

With Independence Day just around the corner, we've recently been thinking about all the things there are to enjoy about our national holiday. The celebration itself is great—it's a time for fireworks and baseball, barbecues and patriotic music. That's exactly what John Adams, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, predicted when he said:

"I am apt to believe that [Independence Day] will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great American Festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp, shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations, from one end of the continent to the other, from this time forever forward." - John Adams¹

But we think what we've enjoyed most about the holiday is that, for one day out of the year, we all truly come together as Americans. On the Fourth of July, there are no longer any Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives. No race, religion, or region matter anymore than another. Our opinions and philosophies can wait until the 5th. As the glint of fireworks reflects in our eyes, as we gaze at the Stars and Stripes waving in the wind, as we listen to the strains of The Star-Spangled Banner, the only thing matters is that we are Americans ... and that we are *all* created equal.

There's a wonderful story from our country's history we feel everyone should know. Let's go back to July 3rd, 1826. On that day, two men were both lying on their deathbeds. One was in Quincy, Massachusetts, the other in Monticello, Virginia. The first was John Adams, 90 years old. The other was Thomas Jefferson, 83. As these two men spent their final hours, it's all but certain that their thoughts were on two things. The first was that the anniversary of their famous signing was but a day away. The second was on each other.

When Adams and Jefferson first met in 1775, it was as delegates to the Continental Congress during the American Revolution. They had similar views and quickly became friends. When Congress ordered a committee to draft the Declaration of Independence, both men were on it. John Adams was the initial choice to be its author, but Adams felt that Jefferson should do it. Adams told Jefferson:

"You should do it. Reason first: you are a Virginian and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second: I am obnoxious, suspected and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third: You can write ten times better than I can." - John Adams

Jefferson returned the compliment when he called Adams, "the pillar of [the Declaration's] support on the floor of Congress, its ablest advocate and defender."³ After the Revolution, the two continued to be close, with Jefferson often a guest in Adams' home. And they wrote to each other frequently, exchanging hundreds of letters.

Then each man decided to run for president.

During George Washington's two terms, Adams had served as Vice President, with Jefferson as Secretary of State. But after Washington left office in 1796, the two friends reached a parting of the ways. For one thing, political parties began to make their first appearance. Adams joined the Federalist Party, and Jefferson the Democratic-Republicans. The philosophical differences between the two parties, and between themselves, were too difficult to overcome. And politics were no less vicious in their time than they are in ours ... in fact, they were probably more so. Both parties frequently spread lies and slander about each other.

Adams defeated Jefferson for the presidency in 1796, but the rules at the time stipulated that the loser became Vice President. This created an awkward situation. As Adams' presidency wore on, the two began to disagree more and more. At one point, Jefferson actually left the capital and returned home, spending time drafting secret resolutions that were in direct opposition to Adams' own.

The 1800 election was bitter and complicated, with Adams especially under attack. When Jefferson emerged the victor, Adams left the White House in disgust. He did not attend Jefferson's inauguration, and one of his last acts as president was to appoint a number of Jefferson's rivals into powerful positions.

It looked like the friendship between America's two greatest statesmen had ended. They exchanged almost no correspondence for the next ten years.

Then, after the urging of a mutual friend, Adams finally wrote a letter to Jefferson on New Year's Day, 1812. Jefferson wrote back a few weeks later, saying:

"A letter from you calls up recollections very dear to my mind. It carries me back to the times when, beset with difficulties and dangers, we were fellow laborers in the same cause, struggling for what is most valuable to man, his right of self-government." - Thomas Jefferson⁴

The two exchanged several letters that year, mostly asking about each other's health and habits. In 1813, they wrote even more, with Adams writing a total of 29 letters. Their correspondence continued for the rest of their lives, with each man penning thoughtful, detailed letters that touched on everything from politics and philosophy to religion and morality. While their words were occasionally pointed, the body of letters they left was for the most part an amazing example of the kind of high-level dialogue that two people can produce when they emphasize respect and admiration for each other. Adams and Jefferson came to realize that a difference in opinion did not mean a difference in character, and their letters reflect that. Said Jefferson:

"I have thus stated my opinion on a point on which we differ, not with a view to controversy, for we are both too old to change opinions which are the result of a long life of inquiry and reflection; but on the suggestion of a former letter of yours, that we ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other. We acted in perfect harmony throughout a long and perilous contest for our liberty and independence. A constitution has been acquired which, though neither of us think perfect, yet both consider as competent to render our fellow-citizens the happiest and the securest on whom the sun has ever shone. If we do not think exactly alike as to its imperfections, it matters little to our country which, after devoting to it long lives of disinterested labor, we have delivered over to our successors in life, who will be able to take care of it, and of themselves." - Thomas Jefferson⁴

If all of us could have the same attitude as Adams and Jefferson did, it would be a happier world. But the point is that these two great men decided to focus on their *friendship* with each other rather than on their differences. They were both Americans who cared deeply about their country. For them, that was enough.

Back to July 3rd, 1826. Both men were old and dying. They had written over 380 letters to each other over their lives, but there would be no more. Yet their minds still went to the same place. Each wanted nothing more than to live one more day, to see and celebrate the 4th of July one more time. The day that meant more to them than any other. On the night of the 3rd, Jefferson called his family in for the final time. "I have done for my country, and for all mankind, all that I could do, and I now resign my soul, without fear, to my God." He fell asleep shortly thereafter, but woke once more before the night had ended.

"Is it the Fourth yet?" Jefferson asked.

"It soon will be," his doctor assured him.⁶

Shortly before one o'clock in the morning, on July 4th, Thomas Jefferson died.

John Adams lasted a little longer. When told that it was the Fourth of July, he said, "It is a great day. It is a *good* day." Not long after, he too passed away, unaware that his friend and rival had already preceded him. According to his family, his last words were, "Thomas Jefferson survives."⁶

That these two great founders, signers, presidents, and friends died within hours of each other is notable enough. The fact that they died on the Fourth of July is more amazing still. But the most astounding thing of all?

It was the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

This Independence Day, we'd encourage us all to remember the story of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Remember the ideals they stood for. Remember the friendship they had. And remember the connection they shared—they were “fellow laborers in the same cause,” each working in the way they thought best. Their opinions differed greatly, and after years had passed, they realized there would be no changing them. But they recognized in each other what we hope we all can recognize: That we are all Americans, continually defending and working on a constitution that enables us all to be “the happiest and surest people on whom the sun has ever shown.”

On behalf of everyone here at Hudock Capital Group, we wish you and yours a happy Fourth of July!



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¹ “Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776,”

<https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760703jasecond>

² “Writing the Declaration of Independence,” *Eyewitness to History*, <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/jefferson.htm>

³ “John Adams,” *United States Senate*, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/art/artifact/Painting_31_00005.htm

⁴ “To John Adams,” <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl213.php>

⁵ “Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 28 October 1813,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-06-02-0446>

⁶ “Thomas Jefferson – Final days, death, and burial,” *Wikipedia*,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Jefferson#Final_days,_death,_and_burial

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