

JEFFERSON, ADAMS, AND THE CRUCIBLE OF REVOLUTION

by Dr. Jane Kamensky

In this essay, historian Jane Kamensky explores the intertwined lives of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, two influential but very different figures in the American Revolution. She examines how their contrasting personalities, political philosophies, and visions for the nation shaped the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, strained their relationship, and ultimately gave way to a renewed friendship grounded in shared commitment to the American experiment.

Use the questions below to guide your reading.

First Encounters and Early Collaboration

1. What were some important similarities and differences in John Adams's and Thomas Jefferson's personalities and political views?
2. What contributions did each man make to the drafting and sharing of the Declaration of Independence?

Differing Visions for the New Nation

1. How did Jefferson's vision for America differ from Adams's vision? Think about their ideas on the economy, expansion, the role of ordinary citizens, and the government's relationship to Britain.
2. What strengths or potential problems can you see in each man's vision?

JEFFERSON, ADAMS, AND THE CRUCIBLE OF REVOLUTION

by Dr. Jane Kamensky

Common Ground and Lasting Values

1. What helped Jefferson and Adams rebuild their friendship after more than a decade of silence?
2. In their later letters, Adams and Jefferson debated big questions about human nature, progress, and democracy. Which of these questions do you think is still most relevant today? Why?

Reflect and Discuss

Kamensky concludes her essay with: “Explanation had been the great work of the Declaration. It remains the great work of our constitutional democracy, even still.” What do you think that she means by this?