

Introduction

The idea for this database originated in the late 1990s when I was commonplacing John Adams, that is, creating a database with entries with interesting quotations from John Adams on a wide array of subjects. Commonplacing was practiced by the Founding generation albeit in a notebook rather than an electronic file. In 1800 Jefferson wrote that he “had, at an early period of life, read a great deal . . . & commonplaced what I read. This common-place has been my pillar.”

I had already compiled such databases for Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and John Jay. After poring through about eight volumes of the Adams papers, I realized that Adams, his wife Abigail, and their son John Quincy Adams regularly commented on their contemporaries. But unlike most of their contemporaries, John and Abigail also loved to write about themselves. That’s when I started compiling a database that I called “The Founders on the Founders.” My criteria were both broad and restrictive. I collected references to character, mannerisms, physical and intellectual qualities, and everyday activities but avoided references to political issues. I wanted to put flesh and blood on these people whose personalities we knew little or nothing about. To date, the database has entries for 606 people with 5,751 separate entries and over 660,000 words.

In December 1817, when preparing his monumental painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, John Trumbull wrote Thomas Jefferson, the primary author of the Declaration, that Americans have a “universal interest” in “those Patriots to whom we owe that memorable Act and all its glorious consequences.” Trumbull planned to have an engraving made of his painting so that Americans could see the forty-seven signers depicted in the painting. A portrait, however, no matter how accurate a rendition of the subject, provides only a limited perspective of a person. Word portraits are needed to flesh out the character of a person and equally important to provide descriptions of the relationships between individuals. William Plumer, an early U.S. senator from New Hampshire, believed that it was important to gather as many perspectives from as many people as possible to obtain an accurate description of a person. “A city appears very different when viewed from different positions—& so it is with a man. Viewed in different situations—different dispositions, the man thus examined appears unlike himself.” John Jay advised his fourteen-year-old son Peter Augustus about the utility of reading biographies to gain an appreciation for character. “Few Books (if properly read) afford more useful Lessons than the Lives of great Men; and among Biographers Plutarch is certainly entitled to the first Place. To enjoy the Experience of others without paying the Price which it often cost them, is pleasant as well as profitable—mankind is the same in all Ages, however diversified by colour manners or customs.”

The great early national painter Charles Willson Peale wrote Thomas Jefferson telling him that a new pair of spectacles helped re-energize his interest in portraiture. Unfortunately, however, while wearing the glasses Peale usually painted his subject less than life size. Because Peale found such a diminution unacceptable, he decided to paint the broad outlines and features of his subject without the aid of the spectacles and then fill in the detailed features with the aid of the spectacles. So it is with word portraits. First we can obtain a broad picture of the individual by reading

biographies and then deepen our understanding by gathering multiple quotations describing the individual.

Some of the Founders were very cautious in their assessments; others could not resist being brutally frank. Some, like Washington, rarely gossiped; while others, like John Adams, could not stop communicating the “Tittle Tattle” of the day. Some Founders used their private correspondence to vent off steam. Some avoided introspection, while others, like both John and Abigail Adams, seemed almost obsessed with assessing their own qualities. A few even subconsciously projected their own traits while describing others. Friends, enemies, colleagues, family members, and occasionally their own introspective feelings provide over a period of time the individual tiles in these biographical mosaics. In essence, the Founders themselves become the joint biographers of each other, or better yet, they become their own autobiographers.

This database has been compiled primarily from the published documentary editions in which reliable, authoritative texts have been painstakingly transcribed by dedicated editors. For the last sixty years, literally thousands of such volumes have been published. Since 1964 the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and the National Endowment for the Humanities have funded a wide variety of documentary editions. Yale University professor Edmund S. Morgan wrote that the publication of documentary editions of the Founding era was the most important contribution to the field of history in the twentieth century. Without these volumes, such a database could not have been compiled.

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