2019.

⁴⁷⁸ Superintendent, Adams National Historic Site to Regional Director, North Atlantic Region, “Preliminary Data Concerning the Adams Birthplaces,” June 5, 1978. From Wilhelmina S. Harris Miscellaneous Correspondence, Box 18, Paul C. Nagel Papers, M 255, (Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University).

the Adams family letters, Harris reported, provided them with “several small bits of information which are both amusing and helpful to portray the life of the Adams family at the John Quincy Adams Birthplace.”⁴⁷⁹ Skeen and Park Ranger Patricia Shaheen then worked together to build an interpretive program for the two birthplaces. Shaheen recalled that the wealth of writing from the Adamses allowed them to “really delve into” the history of the birthplaces, and they “created a historic picture of what happened there.” Even with the reproduction furnishings, tours at the birthplaces could be less object-driven and more focused on telling stories about people and events in a broader context. And because Wilhelmina Harris did not have any recollections from Brooks Adams to rely on, she and her staff had to work together to research and formulate new historic narratives. The birthplaces were, in a sense, a blank slate for interpretation.

Here, too, Harris had the final say. Lawrence Gall researched and wrote a report about the birthplaces before their acquisition. He recalled that Harris had strong opinions about what he could and couldn’t say about John Adams:

I remember when I was involved with some of the preparations for the birthplaces coming in, that I had written a report . . . [and] I had said something about John Adams being cantankerous and difficult to get along with. She was furious that I had said that. “How do you know? You weren’t there?!” “Well, Mrs. Harris, how do you know all of these stories?” [laughs] You know she just didn’t want to hear a bit of criticism about that. It was like, as I say, filiopietistic, like the old defender of the family legacy, heritage. Our forefathers could do no wrong. The funny thing was that Adams himself admitted that he was cantankerous and hard to get along with. [laughs] That’s the way it was.⁴⁸⁰

As with her approach to the Old House, Harris made sure that certain stories about the Adamses remained off limits.

⁴⁷⁹ “Annual Report #1 January 1, 1982 – January 1, 1983,” Box 3, Folder “Adams National Historic Site,” RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Superintendents Annual Narrative Reports, 1980–2001 (NACP).

⁴⁸⁰ Lawrence Gall, interview with Laura Miller, September 13, 2019. Gall’s report was “The Adams Birthplaces: An Interpretive Study in New England Preservation History,” completed in 1978.

The Massachusetts Constitution Bicentennial

Rangers began giving tours of the John Quincy Adams birthplace in 1983, and the John Adams birthplace in 1984.⁴⁸¹ The one exception was, as noted in the previous section, the temporary opening of the John Quincy Adams birthplace September 6–9, 1979 to display the Massachusetts Constitution. For Quincy residents, this was a much bigger event than the 1976 bicentennial. The event placed the city and John Adams, as the drafter of the Massachusetts Constitution, at the center of the celebration. The city's leadership and the staff of Adams National Historic Site pulled out all the stops. They followed a script that mimicked national events for the 1976 bicentennial, but made it a uniquely local celebration of Quincy pride.

Quincy city leadership established a "Committee for the Bicentennial Commemoration and Celebration of the Constitution of Massachusetts," chaired by James R. McIntyre, who had formerly been a Massachusetts State Representative, State Senator, and Mayor of Quincy. Committee members also included important local civic leaders H. Hobart Holly, Mayor Arthur H. Tobin, and William O'Connell, as well as Patricia Shaheen and Wilhelmina Harris from Adams National Historic Site.⁴⁸² The event was billed as a homecoming of sorts for the city. A brochure for the event proclaimed, "For the first time in 200 years the Massachusetts Constitution comes home to Quincy." They dubbed the city "The Birthplace of Constitutional Rights."

The event began on September 6 with the Constitution arriving at Neponset Bridge, and then making its way to Franklin Street, and to the lawn of the John Adams Birthplace, where Secretary of State Michael J. Connolly presented the encased document to Mayor Tobin. More than two hundred people were on hand to witness the occasion. The constitution was then moved into the John Quincy Adams birthplace for public viewing in John Adams's law office. On the first day alone, one thousand people arrived to see the constitution in the display case specially designed by Orville Carroll and Carole Perrault for the occasion. A *Patriot Ledger* reporter said that seeing the document was "an awesome experience," despite the fact that "There's no time for lengthy readings. The lines of people behind you await a turn at the plexiglass case."

Although the Constitution was the main attraction, park staff organized an accompanying exhibit displaying John and Abigail Adams "memorabilia." For Abigail, displayed items included a hair curler, watch, and locket given to her by John when he left for France; for John, law dockets, a watch, and lock of his hair, among other items. A case with John Adams's copy of the Articles of Confederation was also out for viewing. Staff were

⁴⁸¹ "1983 Annual Report, Adams NHS" Box 3, Folder "Adams National Historic Site," RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Superintendents Annual Narrative Reports, 1980–2001 (NACP).

⁴⁸² Meeting minutes, Committee for the Bicentennial Commemoration and Celebration of the Constitution of Massachusetts, April 19, 1979, Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 10 (ADAM).

expected to be able to discuss all these items and more with visitors, and to use information from Harris's furnishings report when necessary.⁴⁸³ For the next three days, the document remained open to the public. Sixth grade students from Quincy Public Schools were invited in to view the constitution as well, with twenty-five students at a time allowed into the building. Subsequent celebratory events were held around the city, including an open house at the Old House hosted by Congressman Brian J. Donnelly, and a fireworks show attended by an estimated 30,000 people.⁴⁸⁴

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THE MASSACHUSETTS CONSTITUTION which was written at the John Quincy Adams Birthplace came home for exhibit in September, 1979. Here it is carried by Ted DeCristofaro and Ronald Catudal.

(Quincy Sun photo by Steve Grochowski)

Figure 45. A photograph from the *Quincy Sun* newspaper of the Massachusetts Constitution being carried by park staff members Ted DeCristofaro and Ronald Catudal. Newspaper clipping from the collection of Adams National Historical Park.

⁴⁸³ "Display at the John Quincy Adams Birthplace, September 6–9, 1979," Resource Management Records, Box 6, Folder 12 (ADAM).

⁴⁸⁴ *Patriot Ledger*, September 5, 6, 7, 8 and 10, 1979, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 24 (ADAM). John F. Harrington to Elementary School Principals, "Constitution Bicentennial," August 29, 1979, Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 9 (ADAM).

The bicentennial events were capped off with a parade of 1,600 people to the John Adams Birthplace, led by Grand Marshall Governor Edward J. King, Representative Donnelly, and Mayor Tobin. There were historic-costumed marchers from the Lincoln Minutemen and Thomas Carpenter Colonial Militia, as well as bagpipers from the Colonial Pipers of Rockland. At the Old House, 88 cadets from West Point “marched through the front gates for the purpose of reenacting the visit to John Adams in 1821. They marched in formation around the lawn and came to a halt near the east door where the Honorable Charles Francis Adams read the welcome address which his forbear, John Adams, had read in 1821.” The evening concluded with a concert and bonfire at Merrymount Park.⁴⁸⁵

The events were a point of pride for many Quincy residents, and helped bring positive attention to the now federally-owned birthplaces. Harris reported that the site’s employees “all feel that the NPS was the winner in this great occasion. It was not unusual to hear people make the confession that they hadn’t remembered that there had ever been anything so lovely in Quincy.”⁴⁸⁶ In the midst of growing concerns about the city’s economic future, the Constitution Bicentennial presented an opportunity for the NPS to publicly demonstrate that they would do right by the birthplaces. In that sense, it was a resounding success.

While the bicentennial celebrations were joyful, not all was well in the city of Quincy. On Saturday, September 8, in the midst of the constitution bicentennial celebration, a new City Hall Complex was being dedicated downtown in an event that sought to link Quincy’s past, present, and future. As Mayor Tobin spoke to an assembled crowd, some 200 city workers picketed the dedication and booed his speech. The unionized workers recognized that the event provided a prime opportunity to draw visibility to their cause, and it underscored tensions bubbling just beneath the surface of the City’s patriotic display.⁴⁸⁷ A few days earlier Tobin had met with local union members demanding their contractual pay raises. Tobin implored workers to understand that he was working within impossible constraints: “I haven’t been sitting on my duff doing nothing,” he said, “I’m filling all these stores, I’m out talking to developers. . . . We put on a first class celebration so we can say to people, ‘Why do you want to go to Plymouth to look at a rock? Why do you want to go to Concord to look at a bridge?’” Although Tobin and others pinned their hopes on the role of tourism in the city’s revival, the protesters were unconvinced. Their signs drew a direct line between the city’s extravagant bicentennial displays and its failure to

⁴⁸⁵ Wilhelmina S. Harris to Regional Director, North Atlantic Region, “Special Activities at the Adams National Historic Site September 6, 7, 8, and 9, 1979,” September 13, 1979, Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 10 (ADAM); and brochure, “Quincy Constitution Bicentennial Celebration,” Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 9 (ADAM).

⁴⁸⁶ Wilhelmina S. Harris to Regional Director, North Atlantic Region, “Special Activities at the Adams National Historic Site September 6, 7, 8, and 9, 1979,” September 13, 1979, Resource Management Records, Box 7, Folder 10 (ADAM).

⁴⁸⁷ “Nearly 2,000 Witness Dedication of New City Hall Complex,” *Quincy Sun*, September 13, 1979.

fulfill their contractual demands: “Constitutional Rights—How about Fair Bargaining Rights For Teachers?” and “Millions for Statues, Thousands for Friends, 0.00 For Nurses” were among the signs seen in the crowd.⁴⁸⁸ Beneath all the fanfare, there was palpable unease about the city’s future.

Preserving the United First Parish Church

In the late 1970s, Quincy was not only grappling with how to preserve and protect the rapidly deteriorating Adams birthplaces; it was also beginning to wrestle with the fate of the UFPC (the “Church of the Presidents”). The aging granite structure, a prominent feature in the downtown landscape, was a pressing concern for the city. The church had been deemed a National Historic Landmark in 1972, but that designation did nothing to fund the building’s much-needed repairs. There were several costly problems to confront: the slate roof was deteriorating, the heating system was outdated, and leaking gutters resulted in water seeping into the crypts of John and Abigail Adams and John Quincy and Louisa Catherine Adams, among others.

Some city members wondered if the NPS might be interested in another of Quincy’s historic properties, in light of their recent acquisition of the Adams birthplaces. In 1980, church members voted to enable their board of governors to create a committee to negotiate with the Department of Interior, with the hopes of preserving the structure as a national historic site. They established a Church of the Presidents Building Preservation Committee, represented by several local leaders: State Senator Paul D. Harold, Mayor Arthur H. Tobin, Massachusetts Congressman Brian Donnelly, and Charles Francis Adams, as well as community leaders such as Wilhelmina Harris and local historian H. Hobart Holly.⁴⁸⁹ Donnelly and Tobin served as the Committee’s honorary co-chairs.

⁴⁸⁸ *Quincy Sun*, September 13, 1979.

⁴⁸⁹ “US Aid Sought to Save Church,” *Patriot Ledger*, March 7, 1980, in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, 1980–1987, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM).



Figure 46. Postcard image of the United First Parish Church, ca. 1960s.
Courtesy of Thomas Crane Public Library – Quincy, Mass. Postcard Collection.

This was not the first time that local residents had floated the idea of federal involvement with the church. That came three decades earlier, in August 1951. Coordinating Superintendent Edwin Small sent a memorandum to NPS Chief Historian Herbert Kahler on the heels of General Douglas MacArthur’s July visit to Quincy. The event, Small noted, had “brought a momentary increase of visitors to Quincy, and has created some local interest in seeing that the Crypt as well as the Adams Mansion and the Birthplaces are open to the public.” At the time, the crypt was only opened to visitors by request. The *Patriot Ledger’s* editor reached out to Small to see if the federal government would consider managing and interpreting the crypts during the tourist season. He was also interested in creating a separate entrance to the crypt, so that visitors could come and go without having to pass through the church itself. Small reported that Wilhelmina Harris believed that the trustees of the Adams Temple and School Fund, which managed the crypt, were “so conservatively minded that they will take no such steps.” He nevertheless wanted to raise the issue in case it came up again in the future. Assistant Director Ronald Lee replied, informing Small that the NPS was (with a few exceptions) uninterested in taking on the care of graves and cemeteries. Those that they did manage, he noted, only “reinforced the view

that the Service is out of its proper element when it goes into this field of activity.” Lee advised that the idea was unlikely to get a favorable hearing from Park Service leadership, who did not want to be in the business of caring for graves.⁴⁹⁰

By the 1980s, the climate had changed dramatically at both the local and national level. This time, the effort moved quickly. Congressman Donnelly filed a bill, H.R. 7411, on May 21, 1980 authorizing the Secretary of the Interior to accept and administer the UFPC as a national historic site, thereby opening the church up to federal funding for its costly repairs.⁴⁹¹ By June, Massachusetts Senators Paul Tsongas and Edward Kennedy—now honorary members of the Church’s advisory committee—filed a companion bill in the Senate, S. 2807, to incorporate the property into the park’s boundaries.⁴⁹²

Many Quincy residents strongly supported federal acquisition of the property, just as they had when faced with the deteriorating Adams birthplaces. There was one glaring obstacle, however: the parishioners wanted the church to not only be an important site in the city’s historical landscape, but also an active congregation with regular services. This time the federal government’s primary hesitation was not about caring for graves, but rather about respecting the constitutional separation of church and state. The Carter administration and NPS leadership worried about maintaining this separation, which prevented federal funds from flowing to an active congregation.⁴⁹³ In a memorandum to Senator Paul Tsongas, aide Missy Grealy outlined the behind-the-scenes negotiations taking place in August 1980:

Donnelly introduced the legislation with the knowledge that the bill would not go anywhere until the details of the conveyance were agreed to (although they do not need to be in the law itself). This is front page news in Quincy, with large steering committees and honorary committees (you are a member) involved in the protection of the church. It seemed wise, and still seems wise, to at least introduce the authorizing legislation as a sign of congressional commitment to the concept. It is in no way an endorsement of the church continuing to use the building as an active parish. However, it is an incentive to resolve the issue, especially with the amendment language which calls for a study prior to

⁴⁹⁰ Coordinating Superintendent, Adams Mansion National Historic Site to Chief Historian, “Possibility of Request for Recognition of Crypt of Granite Church, Quincy, Containing Graves of Presidents John and John Quincy Adams,” August 7, 1951; and Assistant Director Ronald Lee to Regional Director, Region One, “Possible Request for Recognition of the Graves of Presidents John Adams and John Quincy Adams,” October 8, 1951; both in Resource Management Records, Box 9, Folder 10 (ADAM).

⁴⁹¹ A digitized copy of H.R. 7411, May 21, 1980 is available online in the Paul Tsongas Digital Archives, UMass Lowell Digital Collections, <https://ptsongasuml.omeka.net/items/show/4780> (accessed July 17, 2019).

⁴⁹² “Tsongas, Kennedy Join Church Preservation Effort,” unidentified newspaper clipping (likely the *Patriot Ledger*), July 8, 1980, in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, 1980–1987, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM).

⁴⁹³ “To worship or preserve has a price,” *Patriot Ledger*, July 29, 1980, in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, 1980–1987, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM).

conveyance. The NPS has not been an adversary on this issue, but they are rightly cautious about taking any action which would be improper, and must ultimately rely on DOJ for a clean ruling on any proposed conveyance plan.

NPS will testify against the bill on the basis of the unresolved church/state issue and also on the question of cost. Privately, NPS has indicated that they would not be in a position to oppose the bill if the church/state problem can be resolved.⁴⁹⁴

Ultimately, this ended up being only a minor hiccup in a relatively smooth process. In late August, the bill passed the House Interior Committee, and by late September the Senate bill was approved and sent to Carter for his signature.⁴⁹⁵ Donnelly invited the President to Quincy to sign the bill in a public ceremony, but Carter demurred. Deputy Assistant William H. Cable told the *Patriot Ledger* that the president had lingering reservations about the bill's constitutionality, and was not keen to draw attention to it.⁴⁹⁶ The final bill included a provision that the secretary of the interior would consult with the attorney general and then submit a report "describing the measures which the Secretary intends to take to ensure that in the management of said property there is no violation of the constitutional provisions regarding the separation of church and state."⁴⁹⁷ President Carter signed it into law without fanfare on October 10, 1980.

Many Quincy civic leaders hoped that the addition of the UFPC to Adams National Historic Site would bolster the city's broader tourism goals. Congressman Brian Donnelly argued that "If this bill is not passed, it would mean further economic decay in a community struggling to revitalize itself."⁴⁹⁸ Even before President Carter had signed the bill, Donnelly was already envisioning the creation of a visitors' center for Quincy tourism: "We would then need one center that would be manned by National Parks people and used as a focal point for the three pieces and any other pieces that are added over the years." He continued, "Once we tie the Church in with the other Adams sites, the next thing we need to do is promote them properly so we can have people come to Quincy and spend money as tourists." A visitors' center, in Donnelly's vision, would announce Quincy as a tourist destination that merited more than a brief day trip. Visitors "might be encouraged to stay

⁴⁹⁴ Missy Grealy to Paul Tsongas, "Hearing August 25 on Quincy Church," August 22, 1980, Paul Tsongas Digital Archives, UMass Lowell Digital Collections, <https://ptsongasuml.omeka.net/items/show/819> (accessed July 17, 2019).

⁴⁹⁵ "First Parish Church, Quincy, Nears US Landmark Status," *Boston Herald*, October 1, 1980, in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, 1980-1987, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM).

⁴⁹⁶ "Carter Likely to Preserve Church," *Patriot Ledger*, October 4, 1980, in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, 1980-1987, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM).

⁴⁹⁷ "Public Law 96-485—October 10, 1980," in Record Carton 1, Folder 1980 Correspondence, AMS Records (MHS).

⁴⁹⁸ "News from Paul Tsongas," August 24, 1980, Paul Tsongas Digital Archives, UMass Lowell Digital Collections, <https://ptsongasuml.omeka.net/items/show/5676> (accessed July 17, 2019).

overnight or buy a meal or do some shopping. Right now they get off the Expressway, spend \$1.25, get right back on and go to Plymouth.”⁴⁹⁹ Like Donnelly, many Quincy residents believed that adding the Church to Adams National Historic Site would be a win-win: beneficial both to the Church, which could not keep up with its many costly repairs, and to the city of Quincy, which could use another historic attraction under the NPS’s purview to draw in tourist dollars.

In reality, the legislation’s outcomes were far messier. Ronald Reagan was elected President in January 1981, leaving negotiations over the separation of church and state question open until the administration named a new NPS regional director and made its views known.⁵⁰⁰ And although the Church was added to the boundaries of Adams National Historic Site in October 1980, the actual conveyance of the property never came to pass. The Church would remain a pressing concern for the city in the coming decades.

An Inadvertent Transformation

At the start of the 1980s, Wilhelmina Harris was finally starting to slow down. Her mind was still sharp, but she was now in her 80s. Her eyesight was failing, and she grew increasingly frail. She kept a machine in her office that enlarged documents for reading, and eventually staff members began reading documents directly to her. Supervisory Park Ranger Patricia Shaheen recalled that over time, “I began to assist her more with a lot of things that had to be read,” and she was increasingly “dependent on other people.”⁵⁰¹ Park Curator Kelly Cobble, who started working at the park as a seasonal ranger in 1983, concurred. She recalled that staff members “needed to kind of give her a hand when she was walking in, and everybody jumped when she came in and wanted to help her and make sure she was safe.” Harris had turned much of the Park’s day-to-day administration over to Shaheen and Marianne Peak, who became Deputy Superintendent in 1982. Even as Harris’s physical health declined, however, she was resolute in her determination to continue supervising the Old House. Cobble noted that even as Harris’s health declined, she still kept employees on their toes:

Part of us knew that she was blind—almost blind, I would say—and needed assistance. . . . But then at the same time, it wasn’t unheard of to get a call and she’d be across the street in her house and she’d be saying “who’s that ranger

⁴⁹⁹ “Cong. Donnelly Sets Sights On Visitors’ Center For Quincy,” *Quincy Sun*, October 2, 1980.

⁵⁰⁰ “Church Still Waiting Funds for Historic Site Repairs,” *Patriot Ledger*, July 11, 1981, in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, 1980–1987, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM).

⁵⁰¹ Patricia Shaheen, phone interview with Laura Miller, October 10, 2019.

sitting on the steps without their jacket on?” . . . It was like, how does she know?! Does she have her spies? [laughs] . . . Her presence was definitely known all the time, whether she was there or not.⁵⁰²

The longer Harris remained Superintendent, the more remarkable it seemed—particularly to younger staff members—that she had once lived and worked in the Old House as Brooks Adams’s social secretary. Kelly Cobble noted that the fact that Harris “had been caring for it [the Old House] and keeping those memories alive, you really [did] get a sense that the house passed from one family . . . to another. And you were just part of the next chapter, really.” Harris inspired a sense of reverence for the Old House in her staff:

I will say, and it’s still in me today, the feeling of awe and respect that the house deserves to be shown, and I think she really did impart how in her way—not in the Park Service way—[that] it’s our obligation to preserve the house for future generations and for the rest of our lives . . . It’s like something that has been passed on to you that you’re now a responsible party for preserving and protecting the house.⁵⁰³

This atmosphere of pride and investment has undoubtedly contributed to the remarkably low turnover of Park staff.

Wilhelmina Harris finally retired in 1987 and was succeeded as superintendent by Marianne Peak. At the time of her retirement, she had achieved two remarkable milestones: she was the oldest superintendent in the NPS (at 91 years old), and also the longest serving (37 years). An outdoor ceremony was held in her honor in the gardens of the Old House. It was an event befitting the honoree, who had lovingly supervised, protected, and promoted the house and gardens for decades. In all, 150 people turned out for the occasion, including Thomas Boylston Adams, NPS Regional Director Herbert S. Cables, state Senator Paul D. Harold, Mayor Francis McCauley, and City Councilor Ted DeCristofaro.⁵⁰⁴ Congressman Brian Donnelly made a statement on the House of Representatives floor about Harris’s retirement and read a statement written by Thomas Boylston Adams. He submitted both into the Congressional Record. Adams’s tribute concluded,

Although she will remain close by as a guardian for the site, we of the Adams family will miss her. The family and the American public can be grateful that her successor Marianne Peak has pledged to follow closely the indomitable Mrs. Harris.⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰² Kelly Cobble, interview with Laura Miller, October 17, 2019.

⁵⁰³ Kelly Cobble, interview with Laura Miller, October 17, 2019.

⁵⁰⁴ “Marianne Peak New Superintendent For Adams National Site,” *Hingham Journal*, August 1987, in Resource Management Records, Box 57, Folder 18 (“Superintendent Transition Mrs. Harris Retires 1987”) (ADAM).

⁵⁰⁵ Hon. Brian J. Donnelly, “Retirement of Superintendent of Adams National Historic Site,” Congressional Record, Vol. 133, Wednesday, August 5, 1987, in Resource Management Records, Box 57, Folder 18 (ADAM).

For the next few years, Harris did remain close by. After all, she still lived directly across the street, and made a point of visiting the site when she was able. She passed away on May 20, 1991, at the age of 95. Her funeral was held at the Bethany Congregational Church in Quincy, and Charles Francis Adams spoke at the service.⁵⁰⁶ On Monday, August 19, a Women's Equality Day celebration of her life was held at Adams National Historic Site. The program included remarks from NPS Deputy Director Herbert S. Cables Jr. and the announcement of the "Wilhelmina S. Harris Award" "to encourage the preservation, conservation, and development of the NPS's resources through formally recognizing employees within the North Atlantic Region who have demonstrated exceptional methods of promoting stewardship initiatives."⁵⁰⁷ She was certainly, in the words of Charles Francis Adams, "a redoubtable lady."⁵⁰⁸

* * *

It is worth pausing here to emphasize how dramatically Harris shaped the history of Adams National Historical Park. She was—and arguably still is—inextricably intertwined with how the Park has been preserved and interpreted. Lawrence Gall made a particularly astute observation on this point: "I give [Harris] all kinds of credit for just the enormous amount of effort she put into getting that place up and running and protecting it. I think she was able to get a lot of things done there that would—the place would've fallen to pieces had she not come in and really dedicated herself to creating." He continued,

Now granted, what she created was a kind of a particular viewpoint, a particular image of the family. That in itself, I'm sure you would appreciate, has become kind of an historic feature, you know? The era of Wilhelmina Harris is almost as important as the era of the Adamses there.

Harris's connection to the Old House and to Brooks Adams gave her the authority to craft the Park's interpretive story in its formative years. She fiercely protected both the Old House and its narrative for decades to come.⁵⁰⁹ This legacy lives on at the Park today, decades after Harris's retirement and death.

⁵⁰⁶ "Report of the Adams Family Committee Who Visit the Old House," September 10, 1991, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder "1991 Minutes," AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS). See also Harris's obituary in the *New York Times*, May 29, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/05/29/obituaries/wilhelmina-harris-95-directed-historic-site.html> [accessed October 16, 2019].

⁵⁰⁷ Event program, "Remembering Wilhelmina S. Harris, 1896–1991," August 19, 1991, in Resource Management Records, Box 57, Folder 10 (ADAM).

⁵⁰⁸ Charles Francis Adams, "Memoir: Wilhelmina Sellers Harris," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Volume CIII, 1991, in Resource Management Records, Box 57, Folder 10 (ADAM).

⁵⁰⁹ Lawrence Gall, interview with Laura Miller, September 13, 2019.

Harris left behind other legacies as well. Although for decades she resisted the modernization of Adams National Historic Site, it still experienced tremendous change under her care. New properties were incorporated into the park boundaries, extensive restorations of the Old House and birthplaces were conducted, new staff members were hired, historical research was carried out, the site's interpretive program was strengthened, and the site hosted a growing number of visitors each season. There were still moments where Harris doubled down on an older way of thinking about historic house museum stewardship, as her approach to the birthplace furnishings and interpretation suggests, but her efforts to stave off change inadvertently resulted in the beginnings of a transformation at the park that would take off in the 1980s and 1990s. The addition of the Adams birthplaces and the UFPC within a few short years made it increasingly clear that the NPS was a central player—if not *the* central player—in Quincy's heritage tourism landscape. It would take new leadership at the Historic Site, with a new approach to city partnerships, to envision a broader plan for Quincy tourism.

CHAPTER SEVEN

EMBRACING PROGRESS, 1987–2000

In 1960, Wilhelmina Harris interviewed a young Weymouth woman, Marianne Peak (at the time, Marianne Potts), for a clerk typist position at Adams National Historic Site. The Regional Office encouraged Harris to hire someone for the role, but she was rather unenthusiastic about filling it. Peak recalled Harris saying that she “wasn’t really sure what I’d do,” and that the position was “full time, but it might end up being part time.” Her primary concern was whether Peak could spell. It was an inauspicious beginning to what would become a decades-long relationship between the two women.

Peak’s relationship with Harris echoed Harris’s relationship with Brooks Adams. When she began working at the Historic Site, Peak relished the opportunity to learn from Harris:

I was a willing listener. I wanted to learn, I wanted to experience. I was a woman who was born in the same town as Abigail Adams, and I just knew this place was filled with history and opportunity, I just didn’t know where it would take me. But I knew I had arrived.⁵¹⁰

By the time of Harris’s retirement, Peak was an obvious choice to be her successor. Her promotion was a long time coming. She had already assumed the role of deputy superintendent, taking over much of the day-to-day management of the Historic Site in Harris’s final years. She had acquired a Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology and art history from Emanuel College, and a Master’s degree in psychology from Eastern Nazarene College. When she took the reins in 1987, Peak had been working at the Historic Site for 26 years.

⁵¹⁰ Marianne Peak, phone interview with Laura Miller, January 24, 2020.



Figure 47. Marianne Peak standing in front of the Stone Library (left) and the Old House (right).

Peak succeeded Wilhelmina Harris as the park's superintendent in 1987.

Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

Peak was undoubtedly influenced by her decades of working closely with Harris. Her correspondence with Adams family members, particularly in her early years as Superintendent, show a striking similarity to the letters penned by her predecessor: giving detailed accounts of goings-on at the Historic Site, reminding them when the daffodils were in bloom, and encouraging them to visit.⁵¹¹ Peak definitely forged her own approach to the position, however. Curator Kelly Cobble described their differences:

Mrs. Harris carried a big stick [laughs] and had a way about her, I would say more of a superior air about her. It was like “you will do this, you want to do this, you want to be part of this. You want to be with us.” Whereas obviously, Marianne’s approach is *completely* different. . . . I think she’s much more humble, but at the same time knows what she wants and will just go after it a different way. Maybe with a little more honey. . . . I think Marianne learned a lot

⁵¹¹ See folder “Superintendent Marianne Peak Correspondence,” in unprocessed Resource Management Records (ADAM).

from the years of operating with Mrs. Harris . . . and I think she had the opportunity to take those connections and those future connections and just smooth out the edges a little bit.

Cobble noted that Peak was also “much more comfortable making partnerships. Harris was very in the know, but not necessarily eager to build a web of connections that would grow the park in any way or change the park in any way.”⁵¹² Whereas Harris sought to fight trends, Peak embraced them, and encouraged her staff to do the same. In the coming years, with Peak at the helm, the Adams National Historic Site nimbly adapted to meet increased visitation, and became a cornerstone of Quincy’s growing tourist infrastructure.

Marianne Peak became superintendent at an uneasy moment for the NPS. President Ronald Reagan, elected in 1980, and his Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, sought to rein in the expansion of the National Park System and focus on cost-cutting and visitor services. In a July 1981 letter to NPS Director Russell E. Dickenson, Watt instructed:

As Director, you should emphasize *management* of the National Park System. At this time, the attention of all managers within the System needs to be specifically directed to achieving efficiency, serving visitors, and protecting park values, rather than expanding the System. Special emphasis should be placed on bringing the old-line parks up to standard.⁵¹³

Keeping the Park Service bureaucracy at arm’s length and “fighting the trends,” as Harris would have preferred, were untenable in this new political climate. Luckily, Peak’s years of experience managing the park’s administrative work made her ideally suited to take over the park in this decade. The agency’s focus on visitor services, too, would come at an opportune time. In the next two decades, Adams National Historic Site experienced a dramatic increase in visitors, and would not have been able to accommodate the increase without some critical adjustments.

Just as the NPS and Adams National Historical Site were undergoing dramatic changes in the final decades of the twentieth century, so, too, was Quincy. It was an uneasy historical moment for the city. The granite and shipbuilding industries that had buoyed it in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries began to falter in the decades after World War II. Signs of deindustrialization were everywhere. The city’s last granite quarry closed in 1960. Shipbuilding continued at the Fore River shipyards through the postwar period, thanks to a buyout by General Dynamics in 1964, but it closed in 1986, in the face of foreign competitors. Historian Marilyn S. Johnson, who has documented Quincy’s upheaval during this time period, noted that the city’s “downturn occurred just when it should have

⁵¹² Kelly Cobble, phone interview with Laura Miller, October 17, 2019.

⁵¹³ Lary M. Dilsaver, *America’s National Park System: The Critical Documents* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), especially Chapter 8, “A System Threatened, 1981–1992,” https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/anps/anps_8a.htm. See also Barry Mackintosh, *The National Park Service: A Brief History* (1999), http://npshistory.com/publications/brief_history/index.htm.

been thriving.” There was a housing boom in the 1960s and 1970s, and the opening of the MBTA commuter rail in 1971. An influx of Irish American families leaving Dorchester for Quincy came during the same time period, followed by a new wave of Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants in the 1980s.⁵¹⁴ City officials increasingly turned to tourism to bolster their economy and identity.

Quincy Historical Society Executive Director Edward Fitzgerald described the late 1980s as “a dangerous time for the city.” The shipyard had closed, “it looked like the center was going to hollow out, retail was abandoning,” and “there was a real sense of concern that nobody quite knew where the city was going.” He recalled going to a public meeting in 1990: “it was four years since the shipyard had closed, but you could sense that people still—it wasn’t even that big of an employer anymore—but somehow . . . [they were experiencing] an identity crisis. I really think that was what was going on. They just didn’t know who they were and where they were.”⁵¹⁵ Park Curator Kelly Cobble, who started working at the Park in 1983 as a seasonal ranger, echoed this sentiment: “Quincy [was] always trying to define itself, or add to its definitions,” she said, “but it just seems that it’s always eluded us from really shining like everybody expected that we should and wanted to.”⁵¹⁶

Quincy politicians and residents increasingly looked to tourism as a means for the city to both define and revitalize itself. In the coming years, Marianne Peak devoted a substantial amount of time and effort to forging partnerships and promoting Quincy tourism beyond the park’s boundaries.

Heritage Tourism in Quincy

It was not unrealistic for Quincy residents to think that tourism could fill the void left by fleeing industry. Like many other deindustrializing cities, Quincy increasingly looked to its own history as a path toward economic revitalization. By the late 1980s, tourism had become one of the largest retail revenue generators in Massachusetts, and Quincy politicians were eager to get in the game. In 1987, the *Patriot Ledger* reported that city council candidates’ campaigns “focused on tourism as a way to revitalize the city’s business districts, particularly the downtown.” The Quincy Tourism Association, led by

⁵¹⁴ Marilyn S. Johnson gives a thorough overview and analysis of the demographic changes in Quincy in the 1970s and 1980s. See Johnson, *The New Bostonians: How Immigrants Have Transformed the Metro Area since the 1960s* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 97. For more on Chinese immigrants in Quincy, see Anthony Bak Buccitelli, *City of Neighborhoods: Memory, Folklore, and Ethnic Place in Boston* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016). Another fantastic resource on immigration in Boston more broadly is “Global Boston: A Portal to the Region’s Immigrant Past and Present,” a digital project based at Boston College directed by Marilyn S. Johnson, <https://globalboston.bc.edu/>.

⁵¹⁵ Fitzgerald started working at the Quincy Historical Society in 1992. Edward Fitzgerald, interview with Laura Miller, September 10, 2019.

⁵¹⁶ Kelly Cobble, phone interview with Laura Miller, December 5, 2019.

President Loren Strout, used city money to hire a company to create a five-year tourism promotion plan for the city. Adams National Historic Site staff, led by Superintendent Peak, worked closely with the Association to improve signage, promote Quincy's historic sites, and help devise a trolley system for the city's historic sites.⁵¹⁷ In her study of Lowell National Historical Park, anthropologist and public historian Cathy Stanton describes the thinking behind heritage tourism efforts: "the specific histories and landscapes of particular places are seen as invaluable assets that can be mobilized to help 'brand' (or in depressed areas, to re-brand) places so that they are immediately associated in people's minds with memorable images, stories, and impressions."⁵¹⁸ In Quincy, that rebranding effort would come to revolve, above all, around the city's two former presidents and native sons, John Adams and John Quincy Adams.

In 1989, the Quincy Tourism Association's Historic Sites Committee reported on attendance at the area's historic sites. The numbers drive home the site's outsized popularity in comparison to other Quincy historic sites. That year, the NPS welcomed 19,799 visitors to the Old House, and 8,720 to the birthplaces; three-quarters of those visitors came from outside Quincy. By comparison, the Dorothy Quincy Homestead welcomed 542 visitors and 178 local fourth graders, and the Josiah Quincy House welcomed 188 visitors and 600 local students. Adams National Historic Site was far and away the city's primary historic attraction. Lawrence Yerdon, director and curator of the Quincy Historical Society from 1975 to 1986 (and previously a seasonal guide at the Old House), recalled that Quincy's historical organizations were "pretty much a siloed community at that point."⁵¹⁹ This undoubtedly made it more difficult to embark on a joint effort to boost attendance at local historic sites.

Local historian and Committee Chair H. Hobart Holly thought that the solution to this imbalance lay, in part, in educating Quincy residents about their community's history and its historic resources:

Most people of the area have little appreciation or even knowledge of the historic sites. Better knowledge and appreciation on the part of local people would enable them to better aid visitors to Quincy, and also increase their interest in visiting local sites- instead of taking their out-of-town guests to sites elsewhere.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁷ *Patriot Ledger*, October 24, 1987, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, 1980–1987, Box 2, Folder 10 (ADAM).

⁵¹⁸ Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 5.

⁵¹⁹ Lawrence Yerdon, phone interview with Laura Miller, October 2, 2019.

⁵²⁰ H. Hobart Holly, "Quincy Tourism Association, Inc. Historic Sites Committee Report on 1989 Tourist Season," January 21, 1990, Quincy Tourism Brochures, Box 41, Folder 99.78.3 "Quincy Tourism Association Inc., 1981–1991 Miscellaneous" (Quincy Historical Society, Quincy, MA).

Holly's reference to "sites elsewhere" undoubtedly referred to the popular historical offerings in nearby Boston and Plymouth, which tended to overshadow Quincy's historic sites. The challenge was convincing people—both local and from outside Quincy—to move beyond Boston's Freedom Trail and Plymouth Rock. Once they made it to Quincy, they then needed to be convinced to move beyond the Old House and birthplaces, and to visit the City's other historic sites. Unspoken in Holly's assessment was who he meant by "local people." The demographic makeup of Quincy's "locals" was rapidly changing during this time period, and the local historical community was doing little to reach out to the Chinese and Vietnamese newcomers to the city who represented a rapidly growing segment of its population.

Local politicians, meanwhile, once again began looking to the NPS for guidance and partnership. This was particularly true of Quincy Mayor James Sheets. Marianne Peak recalled that the "stars were aligned there": Sheets had been Peak's American government professor in college, and he became mayor of Quincy in 1990, not long after she became Superintendent of Adams National Historic Site. The two reconnected and forged a close partnership that sought to benefit both the Historic Site and the city.

In 1990, Mayor Sheets requested technical assistance from the NPS in surveying, preserving, interpreting, and promoting the city's historical resources. The next year, the NPS and the City of Quincy signed a Memorandum of Understanding, "enter[ing] into a cooperative planning effort for the purpose of assessing their historic and cultural resources within the City of Quincy and developing a strategy for the preservation, promotion of these resources by the city and interpretation and development of these resources in a way that maximizes their recognition." The Park Service now had jurisdiction over several historic buildings in the City, and it made sense that a more cooperative effort between the city and the Park Service would further the tourism goals of both. As part of the agreement, known as the Quincy Heritage Agenda, the NPS would create a cultural resources inventory of the city, find linkages between those resources and the themes interpreted at the park as well as "alternative concepts for interpretive development" not relevant to the National Historic Site, and investigate the possibility of a permanent Quincy visitor center. In turn, the city would "be encouraged" to devise a plan for their cultural and historic resources, with historic preservation and management guidelines, enforcement measures for the city's historic districts, transportation, streetscape, and demographic studies, and development and zoning plans.⁵²¹

At the same time that the Quincy Heritage Agenda special resource study was underway, Adams National Historic Site's Superintendent and staff worked to strengthen the site's presence in downtown Quincy. This decision was, in part, a response to space

⁵²¹ "Memorandum of Understanding between the National Park Service North Atlantic Regional Office and the City of Quincy, Massachusetts," signed December 19, 1991, in unprocessed General Management Planning records (ADAM).

constraints. The Adams Carriage House housed the visitor center, fee collection, exhibit space, administrative headquarters, interpretive division offices, and maintenance facilities. Peak moved the Visitor Center to the Carriage House a couple years earlier, in 1988, in an effort to mitigate visitors' frustration. Some had "been impatiently pulling the bell, and feeling unwelcomed by anyone" at the front door of the Old House. Now they followed signs through the garden to the Carriage House, where they paid their admission fee and could browse a selection of books for sale. But it was a temporary, inadequate solution that created new problems. The Visitor Center was cramped, unheated, and poorly lighted, and lacked any restrooms.⁵²² Administrative offices were crammed into the same space. The site's 1993 Statement for Management noted that "the Interpretation Division's office serves as a passageway between the visitor orientation center and the rest room as well as a throughway for general administrative traffic." As a result, "Productivity is severely compromised."⁵²³ The Carriage House also housed some collections storage (which was decentralized and scattered throughout the park), and the building's lack of environmental controls left those collections vulnerable. And, as if this was not enough for one building to handle, the basement also housed the site's maintenance facilities, including a carpentry shop and equipment storage.⁵²⁴ The multi-purpose Carriage House had become unworkably overcrowded.

In 1993, the site implemented a park (not city-wide) trolley system that linked the birthplaces and the Old House, and opened a visitor center downtown in the Galleria at Presidents Place on Hancock Street. The new center, intended to be a temporary fix, opened in April of that year and replaced the visitor contact station and bookstore that had been in the carriage house since in 1988. Much to the relief of park staff, the new visitor center helped ease the Carriage House's space pressures. It also eased some tourists' concerns. Visitors often complained to rangers about Quincy traffic, the woefully insufficient on-street parking, and poor signage around the Old House and birthplaces. Many became overwhelmed and "would get frustrated and leave" before seeing everything the site had to offer—a point borne out by the fact that in 1989, the Old House received more than twice the number of visitors that the birthplaces received. The new trolley removed the stresses that tourists faced when navigating an unfamiliar city. The visitor center's convenient location in downtown Quincy made it easier to access the park by both car and by the MBTA commuter rail, and the adjacent parking garage better accommodated the growing number of people traveling to the park.⁵²⁵

⁵²² "AMS Minutes," September 12, 1992, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder "1992 Minutes," AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS, MHS.

⁵²³ "Adams National Historic Site Statement for Management," January 15, 1993, 12 (ADAM).

⁵²⁴ "Adams National Historic Site Statement for Management," January 15, 1993, 13.

⁵²⁵ Marianne Peak, phone interview with Laura Miller, January 24, 2020; and "Adams National Historic Site Statement for Management," January 15, 1993, 15 (ADAM).



Figure 48. Marianne Peak and Sean Maguire, Vice President of Administrative Services for The Boston Five at the site of the new National Park Service Visitor's Center in Quincy, 1993.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

The visitor center's grand opening on April 18, 1993 was celebrated with a ribbon cutting by Peak, North Atlantic Region Director Marie Rust, Charles Francis Adams, Senator Edward Kennedy, Mayor James Sheets, and NPS Acting Director Herbert Cables. The ceremony included an outdoor skit about the 1776 British evacuation of Boston, and an indoor gala with speeches and the US Army Band.⁵²⁶ The NPS *Courier* noted that "Rangers and volunteers now have a much more visible presence in Quincy and they will be directing visitors not only to the multiple Adams sites but also the many other landmarks in the 'City of Presidents.'"⁵²⁷ Although the visitor center was run by and for the National Historic Site, many residents hoped it would be a hub for city tourism more broadly.

⁵²⁶ "Report of the Adams Family Committee Who Visit the Old House," September 11, 1993, Folder "1993 Minutes," AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁵²⁷ "New Adams Visitor Center Opened," *Courier: Newsmagazine of the National Park Service*, 38, no. 6 (Fall 1993), 19. Available online: <http://npshistory.com/newsletters/courier/courier-v38n6.pdf> [accessed August 8, 2019].

These improvements would have been unthinkable without the support of local and state politicians, including Mayor Sheets, Senators Edward Kennedy and John Kerry, and Congressional representatives Gerry Studds and Bill Delahunt. Peak noted that Senator Kennedy and his staff were instrumental in getting the park the funding necessary for the visitor center and trolleys. “We are what we are today because of that,” she said.⁵²⁸ Sheets was also a critical Park ally. Because Peak was unable to lobby for funding, Sheets was able to pull strings for her in Washington. It helped, too, that this push for an improved visitor infrastructure came at a time when the NPS was focused on improving visitor services throughout the system. It was a fortuitous moment for the park, when agency-wide priorities, congressional support, and a superintendent who was willing to challenge the status quo were all aligned.

In 1994, the NPS’s long-awaited special resource study, *A Quincy Heritage Agenda: Conservation, Use, and Interpretation of Historic Resources in Quincy*, was released. The study organized the city’s sixteen historic sites into three primary themes: the Adams family and patriotism, the granite industry, and maritime activities. After evaluating these sites, the special resource study drew four primary conclusions. First, it noted that the most important sites in Quincy related to the Adamses were already under the NPS’s purview. Second, it argued that there should be a concerted local effort to preserve and interpret the city’s historic sites. Third, a separate evaluation was needed to investigate the city’s sites related to the granite industry. And fourth, “an extraordinary convergence of events and trends in Quincy at this time presents an opportunity for local leaders to create or enable a coordinating group to assure the protection of Quincy’s historic resources and to develop and expand related visitor services.”⁵²⁹

Despite the energy and enthusiasm behind these efforts, Quincy’s city-wide tourism plans remained slow-going. A 1995 political cartoon in the *Patriot Ledger* humorously depicted the frustration that many Quincy residents felt about the plans. In the cartoon, John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and John Hancock are reading a newspaper headline, “Quincy Tourism Still Lacks Focus,” to which John Adams quips, “Geez, we organized a country *faster!*”

⁵²⁸ Marianne Peak, phone interview with Laura Miller, January 24, 2020.

⁵²⁹ *A Quincy Heritage Agenda: Conservation, Use, and Interpretation of Historic Resources in Quincy* (National Park Service North Atlantic Region, June 1994), 1.



Figure 49. Political cartoon from the *Patriot Ledger*, July 5, 1995, mocking the slow progress of the Quincy tourism agenda. Image courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

While a broader, coordinated Quincy tourism agenda sputtered in the 1990s, Adams National Park enjoyed a decade of growth and promotion. It was boosted by the new Visitor Center, the park trolley, an innovative interpretive staff, and an ambitious Superintendent who was ready to push beyond her predecessor's conservative approach.

Seeking “A Cradle to Grave Continuity”

Superintendent Marianne Peak saw the UFPC as an important part of the Adams story in Quincy. The problems plaguing the Church were still unresolved in the early 1990s, and Peak worked hard to provide as much NPS support as possible. She also kept an eye out for ways to collaborate; given the Church’s many ties to the Adamses, the congregation was an obvious partner. Peak tried to arrange an agreement for NPS rangers to give tours of the Adams crypts, which were open by appointment only and received a meager number of visitors each year. Church leadership, however, were concerned that NPS involvement would obscure the building’s role as an active place of worship. The Adams Memorial Society’s 1991 meeting minutes noted that church leadership worried “about being perceived as a *national* shrine, not a religious one. The [church] authorities do not like the idea of its guides wearing Park Service uniforms, and so the plan came to naught.”⁵³⁰ Peak, however, was as persistent as her predecessor. She put the idea on the backburner, but did not give up on it entirely.

Peak also explored ways of including the historic Hancock cemetery on an extended Park tour, telling the Adams Memorial Society members that she felt that it made sense for the crypts and cemetery to be toured together. Along with the birthplaces and the Old House, these additions would provide visitors with “a cradle to grave continuity” at Quincy’s Adams-related historic sites.⁵³¹ Taking a page from Wilhelmina Harris’s playbook, she told the family that if this was of interest to them, “she felt her credibility would be enhanced, if the family would endorse the idea in writing.”⁵³²

In March 1993, the UFPC, the Adams Temple and School Fund, and the NPS finally came to agreement. They formalized a Memorandum of Understanding to offer interpretive programming at the church and crypts. The Adams Temple and School Fund and the UFPC would provide public access to the church, with the church charging a separate fee (\$1.00 for adults, children under 16 free) and keeping a site manager on hand during hours of operation. The Park Service, in turn, would provide interpretation. Park Rangers would give tours that focused on the church’s vestibule, sanctuary, and the crypts, and they would help research and write an interpretive program, organize tours, plan special events, and provide printed materials for visitors. The Memorandum included language that was no doubt meant to ease the concerns of NPS leaders and church leaders alike:

⁵³⁰ “Report of the Adams Family Committee Who Visit the Old House,” September 10, 1991, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder “1991 Minutes,” AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁵³¹ “AMS Minutes,” September 12, 1992, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder “1992 Minutes,” AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁵³² “AMS Minutes,” September 12, 1992.

To insure separate of church and state, NPS interpretive material will not include discussion of the religious tenets of the congregation. The program will focus on the institution's connection with the Adamses, the history and architecture of the structure, and identify that the building is the property and place of worship of an active congregation with a continuous history since 1639. Inquiries specific to the religious congregation will be referred to church representatives.⁵³³

The agreement was signed by Charles Francis Adams as chair of the Adams Temple and School Fund, Peak as Superintendent of Adams National Historic Site, and UFPC Board of Governors Chair Brenda Powers.

The Memorandum of Understanding guided the relationship between the Park and the church for the next six years. During this time, visitors were able to take a twenty-minute tour of the church, followed by a visit to the family crypt. Park staff created a detailed interpretive resource manual that outlined the general approach to these tours. Rangers emphasized the importance of the church in Quincy's history and its importance to the Adams family, including a discussion about how the "morals and ideals" shaped by their spiritual lives influenced their commitment to public service. Importantly, the rangers also sought to underscore the family's religious tolerance and their commitment to the separation of church and state established by the First Amendment.⁵³⁴

Marianne Peak recalled that it was a successful program that seemed to please all parties involved.⁵³⁵ Unfortunately, it was short-lived. The church began a construction project in the basement that made giving tours unsafe for visitors and staff. As a result, the parties decided to end their agreement in 1999.⁵³⁶

⁵³³ "Memorandum of Understanding by and among the United First Parish Church, Adams Temple and School Fund, and the National Park Service," in binder of Park administration documents (ADAM).

⁵³⁴ Adams National Historic Site, *United First Parish Church Interpretive Resource Manual: Materials for Interpreters Presenting Programs on the Importance of Spirituality to the Adams Family*, undated (ca. 1990s), in binder of Park administration documents (ADAM).

⁵³⁵ Marianne Peak, phone interview by Laura Miller, January 24, 2020.

⁵³⁶ 1995 newsletter for Adams National Historic Site, Resource Management Records, Box 20, Folder 37 (ADAM).

Visitation in the 1990s

As the twentieth century drew to a close, tourists were no longer welcomed at the front door of the Old House like they were guests of the Adamses. They now began their visit at the Visitor Center in bustling downtown Quincy. Here, rangers oriented visitors to the site, interpretive programs, and tour schedules, and collected the \$2.00 fee that enabled them to tour all three houses and the church. They could also spend time perusing the Visitor Center's bookstore and exhibits, which in 1995 included "The Adams Family: An Enduring Vision," about the family's public service, and "The Adamses in Quincy," about the family's contributions to the city. That same year, Park staff also put together a creative display of antique trunks modeled on the family's purchases of books on diplomatic missions:

With this aspect of the Adams family story in mind, antique trunks have been transported to the Adams National Historic Site Visitor Center filled with out of print books relating to park themes for visitors to browse, purchase and of course pack and take home with them to add to their own family fortune of knowledge.⁵³⁷

Visitors were now shuttled around the Historic Site by a twice-hourly trolley service which connected the birthplaces, Old House, and the UFPC. They had the option of visiting some or all of these properties. If they wanted to see everything, a complete visit would take about three hours: an hour for the Old House, forty minutes for the birthplaces, and twenty minutes for the UFPC, plus time for the Visitor Center and a stroll through the gardens, where visitors were encouraged to enjoy the "annuals and perennials maintained in the tradition of the third and fourth generation of the Adams family."⁵³⁸ Outside of regular tours, visitors could also enjoy a variety of creative and engaging curatorial and interpretive offerings. There were furniture and rare book symposiums, special tours of exhibits, visits from renowned scholars, the ever-popular Spring Lecture Series, and performances by costumed interpreters.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁷ 1995 newsletter for Adams National Historic Site, Resource Management Records, Box 20, Folder 37 (ADAM).

⁵³⁸ 1995 newsletter for Adams National Historic Site, Resource Management Records, Box 20, Folder 37 (ADAM). See also Adams National Historic Site, "Statement for Management," January 1993.

⁵³⁹ "Accomplishments of the Curatorial Division FY94," unprocessed resource management records (ADAM); and 1995 newsletter for Adams National Historic Site, Resource Management Records, Box 20, Folder 37 (ADAM).



Figure 50. The Adams National Historical Park trolley at the birthplaces.
Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

All these changes were taking place at a time when NPS units were beginning to feel the effects of political turmoil in Washington, DC. When the National Park Service faced significant budget cuts, those cuts trickled down to the parks. Adams National Historic Site was no exception. In 1995, the Adams maintenance staff was reduced from seven to five employees, and they had only one permanent interpretive staff member, Caroline Keinath. With staff layoffs throughout the NPS, parks struggled to find hiring workarounds. Peak, for example, was eager to hire John Stanwich as a full-time historian. The Adams Memorial Society's 1995 meeting minutes recorded that Peak had "to be a little devious in the job description in order to get him. John speaks Russian, and so the Old House has requested a Russian-speaking Historian!" (Stanwich was finally hired as a permanent Ranger-Historian in 1996). This staff reduction was particularly challenging considering that the Site was now managing more properties and amenities than ever before.⁵⁴⁰

The government dysfunction extended beyond staffing issues. In 1996, a government shutdown wreaked havoc on the Historic Site. Staff were unable to complete essential fall and winter maintenance tasks, missed payments to vendors, "and the same old leaks leaked again and again—saturating the ceiling in the upstairs back hall and staining the tile table there." During the shutdown, Maintenance Chief Eugene Gabriel was the

⁵⁴⁰ "Report of the Adams Family Committee Who Visit the Old House," September 9, 1995, Folder "1995 Minutes," AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

only staff member permitted to go to the Old House to pick up the mail, inspect the buildings for leaks, and clear snow on the property. Historian David McCullough, who at the time was conducting research at the Old House for his forthcoming biography of John Adams, offered to contribute his own money toward keeping the house open. His offer was politely declined.⁵⁴¹

By the late 1990s the direct impact of these events had mostly passed, and just in time. A record number of visitors descended on Adams National Historic Site in the late 1990s, driven by several new books, films, and television programs about the Adamses. Steven Spielberg's 1997 film, *Amistad*, brought renewed attention to John Quincy Adams and his role in the Supreme Court case defending Mendi tribesmen who had mutinied aboard the slave ship *La Amistad* in 1839. The park published a booklet, "John Quincy Adams and the *Amistad* Event," to help educate the public about the event and the role of John Quincy Adams. In 1999, C-SPAN ran a live broadcast from the Stone Library for its *American Presidents: Life Portraits* series, featuring historian David McCullough discussing John Adams (before his popular biography was published—which would touch off another, much larger wave of visitors in the early 2000s). Another broadcast from the MHS focused on John Quincy Adams. In 1999, 79,255 people came to Adams National Historical Park. That number was up more than 20% from the year before.

Park staff responded to this renewed media attention by increasing programming and special events to accommodate the tremendous demand. They also entered a new interpretive phase, Curator Kelly Cobble said. They went from "this is the way we've always done it" under Harris, to "hey, let's look at different possibilities." Supervisory Park Ranger John Stanwich was at the forefront of these public programs. He led interactive programs at the park, including "Independence Forever," in which visitors role-played a debate among Continental Congress delegates representing their colonies.⁵⁴² Stanwich approached the role with tremendous enthusiasm; he had much more freedom than staff had under Harris, "and he just ran with it." Stanwich received the 1999 Freeman Tilden Award from the NPS Northeast Region "for excellence in the field of Interpretation." Cobble concluded, "It was a very exciting time and I do think it changed the mindset significantly of what [interpretive] possibilities there are" at the Historic Site.

⁵⁴¹ "Report of the Adams Family Committee Who Visit the Old House," September 9, 1996, Folder "1996 Minutes," AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁵⁴² "Adams National Historical Park: Fiscal Year 1999 Annual Report," unprocessed park records (ADAM).

From Historic Site to Historical Park

With so many changes underway at Adams National Historic Site in the 1990s, it made sense for the park's staff to take a step back and reevaluate their history and plans for the future. What were the park's core values? What resources needed protecting? What were the staff's ambitions for the park's future? This was the goal of a General Management Plan (GMP). The GMP was intended to be a modern update on the site's Master Plan from the 1950s and 60s, focused on planning "the direction and management philosophy for each park in the system."⁵⁴³ The park began its years-long general management planning process in 1991, working with a team from the NPS Denver Service Center.

The GMP process prioritized public input. In the words of historian Joan Zenzen, "open government in the post-Watergate years required such an approach, and the NPS largely tried to embrace this commitment."⁵⁴⁴ The planning team held a public meeting at the Adams Academy on February 3, 1993 that drew 32 people. The goal of the meeting was to introduce the team, explain the process, and solicit public feedback. Denver Service Center Team Captain Jackie Powell sent a trip report summarizing her visit to the park in late January and early February 1993. She noted that the public meeting included public presentations from community stakeholders, and that "most of the comments from the floor were related to sites that are part of the Quincy Special Resource Study." With the GMP and the Special Resource Study (which resulted in the 1994 *Quincy Heritage Agenda*) underway at the same time, it was clear that Quincy community members were confused about the difference between the two. These distinctions, Powell noted, "must be clearly defined and reiterated, and local citizens must be informed of the importance of the NHS [National Historic Site] to their community."⁵⁴⁵

The Adams Memorial Society watched these new developments closely, and made sure to share their input as well. Some family members worried about the fast pace of change at the park. They were also uneasy about a GMP planning process being directed from afar by an NPS team in Denver. At the Adams Memorial Society's September 1993 meeting, Charles Francis Adams IV expressed "a general concern that people in the Park Service who were not familiar with the site could urge things that are not appropriate. The planning process heightens these concerns." He assured Marianne Peak (who was, of course, present at the meeting) that the family trusted her judgment. But, he said, the family still needed to make sure their views were well-known to the regional Park Service

⁵⁴³ *Adams National Historic Site, Massachusetts: General Management Plan* (December 1996), 3.

⁵⁴⁴ Joan Zenzen, *Bridging the Past: Minute Man National Historical Park Administrative History* (National Park Service Northeast Region History Program: July 2010), 218.

⁵⁴⁵ Jackie Powell to Manager, Eastern Team, Denver Service Center, "Trip Report, January 31–February 6, 1993," in unprocessed Resource Management Records, Folder "General Management Plans" (ADAM)

leadership. The Memorial Society members decided to form an ad hoc committee that would receive a briefing on the planning process from Regional Director Marie Rust, “and then draft a careful response.”

Charles Francis Adams also noted that he was wary of Mayor Sheets’ plans to bring more tourists to Quincy: “if successful, the quality of a visit to the Old House could be degraded, and we don’t want that to happen.” Adams told Sheets directly that a dramatic increase in visitors to the Old House “could result in frustration and ill will” among family members. Peak assured Adams that their goal was “not to get more visitors [to the Old House], but to get them to more of Quincy’s resources.”⁵⁴⁶ In her report of the Committee Who Visit the Old House that same year, Nancy M. Adams voiced similar concerns: “We perceived a danger of the City of Quincy involving [the] Park Service to its own advantage, not necessarily to the best interests of the Adams Site. We all have great reservations over representation of the Adams family to solve the financial problems of Quincy.”⁵⁴⁷

Despite these concerns from the Adams Memorial Society, the Park’s GMP was approved in 1996. It provided a blueprint for efforts to update and modernize the Park that were implemented in the late 1990s and early 2000s: the rehabilitation of the Beale Estate for administrative offices, maintenance facilities relocated to the Beale carriage house, the renovation of the Adams carriage house, and improved museum and curatorial storage and workspace across the site. These improvement projects and increase in partnerships with other Quincy organizations were critical to the park’s development in the new century. In 1998, the Park received funding to renovate the Adams carriage house and build a maintenance facility at the Beale carriage house, which would enable the Park’s administrative offices to be moved to the Beale Estate.

The 1996 GMP also recommended that the Historic Site pursue another name change. Here it is helpful to pause and recall the site’s various name and boundary changes over the previous five decades: Adams Mansion National Historic Site was established as a NPS unit in 1946. It was enlarged in 1952, and renamed Adams National Historic Site the same year. The Site was enlarged again in 1972 with the acquisition of the 3.68-acre Beale Estate; and again in 1978 with the addition of the John Adams and John Quincy Adams birthplaces. In 1980, the site was authorized to accept the conveyance of the UFPC, and although the church did not become an NPS property, it did bring the church within the Site’s boundaries. What had begun as a single historic house museum, the Old House, was now “a multi-site unit of the National Park System with no over-arching enabling or authorizing legislation.”⁵⁴⁸ The designation of the unit as a National Historic Site had outlived its

⁵⁴⁶ “AMS Minutes,” September 11, 1993, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder “1993 Minutes,” AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁵⁴⁷ “Report of the Adams Family Committee Who Visit the Old House,” September 11, 1993, Folder “1993 Minutes,” AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁵⁴⁸ <https://www.congress.gov/105/plaws/publ342/PLAW-105publ342.pdf> [accessed July 18, 2019].

usefulness. For all intents and purposes, it was a national historical *park* that encompassed several distinct but interrelated properties across the city. Designating it as such would enable the staff to further their goals of developing a permanent visitor center, improving their administration and maintenance facilities, and better orienting visitors to the many Adams-related historic sites in Quincy.

On November 2, 1998, Congress passed the Adams National Historical Park Act of 1998. The legislation, introduced by Congressman William Delahunt with support from Massachusetts Senators Edward Kennedy and John Kerry, gave the park a new name, and enabled the secretary of the interior to acquire up to 10 acres “for the development of visitor, administrative, museum, curatorial, and maintenance facilities adjacent to or in the general proximity of the property.”⁵⁴⁹ According to Curator Kelly Cobble, the change enabled the Park to “position ourselves to be capable of bigger things. . . . We were already big, so why not establish ourselves as that.”⁵⁵⁰

Vandalism and Theft

The 1990s were, in all, a tremendously successful decade for Adams National Historical Park. But it was not a crisis-free decade: in 1996, Park staff were forced to confront what they had long feared, but had managed to avoid for several decades: a robbery so devastating that it became national news.

This was not the park staff’s first brush with vandalism and theft. In the 1960s, Wilhelmina Harris documented the occasional beer can tossed over the stone wall, and the presence of unleashed dogs harassing ducks on the pond. In 1966, she was able to “report that we have been remarkably free of vandalism at the Adams National Historic Site since 1948.” The beer cans and dogs, she said, “would not be classified as ‘Vandalism’ but it is disturbing to the personnel.”⁵⁵¹ A couple of years later, however, she noticed an increase in these activities. One night, she looked out her bedroom window and witnessed a group of boys jumping in the flower beds. A few weeks later, someone stole the Historic Site’s sign (a copy of Mary Ogden Abbott’s original carved sign, which was in storage for safekeeping) and damaged the Stone Wall in the process. Harris worried that the NPS needed to do more to protect the Site. She wrote to the regional director to recommend that they hire a night watchman to patrol the property. “The stakes are too high at Adams to play our luck any longer. Broken window panes, broken glass in the Greenhouse, damage to the

⁵⁴⁹ <https://www.congress.gov/105/plaws/publ342/PLAW-105publ342.pdf> [accessed July 18, 2019].

⁵⁵⁰ Kelly Cobble, phone interview with Laura Miller, December 5, 2019.

⁵⁵¹ Wilhelmina S. Harris to Alden Stahr, December 8, 1966, Resource Management Records, Box 6, Folder 4 (ADAM).

shrubbery and now the tearing down of the sign indicates that the time is approaching for us to take steps to protect the ‘Old House.’ . . . You see the vandals are on the move in this section of town,” she concluded.⁵⁵²

From the 1970s to the 1990s, Adams National Historic Site suffered a few high-profile incidents. In 1970, the park office was broken into, and an adding machine, air conditioner, staple gun, radio, and an IBM electric typewriter (“our most prized possession”) were stolen, and never recovered. In June 1975, Harris fretted about groups of people gathering to drink in the orchard, leaving empty beer cans and matchbooks behind.⁵⁵³ Maintenance employee Eugene Gabriel wrote to the *Patriot Ledger* to decry “Floral Combat” at the Historic Site: “On May 11, the kids scored their biggest victory of their campaign. They destroyed 165, hard-core, combatant flowers”—the precious and eagerly awaited daffodils in the meadow.⁵⁵⁴ Another theft in 1979 was more serious. Over Labor Day weekend, someone broke into the laundry room of the Old House and took several family artifacts, including pistols belonging to John Quincy Adams, seals, a pocket watch, and an American flag.⁵⁵⁵ The items, stolen by James J. Nally of Hingham, were recovered in March 1980.⁵⁵⁶ For the next decade and a half, park staff continued to contend with relatively minor yet distressing acts of vandalism.⁵⁵⁷ Collectively, they left the staff on edge.

Then came a devastating break-in on November 11, 1996. The day before, on November 10, the staff closed down the Historic Site for the season. The next night, someone sawed a hole through the door of the Stone Library, broke in, and took four priceless books from John Quincy Adams’s book collection. Most precious was a bible that Mendi tribesmen gave to Adams in gratitude for defending them before the US Supreme Court and securing their freedom after their mutiny aboard the slave ship *Amistad*. The other

⁵⁵² Wilhelmina S. Harris to Regional Director, “Vandalism,” May 21, 1968, Resource Management Records, Box 6, Folder 4 (ADAM).

⁵⁵³ Wilhelmina S. Harris to Director, “Report of Larceny at Adams National Historic Site,” June 17, 1970, and Harris to Regional Director, North Atlantic Region, both in Resource Management Records, Box 6, Folder 4 (ADAM).

⁵⁵⁴ Eugene A. Gabriel, “Readers’ Opinions: Floral Combat,” *Patriot Ledger*, date unknown (ca. June 1975), enclosed with a letter from Wilhelmina S. Harris to David A. Richie, North Atlantic Regional Office, June 11, 1975, RG 79, Box 6, Folder D-3215 Adams National Historical Park, National Park Service North Atlantic Region Program and Subject Files 1962-1977 (National Archives at Boston, Waltham, Massachusetts).

⁵⁵⁵ Records on the police case for the 1979 burglary can be found in Resource Management Records, Box 57, Folder 15 (ADAM). See also newspaper clippings, *Boston Herald American*, September 6, 1979; *Patriot Ledger*, September 4 and September 5, 1979, in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 1, Folder 24 (ADAM).

⁵⁵⁶ *Boston Herald*, March 28 and 29, 1980, *Patriot Ledger*, March 28 and April 15, 1980, and *Quincy Sun*, April 3, 1980; all in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 2, Folder 1 (ADAM).

⁵⁵⁷ In 1982, the park installed lights on a utility pole near the greenhouse after unknown individuals broke the glass panes on the south side of the structure and destroyed growing seedlings, which needed to be replanted. That same year, a drunk driver hit and destroyed about 20 feet of the stone wall along Adams Street. The accident also resulted in the death of a passenger in the vehicle. “Annual Report #1 January 1, 1982–January 1, 1983,” Box 3, Folder “Adams National Historic Site,” RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Superintendents Annual Narrative Reports, 1980–2001 (NACP).

books were a 1772 English bible published in England, belonging to Louisa Catherine Adams; the oldest book in Adams's collection, *Biblia Cu Concordantus Veteris*, a 1521 Latin bible published in Germany; and a 1785 book of fish illustrations, *Ichtyologie*, published in Germany and printed in French. The break-in triggered the site's alarm system, and the thief quickly grabbed what they could and fled before the police arrived.

Kelly Cobble, at the time the site's Museum Technician, recalled the series of events that followed. She got a call at seven o'clock that night saying that there had been a robbery, and she had to report immediately because she was in charge of making sure that all items in the Old House and Library were accounted for. There were "a lot of fingers pointing in my direction to say, 'what was there, when did you see it, how do you know, what do you have for evidence that you can tell us, can you tell me that you walked out the door at five o'clock and you saw everything there.'" The staff had to negotiate investigative procedures with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who wanted to take items of historical value for fingerprinting. The parties settled on a compromise: there was a box containing one hundred maps of Russia on the table which they let the FBI take (and leave the maps behind). Kelly recalled that "the FBI . . . was really looking at every single one of us as a possible suspect. It was a lot of interrogation." "It's something that never leaves you," she added.⁵⁵⁸

The investigation conducted by the FBI and the Quincy Police Department led to the recovery of two of the books, the Mendi Bible and *Biblia Cu Concordantus Veteris*, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire in January 1997. In late April, the other two books were located in Salisbury, Massachusetts. In March 1998, Kevin P. Gildea was charged by a federal grand jury on four counts: two counts of theft and concealment of cultural heritage, and two counts of theft and concealment of government property. On the same day, a news conference was held at the site. Superintendent Peak presided with a welcome on behalf of the NPS, which was followed by remarks from representatives of the US Attorney's Office, the FBI, the Quincy Police Department, and the NPS, and the official return of the volumes to the park. Representatives of the Adams Memorial Society were present, including Peter Boylston Adams (son of Thomas Boylston Adams and Ramelle Cochrane), as well as a conservator from the Northeast Document Conservation Center, interpretive staff members John Stanwich and Caroline Keinath, and curatorial staff members Judith Curtis and Kelly Cobble.⁵⁵⁹ Everyone at the park was relieved to have the books returned to their rightful home, but distressed that such a theft could have happened at all.

⁵⁵⁸ Kelly Cobble, interview with Laura Miller, December 5, 2019.

⁵⁵⁹ US Department of Justice, United States Attorney, District of Massachusetts, "Press Release: Local Man Charged with Theft and Concealment of Four Valuable Books Stolen in November, 1996 from Adams National Historic Site in Quincy," March 25, 1998; and Program, "Adams National Historic Site: Return of Historic Volumes to the Stone Library," March 25, 1998; both in Reference Archives, Box 11, Folder 2 (ADAM). For newspaper clippings on the theft, see Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, 1996–1998, Box 5, Folder "1996—File on Robbery" (ADAM).



Figure 51. Judith Curtis and Kelly Cobble at the press conference marking the return of the stolen items to the Stone Library on March 25, 1998. Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service, Adams National Historical Park.

* * *

The 1990s were a decade of profound change for Adams National Historical Park. Marianne Peak was much less progress-averse than her predecessor, and in a few short years, she implemented an improved park transportation system, opened an off-site Visitor Center, and oversaw the completion of a GMP and a Quincy Heritage Agenda. She also forged new partnerships, reinvigorated the Park’s outreach to the local community and the UFPC, and sought to strengthen Quincy tourism not only for the Park’s benefit, but for the city as a whole. It was an extraordinarily ambitious program.

There were undoubtedly trade-offs that accompanied these changes. The efforts to boost Quincy tourism sometimes seemed to have lopsided benefits. There had been hopes, for example, that the Park’s Visitor Center and the trolleys would be used to promote city-wide tourism. Although rangers could help direct tourists to other area historic sites, the Visitor Center and trolleys primarily served the National Historic Site. Looking back on the city’s tourism efforts in the 1990s, Quincy Historical Society Executive Director Edward Fitzgerald noted that some city leaders thought that “the National Historic Site would be their salvation,” and were “shocked and dismayed to find out that that wasn’t going to work. . . . it was an unrealistic hope.” Quincy tourism, he suggested, was facing an uphill battle compared to other regional attractions:

We're not going to be like Plymouth. Plymouth has a two hundred-year jump on the public relations. They've got a nice, if not necessarily true story that they tell. We don't have anything sensational like witches [like Salem, Massachusetts]. . . . we're never going to be like those places, and it's foolish, and it simply sets up frustration and disappointment . . . to try and be that.⁵⁶⁰

In short, he suggested that it was misguided for people to expect that the NPS, and tourism more broadly, would offer a quick solution Quincy's economic uncertainty.

As for the site itself, there was a subtle shift in the rangers' tours of the Old House. Patricia Shaheen noted that Wilhelmina Harris prioritized making visitors feel that they were being welcomed as a guest into the Adams family home. Sometimes Harris would sit on the front porch, waiting to greet people and invite them in. "I think I'm just speaking about the intimacy and the history, you know, the feeling that you got waiting on the front porch, just as if you were a real visitor." Carole Perrault made a similar observation: "With Mrs. Harris it was much more intimate—you were a guest in the home. The interpreters were told, 'These are your guests, you meet them at the front door and you take them and give them a tour of your home.'" With the volume of tours coming by trolley, she said, "it's hard to maintain that level of intimacy."⁵⁶¹

This shift was no doubt inevitable in Harris's absence. The fact that in the 1920s she had welcomed *actual* guests of Brooks and Evelyn Adams into the Old House made her something of a historic relic in her own right. But this atmosphere was also upended by the Park's modernization. The trolley, the off-site visitor center, and interpretive signage all detracted from the highly personalized, intimate feeling that Harris had so carefully cultivated.⁵⁶²

Harris's approach had its own trade-offs. It left little room to move beyond her celebratory narrative of the Adamses—after all, it would be impolite for visitors to critique the host, or ask them difficult questions! Stripping away the pretense of the host/guest encounter opened up new interpretive possibilities for the park's rangers. These barriers finally began to come down after Harris's retirement.

⁵⁶⁰ Edward Fitzgerald, interview with Laura Miller, September 10, 2019.

⁵⁶¹ Perrault, interview by Laura Miller, September 13, 2019.

⁵⁶² Patricia Shaheen, phone interview by Laura Miller, October 10, 2019; Carole Perrault, interview by Laura Miller, September 10, 2019.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ADAMS NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK IN THE EARLY 2000s

Adams National Historical Park kicked off the twenty-first century with a bang. It was an exciting, if exhausting, moment for Park staff: the interpretive team began experimenting with new ways of presenting the Park's history to visitors; David McCullough's 2001 biography *John Adams* (and the HBO series it inspired) brought a deluge of new tourists to Quincy; and a backlog of sorely needed construction and renovation projects were underway to alleviate the Park's overcrowding and storage challenges. Superintendent Marianne Peak also continued her efforts to bolster Quincy tourism, and worked with the Adams Memorial Society to help preserve the historic UFPC and its priceless collection of historic silver.

David McCullough's *John Adams*

In the decades after the Adams papers were opened up to researchers at the MHS, the Park routinely saw spikes in visitation and media attention that corresponded with the release of Adams-related books, television series, and movies. This had also been seen with the publication of Page Smith's two-volume biography of John Adams in the 1960s, the airing of the PBS miniseries *The Adams Chronicles* in 1976, and again when Paul C. Nagel's *Descent from Glory* was published in 1983. None of these compared to the tremendous impact of David McCullough's 2001 biography, *John Adams*. Marianne Peak described 2001 as "the most challenged and accomplished year in the park's history (since 1946) under the management and administration of the National Park Service."⁵⁶³ McCullough's book brought years of increased attendance and unprecedented publicity to the Park.

⁵⁶³ "Superintendent's 'State of the Park' Narrative, Adams National Historical Park," FY 2000, Box 3, Folder "Adams National Historic Site," RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Superintendents' Annual Narrative Reports, 1980–2001 (NACP).

As he researched and wrote his biography of John Adams, McCullough spent considerable time at the Park, walking the halls of the Old House and soaking up every small detail. He told a *Newsweek* journalist in 2001, “I gotta go smell the place and see how the light comes into the room. . . . It’s what I have to do to get myself into their lives and their time.”⁵⁶⁴ Curator Kelly Cobble recalled these visits:

he definitely came to the Park on several occasions to, as he would say it, “witness and become one with the eighteenth century.” He wanted to walk through the house, he wanted to feel the presence and the space where John and Abigail spent their time. Obviously, that’s a fraction of the house . . . but it was definitely significant rooms and some significant objects that he could really relate to and wanted to just study for his own time travelling [laughs]. And of course down at the birthplaces there is really the sense that it’s where it all took place. So it was kind of twofold. The story takes primarily from the birthplaces area, and the houses, but then what we have today and [John and Abigail Adams’s] later life is what he could really focus in on and try to come to terms with.

Cobble noted that the staff enjoyed meeting with McCullough and exchanging tidbits of historical research as they toured the Old House:

He’d be walking through and we’d be walking through . . . quoting the same things at the same time, you know. We’d point out a clock, or a table, or something and you might [mention] Abigail shelling beans, and when a visitor came, or this is where they were having tea when they discussed Shakespeare and the events of the day. It was really kind of a fun experience to have him here.

When the book was published and the staff sat down to read the finished product, they were thrilled to see echoes of their own interpretation:

All of us kind of were like, “Oh! Well that’s just . . . what we say all the time!” [laughs] But he had put such a craft to it, and really such a narrative to it that it’s a very comforting book. He did what we hadn’t been able to do. We have been quoting and telling the Adamses story all these years, but what he could do was to really push it out there and into people’s hands . . . once they really had [the Adams’] words and their stories in their own hands, it really gave an “aha!” moment to the public and [they] said “whoa, where’s this guy been hiding all these years?”⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶⁴ David Gates, “Founding Fathers: John Adams Is in the House,” *Newsweek*, May 21, 2001, in Reference Archives, Box 14, Folder 3, “2001, April-May, Magazines” (ADAM)

⁵⁶⁵ Kelly Cobble, phone interview with Laura Miller, December 5, 2019.

McCullough warned the Park staff that there might be a deluge of visitors after the book's publication. Apparently, his 1992 biography of Harry S. Truman had caused a similar spike at the Truman National Historic Site in Missouri. He was right: visitors came in droves. Peak reported 158,568 visitors in 2001—a 99% increase over the year before.⁵⁶⁶ She was able to hire a few more staff members to give tours, and they all adapted to changing conditions as they went along. The Park's single trolley was not adequate to move so many visitors, and wait times went up for tours.⁵⁶⁷ Whereas tour guides previously had to usher ten visitors at a time through the Old House and birthplaces, now they had to accommodate more than twenty people. For the first time in the Park's history, the staff had to move some artifacts in the Old House to prevent fragile pieces of furniture and tables from being jostled or sat on by the massive tour groups making their way through the house. Cobble noted that they also had to be “extra vigilant about security and photography policies and that kind of thing.” It was harder to keep groups together on the tour, and sometimes they had to call for backup to rein in wandering tourists.⁵⁶⁸ And although it is hard to quantify what structural impacts this increase in visitors had on the house, it undoubtedly caused additional wear and tear.

McCullough's book was not the only form of media driving up visitation at the Park. A few years earlier, in 1997, Steven Spielberg's film, *Amistad*, produced a spike. Then there was the C-SPAN *American Presidents* series in 1999, with episodes about John Adams and John Quincy Adams, and the C-SPAN *American Writers* series in 2001, with an episode on Henry Adams. There was also a 2001 CBS *Sunday Morning* segment on John Adams. The Annual June Lecture Series, a longstanding tradition at the Park, was particularly exciting in 2001; the theme, “Father & Son Presidents,” brought distinguished speakers including Joseph Ellis, Richard Norton Smith, Herbert S. Parmet, Lynn Hudson Parsons, and Elizabeth Mitchell.⁵⁶⁹ Finally, in 2008, there was the premiere of the HBO series *John Adams*, adapted from McCullough's book. This diversity of media forms also brought different kinds of visitors to the Park. Cobble recalled that films, books, and TV shows all attracted unique audiences—*Amistad* brought history buffs; McCullough's *John Adams* brought a slightly broader audience, and loads of book groups. The HBO series starring Paul Giamatti and Laura Linney brought more families and younger people. “Once you introduce it to

⁵⁶⁶ “Superintendent's ‘State of the Park’ Narrative, Adams National Historical Park,” FY 2001, Box 3, Folder “Adams National Historic Site,” RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Superintendents' Annual Narrative Reports, 1980–2001 (NACP).

⁵⁶⁷ “AMS Minutes,” September 8, 2001, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder “2001 Minutes,” AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁵⁶⁸ Kelly Cobble, phone interview with Laura Miller, December 5, 2019.

⁵⁶⁹ “Superintendent's ‘State of the Park’ Narrative, Adams National Historical Park,” FY 2001, Box 3, Folder “Adams National Historic Site,” RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Superintendents' Annual Narrative Reports, 1980–2001 (NACP).

their TV, forget it,” Cobble said. “A lot of people did come through and say, ‘Have you watched it? Have you seen the HBO series?’”⁵⁷⁰ The Park had seen its fair share of media attention over the years, but nothing that could have prepared the staff for this deluge.

The renewed attention to Adams National Historical Park created an opportunity for the interpretive staff to continue exploring different avenues of interpretation and education for visitors. They began hosting a variety of participatory reenactment events in which visitors could reenact debating the Declaration of Independence, the Boston Massacre, and even “Patriots in the Countryside,” which portrayed refugees in British-occupied Boston in 1775. For those who preferred nineteenth century fare, staff hosted debates over whether or not to dissolve the Union in the United States Congress in 1861. Education programs were particularly robust in the early 2000s; the Park was awarded two grants from the Department of Education to build collaborative educational programs with local schools, which enabled the park to hire educational staff. The Park also hosted a Teacher Institute program, chaired by David McCullough, which welcomed twenty-eight Massachusetts teachers.

The interpretive staff’s efforts did not go unnoticed by the agency. In 2000, Park staff received several awards for interpretation: Deputy Superintendent Caroline Keinath received the Northeast Region (NER) Excellence in Interpretive Management Award, Supervisory Park Ranger John Stanwich received the NER Excellence in Interpretive Publications Award for his booklet “John Quincy Adams and the Amistad,” and Karen Yourell received the NPS’s Golden Arrowhead Award for excellence in interpretation.⁵⁷¹

⁵⁷⁰ Kelly Cobble, phone interview with Laura Miller, December 5, 2019.

⁵⁷¹ “Superintendent’s ‘State of the Park’ Narrative, Adams National Historical Park,” FY 2000, Box 3, Folder “Adams National Historic Site,” RG 79, Records of the National Park Service, Superintendents’ Annual Narrative Reports, 1980–2001 (NACP).

“Saving Souls or Saving Silver” at the United First Parish Church

By the turn of the new century, the UFPC was in need of urgent, extensive repairs to fix relentless leaks, a long-neglected roof, and most perhaps worryingly, weakening wooden trusses above the sanctuary’s plastered ceiling. The church was in significant debt, and Reverend Sheldon Bennett struggled to raise the necessary funds to manage these expenses with a congregation of fewer than 200 people. The Church was awarded a \$100,000 grant by the Massachusetts Historical Commission in 1997 to address some much-needed roof repairs and painting. But the total cost of repairs would be much more—an estimated five million dollars.⁵⁷²

The repair work came in fits and starts in the coming years. In April 1999, the Church closed the crypt to visitors, citing their inability to maintain the church, its growing debt, and costly renovations. Massachusetts Secretary of State William F. Galvin, who was also the chair of the State Historical Commission, announced that the Commission would give the church a \$15,000 grant from emergency funds to reopen the crypts to the public. “To leave this site closed to the public is absurd,” he said. “It is an embarrassment to the state.”⁵⁷³ Galvin also indicated that the funding would only be a short-term fix: “we need to get this resolved once and for all,” he said. There were local fundraising efforts, including a Quincy-based campaign in partnership with the *Patriot Ledger* to raise money for the Adams Crypt & Legacy Fund.⁵⁷⁴ The State Legislature approved \$291,000 for the crypt, but it was vetoed by Governor Paul Cellucci. Bennett began suggesting that they might have to close the Church altogether out of concern for the public’s safety.⁵⁷⁵

In April 1999, local talk again began to swirl around the idea of the Park Service taking responsibility for the Church crypts. Superintendent Marianne Peak and representatives of the NPS had to walk a fine line in discussions with the church, being careful not to run afoul of the separation of church and state. They also had to negotiate delicately between all the parties concerned about the Church’s future, including the church trustees, the Adams Temple and School Fund (which owned the crypts), and the NPS. At the same time, Peak decided that she could no longer allow rangers conduct tours at the church, because it

⁵⁷² “First Parish Receives \$100,000 State Grant For Needed Repairs,” *Patriot Ledger*, November 20, 1997; “Historic First Parish Needs Major Repairs,” *Quincy Sun*, December 3, 1998; and “Historic Church Needs \$5M Fix,” *Patriot Ledger*, December 8, 1998; all in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 5, Folder 5 “The Church of the Presidents (1996–2001) (ADAM).

⁵⁷³ “Church to Reopen Historic Adams Crypt,” *Boston Globe*, April 20, 1999, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 5, Folder 5 “The Church of the Presidents (1996–2001) (ADAM).

⁵⁷⁴ “Appeal Launched; Goal is \$55,000,” *Patriot Ledger*, May 13, 1999.

⁵⁷⁵ “Quincy Church could Close,” *Patriot Ledger*, August 13, 1999, in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 5, Folder 5 “The Church of the Presidents (1996–2001) (ADAM).

did not meet federal safety standards.⁵⁷⁶ The church *did* manage to embark on a restoration project that addressed the most urgent repairs, which was completed in September 2000. Importantly, the roof now had sixteen steel trusses to help take some of the pressure off the wooden trusses.⁵⁷⁷ But the greatest drama surrounding the church was yet to come.

In December 2000, the church congregation voted unanimously to auction off eleven pieces of colonial-era silver through Sotheby's auction house to fund its continued renovations. The pieces included two seventeenth century communion cups made by the first New England silversmiths, John Hull and Robert Sanderson; a two-handled caudle cup made by Sanderson and his son, Robert Jr.; and a pre-Revolutionary War tankard owned by Colonel John Quincy. All had made their way into the church's collections through bequests made between 1685 and 1872. They had been stored in the vault of a bank across the street because insurance made the silver too expensive to use, and display was impossible without improved security. Nevertheless, the *Boston Globe* reported that "once a year, [Bennett] would gather a gym bag and a member of the congregation, head to the bank across the street, and withdraw one or two pieces of the silver from the vault for use during a Communion service." (The irony that Sotheby's came to retrieve the silver with an armored truck and guards was not lost on Bennett.⁵⁷⁸) The *Quincy Sun* reported that Bennett said the congregation "made the decision to be an active church with a well maintained building rather than a church with no home and a collection of silver."⁵⁷⁹

The decision caused an uproar in Quincy. The Sotheby's auction was followed closely in the Quincy and Boston-area press, with local newspapers printing regular updates and impassioned letters to the editor. Marianne Peak and some of the Adams descendants made rare public statements about the move. Peak told the *Globe* "I'm disappointed and saddened by this. We'll lose a little bit of our Quincy history with this silver going somewhere else." Peter Boylston Adams, son of Thomas Boylston Adams, followed in his father's footsteps and became an informal spokesperson for the family. Adams descendant Jim Perkins described him as "a classic Adams in looks, and he spoke well, so he was really our connection to all that went on in Quincy . . . and letting the city fathers know what concerned us and what we felt was important. He was a real force."⁵⁸⁰ On behalf of the

⁵⁷⁶ "AMS Minutes," September 9, 2000, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder "2000 Minutes," AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁵⁷⁷ "Church Restoration is Nearly Complete," *Patriot Ledger*, September 5, 2000, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 5, Folder 5 "The Church of the Presidents (1996–2001) (ADAM).

⁵⁷⁸ "Church of Presidents' Rare Silver Service to be Auctioned," *Patriot Ledger*, December 13, 2000, and "Quincy Church Cashing in its Colonial Legacy," *Boston Sunday Globe*, December 31, 2000; both in Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 5, Folder 5 "The Church of the Presidents (1996–2001) (ADAM).

⁵⁷⁹ "First Parish To Auction Colonial Silver To Preserve Church," *Quincy Sun*, December 14, 2000, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 5, Folder 5 "The Church of the Presidents (1996–2001) (ADAM).

⁵⁸⁰ Jim Perkins, phone interview with Laura Miller, October 18, 2019.

Adams Memorial Society, Peter Boylston Adams said that his family members “were stunned and disturbed when we learned of it. What they’re intending to do is not just to sell the work of some extraordinary silversmiths but the gifts of people who are long deceased who sought to leave a legacy to the church.” Bennett held firm, saying that the church had exhausted all other avenues of funding and was out of options.⁵⁸¹ The *New York Times* boiled the debate down to “Saving souls or saving silver.”⁵⁸² The *Boston Globe* was less charitable, announcing: “Quincy church cashing in its colonial legacy.”

The Adams Memorial Society meeting minutes from September 2001 described in detail the family’s perspective on this series of events, and their behind-the-scenes efforts to work with the church and the NPS to find a resolution. Treasurer Peter Boylston Adams

noted he had become involved, because he was an Adams in the area. The National Park Service asked him to approach the First Parish Church to see if it would donate the entire structure to the NPS. The NPS, the state and the City of Quincy were all concerned the structure was unsound, and in danger of falling down.

Eventually, Peter met with the Chairman and Treasurer of the Church Board. They explained the Church’s silver had been pledged as collateral for a loan taken out to refurbish the building. The bank had become uncomfortable with the loan. In addition, the Church had spent all its endowment, so it was practically bankrupt. They had committed to auction off the silver at Sotheby’s. . . .

In an effort to keep the silver from going to auction, Peter was able to raise \$1,300,000 in three weeks. He then went back to the Church Board, and appealed to it to sell the silver to the Adams Memorial Society, which would put it on display somewhere in Quincy, ideally at the Old House. The Church Board rejected this offer. Peter was then able to increase the amount raised to \$2,600,000, and appealed to them again. Once more, rejection followed. The silver was auctioned for over \$3,000,000.

Superintendent Marianne Peak and Quincy Mayor James Sheets fully supported Adams’ fundraising efforts. Bennett claimed that the church was hamstrung by the potential penalties of breaking their contract with Sotheby’s, and declined the offer. He told the local press that he held out hope that some of the silver would be purchased by “someone with a concern for Quincy history.”⁵⁸³

⁵⁸¹ “Silver, History in A Duel,” *Boston Globe*, January 2, 2001, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 5, Folder 5 “The Church of the Presidents (1996–2001) (ADAM).

⁵⁸² “Sacrificing a Temporal Treasure,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2001, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 5, Folder 5 “The Church of the Presidents (1996–2001) (ADAM).

⁵⁸³ “First Parish Silver Goes On Auction Friday,” *Quincy Sun*, January 18, 2001, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 5, Folder 5 “The Church of the Presidents (1996–2001) (ADAM).

The decision by the church's Board of Governors to auction its historic silver collection raised a critical \$3.2 million for the church. The Adams Memorial Society members, however, felt that "Quincy lost an irreplaceable piece of history"—a perspective that was shared by many Quincy residents.⁵⁸⁴ In an op-ed in the *Patriot Ledger*, former minister of the Church of the Presidents John R. Graham decried the swiftness with which the auction was announced and carried out, which limited public debate. He noted that legislation had already brought the church within the boundaries of Adams National Historical Park, and if they were willing to be brought under the stewardship of the NPS, the much-needed repairs could be addressed. "Why has the church not pursued this option? Why has the church stubbornly refused to enter into any dialogue whatsoever? Unfortunately answers to these questions are not forthcoming." He continued, "in order to preserve its 'ownership' of the building, the church is systematically selling the community's historic soul."⁵⁸⁵

Bennett defended the church's decision, writing in the *Patriot Ledger* that "The Church of the Presidents is exactly that: A church. We are not a museum or an historical park. Our true legacy is the tradition of spiritual ideals we cherish and by which we strive to live for the sake of our lives and our world."⁵⁸⁶ He noted that although the congregation and the NPS had been working toward a partnership, the 1980 legislation to bring the church within the Park's boundaries "was unfortunate," and "proved to be a stumbling block." "In the recent debate over our church's silver, we were troubled by claims that history overrides the freedom of worship. We were troubled by the statements of those who argued that we had an obligation to hand over our historic house of worship so that it could become a public museum."⁵⁸⁷

Quincy State Representative George Burke purchased the Quincy tankard at the auction for \$160,000. Boylston Adams called this development "The only good thing to come of this." He held out hope that Burke would donate the tankard to the NPS or the Quincy Historical Society. Instead, in the short-term, the tankard returned to Quincy from New York City and was briefly placed on display in the window of the *Quincy Sun*, where it was guarded by a police officer. Nearly two decades later, in March 2019, Burke gave it to the city museum in Old City Hall as a permanent loan.⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁴ "Attempt to Keep Rare Silver Fails," *Patriot Ledger*, January 13–14, 2001, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 5, Folder 5 "The Church of the Presidents (1996–2001) (ADAM). Report of the Committee Who Visit the Old House," September 8, 2001, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder "2001 Minutes," AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁵⁸⁵ Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 5, Folder 5 "The Church of the Presidents (1996–2001) (ADAM).

⁵⁸⁶ "At Quincy Church, Faith Comes Before History," *Patriot Ledger*, February 7, 2001, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 5, Folder 5 "The Church of the Presidents (1996–2001) (ADAM).

⁵⁸⁷ At Quincy Church, Faith Comes Before History," *Patriot Ledger*.

⁵⁸⁸ "Quincy Tankard Goes on Display Tomorrow," *Patriot Ledger*, February 1, 2001, Superintendent Newspaper Clippings File, Box 5, Folder 5 "The Church of the Presidents (1996–2001) (ADAM); "Quincy Tankard, Relic of City's Past, on Display," *Patriot Ledger*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.patriotledger.com/news/20190327/quincy-tankard-relic-of-citys-past-on-display>.

The local debate over the UFPC and its collection of silver illuminates a few important shifts in the history of Adams National Historical Park. A generational turnover was once again underway in the Adams Memorial Society. In 1996, the Society's longtime president, Charles Francis Adams, and treasurer, Thomas Boylston Adams, turned their respective positions over to Benjamin C. Adams and Peter B. Adams, saying that they "felt that it was time for the younger members to take up the reins."⁵⁸⁹ Thomas Boylston Adams, former president of the MHS and his generation's family historian, passed away in June 1997. Charles Francis Adams died in January 1999. With their deaths, the family had lost the remaining family members with the strongest memories of the Old House before it became an NPS site, and who were perhaps the most deeply invested in the Park and the Memorial Society.

Peter Boylston Adams admirably took up the charge. At the Adams Memorial Society's 2001 meeting, he used the drama over the church's silver to make a case to his family about the importance of their continued involvement in Quincy. His remarks "concluded by noting [that] the impact of the family was very significant on all the involved parties. Those of you who are younger should be aware you may someday be called upon to take up such a task, and it is important you do so."⁵⁹⁰ He wanted to ensure that the family's commitment to preserving Quincy's heritage remained strong. But with the death of Thomas Adams and Charles Francis Adams, the Memorial Society members had to place their trust in Superintendent Marianne Peak and her staff more than ever.

The silver episode also highlights a moment of resistance in Quincy to the Park's influence. In the 1970s, many Quincy residents saw the NPS as the logical inheritor and protector of the city's neglected historic properties. In 2001, the church congregation actively resisted this approach, and decided to strike out and find their own solution to the problem. Although the church was still considered part of the National Park's boundaries, the congregation and its Board of Governors were intent on preserving their autonomy, rather than be fully incorporated into Adams National Historical Park. In the coming years, the church congregation would slowly continue repairing the structure, and once again begin hosting tours. This time, they did so without the help of the NPS.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁹ "AMS Minutes," September 7, 1996, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder "1996 Minutes," AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁵⁹⁰ "AMS Minutes," September 8, 2001, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder "2001 Minutes," AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁵⁹¹ The following year, in 2002, the Memorial Society reported that "the saga goes on"—the government's offer to acquire the church and create a special use agreement with the church so that they could continue to hold Sunday services, but the church leadership declined the offer. Maintenance and repairs were proceeding at an exceptionally slow pace, and the crypts were not easily accessed. Although the Park Service was interested in incorporating the church into its tour, in 2005 the AMS reported that "The church is still operating their program very independently and does not wish a stronger connection to ANHS."

"AMS Visiting Committee Meeting," May 2005, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder "2005 Minutes," AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

Modernizing Park Facilities

By the 1990s, the staff members of Adams National Historical Park were struggling to adequately accommodate their offices, maintenance facilities and equipment, and the Park's massive collection of historic objects and papers. Curator Kelly Cobble elaborated on the Park's ongoing space issues and organizational challenges during this decade:

At the time, we had our maintenance and paint shop, wood shop, everything was all in the basement of the Carriage House. And, of course, the Carriage House is one of our primary resources, because it's a nineteenth century building . . . [with] a nineteenth century stable and carriage house and coachmen's quarters . . . So we had maintenance operations in the basement, and we had offices stuffed in every imaginable space on the first floor, and . . . the second floor[.]

Meanwhile, space in the Old House was also at a premium. Family collections that were not on exhibit were crammed in nooks and crannies throughout the house:

in the attic, down in the basement, in closets, and even in drawers of the furniture. There were still pieces of paper, pencils, books . . . you name it, it was left behind. Most of it obviously wasn't the prime stuff, but it was still stuff that we were accountable for and had to take care of.⁵⁹²

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, the Park grew dramatically in size with the addition of two Adams birthplaces and a new downtown Visitor Center. Their space to accommodate staff and maintenance needs was unchanged, however. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Park finally had the resources it needed to adequately address these issues. The Park modernized its facilities through a series of projects and renovations that enabled staff to better care for and manage the site's many historic buildings and objects.

Critically, the Beale Estate was fully turned over to the NPS in 1990 after the death of the home's last resident, Dr. Esther Bartlett, in 1989. Staff were now able to consider how to implement all the hopes they had long imagined for the property.⁵⁹³ The site's 1996 GMP outlined the general contours of the proposal, which included rehabilitating the house for administrative office space and adapting the Beale Carriage House for the Park's

⁵⁹² Kelly Cobble, phone interview with Laura Miller, December 5, 2019. See also Jessica Geisler and Alicia Paresi, *Completion Report: Technical Assistance Project, Adams National Historical Park, Quincy, Massachusetts* (Charlestown, MA: Northeast Museum Services Center, March 2003), 1, in Resource Management Records, Box 58, Folder 8 (ADAM).

⁵⁹³ There were many contenders—possibilities included exhibit space, space for children's programming, and research areas on the ground floor; and office space on the second floor, which would help ease space pressures in the Adams Carriage House. "Report of the Adams Family Committee Who Visit the Old House," September 8, 1990, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder "1990 Minutes," AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

maintenance facilities. With these plans in place, they were able to secure project funds from the NPS to begin the necessary renovations. The combination of newly available space, a concrete plan (thanks to the GMP), and line item construction project funds resulted in a dramatic improvement in the use of Park space. These projects finally came to fruition in the early 2000s.

Although the Beale house was now vacant, staff still needed to clean it out, shore it up, and transform it into office space. It took staff nearly a decade to renovate the house, because there was no dedicated funding associated with the NPS's acquisition of the property. Facility Manager Gardner ("Red") Power slowly and steadily led the work to reinforce the floors and walls and convert the space into offices. The Park received line item construction funds from the NPS to begin expanding the Beale Carriage House to accommodate a new permanent maintenance facility for the Park. This was a dramatic improvement over the inadequate space they had inhabited for years in the basement of the multi-purpose Adams Carriage House. Now they had dedicated space for a paint shop, wood shop, and a garage to store maintenance equipment.

In 2000, just as park staff were preparing to move into the Beale house, representatives of the Junior League of Boston approached Marianne Peak with an opportunity for collaboration. They were scouting the South Shore looking for a site for their annual Decorators' Show House, an event where they would select a house for renovation by Boston's high-end interior designers and open it up to the public for viewing. The money they raised was used to support the League's community programs in the Boston area. They thought that the Beale Estate would be a great fit for the event. Peak sensed a mutually beneficial opportunity—in addition to being a goodwill gesture, it would bring positive exposure to the Park and the newly renovated Beale house.

Curator Kelly Cobble recalled working with the designers in preparation for the show:

That was a trip, because we're supposed to do historic preservation compliance. So I'm telling them, "You can't do this," and "you can't do that." And they're telling me, "Well you can't tell us that we can't do this because we can do anything we want." I said, "well that's somewhere else, not here!" [laughs] These designers were great people, they were fabulous, but it was kind of a love-hate relationship. I had to have a great sense of humor, and they did too.

She continued,

We made a lot of compromises . . . but it was Marianne's and all of our insistence that it would really behoove [them] to stick with the beautiful lines and the original material that's already here. . . we're not going to let you paint the deco molding because it had all been done by hand by our guys within a

couple of years. We said . . . “it would really benefit you to stay within the period.” A lot of them did, [and now] we have beautiful wallpaper and carpeting of the period.⁵⁹⁴

The designers also worked closely with the Park’s maintenance division, whose work was critical to making the show possible. The resulting renovations left the house in much better shape than it had been—including a \$20,000 Viking Kitchen, as well as paint, wallpaper, floor coverings, drapes, and a restored garden—many things that the Park’s budget could never have accommodated.⁵⁹⁵

The Decorators’ Show House was open May 5–25, 2001. Members of the public could purchase \$25 tickets to tour the Beale Estate, and more than 20,000 showed up. Peak used the event to promote the Park in other ways, too; it gave them an opportunity to host an event that they couldn’t have done otherwise. They held a dinner for 600 people in a tent on the property, with David McCullough as the guest speaker.⁵⁹⁶

The Park’s archival collections and historic artifacts also received much-needed attention in the early 2000s. A \$1.6 million renovation of the Adams Carriage House, completed in 2003, dramatically improved the Park’s use of space. The renovation included a Museum Collection Preservation and Protection technical assistance project to relocate artifacts that were not on exhibit to a new museum storage facility. Superintendent Marianne Peak, Museum Specialist (now Curator) Kelly Cobble, and Museum Technicians Patty Smith and Jessica Geisler worked in close collaboration with a team of specialists from Longfellow National Historic Site, the Northeast Museum Services Center (NMSC), the SPNEA, and the Harpers Ferry Center. In their Project Completion Report, Jessica Geisler and Alicia Paresi (of the NMSC) noted that before the renovation, the Park’s storage conditions did not meet the NPS’s preservation standards. The haphazard storage of museum collections that were not on exhibit left them “at risk from vandalism, theft, and inherent deterioration due to improper storage conditions such as poor environment, overcrowding, and lack of climate control.” There was also a collection of rare books and pamphlets on the top shelf of the Stone Library that was “virtually inaccessible” to the curatorial staff, “and suffered therefore from a lack of cleaning and proper accountability techniques.”⁵⁹⁷

⁵⁹⁴ Kelly Cobble, phone interview with Laura Miller, December 5, 2019.

⁵⁹⁵ “Report of the Committee Who Visit the Old House,” September 8, 2001, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder “2001 Minutes,” AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁵⁹⁶ “Report of the Committee Who Visit the Old House,” September 8, 2001, AMS, Record Carton 1, Folder “2001 Minutes,” AMS Records, 1927–2015, MS N-1776 AMS (MHS).

⁵⁹⁷ Jessica Geisler and Alicia Paresi, *Completion Report: Technical Assistance Project, Adams National Historical Park, Quincy, Massachusetts* (Charlestown, MA: Northeast Museum Services Center, March 2003), 1, in Resource Management Records, Box 58, Folder 8 (ADAM).

The Carriage House hayloft was converted into museum storage, including a new, climate-controlled conservation center. Cobble, Smith, and Geisler worked diligently to identify, document, clean, and relocate the many objects that had been scattered throughout the Old House's basement and closets. This included, but was not limited to, an antique trunk of textiles, approximately 180 objects housed in metal cabinets in the basement, and 720 books and pamphlets from the Stone Library. The team rehoused and moved these objects into the new Carriage House storage facility, enabling the staff to better care for the site's precious collections of documents and artifacts. By moving some offices over to the Beale House and rearranging the existing offices, staff were also able to open up space to add two desperately needed restrooms in the Carriage House.

One final preservation project from the early 2000s merits special mention. In 2001 and 2002, the Park received NPS Backlog Cataloging funds to catalog the Park's Resource Management Records, as well as its collection of Adams Memorial Society Records and Adams Family Papers. Here, too, Kelly Cobble, Patty Smith, and Jessica Geisler worked with staff from SPNEA and the NMSC, to process forty linear feet of records—nearly 64,000 items. The collections were shipped to the NMSC's Charlestown office, where catalogers processed the collections and wrote finding aids for each. Their efforts are critical to understanding the Park's history, and made writing this administrative history possible.⁵⁹⁸

⁵⁹⁸ Teri DeYoung and Amy Andrus, "Completion Report: Backlog Cataloging for Adams National Historical Park, FY01 and FY02," Draft, May 2002, in Resource Management Records, Box 58, Folder 8 (ADAM).

CONCLUSION

PAST AND FUTURE TRANSFORMATIONS

What is striking about Adams National Historical Park as it approaches its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2021 is how much it has changed, despite staff members' protests to the contrary. "We don't do anything radical, ever," Curator Kelly Cobble joked to me in our interview.⁵⁹⁹ Of course, some things have remained remarkably consistent. Tours of the Old House, the objects exhibited there, and the peaceful landscape surrounding the house all look much like they did under Superintendent Wilhelmina Harris's watchful eye from 1950 to 1987. But the reality is that keeping the veneer of consistency, of an unchanged house and landscape, required *work*.

There has been a great deal of work at Adams National Historical Park in three-quarters of a century. Some of it has been largely symbolic—even aspirational. The Park's many name changes over time reflect concerted efforts to rework its image: in 1952, for example, the change represented the Adams Memorial Society's desire for the Old House be seen as the home of a humble New England revolutionary, rather than another founding father's grandiose mansion. In 1998, the name change was aspirational. It reflected the National Historic Site's growth into a National Historical Park with multiple properties across the city of Quincy, and Superintendent Marianne Peak's hopes for its continued growth and improvement in the future.

Other efforts have been positively transformative: the addition of the Adams birthplaces to the site, for example, offered a dramatic opportunity for staff to reimagine interpretation and expand the breadth of stories rangers could tell about the Adamses. The establishment of a downtown Visitor Center and the introduction of trolleys to transport visitors around the park drastically reshaped the Park's position within the city of Quincy, and moved the hub of tourist activity from the edge of the city to the heart of downtown. Even keeping the view surrounding the Old House unobstructed, with its lush greenery, peaceful orchard, and minimal modern intrusions, required work. Harris, and later Peak, participated in relentless neighborhood meetings, made calls to local and state politicians, and negotiated with the site's neighbors. This is not a site where time has stood still (such a site does not exist). Quincy continues to grow and develop around the Old House.

Wilhelmina Harris was candid about the work required to keep modernization and "progress" at bay at Adams National Historic Site. Resisting the Park Service's dreams of new parking lots, museums, interpretive signage, and other modern touches may have been

⁵⁹⁹ Kelly Cobble, phone interview with Laura Miller, October 17, 2019.

the hardest job of all. Harris might not recognize the Park as it is today, with its trolleys, downtown visitor center, and the masses of tourists being shuttled from property to property without ever receiving a genteel welcome at the Old House's front door. But it would be difficult to give a house tour that makes visitors feel like a guest in the Adamses home a la "Mrs. Harris" (as nearly every person I interviewed still calls her), with ballooning tour sizes and without a superintendent who had lived with Brooks Adams in the Old House a century before. It is worth noting, too, that present-day Park staff have less of an appetite for willfully ignoring the NPS bureaucracy, nor is it as easy or advisable to do so.

Wilhelmina Harris also worked to create a particular image of the Adamses for public consumption. She certainly favored some interpretations over others, promoting a celebratory vision of the Adamses that venerated their public service and studiously avoided any of the family's "imperfections." One final anecdote underscores this point. Marianne Peak recalled that Harris was devastated by the publication of historian Paul Nagel's 1983 book, *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family*. Nagel dedicated the book to Harris, writing in the acknowledgments that "The Adams family has no greater friend than she, nor have I."⁶⁰⁰ Harris and Nagel were dear friends who kept in close contact; Nagel's personal papers, archived at Virginia Commonwealth University, reveal that they regularly corresponded by mail. The two exchanged not only pleasantries, but also ideas: Harris often sent Nagel draft bits of writing about the Adamses, the Old House, and the birthplaces for his opinion. Nagel, in turn, sent scripts of lectures that he graciously agreed to present at the Old House.⁶⁰¹ It is safe to assume that at least some of the anecdotes about Brooks and Evelyn Adams in Nagel's (regrettably footnote-free) *Descent from Glory* were stories that Harris relayed to the author. When his book was published, however, it was not the book that Harris expected. She was upset by the title, which she thought was too negative. She "didn't want to focus on their weaknesses or vulnerabilities," Peak said. "I don't know if she ever really got over it."⁶⁰² Harris's narrative of Adams family history was one that she had carefully shaped and protected, and one that elided the heartbreak and personal troubles embedded in the family's past. Nagel's book considerably complicated that narrative.

Adams National Historical Park is not the same site that it was under Wilhelmina Harris, nor could it be. Marianne Peak has followed the spirit of Harris's approach, but not the letter of it. By most accounts, the park is better for that change. It is doubtful that staff could have managed the tremendous pressure of visitors and media attention in recent years without it.

⁶⁰⁰ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, ix.

⁶⁰¹ Paul C. Nagel Papers, M 255 (Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University).

⁶⁰² Marianne Peak, phone interview with Laura Miller, January 24, 2020.

Recommendations

With their twenty-first century growing pains behind them, now is an ideal time for staff to turn to reimagining the Park's interpretation. This is no easy task. Wilhelmina Harris's interpretation of the Old House is so thoroughly ingrained that it continues to influence the park today. This is not a challenge that is unique to Adams National Historical Park. As the authors of the 2011 NPS/OAH report, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* report suggested, the NPS has long struggled to interpret and preserve its own history. They argue that this work is critical because "meaning resides in both the past event itself and in the act of commemorating and remembering it." A self-reflexive approach to interpretation "acknowledges the position of the storyteller vis-à-vis the story being told."⁶⁰³ This history of commemoration is a central part of park's story, from Brooks Adams's dreams for a museum, to the Adams Memorial Society's mandate that the NPS focus on "fostering civic virtue and patriotism," to Harris's carefully constructed and sanitized narrative of the family's history. Until staff members grapple with this long history of interpretation and commemoration, they will be unable to move beyond its constraints.

The park's May 2019 *Foundation Document* took a tentative first step in this direction. One of the park's stated interpretive themes is "Legacy and Remembrance": "The Adams family's awareness and concern about their legacy has played out in both family and outside historians' interpretations of the family's contributions in shaping the national discourse."⁶⁰⁴ What is missing from this statement, however, is a discussion of how both the park itself and the Adams legacy was shaped by the efforts of the Adams Memorial Society and Wilhelmina Harris. It is important to examine how generations of Adamses sought to shape their family's legacy; it is equally important, but much more challenging, to contend with the Park's own role in that process. This was no secret to the Adamses; the descendants themselves understood how central Wilhelmina Harris was to the process of memorializing their ancestors. An anecdote from Lawrence Gall helps illustrate the point. Gall recalled a lecture series in the 1970s where Thomas Boylston Adams "got up and he said, 'Well, Mrs. Harris, I don't think that we would exist had it not been for you.'"⁶⁰⁵ Tours of the birthplaces and the Old House should engage with this history directly. Freed from Harris's constraints, staff can approach it with greater imagination and nuance.

⁶⁰³ Anne Mitchell Whisnant, Marla R. Miller, Gary B. Nash, and David Thelen, *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* (Bloomington, IN: Organization of American Historians, 2011).

⁶⁰⁴ *Foundation Document: Adams National Historical Park, Massachusetts* (National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, May 2019), 10.

⁶⁰⁵ Lawrence Gall, phone interview with Laura Miller, September 13, 2019.

This challenge brings us back to Harris's ten-volume *Furnishings Report*. So much of what Park staff members know about the Old House's collections comes from Harris's *Furnishings Report*, and her recollections of what Brooks Adams told her about those objects and their provenance. Kelly Cobble told me that this "really hurts us, because we don't have shipping invoices and receipts, all that stuff that many many other historic house museums have, and [that] lead you to a treasure trove of information. We just don't have it, so Mrs. Harris was really doing the best that she could by getting it from the closest source that she could." That source, of course, was Brooks Adams. Cobble and other collections staff members have worked to authenticate and document as many of these objects as possible (as well as authenticate misidentified objects) through their own research and through consultation with institutions such as the MHS in Boston. But the lack of documentation, Cobble said, "has made my job so much more challenging."⁶⁰⁶ This reality is all the more reason for the staff to broaden their interpretation and think beyond their collections' constraints. As the *Imperiled Promise* report advocates, park staff should "probe the largest possible questions that a resource allows us to explore."⁶⁰⁷

The park also has an opportunity to engage more directly with members of the local community, particularly new generations of Quincy residents who may not feel welcomed at the park or feel like it is not "for" them. This is especially true for the city's Asian American population, who make up a significant portion of the city today. The park participates in Quincy's yearly August Moon Festival, and has translated brochures and driving tours. But more can, and should, be done. As Edward Fitzgerald noted, Quincy's "Asian population is truly significant at this point." He continued,

it's going to be interesting to see what happens because it arguably is at what you would consider the tipping point. It's a large enough population that they should really become the determinative factor if they were to choose to do so. You don't have to be at 50%, I mean once you get at about 25% you can pretty much begin to be a real decision maker in the city.

Quincy's historic sites have never fully welcomed these community members into their institutions. Furthermore, racism is a pervasive part of the history of Boston and its suburbs, and its legacies have undoubtedly shaped how immigrants and people of color feel about many of the region's most celebrated historic sites. The muted interest they have shown in local historic sites suggests that these institutions will need to transform their approach to foster continued community investment.

⁶⁰⁶ Kelly Cobble, phone interview with Laura Miller, October 17, 2019.

⁶⁰⁷ Whisnant, et al., *Imperiled Promise*, 101.

This point is further underscored by the fact that the Park has generally only lightly treaded on discussions of race in the past; the primary vehicle for these discussions has been the Mendi bible, and John Quincy Adams's role in the *Amistad* trial. As the Park's 2019 Foundation document notes, the origins of the Old House naturally raise questions about slavery and race relations in eighteenth-century New England:

The involvement of the Adams family in anti-slavery politics is cast in an ironic light, in that their home at Peace Field was originally owned by a Caribbean sugar planter and slave holder, Leonard Vassall. Explore how the Adamases encountered enslaved African Americans within their community. How did they respond to neighbors who were enslaved or slaveholders, in addition to their own political or theoretical positions?⁶⁰⁸

The Park must contend more fully with these questions. Many of the family members' perspectives on slavery are well-documented, and offer ample avenues for interpretation. Abigail Adams, for example, wrote in 1774 to her husband, "I wish most sincerely there was not a Slave in the province. It allways appeared a most iniquitious Scheme to me—fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have."⁶⁰⁹ These discussions can and should also go beyond slavery to broader discussions of race in New England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. John and Abigail Adams, for example, employed a paid African American servant named James, who did considerable work for them on their farm. A 1797 letter from Abigail to John reveals that Abigail had also been teaching James to read and write, and that she worked to get him educated at a local school over her neighbors' protests.⁶¹⁰ Incorporating these kinds of stories into interpretation at the birthplaces and the Old House will help expand the Site's relevance to more diverse audiences.

The 2018 completion of the Hancock Adams Common in Quincy makes the downtown area feel more like a historic hub that unites the NPS Visitor Center, the UFPC, and the Hancock Cemetery, allowing visitors to spend some time exploring downtown before or after their tours of Adams National Historical Park. The City's efforts to promote Quincy tourism—of which Marianne Peak has played a critical role—is finally coming to fruition. Quincy Historical Society Executive Director Edward Fitzgerald told me that he saw the Common as a sign that the City was figuring out more effective ways of promoting tourism: "I think what's going on now is probably the most productive . . . and you can start building off of that to get people to be here more, I think. But it's not going to do it by itself,

⁶⁰⁸ *Foundation Document: Adams National Historical Park, Massachusetts* (National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, May 2019), 43.

⁶⁰⁹ Abigail Adams to John Adams, September 22, 1774, Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive, Massachusetts Historical Society, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17740922aa>.

⁶¹⁰ See Alexis Coe's interview with MHS Adams Papers Series Editor Sara Georgini, "Abigail Adams Persisted," December 12, 2017, <https://www.lennyletter.com/story/abigail-adams-defends-black-servant>.

it's going to still require a lot of work.” As the Park prepares for another round of historic anniversaries in celebrations, including Quincy’s 400th anniversary in 2025, and the United States semiquincentennial in 2026, it has renewed opportunities to engage with its neighbors, including the UFPC and the Quincy Historical Society.⁶¹¹

Although this administrative history has offered a thorough look at the history and development of Adams National Historical Park in the twentieth century, it could only offer a few early thoughts on the Park at the beginning of the twenty-first. Many of the Park’s more recent archival records are unprocessed, which made it difficult to move this narrative beyond the early 2000s. There are many more insights to be gleaned from the Park since 2000. Superintendent Peak’s partnerships with the local business community, her efforts to promote South Shore tourism, the Park’s ongoing struggle with urban development, and interpretation and collections management in the new century all merit closer analysis. I hope that a future historian will take up the documentation and assessment of this more recent history.

Finally, the NPS would benefit from further study and comparison of presidential historic sites and house museums. Although Adams National Historic Park is in many ways unique, other presidential sites likely share many of the themes that are woven throughout this book. A comparative examination of these sites might yield fresh insights and illuminate larger issues, such as how NPS units have navigated questions of memorialization, presidential legacies, and political influence.

⁶¹¹ Marianne Peak comments on the first draft of this report, January 2020.

* * *

One final note: an alternate title for this book could have been “Remember the Ladies.” The well-worn phrase, of course, belongs to Abigail Adams. In March 1776, she famously wrote a letter to John Adams, urging her husband to keep women in mind as the Continental Congress worked to create a framework for the new nation.⁶¹² As I worked on this project, I was in awe of how thoroughly women have shaped the history of Adams National Historical Park. Although this is not at all unusual for historic house museums in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it *is* unusual for a NPS unit to have only had two superintendents in its history, both women. These pages recounted the tireless efforts of many women in the Park’s history—including multiple generations of Adams Memorial Society members (Elizabeth Ogden Adams, Mary Ogden Abbott, and more); Brooks Adams’s social secretary-turned-Park Superintendent Wilhelmina Harris; and Harris’s protégé and successor, Superintendent Marianne Peak. These women and many others sprinkled throughout these pages deserve special acknowledgment—to be remembered—for making the park what it is today.

⁶¹² Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March - 5 April 1776 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

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