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Author(s): Robert E. McGlone

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Deciphering Memory: John Adams and the Authorship of the Declaration of Independence

Robert E. McGlone

In old age John Adams remembered with astonishing clarity a conversation with Thomas Jefferson nearly half a century before about which of them should draft the Declaration of Independence. In the Second Continental Congress, Adams and Jefferson had served together on the committee assigned to frame the document, and the eighty-six-year-old Adams remembered that he and Jefferson had been a “sub-committee” appointed to prepare a draft.¹ He recalled that each had professed the honor to the other, Adams finally persuading the young Virginian to accept it. But despite the clarity of Adams’s memory of this story, Jefferson emphatically denied it, insisting instead that the whole five-member committee had chosen him alone to draft the great charter.²

At issue in these disputed recollections are important questions. Did Jefferson owe his fame as author of the declaration partly to Adams? Answering that question raises in turn fundamental epistemological concerns: Can historians authenticate disputed memories unverifiable by independent documentary evidence? Here

Robert E. McGlone is assistant professor of history at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa. Substantially this essay was presented at the Eighty-ninth Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians in Chicago, March 28–31, 1996, and at the Eighty-eighth Annual Meeting of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association in Maui, August 4–7, 1995.

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¹ Since several five-member committees were working simultaneously in June 1776, I shall call the committee in question the *drafting committee* or *committee on independence* rather than the *Committee of Five*, as it is commonly known. See Calvin Jillson and Rick K. Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics: Structure, Coordination, and Choice in the First American Congress, 1774–1789* (Stanford, 1994), 96–99.

² John Adams recounted the disputed conversation in a letter to Timothy Pickering, who quoted Adams in a Fourth of July oration on the Declaration of Independence delivered at Salem, Massachusetts, in 1823. The *Richmond Enquirer* reprinted the speech, and Thomas Jefferson saw it. Although Jefferson did not respond to it publicly, he wrote James Madison in August insisting that he had his “written notes” made “at the moment and on the spot” from which to prove Adams’s errors. Julian P. Boyd has shown, however, that Jefferson’s surviving notes of proceedings in Congress were written some time between August 1776 and June 1783. Julian P. Boyd et al., eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (27 vols., Princeton, 1950–), I, 299–306, 313. Part of the Pickering letter and Jefferson’s rebuttal are reprinted in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (12 vols., New York, 1904), I, 29–30.

either Adams or Jefferson must have been mistaken, and both may have been.³ How can scholars resolve such matters? And what are the implications of errors in memory for historians and biographers?

Questions about memory are today a major concern of historians. Inspired initially by French social theorists, during the past decade historians have found a key to understanding cultural and social change in the ways societies commemorate and quarrel over the past. Historians recognize that, like the memories of individuals, public or social memories are sustained by the rituals and popular beliefs of many sorts of communities.⁴ But historians have focused less on the private, personal dimension of memory. They have long understood that contested, mistaken, or even false memories may be coded signals about the rememberer, but breaking that code has been maddeningly difficult, often impossible. In this essay, I argue that recent advances in cognitive psychology have cracked open a code book that historians can use, even on memories two hundred years old.

Adams's story, I shall argue, represents a distinctive class of reminiscences characterized by unquestioned beliefs about special moments in life. I call such recollections *aphoristic* because they confirm one or more cherished truths about the rememberer's sense of self or about his or her understanding of life in general. Indeed, they often do that better than they mirror the past. In the context of Adams's preoccupation with his place in history, the memory mentioned above claims for him greater renown and greater wisdom than Jefferson, who in 1776 was a relative newcomer to the Congress and seven years Adams's junior. Adams's memory can be read as a refutation of the verdict of history, which had already bestowed on Jefferson fame that Adams felt rightly belonged to himself. The purpose of this article is to explain how a man of Adams's integrity and at times remarkable memory might recall a conversation that Jefferson denied had ever happened and how the memory of an event so distant in time might nonetheless be so compelling.⁵ If Adams did not offer the authorship of the declaration to Jefferson, what explains his memory of doing so?

In a letter dated August 22, 1822, to the once-mistrusted Timothy Pickering, Adams recalled that he and Jefferson had formed a subcommittee to draft a declaration of independence. Jefferson had magnanimously asked Adams to write it, but Adams had refused: "I will not," he said. But Jefferson persisted. "You should

³ Dumas Malone observed that Adams's letter implied that Jefferson's prominence was "fortuitous." Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, vol. VI: *The Sage of Monticello* (Boston, 1981), 433. Joseph J. Ellis notes that Adams believed he had "delegated" the drafting to Jefferson. Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1997), 49. Pauline Maier finds "one mistake after another" in Adams's and Jefferson's recollections about the drafting. Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1997), 97.

⁴ The best introduction to this literature is Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, 1993), chap. 1. On American social memory, see David Thelen, ed., *Memory and American History* (Bloomington, 1990); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991); and John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1992). Seminal works include Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, 1992); and Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989).

⁵ Jefferson stated not only that he and Adams were not appointed as a subcommittee but also that Adams's account of "the urgencies of each on the other" was "quite incorrect." Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Aug. 30, 1823, in *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Ford, I, 30–31.

do it.” Adams refused again, “‘Oh! no.’” Jefferson responded, “‘Why will you not? You ought to do it.’” To this Adams replied once more, “‘I will not.’” “‘Why?’” demanded Jefferson. “‘Reasons enough,’” Adams countered. “‘What can be your reasons?’” Jefferson asked. “‘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.’ ‘Well,’ said Jefferson, ‘If you are decided, I will do as well as I can.’ ‘Very well,’” concluded Adams, “‘When you have drawn it up, we will have a meeting.’”⁶

Adams’s verbatim recall of this exchange was remarkable, especially since he had earlier remembered the story of Jefferson’s selection quite differently and his memory of related events at times failed him completely. Twenty years before he wrote Pickering, Adams could not remember whether he or the committee had altered the draft Jefferson presented two days after the date of the exchange recounted in the letter to Pickering. In fact, as the historian Carl Becker noted long ago, Adams had made a copy of the declaration that included one of his own two corrections of Jefferson’s draft. Similarly, in working on his autobiography in 1805, Adams lamented that without seeing John Dickinson’s speech opposing the resolution for independence he could not recall what he himself had said in its defense during the “great” and “solemn” debate in Congress on July 1. That failure is significant because Adams had repeated substantially the same speech for the late-arriving delegates from New Jersey. In 1807, as he worked on his autobiography, Adams remembered giving the speech only once. How, one wonders, could Adams preserve the memory of an informal conversation for half a century and forget what he had said in his formal defense of the resolution for independence?⁷

The disparities between Adams’s and Jefferson’s accounts of Jefferson’s selection have sown historiographic confusion. Some scholars assume that Adams chaired the committee or at least a subcommittee, as he later claimed, and that Adams appointed Jefferson as draftsman. Despite Garry Wills’s admonition to be skeptical of Adams’s recollection, John E. Ferling even claims that the committee first offered the honor of drafting the document to Adams, who declined.⁸ Other scholars iden-

⁶ Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*. . . . (10 vols., Boston, 1850–1856), II, 512–15. I have added phrases to identify which man spoke which of these exhortations and responses.

⁷ Carl L. Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York, 1922), 140. Adams’s copy of the declaration is reprinted in Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, II, 42. All the extant drafts are analyzed and reproduced in Julian P. Boyd, *The Declaration of Independence: The Evolution of the Text as Shown in Facsimiles of Various Drafts by Its Author, Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, 1945). For the committee’s alterations, see *ibid.*, 28–31. L. H. Butterfield, ed., *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (4 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1961), III, 396–98. Butterfield cites Adams’s letter to Mercy Otis Warren, August 17, 1807, which varied in “important details” from the account in the autobiography. *Ibid.*, 397–98n6.

⁸ On Adams as chair, see Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York, 1993), 42, 61–64; Ellis, *American Sphinx*, 49; and Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (New York, 1976), 100. Page Smith has Jefferson as chair of the drafting committee and ignores Adams’s later claim to have been appointed to a subcommittee with Jefferson. Page Smith, *John Adams* (2 vols., Garden City, 1962), I, 266–67. Garry Wills suggests that the importance Adams attached in hindsight to events led his memory to err. Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1978), 348–49. John E. Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (Knoxville, 1992), 147.

tify Jefferson as chair of the committee or insist, as Jefferson did, that the committee—not Adams—appointed him to draft the declaration. Some accept Jefferson's recollection but gloss over the difference between it and Adams's conflicting memory. "Whether or not [Jefferson] and Adams were appointed to a subcommittee, as the latter said and [Jefferson] himself denied, is unimportant," wrote Dumas Malone in 1948, "and even if the conversation between the two men did not occur precisely as Adams reported it long afterwards, the reasons which he then assigned were valid."⁹ If Adams's recall of detail was suspect, Malone implied, his memory of essentials was correct.

But Malone's commonsense resolution of the matter depends largely on Adams's recollections. Moreover, it begs the question of why Jefferson was on the committee in the first place. In fact, if the account Adams sent to Pickering was mistaken, our whole understanding of the drafting of the declaration is doubtful. Common sense alone cannot resolve this issue. As Lyman Butterfield noted in 1961, research and textual analysis have amplified and corrected both Adams's and Jefferson's accounts, but the points in dispute may never be resolved empirically.¹⁰

Since Butterfield wrote, psychologists and other students of human memory have offered insights that may help settle such disputes. The implications of this "cognitive revolution" in memory research are good news for historians. As scholars in Butterfield's day understood, even vivid memories of personal experiences may not be presumed to represent the past reliably. But cognitive psychologists have developed conceptual tools that historians today may use to probe for new meaning in reported memories.¹¹

Memories, those psychologists say, are reconstructions of past events, and long-term memories form slowly in stages that involve many areas of the brain. Things we experience directly survive in our "sensory register" for only milliseconds unless, in taking note of features of the impressions they create, we move the resulting images and sounds (termed "icons" and "echoes") into short-term or "working memory." There the icons and echoes survive not more than thirty seconds unless we transfer them to long-term memory by fixing attention upon them. These fragmentary representations of experience persist in long-term memory by becoming linked to established memories by affinities of meaning. That is, memories endure in chains or packages of related impressions and images, and then only as the gist, or essence, of experiences. To achieve a kind of permanence, researchers believe,

⁹ Boyd concludes that the "main outlines" of what happened "are clear and indisputable. The committee selected Jefferson to prepare a draft. He did so, submitting it first to Adams and then to Franklin." Boyd et al., ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, I, 414. Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, vol. I: *Jefferson the Virginian* (Boston, 1948), 220. Noble E. Cunningham Jr. notes that the conversation Adams remembered may have been "imaginary," but that the reasons he gave for the choice of Jefferson "ring true." Noble E. Cunningham Jr., *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1988), 46–47. Nathan Schachner proposed that something like the conversation Adams remembered may have occurred during a meeting of the "entire committee," which gave the job to Jefferson. Nathan Schachner, *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography* (2 vols., New York, 1951), I, 125–27. See also Maier, *American Scripture*, 101.

¹⁰ Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, III, 337n1.

¹¹ The best introductions to this literature are Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York, 1996); and Gillian Cohen, *Memory in the Real World* (Hove, Eng., 1989).

memories must be processed in the hippocampus for perhaps three years. Cognitivists call this whole complex process “encoding.”¹²

Once encoded, these abbreviated versions of experience may be “retrieved” only by processes that reshape them. In encoding and retrieval, even images of climactic experiences and moments of historic significance are reconfigured. In fact, memories of personal experience are not so much reexperienced as reassembled. They symbolize or stand for the past more than they reclaim it. It follows, then, that to recover personal experiences, we must interpret or, more precisely, decipher memories.

John Adams’s memory of the drafting of the declaration is, then, the product of elaborate processing. But how are we to explain the inconsistencies in his ability to recall his past and his confidence in a memory that Jefferson insisted was false? To answer that question, it is necessary to understand how long-term memory seems to work.

For present purposes, the most useful discovery of memory researchers is that memory depends on processes facilitated by “schemas” (or schemata). Schemas are organized representations of information, “structures” of knowledge in the mind, and as such, heuristic constructs that facilitate analysis. A biochemical event corresponding to a particular schema might exist simultaneously in many parts of the brain, and it should not therefore be thought of as having concrete form or location. Some researchers suggest that memories are stored as holograms, but how that might happen neurologically has not been demonstrated.¹³

Like particular memories, nonetheless, schemas seem real enough. Familiar examples of them may be summoned to consciousness as needed—grammars, mathematical rules, musical scales, rhyme schemes—all of which permit us to make sense of creations that would otherwise be nonsense. Schemas permit us to classify mosquitoes as insects and to manipulate numbers in our heads. They provide generic images of “natural categories” such as “bird” or “river.” They may be as concrete as the alphabet (a serial schema) or as subtle as the sound of a piano concerto.

Other sorts of schemas help us store and recall personal experiences. These enable us to visualize places and scenes previously encountered and to recall in proper sequence events and the plots of countless stories. They permit us to impose patterns on objects of perception in everyday life, and they make possible cognitive mappings of personal memory.¹⁴

¹² See David C. Rubin, “Introduction,” in *Remembering Our Past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory*, ed. David C. Rubin (New York, 1996), 4. Two leading psychologists conclude that memories are “compilations, constructions, or compositions of knowledge.” Researchers can identify “no specific type of knowledge which can be easily singled out as being a *memory*.” Martin A. Conway and David C. Rubin, “The Structure of Autobiographical Memory,” in *Theories of Memory*, ed. Allan F. Collins et al. (Hove, Eng., 1993), 104. Memory researchers hoped to identify a physiological “trace” or “engram” in the brain that embodied the representation of a memory, but no specific engram has been found. Rather, a memory subsists as a new pattern of strengthened connections between groups of neurons that participate in encoding. See Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, 57–60.

¹³ See Larry R. Squire, *Memory and Brain* (New York, 1987), 66. The neurologist Antonio R. Damasio has proposed that information from various parts of the brain is integrated in “convergence zones,” a zone in the medial temporal region binding together explicit memories. For an accessible introduction to the neurobiology of memory and thought, see Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York, 1994).

¹⁴ See Jean Matter Mandler, *Stories, Scripts, and Scenes: Aspects of Schema Theory* (Hillsdale, 1984).

Most cognitive psychologists accept Endel Tulving's distinction between "episodic" and "semantic" memory. The former term refers to memory of personal experiences, while the latter refers to memory of knowledge that lacks any specific personal context. Thus, semantic memory contains a "permastore" of information that is free of experiential contexts but, when adequately cued, is directly available for recall. We can think of a Virginia cardinal, for example, without remembering when we last saw one. On the other hand, experiences preserved in episodic memory are more problematic. When did we last see a Virginia cardinal? Only by consulting episodic memory may we "travel" mentally through time, Tulving insists.¹⁵ Episodic memory and semantic memory are thus distinct but not entirely separate systems.

Tulving's distinction helps us understand why historians may remember events in the lives of people they study more clearly than events in their own lives: Knowledge of history belongs to semantic memory and is elicited by processes quite different from those that control episodic memory. That is why in old age Adams and Jefferson could still read French and translate Greek and Latin texts, while their memories of events in which they took part during the Revolution were often clouded. "What are we to think of history?" the aging Adams lamented, "when in less than forty years, such diversities appear in the memories of living men who were witnesses."¹⁶

The despair in Adams's question grew in part from what cognitive psychologists recognize as the influence of schematic reconstruction. The very processes that preserve memories also change them.¹⁷ In specific situations, researchers believe, individuals encode information that is relevant to and important for the currently activated schema. Perception is selective, and people remember most readily what they need to grasp from the scene before them, the gist, or import, of what they are experiencing. They then store the nub of what they experience in memory while its "surface form" is lost. The information thus gained is integrated with previously acquired information, making the schema itself more nuanced and more likely to elicit other, related schemas. In this way, schemas facilitate learning.¹⁸

But schemas may confuse as well as clarify memories of experience. Herbert Kay has shown that test subjects remember their own inaccurate versions of events they

¹⁵ Mark A. Wheeler, Donald T. Stuss, and Endel Tulving, "Toward a Theory of Episodic Memory: The Frontal Lobes and Autoeic Consciousness," *Psychological Bulletin*, 121 (May 1997), 331–54. For an early statement of Endel Tulving's theory, see Endel Tulving, *Elements of Episodic Memory* (New York, 1983). Researchers also identify a separate "procedural memory" or "habit memory" that permits us to "remember" how to swim or ride a bicycle after years without practice. See Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, esp. 15–26.

¹⁶ See the translations in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (2 vols., New York, 1959), II, 335–38, 365–66. When trying to remember who wrote certain resolutions in Congress, Jefferson asked Adams, "Am I right in this? . . . On these questions, I ask of your memory to help mine." Jefferson to John Adams, Aug. 13, 1813, *ibid.*, 367–70. Adams is quoted in James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection* (New York, 1992), 51.

¹⁷ The concept of schemas was introduced in Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (New York, 1899). See Howard Gardner, *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution* (New York, 1985), 56–60.

¹⁸ Master chess players have an advantage over novices because their recognition of familiar chess configurations is superior, not because their general memory is better. See Arnold Lewis Glass and Keith James Holyoak, *Cognition* (New York, 1986), 387–92.

witnessed much better than they recall correct versions, even when the latter are repeatedly presented to them.¹⁹ Like particular memories, moreover, schemas change over time, becoming better integrated and elaborated or, like knowledge of childhood games, fading. The schemas operating when memories are encoded may differ significantly from those active at the time of recall. Yet remembering depends upon whether schemas engaged at the time of recall resemble those that shaped the original encoding of the experience sufficiently to cue its memory. Reports we take to be memories of early childhood may actually be reconstructions derived from later times.²⁰

To draw together these disparate threads, present understandings of the schematic encoding of experience cast doubt on the accuracy of Adams's memory of the conversation with Jefferson about drafting the Declaration of Independence. Ordinarily, even for a period of weeks or months, Adams would have remembered only the gist of such a conversation; the precise words would have been quickly forgotten. Adams himself illustrated how quickly forgetting may distort even a carefully drafted text. On May 15, 1776, he reported jubilantly to a friend the adoption that very day (after three days of heated debate) of his preamble to the resolution that he and Richard Henry Lee had introduced urging the colonies to write new constitutions to end Crown authority over them. Despite his best efforts to "repeat" the measure "from memory," Adams introduced small discrepancies in phrasing and shortened the text, evidencing the apparent beginnings of schematic encoding.²¹

Thus the very detail of Adams's 1822 recollection of the conversation with Jefferson invites skepticism. Only if Adams had repeated the whole exchange to himself or to others immediately afterward and often enough to store it, like a French lesson, in semantic memory, might it have survived substantially intact. Evidence from Adams's own quill, as we shall see, suggests that this was not the case. To account for his insistence that the memory was accurate, we must consider the functions of specific kinds of schemas in episodic memory.

¹⁹ On Herbert Kay's experiments and repetitions of them, see Michael Howe, *Introduction to Human Memory: A Psychological Report* (New York, 1979), 78–80, as reported in Alice M. Hoffman and Howard S. Hoffman, *Archives of Memory: A Soldier Recalls World War II* (Lexington, Ky., 1990), 13–14.

²⁰ This helps explain the experimental evidence for what Sigmund Freud called "infantile amnesia." Freud claimed that memories from the "oedipal period" were too traumatic to enter consciousness and were repressed and replaced by innocuous "screen memories." Recent investigators, however, question whether early childhood memories are either more threatening or more benign than memories from later life. Katherine Nelson states that research supports a developmental model of the emergence of autobiographical memory rooted in the child's efforts to share experience with others. See Katherine Nelson, "Explaining the Emergence of Autobiographical Memory in Early Childhood," in *Theories of Memory*, ed. Collins et al., 355–82, esp. 359–60, 376. A dramatic illustration of false memory is recounted by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. He recalled a childhood incident in which his nursemaid protected him against an attempted kidnapping. When he was an adult, Piaget learned that what seemed a vivid personal memory was a falsehood his nursemaid told for her own purposes; the experience he remembered had not happened. *Ibid.*, 359–60.

²¹ Adams to James Warren, May 15, 1776, in *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774–1789*, ed. Paul H. Smith (24 vols., Washington, 1976–1995), III, 676, 678; Adams to Joseph Palmer, May 16, 1776, *ibid.*, IV, 3–4. On the ferocity of the debate, see Carter Braxton to Landon Carter, May 17, 1776, *ibid.*, 18–21. For the original text, altered only in punctuation, see *ibid.*, 677. See also Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789* (34 vols., Washington, 1904–1937), IV, 342, 357–58.

Schemas representing places—scene schemas—are building blocks of cognition, essential elements in other sorts of schemas. Memory of places is organized in three-dimensional, hierarchical scene schemas in which smaller units are “embedded” in larger ones. We have, for example, a schema for a supermarket containing, among other features, aisles of shelves and check-out counters. Our ability to visualize scenes is so powerful that since antiquity mnemonists (memory experts) have taught people to remember lists by means of location, the so-called mental-walk technique.²²

Scene schemas long sustained the memories of Adams and Jefferson concerning the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. In Paris in 1786 Jefferson suggested to John Trumbull that he include a painting commemorating the declaration in a series depicting the American Revolution. He sketched from memory a rough, somewhat inaccurate floor plan of the Assembly Room in Independence Hall and advised Trumbull of the seating of the drafting committee and other delegates. Adams later denounced his friend’s famous painting of the scene as a misrepresentation because not all those depicted were actually signers. Like Jefferson, Adams recalled the layout of the room, but he could not remember when most of the delegates actually signed the engrossed parchment.²³

The reason for this apparent anomaly was very probably that Adams had formed a single event schema, or script, of the many meetings he attended in Independence Hall. Scripts are “structures” of knowledge that guide individuals through the routines of everyday life. A script is a kind of mental repository containing and representing information abstracted from a class of similar events but excluding concrete details about specific occurrences. We all have many such scripts for everything from the proper conduct for eating in a restaurant to that for participating in, say, a poker game. Scripts are sets of expectations about how to behave in routine situations. They consist of a temporally and causally ordered sequence of actions that point toward a given outcome.²⁴

The concept of scripts is crucial for understanding long-term memory. Scripts help one encode personal experience for deep processing. They provide organizing frameworks for remembering routine, open-ended, familiar events for which we

²² See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago, 1996); and Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory*.

²³ On Jefferson’s sketch, see Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 101–2. See also Wills, *Inventing America*, 346. For Jefferson’s and John Trumbull’s sketches of the Assembly Room, see Irma B. Jaffe, *Trumbull: The Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1976), 60–62. On Adams’s recollection, see Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, 99–100. The vote for independence occurred on July 2. On July 3 and 4 Congress met as a committee of the whole to approve the declaration itself. The authenticated copy, signed by John Hancock, was sent out to be printed, but it was not until July 19 that Congress ordered the declaration to be put into final form. The signing occurred on August 2; some members signed even later. See Boyd, *Declaration of Independence*, 37–38.

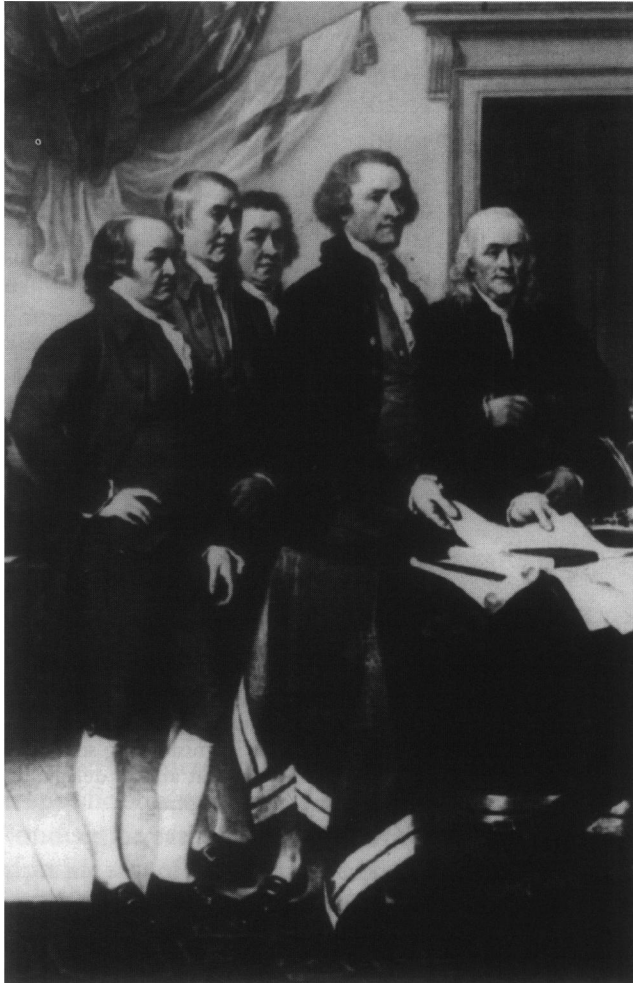
²⁴ Scripts can be analyzed as subscripts or scenes, which are hierarchically organized because the principal action governing the script may require further, subordinate actions. Roger C. Schank, a pioneer in script theory, proposes that we have scripts of several levels of generality. Schank calls the higher-level generalized event representations MOPs (memory organization packets). He theorizes that we construct scripts when we confront atypical situations, for we cannot have developed a script for every conceivable situation. We may borrow more general rules of conduct from a MOP, such as one for attending a meeting, while combining those rules with instructions from another script about behavior in a specific kind of meeting such as a class. Since we can misapply scripts, Schank’s theory helps account for errors we make in social situations. Roger C. Schank, *Dynamic Memory* (Cambridge, Eng., 1982).



John Trumbull, *The Declaration of Independence*, 1817. To document as well as memorialize the nation's birth, Trumbull made portraits of the delegates from life during the 1790s. John Adams criticized his friend's painting of the presentation of the declaration to the whole Congress for its misleading serenity and for its suggestion (as Adams supposed) that all the delegates were present at once for the signing.
Courtesy National Archives.

have a generic memory. We usually remember repetitious events such as committee meetings or holiday celebrations only in a general way, if at all. Only when something unusual happens in a series of such events does the event itself become "tagged" or "indexed" and retrievable from memory. The idea of scripts helps explain why we remember some routine events clearly and others not at all.

Given the role of scripts, then, it is not surprising that John Adams would be unable to recall at which meetings of Congress various members signed the Declaration of Independence. Furthermore, since Adams had often argued for independence, he could not separate in memory the substance of his speech on July 1 from that of other speeches. For more than a year "all the Arguments for it and against it had been exhausted and were become familiar," he recalled in his autobiography. Adams had reluctantly agreed to speak, he remembered, when no one else rose to respond to John Dickinson's eloquent speech against declaring independence. Unhappily, Adams had kept no record of this, perhaps his most dramatic speech. "But if I had a Copy of Mr. Dickinson's before me," Adams claimed, "I would now after Nine and twenty Years have elapsed, endeavour to recollect mine." Adams could remember the circumstances and the scene of the speech because he had



Detail, John Trumbull, *The Declaration of Independence*, 1817. The Drafting Committee, from left to right: John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert R. Livingston, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin. The appearance of the room and the placement of delegations follow Jefferson's memories of the scene, recounted to Trumbull in Paris in 1786.

Courtesy National Archives.

tagged this special event in memory, but without more elaborate cuing his arguments remained in his memory only in generic terms—as a script.²⁵

Scripts may taint as well as blur memories. When memories of specific events fail, scripts fill the resulting gaps with generic information about probable behavior. As the story of a particular event is told and retold, one's memory of it becomes

²⁵ Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, III, 396–97.

larded with inferences. Typically, concrete details are lost and information from activated scripts accrues in their place. Adams acknowledged that his ability to recall once-familiar details of the stirring events of 1776 was sometimes owing to “our histories” and not “my own memory.” Records derived from such *rescripting* of memories may contain not only inaccurate information but substantially false memories that seem convincing.²⁶

Schema theory explains how and why we remember what is normal, relevant, or consistent with preexisting knowledge. But we often remember best what is unexpected, bizarre, even irrelevant. Indeed, some memories of that sort have such immediacy that one questions whether they could really be “reconstructed.” Was John Adams’s memory of his conversation with Jefferson such a memory?

Psychologists have tested the accuracy of distinctive memories in both laboratory and real-world settings. They have found that in memories of highly emotional events, the “gist” of an event, including detail associated with its “center,” is generally enhanced while memory for peripheral detail is lost. Subjects witnessing traumatic events in the laboratory evidence a “defensive reaction”: abruptly increased heart rates, constricted pupils, and other physiological changes suggesting a blocking of external stimuli.²⁷ But even memories of traumatic events are influenced by schemas. Elizabeth Loftus and others have demonstrated that the memories of eyewitnesses to accidents can be changed or supplemented by the questions investigators ask them or the reports of the events that they read. Indeed, some studies show that eyewitnesses may remember, not what they saw, but what other people tell them they saw.²⁸

Emotionally moving historical events may leave lasting impressions, and that fact must influence any assessment of John Adams’s recollections of events in 1776. “Flashbulb memories” are the vivid pictures many people have of the circumstances surrounding their hearing of a shocking item of news. Such memories are so graphic and compelling that they seem to have a quasi-photographic quality. Even after many years, a “core” image of such an event seems unaffected, although the narrative forms in which flashbulb memories are reported may vary significantly. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the explosion of the space

²⁶ Adams to Richard Henry Lee (grandson), Feb. 24, 1821, in *Works of John Adams*, ed. Adams, X, 395–96. I have suggested the term *rescripting* to conceptualize how changing cultural patterns and historical events may alter the ground of personal memories. Robert E. McGlone, “Rescripting a Troubled Past: John Brown’s Family and the Harpers Ferry Conspiracy,” *Journal of American History*, 75 (March 1989), 1179–1200, esp. 1182–83.

²⁷ Alafair Burke, Friderike Heuer, and Daniel Reisberg, “Remembering Emotional Events,” *Memory and Cognition*, 20 (May 1992), 277–90. Efforts to explain memories of emotionally distinctive events have focused on the saving (encoding) and eliciting (retrieving) processes. Although no comprehensive theory explains fully the effects of such distinctive events on memory, it is clear that their incongruity with active schemas or frameworks demands increased attention. On “defensive reactions,” see Stephen R. Schmidt, “Can We Have a Distinctive Theory of Memory?,” *ibid.*, 19 (Nov. 1991), 534.

²⁸ Elizabeth F. Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); and Elizabeth F. Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, *Witness for the Defense: The Accused, the Eyewitness, and the Expert Who Puts Memory on Trial* (New York, 1991). Debate has focused on whether the mistaken memories supplanted the witnesses’ original memory by erasing it irrecoverably or whether witnesses retained both memories of an event and chose the wrong version because it was more accessible or seemed to be demanded. The evidence suggests that false memories eradicated test subjects’ own initial recollections. On efforts to interpret evidence about memory for distinctive events, see Schmidt, “Can We Have a Distinctive Theory of Memory?,” 523–42.

shuttle *Challenger*, for example, produced such memories. Researchers differ on what accounts for the durability and “fine-grain” detail of flashbulb memories. Most agree, however, that these qualities stem in part from the strong emotions elicited by tragic news or the intrinsic significance of the event. In a review of recent research, Martin Conway suggests that the unexpectedness of the event and its disruption of the rememberer’s understanding of the wider world may account for the formation of flashbulbs.²⁹

It seems clear, at any rate, that Adams’s conversation with Jefferson would not have triggered the privileged neurological imprint mechanisms thought to explain flashbulbs. The occasion of the conversation was not sufficiently startling, and its significance for Adams appeared only much later. Flashbulbs result from interruptions in the expected course of daily life, whereas the conversation Adams recalled followed logically and predictably from the circumstances of the occasion. Many other experiences in the spring and summer of 1776—stirring floor debates, crucial votes, the arrival of breathless riders from Boston and Virginia—were better candidates for deep processing. Indeed, the conversation Adams remembered was a logical episode in an ongoing drama in which Adams himself played the lead. It gained authenticity for him through its integration into what psychologists call a story schema.

People with less retentive memories than those of John Adams or Thomas Jefferson easily recall the plots of novels and films. This is because their memory for stories is facilitated by hierarchically ordered schemas whose contents cue the recall of emplotted and sequenced episodes. A story schema is a mental structure consisting of sets of expectations about the ways stories play out. It is a psychological reflection of regularities discovered (or sensed) through hearing and reading previous stories. Children as well as adults organize information in such schemas. In recalling incomplete or defective stories, hearers or readers fill in the missing elements with text that preserves canonical or typical story structures.³⁰

The relevance of this for historians is not that historical or biographical narratives

²⁹ Ulric Neisser, “A Case of Misplaced Nostalgia,” *American Psychologist*, 46 (Jan. 1991), 34–36. See Sven-Åke Christianson, “Flashbulb Memories: Special, but Not So Special,” *Memory and Cognition*, 17 (July 1989), 435–43; and Sven-Åke Christianson and Elizabeth Loftus, “Remembering Emotional Events: The Fate of Detailed Information,” *Cognition and Emotion*, 5 (May 1991), 225–39. Ulric Neisser suggests that “flashbulb memories” might better be called “benchmark memories” because they gain their significance after the event. Their “consequentiality” accounts for the durability of flashbulbs. Ulric Neisser, “Snapshots or Benchmarks?,” in *Memory Observed: Remembering in Natural Contexts*, ed. Ulric Neisser (New York, 1982), 43–48. Martin Conway observes that vivid, durable memories of traumatic events in private life occur more frequently than do the flashbulb memories that result from disturbing public news. He suggests that flashbulbs link private experience with historical events and can serve as generational benchmarks. They also serve as tools to argue a point (“I was there!”) or to share experience with others. Martin A. Conway, *Flashbulb Memories* (Hove, Eng., 1995), 118–27.

³⁰ Researchers have noted that very simple stories such as folktales often exhibit striking similarities in plot, revealing an underlying “story grammar.” Several scholars have done parallel work in story schemas. See David Rumelhart, “Notes on a Schema for Stories,” in *Representation and Understanding: Studies in Cognitive Science*, ed. D. Bobrow and Allan Collins (New York, 1975). Perry W. Thorndyke demonstrated that structural characteristics reflecting a story grammar greatly enhanced the recall of facts in prose passages. Perry W. Thorndyke, “Cognitive Structures in Comprehension and Memory of Narrative Discourse,” *Cognitive Psychology*, 9 (Jan. 1977), 77–110. The new subfield of narrative psychology is indebted to the discovery of story schemas and grammars. See Theodore R. Sarbin, ed., *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (New York, 1986), chaps. 4–6.

exhibit recognizable story schemas. It is that personal experiences are reconstructed in memory as stories, thereby gaining schematic structure and meaning. These stories are incorporated into higher-level schemas reflecting “themes” of the broad periods of a person’s life. The result is what students of memory call autobiographical memory, an accumulation of oft-told stories that inform the rememberer’s sense of self. Ironically, as details of such stories fade over time, fragments of the original memory as well as erroneous recollections may be strengthened by a process neuropsychologists call “consolidation.” Thus autobiographical memories may seem to improve, not decay, over time. “Although these memories may contain but a kernel of their original truth and be filled with embellishments, false recollections, descriptions provided by others, and multiple events blended into seemingly singular occurrences,” two psychologists observe, “these characteristics in no way diminish their power in organizing who we are.”³¹

Researchers have shown that memory repeatedly edits and revises the story of our lives. To explain the fluidity this creates, Martin Conway has proposed a “compositional” theory of autobiographical knowledge that is both thematic and loosely chronological. He distinguishes three levels of structure in the construction of memories. “Lifetime periods” (some writers prefer “extenditures”) are structures in a person’s autobiographical memory that represent periods of years or decades. They might include such categories as “when I lived at X,” “when I worked for Y,” or “when I was engaged to Z.” References to such categories are especially effective as “primes,” or directional signals, in memory retrieval. The resulting periodization represents abstract or general levels of autobiographical knowledge that invoke information about people associated with a given period. It also invokes moods, goals, and “thematic” divisions of life such as son or daughter, student or spouse, parent or historian. Each such period represents a constellation of themes, people, emotions, and aspirations, and each both reflects and draws upon specific portions of the structure of autobiographical knowledge. Thus, cuing different life periods may summon quite different reminiscences about the rememberer and others.³²

In contrast, “general events,” or “episodes,” are schemas of related personal experiences organized chronologically and thematically around specific details. In a study of extended “first experience memories,” J. A. Robinson concluded that first-time experiences such as learning to drive or falling in love function as mini-histories, representing the emergence of important themes or landmarks in the achievement of life goals. They are often structured around “benchmark” events that initiate or culminate efforts to reach important goals, Robinson suggests, and

³¹ Squire, *Memory and Brain*, 204–15. Ted Abel et al., “Steps toward a Molecular Definition of Memory Consolidation,” in *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past*, ed. Daniel L. Schacter (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 298–320; Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, 81–89. Adapting theories of Silvan Tompkins, Jefferson Singer and Peter Salovey argue that vivid, emotional memories people repeat often represent the central concerns of their lives. Jefferson Singer and Peter Salovey, *The Remembered Self: Emotion and Memory in Personality* (New York, 1993), 12–13.

³² See Martin A. Conway, “A Structural Model of Autobiographical Memory,” in *Theoretical Perspectives on Autobiographical Memory*, ed. Martin A. Conway (Dordrecht, Neth., 1992), 167–93; and Conway and Rubin, “Structure of Autobiographical Memory,” 103–32, esp. 104.

serve thereby to tag the episodes in memory. Such events represent a second basic level of autobiographical knowledge. In searches of memory and efforts to solve problems, they remind one of related general events.³³

The third category of autobiographical knowledge—that of specific events—consists of memories of immediate images or sensory details. Remembering specific events seems much like replaying records of ongoing activity. But such records are preserved in autobiographical memory, Conway believes, only if they are “indexed” by a general event or gain thematic and temporal relatedness to higher levels of autobiographical knowledge. In Conway’s compositional theory of life-span memory, one may remember an event as a discrete, differentiated, unitary memory, when in fact it is integrated into schemas of general experience.³⁴ This helps explain how forgotten knowledge may be recalled by repeated searches.

Cognitivists recognize the central role schemas of the self play in the retrieving of personal memories. Theorists differ, however, on whether self-knowledge is integrated in memory into a single “self” or stored (metaphorically) in separate referent bins with individual headers or markers.³⁵ In either case, quite different schematic representations of the self may be associated in memory with different life periods and different representations of general events. Thus, because formative experiences are encoded along with knowledge of particular people and places and linked to distinct episodes or periods, recalling specific events is a hit-or-miss affair.³⁶

Conway’s theory encourages a close look at the story Adams told Pickering in 1822. If Adams did not offer Jefferson the privilege of drafting the declaration, how might his false memory of doing so be explained? The theories and research just summarized suggest that by 1822 fragments of Adams’s earlier memories of his collaboration with Jefferson and the committee in 1776 had been transmuted into an aphoristic memory—a specific story illustrating what the rememberer deems a general truth about himself or about life.

Aphoristic memories, I suggest, are frequently self-centered, sometimes self-serving, and always self-referential, even when the rememberer’s role in the event recalled was marginal. They are autobiographical in that they are integrated with the broad themes of the rememberer’s life story. Through repetition, decay of detail, accretion from scripts, and absorption into larger contexts of remembered experience, they gain structure. In time, they become apt and pointed; but despite their meaning for the rememberer’s self-image, they may lack a precise experiential context. They may thus float in remembered time, inhabiting both semantic and episodic memory.³⁷ Terse in wording, aphoristic memories come more swiftly to a point than do other reminiscences. They may be false—seeming traces of experi-

³³ Conway and Rubin, “Structure of Autobiographical Memory,” 105–6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 107–8.

³⁵ See Robert S. Wyer Jr. and Thomas K. Srull, *Memory and Cognition in Its Social Context* (Hillsdale, 1989), esp. chap. 13.

³⁶ Conway, “Structural Model of Autobiographical Memory,” 167–93.

³⁷ For examples of grossly mistaken aphoristic memories, see Robert E. McGlone, “Forgotten Surrender: John Brown’s Raid and the Cult of Martial Virtues,” *Civil War History*, 40 (Sept. 1994), 185–201, esp. 195–99. Adams gives no hint where or when his conversation with Jefferson occurred. Schachner, *Thomas Jefferson*, I, 127; Maier, *American Scripture*, 100–101.

ences that did not occur. But false or otherwise, like pearls in an oyster, they become more luminous in time. Adams's account of his conversation with Jefferson may have been such a memory.

If that is the case, how might Adams have come to remember that he had offered the honor of drafting the declaration to Jefferson? Over the years Adams recorded a succession of brief recollections about the drafting of the declaration, including the circumstances of Jefferson's election to the drafting committee. In those accounts, the story changes in substance as well as detail. As Adams entered new life periods, his memories mutated; new elements appeared in his account as old ones disappeared. In the process, Adams's memories came to reflect his personal struggle to gain recognition as midwife of the nation's birth and his growing disquiet over misrepresentation of the Revolution in partisan popular celebrations and histories. Finally, his friendship with Jefferson restored, the eighty-six-year-old Adams recorded in his letter to Pickering the false memory that reconciled his previous accounts with the logic of his own life story.

But that false memory included little of what actually happened in 1776. In May of that year, when Jefferson returned to Congress after a four-month absence, he was not the obvious choice to represent Virginia on the drafting committee. On June 7, at the direction of that colony's constitutional convention, Adams's friend and ally Richard Henry Lee had introduced a motion for independence. The fiery Lee was the ranking member of the Virginia delegation and its logical spokesman on this weighty matter.³⁸ Adams himself seconded Lee's motion, which after rancorous debate was tabled. Delegates from the middle colonies refused to support independence without instructions from their governments empowering them to do so; and since unanimity was desirable, Adams and Lee agreed to delay a vote to permit opinion in the wavering colonies to "ripen." Thus on June 10, Congress agreed by a vote of seven to five to postpone debate on the question of independence until July 1 but established a committee to draft a declaration so that no time would be lost should independence be approved.

Since Lee had made the original motion, protocol made him the evident choice to chair the committee, and since chairs usually drafted committee reports, Lee was the logical person to write a declaration of independence. For this reason, historians have wondered why Jefferson rather than Lee was elected to the committee. Two explanations seem plausible. The first, that political infighting excluded Lee, was implicit in a cryptic remark Adams made years later in his autobiography. Adams's remark reflected his belief in the growing resistance within Congress to the alliance between the Adamses and the Lees. John and his cousin Samuel Adams had worked with Richard Henry Lee and his brother Arthur Lee against British initiatives in the colonies even before the First Continental Congress met. Despite the complex factionalism that soon emerged in the Congress, the "radical" Adams-Lee bloc, or "Eastern faction," won crucial votes in the first and second congresses.³⁹

³⁸ In balloting on August 11, 1775, to select delegates to the Continental Congress, members of the Virginia Convention cast 89 votes for Peyton Randolph, 88 for Richard Henry Lee, and 85 for Jefferson. Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason*, 39.

³⁹ See Louis W. Potts, *Arthur Lee: A Virtuous Revolutionary* (Baton Rouge, 1981), 9, 220–21; and H. James

But in June 1776 the supremacy of the faction was still precarious. Influential “moderates” and “conservatives” had hoped for an accommodation with Britain, even after fighting erupted at Lexington and Concord. These delegates, Adams feared, might delay a formal breach by persuading Congress to negotiate. Adams knew that within the Virginia delegation Benjamin Harrison and Carter Braxton, who had publicly attacked Adams’s writings, were not unwavering supporters of independence. Adams suspected that both Harrison, then chair of the committee of the whole, and John Hancock, president of the Congress, were opposed to Lee’s presence on the drafting committee. Thus, Adams reasoned, Lee’s enemies might join reconciliationists to put Harrison on the committee and perhaps thereby delay independence. Adams knew that the radicals might fail to elect a satisfactory committee. Draft resolutions written by Lee and Patrick Henry had earlier been defeated or rewritten by conservatives before passage. A Virginian had to be on the drafting committee, and Adams feared the Congress might select Harrison.⁴⁰

According to this interpretation, Adams needed a less controversial Virginian on the committee than Lee. Jefferson had said little on the floor in the year he had been in Congress, but his pamphlet, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, had established his reputation as an effective writer. Within six weeks of his arrival in Philadelphia in 1775, moreover, he had penned two important documents that Congress adopted in revised form. With Adams, Lee, and others, he wrote most of the resolution rejecting Lord North’s proposal for conciliation as well as a new draft of the Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms. In addition to his credentials as a writer, Jefferson was, in Adams’s view, safe on the great issue of independence and, above all, electable to the committee. Thirty years later, Adams recorded the results of the vote. Beneath an entry from the *Journals of Congress* dated June 11, 1776, that he copied into his autobiography, Adams interlined: “Jefferson was chairman because he had most votes, and he had most votes because We united in him, to the Exclusion of R. H. Lee in order to keep out Harrison.”⁴¹

Henderson, *Party Politics in the Continental Congress* (New York, 1974), chaps. 1–3, esp. 124n2. Jack N. Rakove suggests that neither the Adams-Lee faction nor the moderates could command a majority without the support of less-committed delegates. Independence was ultimately the fruit of opinions widely shared in Congress and a response to the British government’s “unswerving commitment to a policy of repression” that narrowed factional differences. Jack N. Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics: An Interpretive History of the Continental Congress* (Baltimore, 1979), 101–5. Calvin Jillson and Rick Wilson show that despite growing regional factionalism, “vestiges of the ‘Adams-Lee junto’ continued in evidence throughout the 1770’s.” Jillson and Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics*, 237.

⁴⁰ On the quarrel between Adams and Carter Braxton, see Smith, *John Adams*, I, 248. Adams thought Benjamin Harrison “indolent” and “luxurious” and “a great Embarrassment” to Congress, but he believed Harrison was a “Nexus” of parties in Virginia. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, III, 367–68, 392. See Oliver Perry Chitwood, *Richard Henry Lee: Statesman of the Revolution* (Morgantown, 1967), 259n19. For the views of reconciliationists such as John Dickinson of Pennsylvania and Edward Rutledge of South Carolina, see Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, IV, 165–69, 174–75.

⁴¹ Thomas Jefferson, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* (New York, 1943). The drafts and the final resolution are reprinted in Boyd et al., ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, I, 187–219. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, III, 393n5. Adams had already written much of his account of the Continental Congress when he began to consult his copy of the *Journals*. See *ibid.*, 338–39n4.

The radicals, it seems, had pushed successfully for Jefferson in order to block Harrison's election. Adams himself ran second in the balloting, followed by Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Robert Livingston of New York, the only conservative chosen. No contemporary evidence of the plan to keep Harrison off the committee has survived, and no echo of it sounds in the story Adams wrote to Pickering in 1822. Lyman Butterfield, the modern editor of Adams's diary and autobiography, has remarked of the story based on Adams's interlineation of 1806 that it is "at least partly an invention" of Adams's memory.⁴²

Butterfield offered an alternative explanation for Lee's absence from the committee. According to him, Lee intended to be in Williamsburg for the debates on the Virginia Constitution set for late June when the committee would be drafting the Declaration of Independence. Two days after Congress elected the committee, Lee left Philadelphia for Williamsburg at the urging of his brother Thomas and allies in the state convention there. Lee had written to friends of his plan to join the Williamsburg convention even before presenting Virginia's resolution for independence. Like Peyton Randolph, who had earlier resigned the presidency of the Congress to preside over the House of Burgesses, Lee may have seen the framing of the Virginia Constitution as more important than the business of Congress. In May Jefferson himself had urged privately that the entire Virginia delegation in Congress be recalled to sit in the convention.⁴³

In fact, during the seventeen days between his appointment to the committee and its presentation of the draft declaration to Congress on June 28, Jefferson had also worked on a draft constitution for Virginia. He sent that draft to the convention by George Wythe, who arrived with it too late for systematic consideration, though provisions of it found their way into the document adopted by the convention. Apparently none of the participants in this drama, including Adams and Jefferson, realized that great fame would eventually garland the author of the Declaration of Independence. As Pauline Maier has shown, at least ninety other "declarations" of independence were made by colonies, local governments, and patriotic groups between April and July 1776. The resolution Lee and Adams had introduced in Congress in May urging the rebellious colonies to draft new state constitutions was to them and others a de facto declaration of independence. Later Adams concluded that the adoption of Lee's resolution of independence on July 2 was the Republic's de jure "day of deliverance."⁴⁴

⁴² Committee members were nominated and elected on the floor, with each delegate voting by secret ballot for one nominee. Hence lobbying for votes was crucial. Jillson and Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics*, 51–53, 64–65, 98–99. To draft a plan of confederation, Congress created a "grand committee" of one member from each colony. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress*, V, 433. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, III, 393n8.

⁴³ Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, III, 393n8. See Richard Henry Lee to Thomas Ludwell Lee, May 28, 1776, in *The Letters of Richard Henry Lee*, ed. James Curtis Ballagh (2 vols., New York, 1978), I, 196–200; and Richard Henry Lee to Landon Carter, June 2, 1776, *ibid.* Jefferson to Thomas Nelson Jr., May 16, 1776, in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd et al., I, 292–93.

⁴⁴ Maier, *American Scripture*, chap. 2, esp. 48–49. Adams wrote his wife on May 17, 1776, that Great Britain had "at last driven America, to the last Step, a compleat Separation from her, a total absolute Independence . . . for such is the Amount of the Resolve of the 15th." See Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress*, IV, 17–18. See Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, II, 240–41n2. Boyd, *Declaration of Independence*, 8.

The two explanations for Lee's absence from the committee to draft a declaration of independence are not irreconcilable. Lee may well have acquiesced in the plan to substitute Jefferson for himself because he wanted to be in Williamsburg. In any event, Jefferson won a seat on the committee with sufficient votes to make him chair. He and Lee remained political and personal friends after the vote, and Lee returned to Congress, while Jefferson soon resigned to be with his ailing wife.⁴⁵

But in the years that followed, John Adams's story of Jefferson's selection as draftsman evidenced repeated schematic reconstruction. One clue to the process that shaped the story he eventually told Pickering is found in the curious errors of memory he made in describing the drafting of the declaration to French diplomats in 1779.

At the end of a diplomatic mission to France, Adams sailed for America on a French frigate in company with the new French minister to the United States, the chevalier de la Luzerne. During long, wide-ranging conversations, Adams and Luzerne talked of the leading figures in the new nation. On June 23, when the chevalier asked Adams who was responsible for the declaration, Adams replied, "Mr. Jefferson of Virginia . . . was the Draughtsman. The Committee consisted of Mr. Jefferson, Mr. Franklin, Mr. Harrison, Mr. R. and myself, and We appointed Jefferson a subcommittee to draw it up."⁴⁶ This statement in Adams's diary omits two members of the committee, Roger Sherman and Robert Livingston, replacing them with Harrison and "Mr. R."

The inclusion of Harrison here is indeed odd. Had Adams reflected even for a moment, he would have remembered that two Virginians would not have been on the same committee. If the radicals had in fact kept Harrison off the committee, Adams's inclusion of him here would seem to be a "Freudian slip." Butterfield speculates that the erroneous listings "may have been lapses of the pen and not of his tongue or memory" because Adams was probably sleepy when he wrote his notes. But schema theory suggests a more plausible explanation. Since Adams had served on numerous committees with and without Harrison, he may simply have confused two or more committees in his memory. In that case, Adams consulted his blurred generic memory (a script) for the many now-indistinguishable meetings he had attended. Just as he could not recall particular speeches among the many he had made in Congress, so he could no longer distinguish the committees from one another. The committee on independence may have met at a residence on Bristol Pike where Franklin was confined with gout, not in the State House in Philadelphia.⁴⁷ In that case, had Adams searched his memory a bit further, a pic-

⁴⁵ Years later Lee disparaged Jefferson's draft, but in 1776 he praised it as "so good" that it could not be spoiled despite Congress having "mangled" it. Jefferson to Richard Henry Lee, July 8, 1776, in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Boyd et al., I, 455-56, 471; Richard Henry Lee to Jefferson, July 21, 1776, *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, II, 391-92.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 392n3. Dumas Malone and Verner W. Crane conclude that the committee probably met at the house on Bristol Pike to "agree on the main character" of the declaration. Maier believes that Franklin's illness caused him to miss most or all of the meetings, although neither Adams nor Jefferson related that fact. Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, I, 220; Verner W. Crane, *Benjamin Franklin and a Rising People* (Boston, 1954), 168; Maier, *American Scripture*, 101.

ture of those meetings (a scene schema) might have permitted him to sort out the members correctly.

What is noteworthy about this early memory of the drafting committee is that it includes no hint that Adams and Jefferson had formed a subcommittee or, as Adams later claimed, that he had proffered the honor of writing the draft to Jefferson. Rather, the account he gave the chevalier implied that in making Jefferson the draftsman, the committee had but accorded the Virginian his due as chair. This first of Adams's recorded memories of the drafting thus agreed with Jefferson's account.

But the changing public memory of the Revolution would evoke different recollections from Adams. In the next quarter century, Adams served the new government as vice president and president, only to have his reputation eclipsed and his place in history seemingly jeopardized by the triumph of Jefferson's Republicans. Jefferson's climb was marked by a corresponding popular exaltation of the declaration in local patriotic rites and in an expanding print culture.

Just one of many such public pronouncements, the Congress's declaration had initially claimed no special place in the popular imagination as a statement of American political philosophy. For fifteen years after its proclamation in 1776 throughout the thirteen nascent states, it was "all but forgotten," its draftsman seldom publicly acknowledged. From the outset, however, the celebration of the Fourth of July was both a festive commemoration of the Republic's birth and a funereal rite for George III. It became a model for other patriotic holidays that helped shape a popular consciousness of the Republic's identity as a nation. Only with the advent of partisan strife in the age of Federalism did the declaration become, in Joel Barlow's phrase, a "deathless instrument" penned by "the immortal Jefferson."⁴⁸

The Federalists responded to partisan use of the declaration by labeling Jefferson a mere "scribe" who stole his text from others and by claiming that Republicans misused the declaration to justify democratic excesses. Federalists emphasized Adams's "glorious work" in persuading the Continental Congress to adopt the resolution of independence on July 2. But in nationwide celebrations of the Fourth, the Republicans increasingly represented the Revolution itself as their special achievement. Federalist protests against the reading of the declaration were dismissed as evidence of their allegiance to Britain. On Independence Day in 1804 Republican orators even claimed that Adams and his administration had not been "actuated by the principles of the revolution."⁴⁹

These public attacks not only wounded Adams's pride but led him to fear for the survival of the Republic. "When public virtue is gone, when the national spirit

⁴⁸ Maier, *American Scripture*, 167, 170. On the politics of celebration, see David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

⁴⁹ Maier, *American Scripture*, 176, 170-71; Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 8-14, 205-6; Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (Ithaca, 1978), 33-50; Philip F. Detweiler, "The Changing Reputation of the Declaration of Independence: The First Fifty Years," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 19 (Oct. 1962), 557-73. For another view of the rise of nationalism, see Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 21-26.

is fled, when a party is substituted for the nation and faction for a party," he cautioned in 1806, "the republic is lost." Adams was equally alarmed at his countrymen's "very extraordinary and unaccountable Inattention" to their own history. Writing to a friend in 1809, he complained that Sam Adams and John Hancock were "almost buried in oblivion," while works such as John Marshall's admiring *Life of George Washington* were mere "Romances." The cult of Washington was now manifest in birthday feasts held even in Boston, where a statue was erected to the memory of Adams's hated rival, Alexander Hamilton.⁵⁰

Even as the afterglow of the Revolution fell wondrously on such "fathers" as Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin, Adams believed that the public was forgetting the Revolution itself. The era of the American and French revolutions had been an "Age of Folly, Vice, Frenzy, Fury, Brutality, Daemons, Buonaparte, Tom Paine, or the Age of the burning Brand from the bottomless Pit," Adams suggested to Benjamin Waterhouse in 1805. No "severer satire on the age" could be imagined than to label it after the "mongrel" he so despised, Tom Paine. But Adams now believed that Paine's democratic principles had triumphed even if his *Age of Reason* had later made him an "atheist" pariah in America. Adams's abiding wish to correct the public memory of revolutionary times stirred his own fading memories of the framing of the declaration.⁵¹

After his defeat by Jefferson in the presidential election of 1800, Adams retired to Quincy to spend the "short remainder of [his] days." But he lived another quarter century, often brooding about injustices he believed he had suffered in or because of public service. At the urging of his son John Quincy Adams, in 1802 he began to work fitfully on an autobiography so "posterity" would know the "falsehood of that Mass of odious Abuse of [his] Character, with which News Papers, private Letters and public Pamphlets and Histories have been disgraced for thirty Years." Soon he was rummaging through "trunks, letterbooks, bits of journals and great heaps and bundles of old papers" that revealed, among other things, his many "follies, indiscretions, and trifles."⁵²

To his credit, Adams recognized in these records evidence of his own "jealousy and envy of those who ha[d] been [his] most intimate friends, colleagues, and coadjutors." As much as he still resented the charges that had turned Federalists against him in 1800, he acknowledged that his "vanity" and inability to master his temper had plagued his public life. One of the shrewdest political analysts of his age, Adams was nonetheless often out of touch with public sentiment. He dis-

⁵⁰ Adams to Benjamin Rush, Sept. 27, 1806, in *The Selected Writings of John and John Quincy Adams*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York, 1946), 148–49; Adams to Joseph Ward, June 6, 1809, in *We the People: Voices and Images of the New Nation*, ed. Alfred F. Young and Terry J. Fife (Philadelphia, 1993), 191.

⁵¹ Adams to Benjamin Waterhouse, Oct. 29, 1805, in *Selected Writings of John and John Quincy Adams*, ed. Koch and Peden, 147–48. See Alfred F. Young, "Common Sense and the Rights of Man in America: The Celebration and Damnation of Thomas Paine," in *Science, Mind, and Art: Essays on Science and the Humanistic Understanding in Art, Epistemology, Religion, and Ethics in Honor of Robert S. Cohen*, ed. Kostas Gavroglu, John Stachel, and Marx W. Wartofsky (Dordrecht, Neth., 1995), 411–39.

⁵² Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, III, 253; Adams to Rush, July 23, 1806, in *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805–1813*, ed. John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair (San Marino, 1966), 60.

played a genius for making political enemies, largely because his temperament, Christian morals, and republican sense of “virtu” compelled him to take unpopular positions to prove to himself the purity of his motives.⁵³

Perhaps no disappointment in Adams’s later years was greater than his estrangement from Jefferson, whose public criticism of Adams and his presidency had ended their increasingly uneasy friendship. For years an obsession with vindication ruled Adams’s life, and his autobiography included, in the words of biographer Joseph Ellis, “a series of vituperative salvos at his enemies.”⁵⁴

In the summer of 1807, Adams set aside his autobiography to refute the “excruciating calumnies” against him in Mercy Otis Warren’s *History of the American Revolution*. “He needed to exorcise demons,” Ellis writes of this three-year effort, to “settle scores,” and to “expend himself in a worthy, if hopeless, cause.” Adams was envious of the fame writers such as Warren readily bestowed on men he considered his inferiors. In his autobiography he disparaged Paine, who had borrowed from Dr. Benjamin Rush arguments for independence that “had been urged in Congress a hundred times” by Adams himself. “Eloquence in public Assemblies,” he observed, “is not the surest road, to Fame and Preferment, at least unless it is used with great caution, very rarely, and with great Reserve. The Examples of Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson . . . shew that Silence and reserve in public are more Efficacious than Argumentation or Oratory.” The power of his own oratory had turned into enemies men who could not “bare to be outdone in Reasoning or declamation or Wit, or Sarcasm or Repartee.”⁵⁵

Such wounds of memory made Adams especially ungenerous to Jefferson. He emphasized his own role in declaring independence to the detriment of Jefferson’s. Describing himself as “incessantly employed, through the whole Fall, Winter and Spring of 1775 and 1776,” working both “mornings and Evenings,” Adams recalled that he “unquestionably did more business than any other Member of that house.” In contrast, Jefferson “attended his Duty in the House” infrequently and “had never spoken in public.” When Jefferson did finally speak, he expressed a “gross insult on Religion, in one or two sentences, for which I gave him immediately the Reprehension, which he richly merited.” Jefferson’s selection to a committee “of such importance” as the drafting committee thus required explanation. The reasons Adams recalled were Jefferson’s “Reputation of a masterly Pen” and the fact that

⁵³ Adams to Rush, July 23, 1806, in *Spur of Fame*, ed. Schutz and Adair, 60; Smith, *John Adams*, II, 1084–87; Bernard Bailyn, “Butterfield’s Adams: Notes for a Sketch,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 19 (April 1962), 244. For a synthesis of recent scholarship on Adams, see Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York, 1993), chaps. 12–14, esp. pp. 529–37.

⁵⁴ As early as 1787, Jefferson, in Paris, distanced himself from Adams ideologically (though not publicly) when the marquis de Condorcet and other Turgotists attacked Adams’s *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (1787). See C. Bradley Thompson, “John Adams and the Coming of the French Revolution,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 16 (Fall 1996), 368–70. Jefferson privately criticized Adams’s May 1797 speech to Congress. Adams wrote to a friend that Jefferson’s criticism was “evidence of a mind, soured, yet seeking for popularity, and eaten to a honeycomb with ambition.” Adams to Uriah Forrest, June 20, 1797, in *Works of John Adams*, ed. Adams, VIII, 546–47, 320–22. I am indebted to John Ferling for this insight. Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, 60.

⁵⁵ Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* (1805; New York, 1970). Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, 61. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, III, 336.

“Mr. Richard Henry Lee was not beloved by the most of his Colleagues from Virginia and Mr. Jefferson was sett up to rival and supplant him.”⁵⁶

The implication of the second point was that the Virginia delegation, not Adams and his political allies, had displaced Lee in favor of Jefferson. The six members of the delegation did not yet include Lee's brother, Francis Lightfoot Lee, who was still in Williamsburg, but Jefferson's friend and neighbor Thomas Nelson Jr. had returned shortly after Lee had introduced his resolution of independence. Three of the sitting delegates—Lee himself, George Wythe, and Jefferson—were “radicals” committed to the alliance with Adams, whereas Harrison and Braxton were, in Paul Nagel's words, “implacable enemies” of Lee. It was conceivable that the latter two might have persuaded Wythe, Jefferson's old friend and mentor, to bypass Lee in favor of Jefferson. If they had gained Nelson's acquiescence, Lee's enemies would have controlled the delegation, and they could then have threatened to delay the vote on independence or to weaken Lee's resolution.⁵⁷ The influence of Lee's adversaries beyond the Virginia delegation may have made Adams anxious about those possibilities.

But there is no evidence that Jefferson was aware of any deal to bypass Lee in his own favor. His relations with Lee were cordial, and it seems evident that Adams was not suggesting that he himself had abandoned Lee. After Lee returned to Congress, he and Adams continued their collaboration. Thus, if Adams had supported Jefferson, it must have been with Lee's consent. Had Adams turned from Lee to placate Harrison and Braxton, he would have jeopardized the alliance he hoped to use to control future events. Such an act, moreover, would have been difficult for Adams to reconcile with his sense of himself as a principled man. In fact, Adams claimed in 1805 that he had once spurned an offer to advance his own fortunes in Congress by repudiating Lee. Early in 1776, he wrote in his autobiography, John Jay had apologized for omitting him from the secret committees on commerce and correspondence, saying that all that prevented Adams from being the “first Man in Congress” was his loyalty to Lee and Sam Adams. John Adams had indignantly spurned the suggestion that he had “pretensions to the distinction of the first Man in Congress,” declaring that he would never abandon anyone committed to “the cause of their Country” for his own advancement. Whether factual or not, this story is a parable of Adams's sense of his own loyalty.⁵⁸

What Adams implied in referring to the Virginians' preference for Jefferson was that they, not he, had favored Jefferson, whom Adams now represented as of little consequence in Congress in 1776. Jefferson's fame, he implied, was a historical acci-

⁵⁶ Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, III, 335–36.

⁵⁷ Paul C. Nagel, *The Lees of Virginia: Seven Generations of an American Family* (New York, 1990), 100. On the opposition to Lee among Virginians, see Henry Stephens Randall, *The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (3 vols., 1857; Freeport, 1970), I, 146–56. On Lee's struggles against his Virginia adversaries, see Chitwood, *Richard Henry Lee*, 137–47. On the wide latitude that delegates exercised on the floor, see Jillson and Wilson, *Congressional Dynamics*, chap. 5.

⁵⁸ The story gains credibility in light of Jefferson's remark in his autobiography that in 1775 John Jay and Lee were “very hostile to each other.” Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, I, 18. In 1805 Adams admitted in his autobiography that Sam Adams and Lee had repeated rumors harmful to Jay. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, III, 340–41.

dent. In his struggle to vindicate himself to himself in the first decade after he lost the presidency, Adams made many unflattering comments about Jefferson to friends. In 1804 he wrote William Cunningham, a distant cousin, that Jefferson had “a thirst for popularity, an inordinate ambition, and a want of sincerity.” Adams stipulated that these opinions were to be kept confidential, but after Cunningham’s death in 1823, they appeared in the *Richmond Enquirer*. As John Quincy understood on seeing them, his father “with characteristic frankness” had written in a bygone time, “under the excitement of different feelings.”⁵⁹

Not long after writing Cunningham, Adams wrote Benjamin Rush that Jefferson had not cut “a true figure” in the revolutionary movement, that his fame resulted from a “coup de theatre.” In 1811 Adams told Rush that drafting the Declaration of Independence had been a “theatrical show” in which Jefferson had “run away with all the stage effect . . . and all the glory of it.” In contrast, as Jay Fliegelman has noted, Adams pointed to the forgotten debates and deliberations of Congress, in which he had played a vital and “manly” role, as the crucial arena for the history of the Revolution.⁶⁰

Adams wrote his autobiographical account of the drafting of the declaration without consulting the *Journals of Congress*. When he later came upon his copy of the *Journals*, he discovered how much of his own effort on behalf of independence he had forgotten. He therefore abandoned his personal narrative and in its stead inserted entries from the *Journals*, adding other documents and his own comments and explanations as he thought necessary. Thus the story in the autobiography backtracked to pick up, as Adams put it, “some things in 1775 which must be inserted.”⁶¹ Perhaps he intended to return to the manuscript later, but in 1807 he abandoned it unfinished. While constructing a chronology of his own activities from the *Journals*, he returned to June 1776 and for the first time noted that “we” had united behind Jefferson to keep Harrison from the committee. In so doing, evidently he forgot his earlier recollection that the Virginians had “sett up” Jefferson to supplant Lee. Without further documentation, the full story of Jefferson’s selection cannot be reconstructed.

We may conclude, however, that in 1805 Adams was certain that the historic Jefferson was a result of political bargaining. It is in that context that the autobiography’s story of the choice of Jefferson as draftsman must be read. As Adams worked on his manuscript, he recorded his first considered explanation of Jefferson’s selection as penman of the declaration—the part of the story scholars find persuasive. The drafting committee met several times, Adams remembered, to outline the “articles” of a declaration, which were duly recorded in the minutes. The committee then appointed “Mr. Jefferson and me to draw them up in form,”

⁵⁹ John Quincy took the publication of his father’s remarks as an attempt to injure himself politically “by exciting enmities against me among leading men of both parties.” Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams* (12 vols., 1874–1877; Philadelphia, 1969), VI, 176. To John Adams’s relief, Jefferson refused to permit his remarks to come between them. See Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, VI, 434–35.

⁶⁰ Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, 1993), 93–94.

⁶¹ Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, III, 388.

Adams now recalled of the articles, "and cloath them in a proper Dress." The "Sub Committee" met and reviewed the transcribed articles, whereupon Jefferson asked Adams to "make a Draught" based upon them. Adams declined because, he recalled, Jefferson was a Virginian and a southerner whereas Adams was a "Massachusettsian," who had made himself "obnoxious" by his "early and constant Zeal in promoting" independence. Adams therefore thought that a draft he wrote would "undergo a more severe Scrutiny and Criticism" than one written by Jefferson. Adams recalled telling Jefferson that he had "a great Opinion of the Elegance" of Jefferson's pen and "none at all of my own." He therefore insisted that Jefferson take the minutes and "in a day or two [he] produced to me his Draught."⁶²

In short, the shrewd tactics of putting Virginians at the head of "everything" and Adams's modesty prompted him to make Jefferson the author of the declaration.⁶³ Clearly, this memory combined for Adams the common sense of the matter and his belief in his own stewardship of the process of independence. That can be inferred from the deference his colleagues showed in supposedly naming him to a subcommittee of two draftsmen and in the arrangement whereby Jefferson was to produce a draft for Adams's approval before bringing it to the committee as a whole.

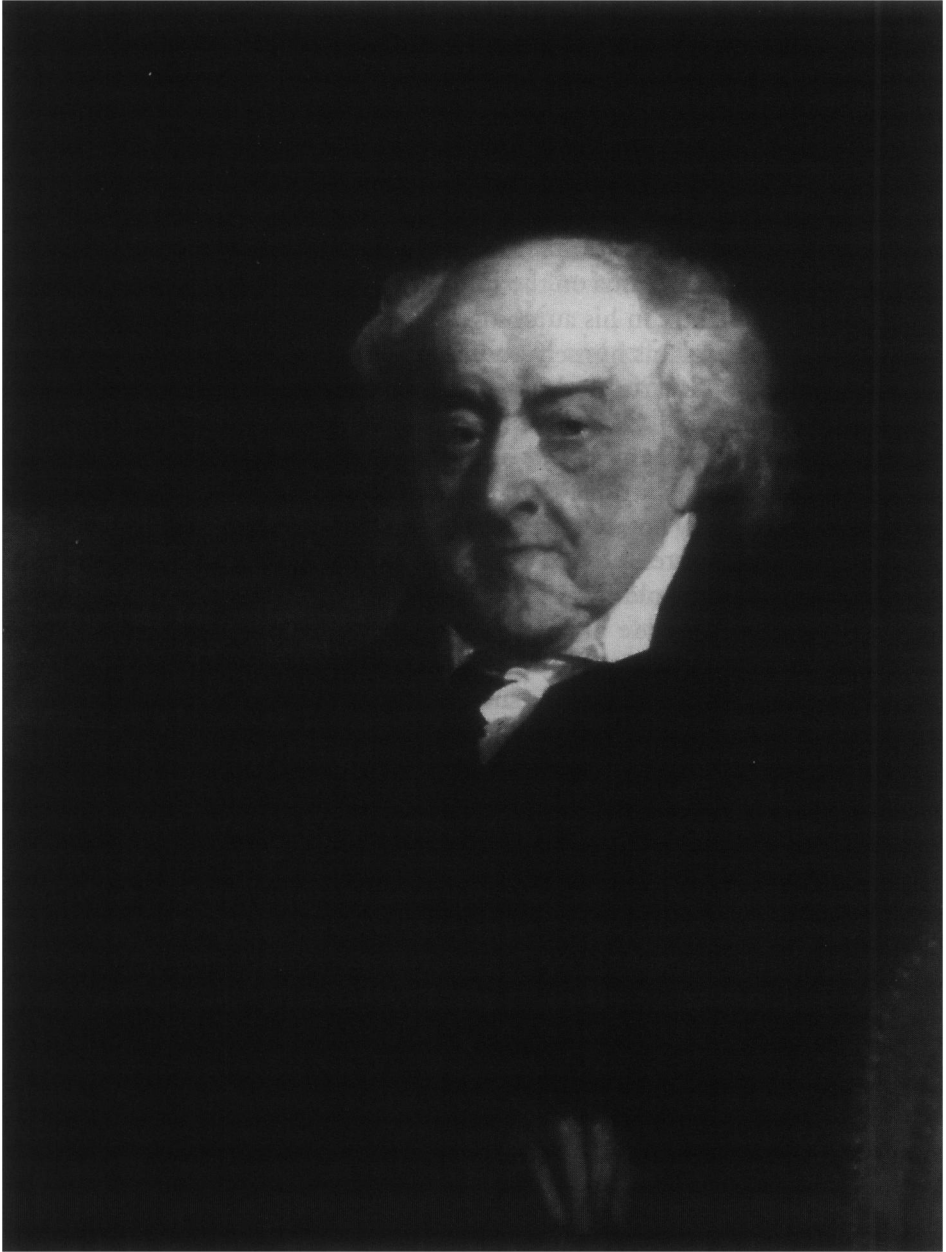
Fifteen years after Adams wrote that version of what happened, Pickering asked him why one so young as Jefferson had been chosen to chair the committee to draft the declaration. By then Adams and Jefferson were once again warm friends who had exchanged a long series of thoughtful letters that laid to rest the political strife that had once divided them. Adams now often received requests to relate the historic events he had witnessed. In 1817 *Niles' Weekly Register* had published an exchange of letters between John Adams and Thomas McKean, another aged signer, about the genesis of the declaration. John Trumbull's tableau of the drafting committee presenting its work to Congress, finished in 1818, had been exhibited in various cities before its installation in the Rotunda of the Capital. The Federalist party was gone, and John Quincy Adams was secretary of state to a Republican president. In a Fourth of July address in Washington in 1821, John Quincy himself had read passages from the "original" declaration, then in the possession of the State Department.⁶⁴

Although John Adams still feared that the true history of the Revolution was vanishing, his own contribution as what Jefferson had graciously called the "pillar of support" for the resolution on independence was recognized. At eighty-six, Adams recalled his role in the Continental Congress with a less troubled sense of personal triumph. Thus, Pickering's inquiry found Adams in a lifetime period quite different from the ones that had shaped his earlier recollections. His memory now evoked another story of the drafting of the declaration.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 336.

⁶³ Adams referred to the strategy of deferring to Virginians as the "Frankfort advice." At a meeting in Frankfort, New York, in November 1775, members of the Philadelphia Sons of Liberty had urged Adams and other Massachusetts delegates to the Continental Congress to allow Virginians to take the lead. Adams to Pickering, Aug. 6, 1822, in *Works of John Adams*, II, ed. Adams, 512-13.

⁶⁴ Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 75.



Oil painting by Gilbert Stuart. John Adams at age eighty-eight, 1823. Memories of his leadership in the struggle for independence were essential to Adams's image of himself. His mistaken memory that he had chosen Jefferson to draft the declaration sustained Adams's self-image as the guiding spirit, the author, of independence.

Courtesy The Bettmann Archive.

To be sure, Adams told Pickering that Jefferson's selection to draft the declaration was owing to the "Frankfort advice," as he had implied in the autobiography. But the context and meaning of the choice were changed. Now, Adams thought that Lee might have "gone to Virginia, to his sick family, for aught I know," but Lee's absence "was not the reason of Mr. Jefferson's appointment." Instead, Lee was to serve on the committee on confederation, and "it was not thought convenient that the same person should be upon both."⁶⁵

Here memory failed the old man. The *Journals of Congress* show that Thomas Nelson Jr. represented Virginia on the committee on confederation, as Adams himself noted in a later entry in his autobiography.⁶⁶ Had Lee been passed over for the reason Adams gave, Adams himself would not have been named on that same day to the committees on treaties and independence, nor would he have become chair of the Board of War and Ordinance a day later.

Given Adams's customary candor on sensitive points, it is notable that Adams now said nothing of the intrigue that deprived Lee of the opportunity to draft the declaration. It is equally notable that Adams now mistakenly believed Lee may have been absent when Congress elected the drafting committee. Adams may have been influenced by the story, told by Lee's grandchildren, that Lee abandoned Philadelphia to rush to the bedside of his ailing wife. That oft-repeated story had supplanted Adams's own memory of the bargain with the Virginia delegation to favor Jefferson over Lee. Such retrospective substitution of memories is well documented, especially when the ersatz memory is validated by competent authority.⁶⁷

Adams now also spoke more generously of Jefferson's stature in Congress. The Virginian, he told Pickering, had come to Philadelphia known for his interest in literature and "science" and with a "happy talent for composition." His writings were "remarkable for their peculiar felicity of expression." And although generally "silent" in floor debate, Jefferson had been so "prompt, frank, explicit, and decisive upon committees and in conversation, not even Samuel Adams was more so, that he soon seized upon [Adams's] heart." Consequently, Adams not only voted for Jefferson for the drafting committee but "did all in [his] power to procure the votes of others."⁶⁸ Here was a quite different picture of Jefferson's election. Adams and his friends had supported Jefferson, not because they feared Harrison, but because Adams himself was fond of the younger man.

Adams was less generous about Jefferson's draft of the declaration. "Delighted" with its "high tone" and "flights of oratory," he nevertheless found it too "passionate" and censorious for so "grave and solemn" a document. Had Adams "drawn it up," he would not have called the king a "tyrant." Such a label was "too personal,"

⁶⁵ Adams to Pickering, Aug. 22, 1822, in *Works of John Adams*, ed. Adams, II, 512–15.

⁶⁶ For the members of the committee on confederation, see Smith, ed., *Journals of Congress*, V, 433. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, III, 393.

⁶⁷ Lee had been summoned home to care for his wife in February, not in May or June; his grandsons may have confused the date of her illness. See Richard Henry Lee to Sam Adams, Feb. 7, 1776, in *Letters of Richard Henry Lee*, ed. Ballagh, I, 167–68. On retroactive interference and memory distortion, see Elizabeth Loftus, Julie Feldman, and Richard Dashiell, "The Reality of Illusory Memories," in *Memory Distortion*, ed. Schacter, chap. 1.

⁶⁸ Adams to Pickering, Aug. 6, 1822, in Adams, ed., *Works of John Adams*, II, 514.

for the cruelties charged to George III had been the work of courtiers rather than the king himself. Adams remembered thinking that Jefferson's fellow southerners would never tolerate his attack on the king for permitting the slave trade, though Adams had said nothing at the time. Despite the document's excesses, Adams had felt it would not "become" him to strike anything out of Jefferson's draft before Franklin and Roger Sherman had seen it. Adams thus "consented to report it," and having withheld his counsel, he watched the Congress cut out "about a quarter" of it, including Jefferson's "vehement philippic" against slavery. Adams had expected that result, and if Jefferson had asked for his advice, Adams might have spared the sensitive author considerable pain.⁶⁹

Adams repeated to Pickering the story that he and Jefferson had been a subcommittee appointed to draft the declaration. He then related the remarkably detailed conversation with Jefferson described at the outset of this narrative. Had Adams recorded this conversation or consciously memorized it, the detail might be credible. But no written record of the conversation survives, and it is difficult to imagine why Adams would have repeated it to himself immediately afterward. Had Adams memorized the conversation, he might have invoked the resulting template in relating the story of the drafting to Luzerne in 1779. But at that time he gave no hint of having been more than one member of the five-man committee.

Why, long after he had forgotten so much about his days in Congress, was Adams convinced that certain things had been said? Adams probably repeated this story frequently in response to the scores of queries he received from young admirers, improving it in the retelling. Over the years such rehearsals promote the consolidation of memories, as we have seen, even though fragments of memory are supplanted and decay. Hence by 1822 a new schema informed Adams's recall. A claim he made early in the story epitomized its aphoristic meaning: Other delegates had shunned him like a "leper" for his early advocacy of independence, he remembered, but the truth of his "prophecies" of British intransigence had convinced them "one after another" of the necessity of independence.⁷⁰

The version of the conversation with Jefferson that Adams sent Pickering improved upon the earlier one in his autobiography. Reflecting schematic development, it eliminated repetition in the earlier account such as the observation that Jefferson was a Virginian and a southerner, while Adams was a Massachusetts man and a northerner. The differences between the reputations of the two men in Congress were now sharpened. "I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular," Adams remembered saying to Jefferson. "You are very much otherwise." The earlier comparison of the literary gifts of the two became the crisper sentence, "You can write ten times better than I can."

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* Adams said nothing to Pickering about his own defense of the declaration, but Jefferson remembered that Adams had "supported the Declaration with zeal and ability, fighting fearlessly for every word of it." Boyd, *Declaration of Independence*, 37. Charles Francis Adams declared that his grandfather had defended the declaration and had "saved its substance." Charles Francis Adams, *The Life of John Adams: Begun by John Quincy Adams, completed by Charles Francis Adams* (New York, 1968), 327.

⁷⁰ Adams, ed., *Works of John Adams*, II, 513.

But what was striking in the false memory was its affable, generous tone. This was consistent with Adams's new, benign story of Jefferson's selection to the drafting committee. In that story, Lee had gone home to his "sick family," and Harrison and the Virginia delegation were missing. Absent also was what Adams elsewhere called the "art and design" of congressional maneuvering—the manipulating of men and interests necessary to put Jefferson on the committee. Adams was now, by his own account, alone at center stage in the maneuvering. Authorship of the declaration was now a gift flowing from Adams's affection for the man who, he once complained, had stolen the "glory of it." In getting Jefferson on the committee and selected as its draftsman, Adams had acted as Jefferson's mentor and sponsor. Understood in this context, the memory of the conversation amplified Adams's role in the drafting of the declaration and validated his sense of stewardship over the process of declaring independence. It thus established Adams's claim as the real author of American independence.

We may never know the full story of Jefferson's selection as the draftsman of the declaration. Although memory's fragile power can help recover experience, memory has other masters than the past. It belongs equally to the present. Cognitive science tells us that autobiographical memories not only fade, they are reconfigured through "interference" and brought to consciousness with the aid of schemas that change over time. Memories are rescripted by "grammars" that demand narrative closure, and they are integrated with benchmarks and transitions in the rememberer's imagined course in life. They mutate with altered circumstances and passing years. In time, they support the rememberer's sense of self and explain his or her place in the world.

Decoding such aphoristic memories makes possible a fresh assessment of other reminiscent evidence and opens new interpretive possibilities. Use of the cognitivist's code book can redirect inquiry, invest neglected data with new significance, and help unearth a fuller and more plausible picture of the past. Thus breaking the coded messages in aphoristic memories will not only permit historians to detect ersatz memories and unintended distortions of the past, it will enable them to uncover unsuspected dimensions of their subjects' lives.