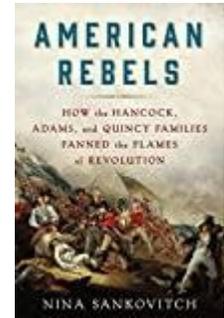


**Nina Sankovitch.** *American Rebels: How the Hancock, Adams, and Quincy Families Fanned the Flames of Revolution.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020. Maps. 416 pp. \$29.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-250-16328-8.



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In his old age, John Adams gave advice to William Tudor Jr. about writing the history of the American Revolution. Among other biographies, he remarked, “There is another life which I wish to see—that of Josiah Quincy.”[1] Although John doubted that John Quincy’s namesake, Josiah Quincy III, would write the biography of his fallen father, the son did so.[2] With *American Rebels: How the Hancock, Adams, and Quincy Families Fanned the Flames of Revolution*, Nina Sankovitch has offered another telling, this time embedded in the story of Quincy’s community and its more famous inhabitants, John Adams and John Hancock, as well as the women in their lives, including Abigail Adams, Dorothy (Dolly) Hancock, Lydia Hancock, and Abigail Quincy. Primary sources include the Hancock Family Papers, the Adams Family Papers, and Josiah Quincy Jr.’s papers in various collections. The bibliography is thin, but the author has consulted nineteenth-century histories and biographies, as well as more recent scholarly monographs.

The familiar events of the American Revolution—the Stamp Act, the Boston Tea Party, the Boston massacre, the First and Second Continental Congresses, Paul Revere’s ride—appear in the midst of marriages, birth, deaths, seedtime, harvest, ships going to and fro. The book is divided into three sections, “Tinder (1744-1764),” “Spark (1765-1773),” and “Flame (1774-1776).” The bookish and sickly Quincy was writer for the Sons of Liberty, eloquent lawyer overshadowing John Adams at the trials of Captain Thomas Preston and his men, and unofficial ambassador to the British government. Even after his death aboard ship off the coast of Gloucester, Massachusetts, on his return from England, he was important, as the reader is reminded: Sankovitch notes that Quincy might have written the Declaration of Independence had he been alive and points to his opposition to slavery. Quotes from his writings introduce the first section, the epilogue, and fifteen of the thirty-three chapters.

*American Rebels*, however, is not only a life of Quincy. This is not another book about a founding

father, or a founding mother, or even founding families, but a founding community: “from this village, Braintree, and this parish, the North Parish, would come the men and women who would shape the history of America” (p. 3). The father of that community was Reverend John Hancock, who appears in both the prologue and epilogue of the book. Sankovitch begins the book with the funeral of the reverend and ends with the burial of Abigail Quincy beside her husband, Josiah, “across from the grassy path from the grave of the Reverend John Hancock, the man whose vision of community and liberty fostered a generation that fought for both” (p. 349). Although the thesis is understated and the work is a narrative rather than an overt argument, the author’s purpose may be best revealed in her account of Abigail Adams’s famous March 31, 1776, “Remember the Ladies” letter to her husband, John. Abigail “was responsible for so much at home ... yet she was too often denied decision-making power” (p. 326). Sankovitch argues that Abigail sacrificed for rights she could never enjoy because she was a woman and therefore understood the need for a good government to ensure “happiness to a community as well as to individuals” (p. 327).

There is much to like about *American Rebels*. The chief contribution is the life of Josiah Quincy and the importance of the man whose courage and untimely death reminded his widow of Homer’s Hector. By drawing back to focus on the community rather than a single individual, the author can easily show men and women together in everyday life. The male revolutionaries were not only lawyers or businessmen but also sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers, partnered with women who were not only mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters but also leaders in their own right in the nonimportation of luxury items and opposition to slavery. The community divided into Patriots and Loyalists, like brothers Josiah and Samuel Quincy, and further divided, as Patriots like Hancock and Samuel Adams disagreed “and would continue the fight toward independence together

but on separate paths” (p. 330). Highlighting these divisions allows the author to illuminate the difference between liberty and independence and convincingly treat the American Revolution as a civil war.

But if “the hills themselves breathed rebellion into their inhabitants,” from whence do the Loyalists emerge (p. 121)? Both future Rebels and future Loyalists grew up in the same families, attended the same church, and were lawyers, judges, and members of the Masonic Lodge. Similarly, the chapter “The Education of Boys” outlines the traditional exposure to the classics, the discipline of learning Latin and Greek, followed by years at Harvard. But the companion chapter, “The Education of Girls,” is disappointing. If the women were partners in politics, what in their education prepared them for this role? What books did they read, what languages did they study? Perhaps the reader can infer that only the boys learned Latin and Greek, only the boys would later attend Harvard, but both boys and girls learned to read the Bible and sat under the same teaching in church, and religious liberty was the foundation for political liberty.

Citations are mainly used for direct quotations, making it often unclear where evidence ends and imagination begins. The author writes that on the day of John Hancock’s funeral, “rain streamed down ... running in widening rivulets between freshly plowed spring fields,” and it was “likely” the “congregation turned out in full, despite the rain” (pp. 3, 5). Or perhaps because of the rain, since they could not work in the fields. Or perhaps the weather was not a factor; rain or shine, everyone attended the funeral of someone as important as Reverend Hancock. Or perhaps it was not raining at all. Similarly, was Abigail Adams “tumbling down the stairs” or did she hold tightly to the railing, pausing and shuddering at each roar of the cannon (p. 278)? Did “Josiah Quincy Jr. dress hurriedly” before appearing in court or slowly and carefully in order to impress

his clients (p. 73)? It is easy to be distracted by this blurring of the line dividing history from historical fiction. There are other distractions as well. For example, Tacitus is usually described as a historian not a philosopher (p. 85). Roman soldiers were not forbidden to wear togas (p. 254). Did the mistreatment of Loyalists include painting their horses or their houses (p. 219)?

Citations are also inconsistent and sometimes incomplete. Readers are sometimes directed to the Adams Papers Digital Edition and other times to Founders Online. Citations to entries published in John Adams's *Diary and Autobiography* helpfully include the volume number, but letters published in *The Papers of John Adams* do not. Unpublished letters do not include the microfilm reel numbers and sometimes direct readers to Founders Online but do not include the caveat that these are unverified transcriptions, subject to change and elimination. A note alerting readers that all Adams documents, whether held by the Massachusetts Historical Society or in other collections, can be located using the free Online Adams Catalogue would have been helpful.

With its short chapters and familiar episodes, *American Rebels* is an accessible text for both general readers and undergraduates. If instructors choose to assign or recommend this book, a useful exercise would be to have students select a passage, turn to the footnotes, read the primary sources, and compare with Sankovitch's narrative.

#### Notes

[1]. John Adams to William Tudor Jr., February 16, 1823, *Adams Family Papers*, reel 124, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

[2]. Josiah Quincy, *Memoir of the Life of Josiah Quincy Junior of Massachusetts* (Boston: Cummings and Hilliard, 1825).

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