

Adams in the Garden: The Environmental Thought of John Adams

A thesis presented

by

Joseph Esparza

to

The Department of History at California State University San Marcos
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in History

California State University San Marcos
San Marcos, California

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Jeffrey Charles, PhD

Committee Member: Dr. Ibrahim Al-Marashi, PhD

Graduate Program Coordinator: Dr. Alyssa Sepinwall, PhD

May 2022

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	2
ABSTRACT	3
Introduction	5
A Note About Nature.....	8
Adams’s Popular Image.....	9
Adams, Calvinism, and the Enlightenment	10
European Influences	12
The Scottish Enlightenment.....	14
Other Nature Thinkers: Adams’s American Context	14
Part I: Nature and Humanity	18
The Natural Law	19
Part II: The Natural World	25
Enlightenment Ideas	27
Romantic Ideas	49
Conclusion.....	58
Bibliography.....	60
Individual Sources:.....	61

Acknowledgements

G.K. Chesterton once wrote that thanksgiving is happiness doubled by wonder. Overcome with a sense of gratitude at the conclusion of my Master's program, I certainly agree with him. There are individuals who deserve individual recognition here. Firstly, I want to give all honor and glory to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I pray that I may strive to use the gifts He has given me to spread His goodness, truth, and beauty on earth. Secondly, I want to especially thank my mother, Perlita, for her love and many sacrifices over the years, and for being the best teacher I have ever had. I would also like to thank my father, Raymond, for his generosity and kindness in supporting my graduate education. I am also tremendously thankful to my step-father, Jim, and my siblings, Anneliese, Julianna, and Peter for their encouragement and patience with me in my studies.

I would like to thank the entire History faculty at CSUSM for being constant sources of inspiration and encouragement. They have helped me not only become a scholar, but more importantly, they have demonstrated the virtues of generosity and intellectual curiosity. I am especially thankful to Dr. Charles for working diligently as my Chair. I treasure the wonderful and stimulating conversations they have had over the course of the last year. I am grateful to Dr. Quinney for her joyful presence and for helping me in the TA program. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Al-Marashi for being my second Committee Member, and for Dr. Sepinwall's fantastic work as Graduate Program Coordinator. With the completion of this Master's thesis, I truly am filled with a profound sense of gratitude, or happiness doubled by wonder. I am happy because the purpose I set out in this graduate program is now complete, and I feel my research has flourished here. But most importantly, I am overcome by a sense of wonder in the generosity of others who have helped me along the way.

Advisor: Dr. Jeffrey Charles

Joseph Esparza

Adams in the Garden: The Environmental Thought of John Adams

ABSTRACT

“Adams in the Garden” seeks to demonstrate that John Adams (b. 1735) was one of Early America’s deepest and most complex environmental thinkers. Previous scholarship has tended to concentrate only on Adams as a political and social thinker, but this thesis argues that Adams was also a committed environmental thinker. John Adams's environmental thought was infused with Enlightenment utilitarianism, but he was also influenced by Romantic ideas about the natural world. Adams’s view of nature synthesized complex transatlantic late Enlightenment and proto-Romantic intellectual trends within a specific American context. As such, Adams’s idea of nature is microcosmic of a general shift in American environmental thought during the transition between Enlightenment practicality and Romantic idealism.

Adams viewed nature in two interconnected senses: the humanistic and the environmental. For him, nature was the unchangeable order of material reality and became known to humanity through sensory empiricism and reason. Adams took an anthropocentric approach in framing a vision of nature that incorporated both humanity and the natural environment. For Adams, humanity was part of nature, but also stood as something above nature in its dignity, worth, and value. In an environmental sense, Adams viewed the natural world from both practical and aesthetic, or Enlightenment and Romantic, perspectives. While humanity could use and commodify the natural world, it also had the obligation to appreciate its aesthetic and divine aspects. In sum, this thesis argues that Adams had complex ideas of nature and thus warrants recognition as one of the Early Republic’s deepest environmental thinkers.

Keywords: John Adams, Nature, Environmental Thought, Enlightenment, Romanticism, American Founding, Early America, Early Republic

Introduction

On what was likely a humid Northeast August day, a young John Adams penned the following thoughts about nature in his diary:

The natural and the moral world are continually changing. The planets, with all their appendages, strike out their amazing Circles round the Sun. Upon the earth, one day is serene, and clear, no cloud intercepts the kind influence of the sun, and all nature seems to flourish and look gay. But these delightful scenes soon vanish, and are succeeded by the gloom and darkness of the night. And before the morning appears, the clouds gather, the winds rise, lightnings glare, and thunders bellow through the vast of Heaven... Thus, God has told us, by the general constitution of the world, by the nature of all terrestrial enjoyments, and by the constitution of our own bodies, that this world was not designed for a lasting and a happy state, but rather for a state of moral discipline, that we might have a fair opportunity and continual excitements to labour after a cheerful resignation to all the events of Providence, after habits of virtue, self-government, and piety.¹

Although it is brief, this quotation displays many of the key themes that Adams held towards nature, as it reflects ideas of science, aesthetics, and human nature, all of which were fundamental aspects of Adams's environmental thought. It also encapsulates Adams's central ideas about the moral lessons and agency of the natural world. Adams wrote this entry just a year

¹ John Adams [henceforth JA], *Diary of John Adams* [henceforth "Diary"], August 1, 1756, in "John Adams diary 1 (Nov. 18, 1755 – Aug. 29, 1756)," Massachusetts Historical Society, *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive* (henceforth "MHS-AFP"), http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/browse/diaries_by_number.php [all diaries in MHS-AFP can be found from this link].

N.B.: Throughout this paper, the author has updated the spelling and capitalizations of certain words for the ease of the reader. When necessary, the original text has been left as it was written. In these instances, "(sic)" will appear at the end of the quotation.

after working as a schoolmaster in Worcester, Massachusetts. The twenty-one-year-old Adams had graduated two years earlier from Harvard College where he studied the liberal arts and what he described as “natural philosophy...the knowledge of those laws by which all the bodys in the universe are restrained.”² On the boundary of colonial civilization, Adams was surrounded by dense landscapes of broadleaf timber stands gradually being felled to give way to agricultural fields. It was among this landscape that Adams’s environmental thought emerged.

When scholars write about Adams, most focus solely on his political thought and statesmanship. He was unquestionably one of the most astute political minds of the founding generation. In more recent years, books on the development of Adams’s republican ideology demonstrate a renewed interest in his political writings.³ However, Adams was much more than a political thinker. During the Cold War boom of intellectual conservatism, Adams was adopted as a favorite figure. Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, the formulating intellectual narrative of the conservative movement, praised many of Adams’s social and political ideas.⁴ Some scholars have ventured from the politically-centered approach to studying Adams by examining his

² JA, *Diary*, April 1, 1754, in “unnumbered John Adams diary (June 1753 - April 1754, September 1758 - January 1759),” in MHS-AFP.

³ Richard Alan Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic: The One, the Few, and the Many* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2016); C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998): ix-x, xiii-xix; Ronald Angelo Johnson, *Diplomacy in Black and White: John Adams, Toussaint Louverture, and Their Atlantic World Alliance*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2014).

N.B.: I would particularly like to acknowledge the work of C. Bradley Thompson, whose primary source bibliography and keyword index in *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* made finding primary sources much easier. I would also like to acknowledge the great amount of background information on John Adams derived from the following videos featuring Thompson: The Rubin Report, “Who was John Adams? C. Bradley Thompson | POLITICS | Rubin Report,” YouTube video, February 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C52ZqjibU1M>; C. Bradley Thompson, “John Adams and The Spirit of Liberty.” C-SPAN video, March 4, 1999, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?121235-1/john-adams-spirit-liberty>; C. Bradley Thompson, “John Adams and The Spirit of Liberty.” C-SPAN video, January 7, 1999, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?118219-1/john-adams-spirit-liberty>

⁴ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, (1953; republished., Washington, DC: Gateway Edition, 2019): 93, 288.

religious writings and classical influences.⁵ Sarah Rous has argued that Adams was a true classical scholar immersed in the ancient world.⁶ Along with other scholars, Andy Trees has noted that Adams was a deeply virtuous person who saw the relationship between morality and the political sphere as inseparable.⁷ Still, no scholar has written extensively on the environmental thought of Adams.

Adams's ideas about nature give extensive insight into the impact of transatlantic ideas in Early American environmental thought and are representative of wider intellectual trends associated with Enlightenment utilitarianism and Romantic aestheticism. Educated in Enlightenment ideas and surrounded by the picturesque lands of rural Massachusetts, John Adams's environmental thought developed into a cohesive worldview of nature. For Adams, influenced by both Enlightenment empiricism and Romantic idealism, nature was the unchanging and transcendent ordering of the cosmos and material reality. His idea of nature was often anthropocentric and utilitarian, grounded in an Enlightenment understanding of the human person. Simultaneously, Adams viewed nature through a proto-Romantic and idealistic lens, finding it a catalyst for aesthetic and moral experiences.⁸ The current historical literature lacks an exploration of John Adams's environmental thought. This thesis adds to the historical knowledge of Early American environmental thought and recognizes John Adams as one of the era's preeminent environmental thinkers.

⁵ Arthur Scherr, "'Visions Judaiques'": John Adams on the Judaism and Christianity," *Cithara* 58, no. 1 (2018): 3-82.

⁶ Sarah A. Rous, "John Adams Reads Terence," in *The Classical World* 113, no. 3 (2020): 299-334; "Stadium sine calamo somnium: John Adams's Favorite Maxim," in *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews* 31, no. 4 (2018): 226-234.

⁷ Andy Trees, "John Adams and the Problem of Virtue," *Journal of the Early Republic* Vol. 21, No. 3 (2001): 393-412.

⁸ N.B.: "Proto-Romanticism" is defined here as a general transatlantic intellectual trend before the proper 19th-Century Romantic Period, and featured an appreciation for the intrinsic qualities of nature, individuality, and emotionalism.

A Note About Nature

Before examining the environmental thought of Adams, it is important to clarify the meaning of the word *nature*. Raymond Williams once noted that nature was the most complex word in the English language.⁹ Today, its meaning is no clearer than in the eighteenth century. As historian Leo Marx put it, “*nature* is a notorious semantic and metaphysical trap,” due to its multiple and changing senses, emphases, interpretations, and definitions across different eras.¹⁰ However, there are similarities in both modern and historical conceptions of the word which suggest a common understanding.¹¹ From the modern perspective, nature is usually understood with two distinct meanings. The first refers to the non-human material or “environmental” world. This is the simplest understanding of the word. It relates to what is frequently meant by the “natural world,” that is the biological organisms, processes, landscapes, forces, and earth systems that are functions of the physical universe. This view commonly considers human activities apart from nature, but many environmental scholars reject this artificial separation of the human and the natural.¹²

Nature may also refer to the “essence” of a thing, that is to say, it is a description of the innate metaphysical characteristics of something.¹³ An example might be the “nature of man,” or the “nature of empires.” A synonym for this understanding may be the “root of something,” or in a more complicated sense, it may refer to that quality of a thing by which the entirety of a thing may not function without. Of course, skepticism and postmodernism question whether the true

⁹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983): 219.

¹⁰ Leo Marx, “The Idea of Nature in America,” *Daedalus* 137, no. 2 (2008): 8-10.

¹¹ Marx, “The Idea of Nature in America,” 9.

¹² William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (January 1996).

¹³ Marx, “The Idea of Nature in America,” 9.

nature of something can ever be pursued or attained. Nature in today's popular environmental sense is much more a product of the post-Enlightenment Romantic period.¹⁴ The two modern meanings of the word nature rarely overlap and are frequently seen as two separate definitions for distinct and unrelated words. As should be obvious, nature as a word and its history is very complicated and nuanced. In this study, *nature* is seen from the perspective of John Adams on the precipice between the Enlightenment's practical and instrumentalist views of nature and Romantic idealistic and aesthetic views of nature. This article analyzes *nature* as an idea in Adams's environmental thought and through his writings in both its environmental sense (i.e., "the natural world") and humanistic sense (i.e., what humans are and how society ought to be arranged in light of their nature).

Adams's Popular Image

John Adams is usually overshadowed in both popular memory and scholarship by the founding generation figures of Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, and Hamilton, among others. Adams never led an army nor did he have the commanding presence of Washington. He did not write with the memorable eloquence of Jefferson. He was not an eccentric genius such as Franklin, nor did he have the suave political demeanor of Hamilton. He is often underemphasized in popular memory because he lacked much of the charisma and tact of other founding figures.¹⁵ Scholars have fared little better than the public in interpreting Adams, and have historically depicted him as a skeptical Puritanical conservative. Bernard Bailyn described Adams's politics as infused with "dark, introspective psychology... [who] was never optimistic

¹⁴ Peter Coates, *Nature: Western Attitudes Since Ancient Times*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998):3.

¹⁵ Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, ix-x, xiii-xix.

about the chances [of constitutional success.]”¹⁶ This melancholic and pessimistic interpretive framework was not limited to Bailyn’s analysis of Adams, as Peter Shaw believed Adams’s political writing ought to be read against a supposed “personality disorder.”¹⁷ There is no doubt that Adams had introspective tendencies, a short temper, and little charisma. However, the characterization of him as a foreboding and brooding misanthrope goes too far.

Adams, Calvinism, and the Enlightenment

One of the most pervasive myths about Adams is that he was deeply influenced by Puritan ideas, and he is frequently characterized as a Puritanical prude. In reality, Adams was a man of the Enlightenment.¹⁸ It is difficult to give an all-encompassing definition of an intellectual trend as diverse and divided as the “Enlightenment.” However, Henry May presented an excellent and concise definition that strikes close at the heart of the movement.¹⁹ May argued that the Enlightenment consisted of two main propositions: firstly, it included a general sense that ideas of the present age were more “enlightened” than previous ones, and secondly, that humanity understood itself and nature best through natural faculties and observation.²⁰ At the very least,

¹⁶ Bernard Bailyn, “Butterfield’s Adams: Notes for a Sketch,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3, no. 19 (1962): 239-56.

¹⁷ Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1976): 223, quoted in C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*.

¹⁸ Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, 5.

¹⁹ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1976): xiii-xvi, 279; N.B.: Henry May divides the American Enlightenment into four main categories: 1: The Moderate Enlightenment (1688-1787), 2. The Skeptical Enlightenment (1750-1789), 3. The Revolutionary Enlightenment (1776-1800), 4. The Didactic Enlightenment (1800-1815). May placed John Adams as a member of the “Moderate Enlightenment,” and the “Skeptical Enlightenment.”

²⁰ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America*; In addition to May, for a more complete and comprehensive understanding of the Enlightenment and its relationship to Nature, see the following title: Peter Hanns Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005): 1-16, 199-236.

even religiously-minded Enlightenment thinkers recognized that faith could not “establish truths which were contrary to reason.”²¹

In this Enlightenment tradition of understanding faith, Adams rejected many of the key tenets of Calvinistic Puritanism as a young man, which included original sin, predestination, and total depravity.²² Adams “shuddered at the Calvinists’ claim that mankind had been arbitrarily judged and found guilty of a crime, not because of ‘their rashness and indiscretion, not by their own wickedness and vice, but by the Supreme Being.’”²³ Adams’s personal religious beliefs were closer to deism than to traditional Calvinism. According to Henry May, deism, with its emphasis on the phenomena of nature, was the final religious progression of Enlightenment-influenced thinkers coming from the Calvinist tradition.²⁴ In his later life, Adams became a Unitarian and doubted the divinity of Christ.²⁵ Despite his adamant refusal to accept Calvinism as a theology, it is not difficult to imagine how the prevalent myth of “Adams the Puritan” emerged. Adams was raised a Congregationalist, his father was a deacon, and many of Adams’s diary entries have a self-deprecating tone. He also believed that God was the arbiter and source of morality and rights, and the head of “the law of nature, common to all animals, from man the lord of all, down to the smallest animalcules.”²⁶ Adams didn’t believe humanity was evil at its core, but rather that it was malleable, fallen, and predisposed to do evil.²⁷ It is true that Adams’s voluminous writings

²¹ Ibid, xvi.

²² Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, 5-12.

²³ Ibid, 10.

²⁴ May, *The Enlightenment in America*, 13-14; See these pages for a discussion on Newtonian ideas, Calvinism, and deism.

²⁵ Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, 11

²⁶ JA, *Diary*, n.d., in “On the Law of Nature and the Moral Sense among Animals and among Men (October–December 1758), MHS-Adams Papers Digital Edition [henceforth APDE; All documents in APDE can be found by searching here: <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/search>].

²⁷ JA, *Diary*, December 18, 1760, in “John Adams diary 6 (December 2, 1760-March 3, 1761),” MHS-AFP.

on the importance of virtue as a correction to the waywardness of human nature do reflect Puritan ethics.

In Calvinism, the natural world was not necessarily something to be feared. In fact, the denomination had a long history of appreciating nature. John Calvin himself found solace in the beauty of the European Alps and believed that nature was the brilliant handiwork of God.²⁸ Jonathan Edwards believed that the natural world emanated from the goodness of God and was a means of divine communication. This strain of creation-oriented Calvinism saw the beauty and joy of the divine in nature.²⁹ Many of Adams's emotional responses to nature suggest influences of natural Christian romanticism rather than Calvinistic theology. Beyond this Christian veneration for nature as God's handiwork, Adams also believed that nature was a material reality comprised of quantifiable scientific phenomena.³⁰

European Influences

If Calvinistic doctrine was not a major influence on Adams's environmental thought, certainly there were other transatlantic intellectual movements that were. In John Adams's world, there were serious disagreements between thinkers on *what* nature was, and *how* nature was experienced. During the Enlightenment, understanding nature was a primary focus of philosophy. It is difficult to underestimate the radical shifts in Western understanding of "the natural" during the period, and the intellectual and cultural ramifications of Copernicus and Galileo's discovery of the heliocentric universe cannot be understated.³¹ Post-Galileo,

²⁸ Mark Stoll, *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015): 19-21.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰ Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, 5.

³¹ Coates, *Nature*, 70, 72.

understanding nature became less the abstract realm of philosophers and transformed into the basis of practical scientific discourse. Under Francis Bacon, and later more prominently under the influence of Isaac Newton, European thinkers began to consider nature as something that could be quantified, observed, sensed, and ultimately harnessed for utilitarian ends.³² This summation of the Enlightenment's scientific ideas influenced other early modern thinkers' views of nature pertaining to humans. Most famously, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke sought to apply a conception of nature to other aspects of the human experience, such as law, political power, and the “state of nature.”³³ As is well known, the Lockean empirical view of human nature insisted that man was born a *tabula rasa* or “blank slate.” In this view, humans used empirical or “sensory” experiences to make sense of the world and build their character.

Adams was keenly aware of Locke’s theory and embraced much of it.³⁴ Moreover, while Adams was well-read in both continental and British philosophy, his approach to nature as a whole was heavily influenced by the British Enlightenment. Specifically, Locke’s natural philosophy in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and Newton’s natural science in *Principia Mathematica*.³⁵ Adams also read the writing of French romantic Jean-Jacques Rousseau. When Adams approached the natural environment, he reflected some of the more Romantic themes of Rousseau, including deeply emotional and aesthetic experiences of the natural world. Overcome with the beauty of nature, Adams would exclaim at times, “Oh nature! How beautiful thou art!”³⁶

³² Coates, *Nature*, 76-77, 116.

³³ Mark Somos, *American States of Nature: The Origins of Independence, 1761-1775*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019): 206.

³⁴ Ryerson, *John Adams’s Republic*, 72, 446.

³⁵ Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, 5-8, 11-12, 112-113.

³⁶ JA, *Diary*, March 14, 1759, in “John Adams diary 2 (October 5, 1758-April 9, 1759),” in MHS-AFP.

The Scottish Enlightenment

Some elements of the Scottish Enlightenment were, much like Adams's views on nature, positioned between empirical Enlightenment thinking and proto-Romanticism. As scholars have noted, the Scottish Enlightenment had an influence on Adams and others prominent in the American founding.³⁷ A tenet among Scottish philosophers was the importance of empirical experiences, including sensory and emotional ones, as a guide to virtuous behavior. Adams gleaned the importance of observing and analyzing human nature from these works.³⁸ Adam Smith categorized this phenomenon as "moral sentiments," and placed it at the center of understanding human nature.³⁹ In general, the Scottish Enlightenment was categorized by emotional empiricism, (moral sympathies) and an emphasis on practical (common sense), rather than speculative knowledge.⁴⁰ Thomas Reid was respected by Adams, and he likely drew some of his skepticism of human nature from him.⁴¹ Much of the emphasis that Adams put on observing human behavior as a catalyst for virtue had its roots in Scottish intellectual trends.

Other Nature Thinkers: Adams's American Context

A transatlantic discourse of nature influenced many of Adams's fellow Americans. Although Adams did not correspond directly with other American nature writers on the topic of nature *per*

³⁷ Daniel Robinson, "The Influence of the Scottish Enlightenment," in *Natural Law, Natural Right, and American Constitutionalism*, ed. Witherspoon Institute (2011), <https://www.nlnrac.org/american/scottish-enlightenment>.

³⁸ Daniel Robinson, "The Scottish Enlightenment and the American Founding," in *Monist*, Vol. 90, no. 2 (2007): 179-180.

³⁹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments and on the Origins of Language* (1759) hosted by Online Library of Liberty (OLL), <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/smith-the-theory-of-moral-sentiments-and-on-the-origins-of-languages-stewart-ed>.

⁴⁰ Robinson, "The Scottish Enlightenment," 170.

⁴¹ Robinson, "The Scottish Enlightenment," 179.

se, it is important to mention Adams's context of other American environmental thinkers who discussed both natural history and philosophy. In this era, natural history was concerned with the documentation of the material and efficient causes of nature and was the precursor to the fields of biology, ecology, meteorology, climatology, geology, and the earth sciences. Natural philosophy considered the more speculative qualities of nature, including its purpose, form, and its relationship to the human person. Four of the most well-known American nature writers are Thomas Jefferson, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, and John and William Bartram, father and son.

Jefferson was the most prolific writer on nature among the founding generation and was fascinated with both natural history and natural philosophy. Jefferson's environmental thought, however, featured Rousseauian and Romantic ideas of nature more prominently than Adams.⁴² In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson demonstrated an optimism about human nature and a vision of the American environment as an exceptional land for an exceptional people.⁴³ As a natural historian, Jefferson observed the material and efficient causes of nature, and as a natural philosopher, considered the philosophical final, and formal causes of nature.⁴⁴ Although both Adams and Jefferson were naturalistic thinkers, few of their letters to each other reflected their mutual interest in environmental thinking. When Adams did write to Jefferson on environmental

⁴² Maurizio Valsania, "Our Original Barbarism": Man vs. Nature in Thomas Jefferson's Moral Experience," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65, no. 4 (2004): 633.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 631.

⁴⁴ Keith Thompson, *A Passion for Nature: Thomas Jefferson and Natural History*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012): 20, 44, 109; Kody W. Cooper, Justin Buckley Dyer, "Thomas Jefferson, Nature's God, and the Theological Foundations of Natural Rights Republicanism," in *Politics and Religion* 10 (2017): 662-688.

themes, it was simply in describing the geography of France.⁴⁵ From an outside view, the greatest difference between the two's environmental thoughts was perhaps Jefferson's tendency to romanticize nature more than Adams.⁴⁶ Jefferson famously exemplified a Romantic naturalistic "American exceptionalism." For example, in his complex transatlantic debate with French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon [Buffon], Jefferson argued the environment of the United States was more disposed to ecological and moral exceptionalism among the size, vigor, and quality of human and animal natures.⁴⁷ This kind of "patriotic naturalism" was never attempted to the same extent by Adams. Jefferson also linked American exceptionalism to land and geographic expansionism, and famously romanticized the future of the United States as an agricultural and continental yeoman nation. Jefferson, even as a deist, respected the tradition of classical theism and believed nature had a divine source. However, Adams's Christian Romanticism was far more explicit in how nature could lead to God and personal religious experiences.⁴⁸ Consequently, Adams's environmental thought, particularly in his younger years, contained more religious overtones than Jefferson's. Like Jefferson and other American nature thinkers, Adams sought to understand nature as a means to construct a better and more moral society.

The other prominent nature thinkers of Adams's era, Crèvecoeur and the Bartrams, were more grounded in natural history than natural philosophy when compared to Adams and Jefferson. In

⁴⁵ JA to Thomas Jefferson, May 22, 1785 and May 23, 1785, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-08-02-0113>. [Original source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 8, 25 February–31 October 1785, ed. Julian P. Boyd. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953, pp. 159–160.]

⁴⁶ Valsania, "Our Original Barbarism," 633.

⁴⁷ Gordon M. Sayre, "Jefferson Takes on Buffon: The Polemic on American Animals in Notes on the State of Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 78, no 1, (2021): 79-116.

⁴⁸ Cooper and Dyer, "Thomas Jefferson, Nature's God, and the Theological Foundations of Natural Rights Republicanism," 684-685.

other words, Crèvecoeur and the Bartrams wrote more prominently on the systems of the natural world than on natural law and human rights. Crèvecoeur echoed many of Jefferson's Romantic and expansionist sentiments in his writings. Just as the Jeffersonian vision of nature is linked to the notion of "American Exceptionalism," Crèvecoeur's attitudes on nature are sourced as an origin of the "American Dream."⁴⁹ Crèvecoeur and Adams both borrowed from Enlightenment and proto-Romantic sensibilities, while Crèvecoeur drew more on the latter. Crèvecoeur believed in moral naturalism and environmental determinism and believed that physical and environmental conditions contributed directly to the moral behavior of humans. He also viewed Native Americans as the Rousseauian "natural man" or "children of nature."⁵⁰ In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur demonstrated both the romantic joys and ideas of nature and the often harsh and merciless realities of nature.⁵¹

No overview of Early American nature thinking would be complete without mention of the Bartram father and son. John Bartram tended to be a serious methodologist, skilled in Linnaean classification and interested in the practical uses of nature for the progress of colonial civilization.⁵² While he did have some proto-Romantic tendencies, his attitudes pair in part with Adams's thinking of nature in practical terms. William Bartram, writing in the late 1700s and early 1800s, saw nature as a gateway to God, and glorious in its diversity. In *Travels*, William had more in common with Romantic than Enlightenment thinkers.⁵³ In this regard, his views were similar to Adams's belief that nature was a path to a Christian understanding of Nature's

⁴⁹ Thomas Patchell, "J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur" in *Early American Nature Writers: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, ed. Scott J. Bryson and Roger Thompson, and Daniel Patterson, (Greenwood, CT: Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 2008): 96-104.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 100-102.

⁵¹ Ibid, 101-103.

⁵² Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Natures of John and William Bartram*, (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1996): 49, 142-44, 181-188.

⁵³ Ibid, 178.

God. While each of these nature thinkers approached the natural environment under the auspices of the Enlightenment or Romanticism, each took either different approaches or emphasis on understanding it. They have long been considered as providing the foundations of Early Republic environmental thought.

John Adams lived within a complex network of environmental thinkers, and his environmental thought is microcosmic of the larger transatlantic transition between Enlightenment and Romantic approaches to nature. Scholars of intellectual thought rarely consider Adams outside the parameters of his political and social ideas. However, these primary sources demonstrate Adams's profound thought and approach to conceptualizing the environment and humanity's relationship to it. This thesis seeks to bring Adams's nature writings into the greater discourse of Early American environmental thought. Part One examines Adams's approach to nature and humanity, including natural law, morality, and human nature. Part Two looks at Adams's ideas of the natural world which were influenced by Enlightenment and Romantic intellectual frameworks.

Part I: Nature and Humanity

Much of Adams's writing on nature comes from his diary as a young man. His most prominent ideas about human nature began to take form while he was a student at Harvard College, and in the immediate years after his graduation in 1754. Adams was a brilliant young man with a penetrating intellect. In college, Adams was exposed to the writings of Enlightenment figures and began to develop his understanding of nature and its relation to humanity. Adams wrote in his autobiography that in college he was fascinated with

“mathematics and natural philosophy.”⁵⁴ Adams claimed that as a young man, he was enthralled with natural science, which he later noted would be “of little use” to his later career. He regretted spending so much intellectual power on natural science and not focusing more on the classics which, “would have been of great importance [to him in his political career].”⁵⁵ Therefore, much of Adams’s environmental writing occurred before the American Revolution, when his fascination with nature was at its height. However, the principles he learned and wrote of during this period shaped his thinking on nature as it related to the natural environment and society for the rest of his life.⁵⁶

The Natural Law

Adams was a robust supporter of natural law as the guide of his moral universe. The natural law tradition stretched back to Ancient Greece and was most formally articulated during the Middle Ages by Saint Thomas Aquinas. In general terms, natural law is the intelligible plan by which nature is ordered. In an ethical sense, the natural law tradition is the understanding of an innate and objective moral code embedded within the soul of man by virtue of his rational nature. In Christian philosophy, the natural law is the divine law of God inherently written in the human soul and known through natural human inclinations. Aquinas believed that by virtue of man’s rational nature, he participated in the knowledge and understanding of the natural law and its moral prescriptions. For Aquinas, moral knowledge known without direct divine revelation

⁵⁴ JA, *Autobiography of John Adams* [henceforth *Autobiography*] Part 1, “Harvard College 1751-1755” in MHS-APDE [all autobiography entries for Part 1 can be found here: <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/ADMS-01-03>].

N.B.: See Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* for a fuller discussion on John Adams and his education.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ N.B: Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* provides a far more extensive and robust discussion of Adams’s view on the relationship between nature, humanity, and morals. Part I of this thesis echoes many of Thompson’s arguments in his book. For a primer, please see Thompson’s lecture which provides a grounding for his argument: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?118219-1/john-adams-spirit-liberty>.

was guided by natural inclinations through self-evident precepts and ordered towards the *summum bonum* (i.e. Goodness and God). The natural law applied to all of creation as well. For example, part of the natural law in animals, by virtue of their irrational nature, was simply in retaining life and reproduction. However, because man had a rational and moral nature, with an inherent knowledge of good and evil, this meant the natural law for humanity included a moral imperative to do good and avoid evil.⁵⁷ Through participating in virtuous behavior, man could flourish towards his appointed end (*summum bonum*). Thomas Hobbes famously broke with the Thomistic understanding of the natural law by arguing that mankind had no natural or supernatural teleology.⁵⁸ He argued, “there is no *Finis Ultimus* (utmost aim) nor *Summum Bonum* (greatest good) as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers...[referencing Aquinas].”⁵⁹ According to Hobbes, there was no inherent law of morality or justice, but only a natural right for each individual to seek his own self-interest within a social contract.⁶⁰ John Locke’s natural law liberalism wedged between Thomistic and Hobbesian natural law interpretations by arguing that the social contract of natural rights needed to be bounded by an understanding of a natural moral law.⁶¹ Scottish Enlightenment thinkers tended to emphasize the

⁵⁷ Thomas Aquinas, “Summa Theologica” in *The Natural Law Reader*, ed. Jacqueline A. Laing and Russell Wilcox, (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014): 119-129.

⁵⁸ Robert P. Kraynak, “Thomas Hobbes: From Classical Natural Law to Modern Natural Rights,” in *Natural Law, Natural Rights, and American Constitutionalism*, ed. Witherspoon Institute (2011), <http://www.nlnrac.org/earlymodern/hobbes/>.

⁵⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), Chapter 11, Paragraph 1, hosted by Project Gutenberg Books, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm>.

⁶⁰ Steven Forde, “John Locke and the Natural Law and Natural Rights Tradition,” in *Natural Law, Natural Rights, and American Constitutionalism*, ed. Witherspoon Institute (2011), <http://www.nlnrac.org/earlymodern/locke>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

empirical and sensory means of understanding the natural law while respecting the natural rights of individuals in the social contract.⁶²

Much has been said by other scholars on the relationship between Adams's political thought and the laws of nature. A robust tradition of natural law discourse was especially prevalent in Adams's sense of human nature.⁶³ Adams saw the natural law as placing a unique responsibility upon humanity: morality. Repeating a Roman saying about law, Adams wrote, "Natural law is taught by Nature to all living things, for that law applies not only to the human species but to all living things that are born in the earth, sea, or sky."⁶⁴ For Adams, nature had not placed the duty of morality upon animals since they show no "proof" of understanding virtue or vice. Because of this, Adams had, "no concern with a society of birds or beats, or fishes, or insects." While he appreciated the similarities between animal nature and human nature, ultimately animals were neither rational nor moral but only acted upon instinct. This is not the case for human nature. Society had to be built upon an inherently natural moral ethic. Virtues were both rationally known and experientially evident in human behavior for Adams as he wrote, "the law of nature includes the laws of reason as much as self-love and desire of propagation and education, includes those rules of temperance, prudence, justice, and fortitude which reason, by the help of experience, discovers to be productive..."⁶⁵ Just as the law of self-preservation was universal to

⁶² Thomas Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), hosted by LibriVox, <https://librivox.org/an-inquiry-into-the-human-mind-on-the-principles-of-common-sense-by-thomas-reid.>; Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments and on the Origin of Languages* (1759), Online Library of Liberty (OLL), <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/smith-the-theory-of-moral-sentiments-and-on-the-origins-of-languages-stewart-ed.>

⁶³ See: Ryerson, *John Adams's Republic*; Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, Chapters 1, 3, and 8.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

both humans and animals, Adams found natural law inscribed a universal duty for humans to act as moral agents in accord with reason and experience.

Adams began by encapsulating a view of nature that intrinsically tied morality and reason to humanity alone writing, “Has any species of animals, besides mankind, ever given proofs that they have any idea of justice, of right or wrong. That they have any discernment of the difference between actions and characters? Have they any moral sense?”⁶⁶ Adams demonstrated that he understood humanity as a rational species. This is nothing particularly revealing in itself, but it is when it is paired with what Adams rhetorical asked next, “Have they any moral sense?” In his reference to *sense* as a gateway to morality, Adams takes a position much in line with Scottish Enlightenment moral philosophy. Adams saw moral perception as a product of both sensory empiricism and reason. He considered what the “law of nature” demanded of both humans and animals, including the similarities and differences between them. Adams believed that all living things had a natural inclination towards, “self-love and self-preservation, the desire of propagation...” This aspect of the natural law was readily discernible in both man and beast writing, “...the law of nature, which teaches other species to nurse their young, teaches man to imbue the tender minds of children with knowledge and virtue...the law of nature, as an instruct is perhaps common [to all living things]...” As in the traditional Thomistic understanding of the natural law, Adams believed the natural law inscribed an additional moral sense and duty to humans due to their rational nature writing, “but the institutions which reason adds to instruct are peculiar to man.”

⁶⁶ JA, *Diary*, n.d., “On the Law of Nature and the Moral Sense among Animals and among Men,” (October–December 1758)”, MHS-APDE.

Reason was a natural tool through which humans could come to perceive the laws of nature as inherently true. Adams wrote about this, “Nature and truth...are right and invariably the same in all times and in all places. And reason, pure unbiased reason, perceives them alike in all times and in all places.”⁶⁷ Adams saw nature and truth as fixed, unmovable, and objective. For him, it was the human inability to escape emotion or bias that led to differing opinions on the meaning of nature and truth. However, he followed this statement with a caution against the frailty of human nature in perceiving those truths, writing, “But passion, prejudice, interest, custom, and fancy are infinitely precarious. If therefore we suffer our understanding to be blinded or perverted by any of these, the change is that of millions to one, that we shall embrace error. And hence arises that endless variety of opinions entertained by mankind.”⁶⁸ While Adams supported emotional approaches to attaining natural virtue, he knew that those approaches needed to be simultaneously tempered by human reason.

Adams believed it was more important for man to act according to his moral nature rather than to have great scientific knowledge of nature writing, “The man to whom nature has given a great a surprising genius, will perform great and surprising achievements, but a soul originally narrow and confined will never be enlarged...by diligence and attention, indeed, he may possibly get the character of a man of science, but never that of a great man.”⁶⁹ As much as Adams valued knowledge of the natural sciences and philosophy, moral goodness was not found within them alone. Rather moral “genius and true “greatness” were only achieved by understanding the order provided by natural law.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ JA, *Diary*, May 11, 1756, in “John Adams diary 1 (November 18 1755-August 29, 1756),” in MHS-AFP.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ JA, *Diary*, April 10, 1756, in “John Adams diary 1 (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756),” in MHS-AFP.

⁷⁰ See Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*

Adams also saw the natural moral law as the ultimate source of morality and political justice.⁷¹ While in the Continental Congress, he vehemently fought to base the origin of American independence upon the natural law principles, rather than the human positivism of the British constitution. Adams recounted, “They [the delegates in a committee] were very deliberately considered and debated...The two points which laboured the most, were...whether we should recur to the Law of Nature, as well as to the British Constitution and our American Charters and Grants. Mr. Galloway and Mr. Duane were for excluding the Law of Nature. I was very strenuous for retaining and insisting on it...”⁷² This is not to downplay at all the high regard and esteem that Adams held for British constitutionalism and colonial constitutions. His respect for both legal frameworks was more than proved by his principled defense of the British soldiers accused in the Boston Massacre, and his later work, *A Defense of the Constitutions of the United States*. However, like Jefferson in the *Declaration of Independence*, Adams saw the justification of the American Revolution as resting upon principles of natural law after the abuses of constitutional infringement on the part of the British. Natural law was the source of both human morality and positive laws. Like the generations of natural law thinkers before him based in the Thomistic tradition, Adams saw human laws as “unlawful [when] repugnant to the laws of God and nature.”⁷³ Nature, or more specifically, the natural law, was also the source of natural human rights. In the *Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law* Adams wrote, “Rights...cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws...[they are] derived from the great Legislator of the universe.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Somos, *American States of Nature*, 19, 54-55.

⁷² JA, *Diary*, n.d., in “John Adams diary 22A (includes notes on the Continental Congress, September–October 1774),” in MHS-AFP.

⁷³ JA, *Diary*, January 9, 1766, in “John Adams diary 13 (March 1–December 31, 1766, March 1767),” in MHS-AFP.

⁷⁴ JA, *Papers of John Adams* Vol. 1 [henceforth Papers], “Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law,” 1765, in MHS-APDE, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/PJA01dg2>.

Rights were natural conceptions that rested in an understanding of man's rational and moral being. Consequently, any human law in violation of man's natural rights was a violation of the natural laws of the universe.

Adams saw within nature the innate source of morality, human dignity, and human nature. The natural law was foundational to Adams's ideas not only of law and politics but of his conceptions of proper human behavior. Adams used his natural law discourse in determining righteous actions and knowing how human nature was constituted. Nature in this humanistic sense was not detached from its environmental sense and the wider material laws of the physical universe. Instead, under his understanding, nature in this humanistic sense was driven by a natural law tradition that saw nature in its humanistic sense as an extension of the physical universe's intrinsic order and applied to humanity. By understanding the rational and empirical qualities of the human person, Adams believed that humans were naturally moral beings. Nature was a unified entity to Adams, and the same natural law ordered both human and environmental aspects of reality.

Part II: The Natural World

John Adams was surrounded by the sights, sounds, beauties, threats, and tangible realities of nature's immediate presence. A hard freeze in early October could spell doom for autumn harvest, precipitating a winter of famine. In January, a powerful Nor'easter with its mighty cyclonic winds could impound transportation and destroy towns in a matter of hours. Summer hurricanes could ravage across Cape Cod, while Massachusetts summer humidity made life both indoors and outdoors miserable. Smallpox and influenza epidemics ran with regularity

throughout New England, with one particular strain killing John's father in 1761.⁷⁵ Industry too was radically dependent on nature. Success or failure in industries such as cod fishing, animal trading, lumbering, masonry, shipbuilding, blacksmithing, and of course agriculture, were directly tied to the bounty of nature.⁷⁶ Recreational opportunities such as walking, hunting, fishing, and archery were popular pastimes and were intertwined with a local familiarity with both landscape and ecology. The western colonial frontier was only a few days walk from Boston, where farmers were pushing the geographic bounds of colonial civilization.

Adams was raised on a small family farm in Braintree, Massachusetts, where his fascination with the natural world began as a young child. Later in his life, he remarked that he enjoyed few things more than being outside in nature playing games and sports.⁷⁷ His father, Deacon John Adams, was an industrious man steeped in the self-sufficient agricultural tradition of New England.⁷⁸ Adams and his siblings participated in daily farming activities, and his heart for agriculture never waned. Here he learned the importance of weather, temperatures, and soils for good farming. He was constantly fascinated by weather and its impact on society. In many of his diary entries, Adams began with meteorological observations, mainly in the form of temperatures, winds, and precipitation. These observations were generally crude, and nowhere near as comprehensive and orderly as Thomas Jefferson's.⁷⁹ However, they demonstrate that

⁷⁵ David McCullough, *John Adams*, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2001): 52-53.

⁷⁶ Andrea Wulf, *Founding Gardeners: The Revolutionary Generation, Nature, and the Shaping of the American Nation*, (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011); Thomas Slaughter, *The Natures of John and William Bartram*, (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996); Virginia Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004).

N.B.: I would particularly like to acknowledge the work of Andrea Wulf in *Founding Gardeners*, who drew connections between Adams and nature in her primary sources, and made them readily findable in her primary source bibliography and keyword index. I used many of her primary source entries indexed in her book, and drew inspiration from the book, to build my argument in Part II.

⁷⁷ JA, *Autobiography* Part 1, "Parents and Boyhood" in MHS-APDE.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Jefferson Weather and Climate Records, ed. Princeton University, <https://jefferson-weather-records.org/>.

Adams's thinking was constantly connected to an omnipresent sense of nature. Adams always craved a personal connection with nature, whether through agricultural enterprises or simple enjoyments of nature's beauty. As a diplomat, statesman, and president, Adams often wrote to his wife about the care and state of Peacefield, his family's farm.⁸⁰ He sought distraction from the chaotic world of politics in the quiet grandeur of nature. Adams recognized that his entire world was dependent and built upon nature, and he, therefore, sought to use and appreciate nature to its fullest potential.

Adams believed in utilitarian uses of nature, and much of Adams's writings on nature tended to view nature from an Enlightened philosophical, scientific, and humanistic lens. However, Adams also appreciated the Romantic, sublime, and aesthetic qualities of the natural world. For Adams, humanity was part of nature but simultaneously stood above the natural world in value. Adams believed that humanity could view nature with both practical and aesthetic attitudes. Adams's environmental thought towards the natural world was positioned between Enlightenment utilitarianism and Romantic idealism and contained a distinct anthropocentric outlook.

Enlightenment Ideas

Like many Enlightenment thinkers, Adams believed humans had dominion over nature, and that nature was an intelligible and qualifiable phenomenon. The Enlightenment also gave thinkers a new emphasis on causality in nature. The Aristotelian study of final (*telos*) and formal (the "form") metaphysical causes of nature were gradually disregarded in favor of Humean positivism. *Metaphysics* were out, *physics* were in. New physical approaches to understanding

⁸⁰ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 35-57.

reality, such as materialism and naturalism, held that only empirically and observable phenomena were parts of reality.⁸¹ Therefore, the study of Aristotelian efficient and material causes, the *how* and *what* of nature, gained greater emphasis. This new physical ethos of nature synthesized with traditional Judeo-Christian ideas and led to an array of utilitarian and practical approaches to using and viewing nature. In many respects, a utilitarian-practical approach toward nature was always present in Western civilization.⁸² Nevertheless, it was the Enlightenment's emphasis on understanding the functions of nature that allowed for the rise of environmental commodification. This context for environmental thinking was arguably the dominant view of nature in Early America during Adams's life.

Adams was convinced that there was a connection between natural science and natural philosophy governed by natural law.⁸³ In other words, the Enlightenment understood that there were universal laws controlling both physical phenomena and human affairs. Adams believed that there was an inherent natural relationship between what governed the universe and what governed mankind. The beginning of Adams's interest in what he called "experimental philosophy" began as a student under the supervision of John Winthrop, a professor of mathematics and natural philosophy at Harvard.⁸⁴ It was Winthrop who introduced the impressionable Adams to the scientific rationalism and methodological approach toward nature.⁸⁵ Adams explained in his diary that Winthrop taught Newton's laws of physics in a "series of experimental philosophy" in which he "explained to us the meaning, nature, and

⁸¹ John Lamont, "The Fall and Rise of Aristotelian Metaphysics in the Philosophy of Science," in *Journal of Science and Education* 18, no. 6-7 (2007): 861-884.

⁸² Coates, *Nature*. Chapter 4.

⁸³ Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, 5-8, 11-12, 112-113.

⁸⁴ JA, *Diary*, April 1, 1754, in "unnumbered John Adams diary (June 1753-April 1754, September 1758-January 1759)," in MHS-AFP.

⁸⁵ Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*, 6.

excellence of natural philosophy, which is the knowledge of those laws by which all the bodies in the universe are restrained...all the minutest combinations of matter in each of them are regulated by the same general laws.”⁸⁶ These laws for Adams were transfixed in objectivity and were the constitutions of material reality.⁸⁷ He saw nature as constantly changing but believed those changes were based on principles discoverable via empirical evidence. If those principles could be known and harnessed for knowledge, nature could be put to profitable use. This Enlightenment development of scientific rationalism would influence the practical-mindedness of much of his later environmental thought.

Enlightenment and practical attitudes towards nature were strongly evident in other areas of Adams’s environmental thought. In one of his earliest diary entries, he recounted a history of the “changes in the land” in New England from Indian “wilderness” to colonial civilization.⁸⁸ This documentation displays Adams’s keen awareness of landscape dynamics and biogeographical change. Adams wrote, “Consider, for one minute, the changes produced in this country, within the space of two hundred years. Then, the whole continent was one continued dismal wilderness, the haunt of wolves and bears and more savage men...then our rivers flowed through gloomy deserts and offensive swamps.”⁸⁹ Adams associated the “primitive” state of nature in New England as having no value without Enlightened influences. The “wilderness” was something to be avoided, something dangerous in which foul creatures and brutish peoples dwelled. It was also evident that he valued landscapes insofar as they might be practically useful. Adams continued in this

⁸⁶ JA, *Diary*, April 1, 1754, in “unnumbered John Adams diary (June 1753-April 1754, September 1758-January 1759,” in MHS-AFP.

⁸⁷ Somos, *American States of Nature*, 58-59.

⁸⁸ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, (1983, republished., New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2003).

⁸⁹ JA, *Diary*, June 15, 1756, in “John Adams diary 1, (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756),” in MHS-AFP.

intellectual strain reminiscent of early Puritan environmental ideology saying, “Now, the forests are removed, the land covered with fields of corn, orchards bending with fruit, and the magnificent habitations of rational and civilized people...now the same rivers glide smoothly on through rich countries fraught with every delightful object, and through meadows painted with the most beautiful scenery of nature, and of art. The narrow huts of the Indians have been removed and, in their room, have arisen fair and lofty edifices, large and well compacted cities.”⁹⁰ For Adams, it was the utilitarian landscape, the clearing of land, the planting of crops, the mechanization of nature, that gave nature value. The removal of the implied “irrational” and “uncivilized” Native cultures to make way for English settlement, made the colonial urban landscape an intrinsically good built environment. Adams also connected the beauty of nature to a dose of Enlightened practicalities. The dense forest and wild animals were not beautiful on their own, but the cleared meadows and drained swamps were. In this sense, natural beauty was found only after colonial rearrangement of land and in proportion to colonial development. Adams displayed in this entry a practical aesthetic, or more properly, an attitude of aesthetic commodification.

Adams realized the dominance that certain aspects of nature had over human endeavors. One such example highly relevant to his life was disease. Smallpox outbreaks nearly doomed the American Revolution. Adams considered the disease the “king of terrors,” and he strongly supported inoculation efforts.⁹¹ Adams was inoculated during the Smallpox outbreak of 1764 and was never personally crippled by the virus.⁹² In the week before the signing of the Declaration of

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ JA to James Warren, July 24, 1776, in MHS-APDE, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-06-04-02-0179>.

⁹² JA, *Autobiography* Part 1, “Marriage and Law Practice, 1764-1765,” in MHS-APDE.

Independence, Adams saw not the British, but smallpox which “invaded our armies and defeated them more than once...” as the enemy of American independence.⁹³ The newly formed Continental Army’s failed 1775 invasion of Quebec was likely the first instance of biological warfare in the war.⁹⁴ He wrote, “smallpox is ten-times more terrible than the Britons, Canadians, and Indians together. This [smallpox] was the cause of our principate retreat from Quebec....”⁹⁵ Adams did receive a twinge of gleeful revenge as the disease spread to both British and American camp during the siege writing, “It is some small consolation that the scoundrel savages have taken a large dose of it [smallpox]. They plundered our baggage, and stripped off the clothes of our men, who had smallpox...”⁹⁶ Adams had a personal connection to smallpox as his maternal great uncle, Dr. Zabdiel Boylston was the physician who developed smallpox inoculation in the colonies.⁹⁷ Inoculation, by applying pus from smallpox sore into a small incision in the skin, was strongly supported by the Adams family. John wrote to Abigail, “I could almost wish that an inoculating hospital was opened in every town in New England!”⁹⁸ Abigail had the children all inoculated in the days following independence. The inoculation’s side effects in the Adams household were not pleasant, “Our little ones stood the operation manfully...the little folks are very sick and puke every morning, but after that they are comfortable.”⁹⁹ Smallpox plagued the new nation for decades, but few epidemics would match the terror the disease held in the summer of 1776. The

⁹³ JA to Samuel Cooper, June 9, 1776, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-04-02-0145> [Original source: The Adams Papers, Papers of John Adams, vol. 4, February–August 1776, ed. Robert J. Taylor. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979, pp. 357–358.]

⁹⁴ George Washington to John Hancock, December 4, 1775, National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/eyewitness/html.php?section=4>, <https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/index.html?dod-date=1204>.

⁹⁵ JA to AA, June 26, 1776, in MHS-AFP.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Obituary of Susanna Boylston Adams Hall, *Adams Family Correspondence* vol. 12, April 29, 1797, in MHS-AFP, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-04-12-02-0062#sn=33>.

⁹⁸ JA to AA, June 26, 1776, in MHS-AFP.

⁹⁹ AA to JA, July 14, 1776, in MHS-AFP.

disease created practical hardships for Adams and was an element of nature that was a constant malady in his life. During Adam's life, disease was the most immediate reminder of human's inability to control nature.

Adams was immersed in agricultural ways of thinking, and his diary entries show constant reflections of farm and rural life. As a young man, he imagined his future writing that his ideal farm would be, "fill my yard with geese, turkeys, ducks, guinea hens, peacocks, fowls, bees...potatoes...cabbages...cauliflower, celery, peas...beans...parsnips, parsley...horse radish...mustard, onions...balm, sage, pennyroyal, hyssop, pinks, tulips."¹⁰⁰ Likely, these were the same crops that his father planted on his farm. Adams reflected that he wanted to base his farm's labor on, "mathematical principles on which ploughs are constructed."¹⁰¹ His methods of labor in agriculture, such as plowing, planting, and harvest, were influenced by scientific principles. Adams's love of farming did not cease when he assumed political responsibilities. Instead, politics made him fonder of rural life. Writing at the Second Continental Congress, Adams suggested that he was a farmer at heart and that political life was not an inherent part of his personality saying, "I shall prefer the delights of a garden to the dominion of a world. I have nothing of Caesar's greatness in my soul."¹⁰² While George Washington is often compared with Roman general-farmer Cincinnatus, and Jefferson's agricultural interest is commonly known, Adams deserves popular and scholarly consideration as one of the founding farmers. Unlike Washington and Jefferson, Adams did not own a large estate nor did he ever own slaves. Peacefield, Adams's modest forty-acre farm was a source of immense personal pride and delight.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ JA, *Diary*, Spring 1759, in "John Adams diary 3 (includes commonplace book entries, Spring and Summer 1759)," in MHS-AFP.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² JA to AA, March 16, 1777, in MHS-AFP.

¹⁰³ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 43.

Anytime he was not directly manning his homestead, he was unfulfilled. When he returned to his Massachusetts farm after years overseas, Adams wrote to a friend that he, “found [the] estate...of total neglect and inattention...fallen to decay.”¹⁰⁴ In this same letter, Adams showed his association of patriotism with yeoman farming, calling Peacefield, “the farm of a patriot.”¹⁰⁵ Writing as Vice-President, John wrote to Abigail, “Oh my farm-when shall I see thee?”, and that upon returning home, “there will be no end of my tragic OH’s and tragic AH’s.”¹⁰⁶ One of Adams’s simple pleasures was collecting fertilizer for soil cultivation. He believed New England seaweed made for the finest of field fertilizers, and he was sure that Peacefield’s soils, located about a mile from Massachusetts Bay, were “filled with seaweed.”¹⁰⁷ He understood the relationship that weather events, such as Nor’easters, had with seaweed washing ashore for collection. He wrote to Abigail, “You have had a North Easter storm I perceive which raised the tides, and I hope brought in a fresh and abundant supply of seaweed.”¹⁰⁸ At his core a farmer connected to nature, Adams desired little more than the ability to return to his beloved fields.¹⁰⁹

Agriculture, and nature, were things that could be continually improved by scientific principles according to Adams. He was not unique among the founding generation in envisioning an agricultural nation, nor was he alone in supporting agricultural development. When it came to farming, Adams was purely utilitarian and strove for efficiency and profitable use of nature. The value of soil and climate was only important insofar as it was valuable for farming. During the

¹⁰⁴ JA to Thomas Brand Hollis, December 3, 1788, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-19-02-0256>. [Original source: The Adams Papers, Papers of John Adams, vol. 19, February 1787–May 1789, ed. Sara Georgini, Sara Martin, R. M. Barlow, Amanda M. Norton, Neal E. Millikan, and Hobson Woodward. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016, pp. 356–357.]

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ JA to AA, May 12, 1794, in MHS-AFP.

¹⁰⁷ JA to AA, December 19, 1794, in MHS-AFP.

¹⁰⁸ JA to AA, February 15, 1795, in MHS-AFP.

¹⁰⁹ JA to AA, December 7, 1796, in MHS-AFP.

early Stamp Act crisis in the 1760s, he drew inspiration for independence and self-sufficiency from nature. Adams believed that colonial farms, blessed with “advantages in soil and climate” could “raise [their] own bread.”¹¹⁰ He believed that it was fully within the power of Bostonian farmers to become self-sufficient and ultimately develop the land to the point where Massachusetts farms could produce crops for export. This would be possible only if farmers were willing to apply the principles of the scientific method to find the finest and most productive ways to grow, prepare, and harvest crops. Adams advocated for a public agricultural science though, “experiments upon soils and manures, grains and grasses, trees and bushes; and in...inquiries into the course of nature in producing them...”¹¹¹ Scientifically understanding nature would lead to profitable commodification of nature and encourage political and economic independence from Britain. In 1771, Adams met with local representatives to organize a Massachusetts colonial committee, “for encouraging arts, agriculture...within the province...” Some of the crops they would encourage included cash crops such as “hemp, silk,” and, “many other commodities might be introduced here, and cultivated...”¹¹² In Adams’s draft of the Massachusetts constitution in 1779, he advocated for the promotion of agriculture on the part of the government.¹¹³ Agriculture was of prime importance to Adams, as he saw it as the “mother of every art and science, every trade and profession in society.”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ JA, *Papers* Vol. 1, “IV. ‘U’ to the Boston Gazette,” July 18, 1763, in MHS-APDE, <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-06-01-02-0045-0005>.

¹¹¹ Ibid. For a more complete discussion of this topic see: Wulf, *Founding Gardeners* (index words: John Adams)

¹¹² JA *Diary*, February 7, 1771, in “John Adams diary 16 (January 10, 1771-November 27, 1772),” in MHS-AFP.

¹¹³ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 116-117.

¹¹⁴ JA, *Papers* Vol 1., “IV. ‘U’ to the Boston Gazette,” July 18, 1763, in MHS-APDE

Adams's travels in the 1780s as a diplomat in England, France, and the Netherlands influenced his desire to replicate the gardening culture of Europe.¹¹⁵ Some English gardens were designed on ideological principles. British Whigs, rejecting the rigidity of the monarchical gardens embodied at Versailles, often desired a more unkempt aesthetic to their gardens.¹¹⁶ Adams, no doubt, was fascinated with this politicization of nature, but the ornamental gardens of Europe were not possible for replication in Peacefield. He simply lacked the financial and proprietary means.¹¹⁷ However, Adams took some modest inspiration from the practical designs of European gardeners. One of these included the incorporation of the "ha-ha," a large ditch that stopped livestock from leaving the bounds of the property, while not impeding the viewshed of the landscape.¹¹⁸ While in London in the 1780s, Adams became aware of the transatlantic botanical exchange of non-native plants. He noted the plethora of "rare shrubs and trees" species being grown as a novelty in English gardens but "to which [the] collection [of] America has furnished her full share."¹¹⁹ Adams was always the astute observer, not only of human nature, but of the landscapes and uses of the natural world.

Adams's vision of nature when it came to the nation, however, was not as clearly articulated as Jefferson's. There is little written on Adams's feelings toward westward expansion on the American continent, particularly after his presidency. When his friend-turned-rival Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory in 1803, Adams stayed relatively quiet on the matter. At the time, Adams was not on speaking terms with Jefferson, but there is some evidence of his

¹¹⁵ Note from MHS: <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-06-18-02-0132#sn=0>.

¹¹⁶ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 47.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹¹⁹ JA, *Diary*, July 24, 1786, in "John Adams diary 45 (July 24-28, 1786)," in MHS-AFP.

general feelings on the idea of expansionism. A decade earlier, when Adams was vice president under Washington, he supported the failed Michaux Expedition to explore the west.¹²⁰ Andre Michaux's expedition was commissioned by the American Philosophical Society (APS) to "explore the interior country of North America from the Mississippi to the Missouri, and westwardly to the Pacific Ocean..." and inform the APS of the "geography...soil, climate, animals, vegetables, minerals...information so interesting to curiosity, to science, and to the future prospects of mankind..."¹²¹ The expedition never occurred because of diplomatic issues between Spain, France, and the United States. However, the eagerness with which Adams supported such an expedition tells of his interest in utilitarian uses of nature. A decade later, Adams was far less enthusiastic about westward expansion and the Lewis and Clark Expedition under the supervision of Jefferson. As Andrea Wulf noted, this may have had to do with Adams's political feuding with Jefferson.¹²² Nevertheless, Adams was far less enthralled with exploration this time around believing that the nation was "...explored and thinly planted much too fast."¹²³ Adams critiqued the non-practical motivations for the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and took a shot at Jefferson's fascination and collection of mastodon bones in saying, "I care not a farthing about all the Big Bones in Europe or America..."¹²⁴ and later, "the spirit of party has seized upon the bones of this huge animal, because the head of a party [Jefferson] has written something about them."¹²⁵ By the Jefferson Administration, expansionism and geographic

¹²⁰ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 159-161.

¹²¹ American Philosophical Society's Subscription Agreement for Andre Michaux's Western Expedition, January 22, 1793, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-25-02-0088>.

¹²² Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 161.

¹²³ JA to Francis Adriaan van de Kemp, November 5, 1804; quoted in Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 161.

¹²⁴ JA to Francis Adriaan van der Kemp, January 8, 1806; quoted in Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 161.

¹²⁵ JA to Francis Addriaan van der Kemp, January 26, 1802; quoted in Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 161.

knowledge of the west became inherently political to Adams, and he wanted little to do with it. If he ever did support expansionism, it was premised on ideas of practical use.

This does not mean that Adams was disinterested in natural history on the American continent. On the contrary, the subject fascinated him and consumed much of his recreational time. Natural history as a field of study was in its infancy during the late eighteenth century. Understanding earth processes was of prime importance and interest to Adams, as general knowledge of the earth provided better agricultural and social opportunities. He enjoyed conversations with those versed in science and those, “well acquainted with philosophical experiments...[who] had much to say on...fixed air, gas, about absolute and sensible heat, experiments with the thermometer...”, as well as those naturalists who wrote, “natural history ...with stamps of all plants and animals...”¹²⁶ Adams left plentiful writings on his opinions, observations, and desires for the uses of the natural environment by understanding natural history.¹²⁷ Adams was subscribed to the most widely-read nature journal of the time, *Travels*, by William Bartram.¹²⁸ From 1778 to 1779, Adams crossed the Atlantic twice, as he was sent by Congress to resume his role as Ambassador to France (after a brief recall to draft the Massachusetts Constitution in 1778). On his first voyage, Adams was fascinated by the power of ocean currents and weather systems. He wrote first of a terrible storm in February 1778 where the “wind was very high, and the sea very rough.”¹²⁹ He harbored concerns for his friends on land during this storm noting, “What anxiety have my friends on shore suffered...during the

¹²⁶ JA, *Diary*, May 14, 1779, in “John Adams diary 29 (March 12-July 31, 1779),” in MHS-AFP.

¹²⁷ JA, *Diary*, Spring 1759, in “John Adams diary 3 (includes commonplace book entries, Spring and Summer 1759),” in MHS-AFP.

¹²⁸ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 75.

¹²⁹ JA, *Diary*, February 13, 1778, in “John Adams diary 47 (February 13, 1778-April 26, 1779),” in MHS-AFP.

Northeast storm which they must have had on land!”¹³⁰ He continued by writing on his curiosity about the Gulf Stream current, famous for helping British ships sail to London in decent time, “What is the Gulf Stream? What is the course of it? From what point and to, and at what point does it flow? How broad is it? How far distant is it from the continent of America? What is the longitude and latitude of it?”¹³¹ Adams asked detailed scientific questions and was interested in scientific knowledge of earth systems as an informal natural historian.

On his second Atlantic crossing in December 1779, Adams took the opportunity to act as a documentarian of European natural history. After their ship sprang a leak in a lightning storm, Adams found himself shipwrecked on the Spanish coast with his two young sons near Cape Finisterre, Spain.¹³² Adams wrote to his wife of the disaster that had befallen them, “I neither solicited nor expected, nor desired, to Europe through the Gulf Stream, through thunder and lightning.”¹³³ From his youth, he seemed to always be bothered by lightning storms.¹³⁴ Adams and his sons could have waited on the coast for a ship to transport them to Paris over the Bay of Biscay, but Adams wanted to move more quickly. Therefore, he opted for a winter overland route across northern Spain, the Cantabrian and Pyrenees Mountains, and southern France. He bought a mule to assist in the journey, which he later regretfully sold, recounting, “I was obliged to sell my mule, for which I was very sorry, as he was an excellent animal and had served me

¹³⁰ JA, *Diary*, February 28, 1778, in “John Adams diary 47 (February 13, 1778-April 26, 1779),” in MHS-AFP.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² McCullough, *John Adams*, 228-231.

N.B.: This thesis’s section on Adams’s European adventure is in gratitude to the following sources for helping establish a general narrative of the events: C. Bradley Thompson’s interview with David Rubin: The Rubin Report, “Who was John Adams? C. Bradley Thompson | POLITICS | Rubin Report,” YouTube video, February 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C52ZqjibU1M>; and John L. Smith Jr., “The Remarkable Spanish Pilgrimage of John Adams,” in *Journal of the American Revolution* (November 23, 2016): <https://allthingsliberty.com/2016/11/remarkable-spanish-pilgrimage-john-adams/>.

¹³³ JA to AA, February 28, 1779, MHS-AFP.

¹³⁴ JA, *Diary*, June 18, 1760, in “John Adams diary 5 (May 26, 1760-November 25, 1760),” in MHS-AFP.

well.”¹³⁵ Adams documented as much of nature as he could on this trip. He was struck mainly by three things on this journey: cold temperatures, biogeographical diversity, and mountain landscapes.

Adams knew how to read landscapes. While in Europe, he often commented on the different natural aspects of the land, noting in one instance in the Netherlands that the farms, animals, vines, even the soil were part of thee, “finest county I have anywhere seen.”¹³⁶ The natural and human landscapes of Europe often impressed him with their interconnection between nature and city. He wrote that “the intermixture of houses, trees, ships, and canals, throughout this town is very striking,” and elsewhere that he found the French countryside to be “...one great garden. Nature and art have conspired to render everything here delightful.”¹³⁷ An avid arborist, Adams did find some words to criticize the French countryside writing that he found it to have, “a great scarcity of trees,” and that in his opinion, “a country...without trees has to me always an appearance of poverty...”¹³⁸ In North America, Adams enjoyed observing the beauty of the American countryside. As much as he hated being away from Peacefield, he found joy in the “scenes of nature” which were “delightful” in the colonies.¹³⁹

Adams noted the agricultural and dietary habits of the peoples of Spain, “The bread, cauliflower, cabbages, apples, pears, beef, pork, and poultry were good...the oysters were

¹³⁵ JA, *Autobiography* Parts 2-3, “January 23, 1780,” in MHS-APDE, [all autobiography entries for Parts 2-3 can be found here: <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/ADMS-01-04>].

¹³⁶ JA, *Diary*, July 27, 1780, in “John Adams diary 31 (January 7-February 5, July 27-August 6, 1780),” in MHS-AFP.

¹³⁷ JA, *Diary*, August 5, 1780, in “John Adams diary 31 (January 7-February 5, July 27-August 6, 1780),” in MHS-AFP; JA to AA, June 3, 1778, in MHS-APDE.

¹³⁸ JA, *Diary*, April 6, 1778, in “John Adams diary 47 (February 13, 1778-April 26, 1779),” in MHS-AFP.

¹³⁹ JA, *Diary*, August 29, 1774, in “John Adams diary 21 (August 15, 1774-September 3, 1774),” in MHS-AFP.

tolerable, but no equal to ours in America.”¹⁴⁰ Northern Spain, while relatively lush by Mediterranean climate standards, was a biogeographical shock to Adams. In his entire life, Adams had lived among the continental forests of New England, and even in his travels to Philadelphia and across the Atlantic to Paris, dense continental forests were a constant presence. Landscapes void of forests were completely unknown to him. In northern Spain, he found himself in a completely new vegetational and climatic zone and remarked that the country had, “rich soil and well cultivated, but very few plantations of trees. Some orange trees, some lemon trees, and nut trees, a few oaks...”¹⁴¹ The lack of dense forests continually struck Adams, as in one instance he wrote “I am astonished to see so few trees. Scarce an elm, oak, or any other tree to be seen.”¹⁴² Thinking of the practical uses of nature in this region, he wrote, “The whole county we have passed is very mountainous and rocky. There is here and there a valley, and here and there a farm that looks beautifully cultivated. But in general, the mountains are covered with furze, and are not well cultivated... [there are] a very few walnut trees, and a very few fruit trees.”¹⁴³ Adams experienced a landscape in Northern Spain that few white Americans could imagine at the time.

There must have been no greater shock to Adams than the vistas of the Cantabrian Mountains. In winter, this range is hit with powerful storms off the Atlantic, and the range’s low treeline due to prevalent maritime influence makes them an imposing sight. Adams had never experienced the scale of imposing and barren mountains. The knolls and hills around Boston were easily

¹⁴⁰ JA *Autobiography* Parts 2-3, “December 14, 1779,” in MHS-APDE.

¹⁴¹ JA, *Diary*, December 15, 1779, in “John Adams diary 30 (November 13, 1779-January 6, 1780),” MHS-AFP.

¹⁴² JA, *Diary*, December 28, 1779, in “John Adams diary 30 (November 13, 1779-January 6, 1780),” MHS-AFP.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

surmounted, with scarcely a summit surpassing 100'. Even on the New England frontier of Worcester, hills only neared 500'. The gently sloping Appalachian and Allegheny Mountains were so far from Philadelphia that they could not even be seen. Even if they could, their wide passes scarcely top 1,500'. In the Cantabrian Mountains, Adams witnessed vertical peaks soaring near 9000', steep hanging valleys, and successive rows of subranges blanketed in heavy winter snows. Treelines and bright snow-covered peaks were something Adams had never seen. Although the passes he took through the mountains likely were not over 3000', it was the highest elevation that Adams would climb in his life. While Adams noted the mountains were an obstacle to efficient travel, he did appreciate their grandeur saying that they were, "the grandest profusion of wild irregular mountains, that I ever saw. Yet laboured and cultivated every one, to its Summit. The field of grain, are all green. We passed a range of mountains that were white with snow, and there were here and there banks of snow on the mountains we passed over, but no frost at all in the ground."¹⁴⁴ When he wrote of the mountains, he discussed the climate of the area writing, "There had been no frost...the weather was so warm that the inhabitants had no fires...We were told we should have no colder weather before May which is the coolest month in the year...we found, however, when we traveled in the month of January in the mountains, frost and snow and ice enough."¹⁴⁵ Adams eventually made it to Paris in the following weeks and completed his diplomatic responsibilities ensuring financial and military support for the American revolution. His duty as a diplomat came first, but his dedication to natural history was a close second.

¹⁴⁴ JA, *Diary*, December 31, 1779, in "John Adams diary 30 (November 13, 1779-January 6, 1780)," MHS-AFP.

¹⁴⁵ JA *Autobiography* Parts 2-3, "December 14, 1779," in MHS-APDE

As a natural historian, Adams saw the balance of nature as something that could be replicated as a model in a system of governmental checks and balances. He chose for his title line in *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, Alexander Pope's quote, "All nature's difference keeps all nature's peace."¹⁴⁶ This idea of balance in government, of unity in diversity, of order out of chaos, of interconnected parts of a whole, was directly tied to Adams's lived experience as a farmer and naturalist. The balance between biotic and abiotic nature was part of the "harmony of our solar system."¹⁴⁷ Adams saw nature linearly and hierarchically. In one of his most insightful observations, he noted that in "our globe" there is found, "an endless variety of substances, mutually connected with and dependent on each other."¹⁴⁸ He understood the inherently interconnected ecology of the earth between living and nonliving things. Most importantly he knew that the natural world was not a static entity upon which any human action or change had no effect. His anthropocentrism here was based more on "stewardship of" rather than "dominion over" nature.

Enlightenment and Judeo-Christian ideas of nature strongly influenced Adams's anthropocentrism.¹⁴⁹ In the postmodern era, few seriously consider the metaphysical *telos* of nature. Those that reference a teleological end in nature, often do so from a materialistic and naturalistic philosophy. In this framework, it is suggested that humans decide and determine the ends of nature.¹⁵⁰ Adams was fascinated by the divine, or transcendent, teleology of nature his entire life. For him, everything in the universe worked towards some end and was the

¹⁴⁶ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 66-67.

¹⁴⁷ JA, *Diary*, April 30, 1756, in "John Adams diary 1 (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756)," in MHS-AFP.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid

¹⁴⁹ JA, *Diary*, May 16, 1756, in "John Adams diary 1, (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756)," in MHS-AFP.

¹⁵⁰ Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: Politics for the Anthropocene*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

preordained intelligent product of a Creator. Humanity could only discover what was already made inherent in nature by God's immanence.

Adams argued that it was humanity's ability to reason that set it above the other species and granted it dominion over the earth. This anthropocentric *ethos* had Christian origins, and was emphasized by Enlightenment thinkers before being popularized in Early America.¹⁵¹ Adams saw nature as a means of knowing God, as a source of natural morality, and believed that nature was given to humanity for good use. Adams wrote, "although the powers of his [humanity's] body are but small and contemptible, [the] use of reason" gave humanity dominion over the material universe, and provided a justification for a utilitarian usage of it.¹⁵² Adams believed that through reason humanity could, "take advantage of the powers in nature, and accomplish the most astonishing designs."

Adams also held a complex vision of the potential power that humanity, through its use of reason, had to alter the environment, harm animals, and create a world of commodities. He wrote:

He [Humanity] can rear the valley into a lofty mountain, and reduce the mountain to a humble vale. He can rend the rocks and level the proudest trees. At his pleasure the forest is cleared and palaces rise. When he pleases, the soaring eagle is precipitated to earth, and the lightfooted roe is stopped in his career...He can form a communication between remotest regions, for the benefit of trade and commerce, over the yielding and fluctuating element of water. The telescope has settled the regions of heaven, and the

¹⁵¹ Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States*, (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2012): 60, 70-78.

¹⁵² JA, *Diary*, May 16, 1756, in "John Adams diary 1, (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756)," in MHS-AFP.

microscope has brought up to view innumerable millions of animals that escape the observation of our naked sight.

The astute awareness that Adams had of the capability of man was surprisingly interconnected and ecological. Returning to Enlightenment practicality, he suggested too that humanity could “assist nature in her own productions.”¹⁵³

The approach that Adams took to viewing nature was formed greatly on Christian teleological conceptions. Adams analyzed the “why” and proper “end” of nature with great clarity. For Adams, the *ends* of nature could not be separated from the transcendent, or divine, origin of it. He wrote on the purpose of nature, “God has told us...by the nature of all terrestrial enjoyments...that this world was not designed for a lasting and happy state.”¹⁵⁴ He explained that the very phenomenon of chance and contingency in the natural world pointed towards the temporal finitude of nature. The aesthetic pleasures of the natural world, the order of the universe, and the moral nature of humanity were all signs of a divine and Christian end of nature. Adams explained that human nature was ordered towards a moral purpose writing, “the adversities of fortune...the malice of men...a world in flames, and a whole system tumbling to ruins from its center, has nothing to terrify in it to a man whose security is builded on...good conscience and confirmed piety.”¹⁵⁵ The person who recognized and lived in accord with the order of the natural universe had nothing to fear as long as he recognized the finitude of it and lived in good conscience. According to Adams, the purpose of nature was created for the use, enjoyment, and moral-building of humanity. Adams reflected on a sermon he heard on the “love

¹⁵³ JA, *Diary*, May 16, 1756, in “John Adams diary 1, (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756),” in MHS-AFP. (All preceding quotes are from this entry).

¹⁵⁴ JA, *Diary*, August 1, 1756, in “John Adams diary 1 (November 18 1755-August 29, 1756),” in MHS-AFP.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

of God” that echoed many of the sentiments that he held. In this view, the obligation to love the Creator stemmed from a recognition of humanity’s gratitude for the goods of nature. The natural world, he wrote, was filled with a “variety of objects proper to delight and entertain,” and “it produces in us an intense sensation of pleasure.”¹⁵⁶ The sensory experience of nature and “reason, to find out the Truth,” pointed towards Adams’s anthropocentric idea of nature, and a recognition that nature’s origin and end were transcendent.¹⁵⁷ Adams did not argue this was a normative state of humanity, but a descriptive state. Understanding Adams’s idea of the purpose of nature is critical in synthesizing what sometimes seems to be contradictions between his practical and Romantic views. However, when these differing views are read against Adams’s wider environmental thought, the contradiction disappears. The human enjoyment of nature, the understanding of nature, and the utilization of nature, all stem from a distinctly Christian and teleological approach towards the natural world.

He continued his understanding of the interconnected ordering of nature writing, “In the wilderness, we see an amazing profusion of vegetables, which afford sustenance and covering to the wild beasts.” He related this ecological interdependence to agriculture saying, “The cultivated planes and meadows produce grass for cattle, and herbs, for the service of man. The milk and the flesh of other animals afford a delicious provision for mankind.” He saw a kind of similarity of human civilization with the wild beats of the forest. Both creatures, man and animals, depended on the food web and an understanding that, “vegetables sustain some animals. These animals are devoured by others and these others are continually and cultivating and improving the vegetable species.” This process, what Adams called, “nature...in a continual rotation,” was a clear insight

¹⁵⁶ JA, *Diary*, August 22, 1756, in “John Adams diary 1 (November 18 1755-August 29, 1756),” in MHS-AFP.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

into his ecological understanding. He understood that the biosphere of the earth was dependent upon abiotic physical systems saying, “we find the sun and moon to a very great degrees influencing us. Tides are produced in the ocean, clouds in the atmosphere, all nature is made to flourish...life and cheerfulness is diffused to all the other planets, as well as ours, upon the sprightly sunbeams.... These bodies are connected with and influenced by each other. Thus, we see the amazing harmony of our solar system.” Adams knew that the climate, tides, and other abiotic processes were influenced by the cosmic power of the sun, and these natural processes had direct influences on life on earth. Nature was most importantly a unified system, working in orderly harmony through diverse individual parts. The connectivity was captivating for Adams’s ecological sense:

The minutest particle in one of Saturn’s satellites, may have some influence upon the most distant regions of the system...this solar system is but one, very small wheel in the great astonishing machine of the world.... playing on the other systems that lie round them. Thus, it is highly probable every particle of matter influences, and is influenced by, every other particle in the whole collective universe.

Adams gave credit for this organized and connected universe to a divinely transcendent cause. He wrote that this “stupendous plan” was, “projected by Him who rules the universe...in this great and complicated drama. The Creator looked into the remotest futurity and saw his great designs accomplished by this inextricable, this mysterious, complication of causes.”¹⁵⁸ For

¹⁵⁸ JA, *Diary*, April 30, 1756, in “John Adams diary 1 (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756),” in MHS-AFP. (All preceding quotes are from this entry).

Adams, the order of nature emanated from nature's God for the expressed purpose of human fulfillment.¹⁵⁹

Despite the human mind's difficulty in perceiving the truth of nature, Adams was not ambivalent in viewing nature as the creation of "the Author of nature."¹⁶⁰ Unlike more radical Enlightenment thinkers, Adams believed that nature was not an ultimate cause in itself but was teleologically ordered towards a Supreme Being. Nature in itself could not supply the universe with the ideals that Adams held so dearly such as rights, law, and morals. Instead, nature was the invention of God to serve humanity. Adams wrote on the metaphysical nature of the universe and echoed many themes of the Thomistic cosmological argument for the existence of nature's God.¹⁶¹ He wrote:

When we consider the vast and incomprehensible extent of the material universe...when we consider that space is absolutely infinite and boundless, that the power of the Deity is strictly omnipotent, and his goodness without limitation, who can come to a stop in his thoughts, and say hither does the universe extend and no farther? 'Nothing can proceed from nothing.' But something can proceed from something, and thus the Deity produced this vast and beautiful frame of the universe out of nothing...He produced a world into being by his almighty fiat...¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Fiege, *Republic of Nature*, Chapter 2.

¹⁶⁰ JA, *Diary*, March 2, 1756, in "John Adams diary 1 (November 18 1755-August 29, 1756)," in MHS-AFP.

¹⁶¹ W. David Beck, "The Thomistic Cosmological Argument," *Liberty University SOR Faculty Publication and Presentations* (2004): 95-107.

¹⁶² JA, *Diary*, May 22, 1756, in "John Adams diary 1 (November 18 1755-August 29, 1756)," in MHS-AFP.

Adams borrowed from generations of philosophers before him in using the contingency and causality of nature to defend the existence of an absolute Being outside of the bounds of the laws of nature. Adams's conception of God was far more personal than Jefferson's deist conception. This divine view saw God as all-good, the source of moral goodness, as well as the source of the reason and intelligibility imbued within nature.¹⁶³ However, Adams was still perplexed by the nature of God and considered "the nature and essence of the material world less concealed from our knowledge than the nature and essence of God."¹⁶⁴ Most of the religiously oriented writing of Adams took place in his youth and later dropped off. Adams would go so far in his 1787 *Defense of the Constitutions of the United States* to directly downplay the direct role of Providence in the American founding. Instead, he argued that it was purely the product of reason and empiricism saying, "The United States of America have exhibited, perhaps, the first example of governments erected on the simple principles of nature... it will never be pretended that any persons employed in that service had interviews with the gods, or were in any degree under the inspiration of Heaven...it will forever be acknowledged that these governments were contrived merely by the use of reason and the senses."¹⁶⁵ As a younger man, Adams saw the work of God as the source and end of nature, and in other writings traced the providence of God in humanity's affairs.¹⁶⁶ So, while this may sound particularly antireligious, it should be read in the context of Adams's larger idea of nature as divinely ordered.

¹⁶³ *Diary*, August 22, 1756, in "John Adams diary 1 (November 18 1755-August 29, 1756)," in MHS-AFP.

¹⁶⁴ JA, *Diary*, July 31, 1756, in "John Adams diary 1 (November 18 1755-August 29, 1756)," in MHS-AFP.

¹⁶⁵ *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: with a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations*, edited by his Grandson Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1856). 10 volumes. Vol. 4. https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/adams-the-works-of-john-adams-vol-4#Adams_1431-04_938

¹⁶⁶ JA, *Diary*, May 16, 1756, in "John Adams diary 1 (November 18 1755-August 29, 1756)," in MHS-AFP.

Adams's Enlightenment and practical views of nature influenced many aspects of his life. From agriculture to the structure of government, Adams often saw nature as a resource for man's material benefit. Adams viewed the uses of nature anthropocentrically and guided by the reason and common sensibilities of contemporary society. He was also fascinated by the empirical and scientific qualities of nature and was an avid amateur natural historian. Much of this environmental thought was formed upon the intergenerational ethos of Judea-Christian and Enlightenment view of man's dominion in a "great chain of being." At the same time, Adams maintained a commitment to the transcendent ordering of natural realities by the "Author of Nature." He agreed with deists at the time that while God sustained and ordered nature, self-sustaining natural laws governed it. Adams would come to approach nature through other intellectual influences as well, his ideas emerging at a crossroads in environmental thought.

Romantic Ideas

The extent to which Adams was influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau is unclear. He certainly rejected his radical ideas regarding the French Revolution. The proto-Romanticism that Adams displayed does have similarities to those of Rousseau, but it can only be speculated as to how much of Rousseauan Romantic philosophy Adams read. Another proto-Romantic thinker, British conservative Edmund Burke, is credited with the introduction of "the sublime" into Romantic thought. Burke portrayed sublime images through the usage of natural scenes and dramatic and awe-inspiring landscapes.¹⁶⁷ Adams read much of Burke and appreciated his critiques of French radicalism. Burke's support of natural aristocracies and natural equality reinforced Adams's own views on the subject.¹⁶⁸ There is, however, no hard evidence found in Adams's writings directly

¹⁶⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry in the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757, hosted by University of Michigan, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004807802.0001.000?rgn=main:view=toc>.

¹⁶⁸ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 88, 94, 99.

pointing towards these thinkers as influencing his environmental thought. Nevertheless, Rousseauan and Burkean themes are strongly suggested in much of Adams's thought.

Adams was always an observer and a categorizer, and he enjoyed labeling where people and natural elements were on a hierarchy.¹⁶⁹ The material world would sometimes overwhelm him with its complexity and beauty. Utilitarianism found its limits in the sublime magnificence of nature. It was not only the forests, mountains, and watercourses that warranted respect to Adams, but each animal's "bones and bloods, muscles and nerves," every plant's, "complex and curious structure...supplied with the juices of life," the "incomprehensible multitude of substances," and the "planets and satellites...the stupendous army of stars that is hung in immense space..."¹⁷⁰ Met with the pure magnitude, complexity, and potency of the universe, Adams believed that mankind found itself "lost and swallowed up" in the "magnificence of nature."¹⁷¹ Adams's contemplation of the universe led to what can be best described as the experience of the sublime, where humanity's infinitely small agency is met with the multitudinous larger, ordered world.

One of the more prevalent views of early Romanticism was the inherent goodness of man in the state of nature. Rousseau believed that in a state of nature, man entered into mutual cooperation and social harmony. The American Indian was a prime example of the "natural man" of Rousseau. In the colonies, there was a distinct understanding of an American state of nature, which was formed by its environment and geography.¹⁷² Adams was keenly aware of Lockean and Rousseauan differences in viewing nature from his studies at Harvard. His grasp of

¹⁶⁹ JA, *Diary*, May 27, 1756, in "John Adams diary 1 (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756)," in MHS-AFP.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Somos, *American States of Nature*, 6.

the topic is evident in much of his political writings.¹⁷³ Moreover, some American nature writers, including Jefferson, believed that the natural environment of America was inherently superior to that of Europe. There was a kind of Americentric value of nature in the founding generation's environmental discourse. While Adams was surely not a strict Rousseauian and did not accept as much of his Romantic ideals as Jefferson, he was aware of the "natural man" in his writing and believed in the superiority of American nature. The beauty of nature was bound up with the "natural man" myth of Native Americans. He noted that he, "took great pleasure in viewing and examining the magnificent prospects of nature...If I cast my eyes one way, I am entertained with the Savage and unsightly appearance of naked woods and leafless forests."¹⁷⁴ Adams intentionally saw Native Americans not as separate from nature, as he saw colonial civilization, but as an inherent part of it. The Indian was the "natural man," unfettered, in his knowledge, by the laws, customs, and rules of white culture. For Adams, the Indian was inherently part of the landscape.

Adams wrote also that the American landscape was far superior to the nature he found in England. He often connected the beauty of nature to western settlement. It was his hope that the gardens and grand riding grounds of England slowly would, "grow so much in fashion in America."¹⁷⁵ He believed that as wonderful as the manicured lands of England were, they were no comparison to the potential of what America could be. He wrote that in the United States, "Nature has done greater things and furnished nobler materials", and the "oceans, islands, rivers,

¹⁷³ Ibid, 58-60.

¹⁷⁴ JA, *Diary*, February 11, 1756 and June 15, 1756, in "John Adams diary 1 (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756)," in MHS-AFP.

¹⁷⁵ JA, *Diary*, April 1786, "It will be long I hope...," in "John Adams diary 44 (March 27, 1786-July 21, 1786)," in MHS-AFP.

mountains, valleys, are all laid out upon a larger scale.”¹⁷⁶ Again demonstrating a dual intellectual framework on environmental thinking, Adams believed that nature could be constructed, and thereby improved in the United States, saying, “If any man should hereafter arise to embellish the rugged grandeur of Pens Hill [in Massachusetts], he might make something to boast of, although there are many situations capable of better improvement.”¹⁷⁷ While Adams did not hold the same fervor and excitement as Jefferson on the prospect of naturalistic nationalism, he did believe in a kind of American environmental exceptionalism.

In the mind of Adams, the natural world in both the United States and Europe had many intrinsically good qualities, with the most powerful of these being beauty. For Adams, beauty was a transformative power that allowed him to feel more fully human and connected to a transcendent force. This theme was similar to what later Romantic American nature writers, such as Cooper, Emerson, Thoreau, Burroughs, and Muir, would echo in their writings. Adams had a habit of personifying nature which demonstrates his intense familiarity and love for aspects of the natural. Upon returning to Boston from a long and arduous trip near the Massachusetts frontier, Adams wrote of his “old haunts” and his “meditations among the rocks.”¹⁷⁸ The Braintree landscape surrounded by, “the rushing torrent, pulling streams, the gurgling rivulet, the dark thicket, the rugged ledges and precipices,” which he called, “all old acquaintances of mine,” inspired immense joy in Adams.¹⁷⁹ He found happiness in the pleasantries of fair weather, particularly after light rains writing, “All nature wears a cheerful garb, after so plentiful a

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ JA, *Diary*, May 1, 1771, in “John Adams diary 17 (April 16, 1771-June 14, 1771),” in MHS-AFP.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

shower...receiving additional luster from the sweet influences of the sun.”¹⁸⁰ He added in another entry, “[Today] is a lovely day. Soft vernal showers...”¹⁸¹ It was in this kind of weather, that Adams felt he had the most openness to his studies and faculties of human nature. The weather could depress and anger Adams’s heart. He hated hot and humid weather, especially the weather of Philadelphia.¹⁸² It was the days after calm New England rain that Adams found as the perfect opportunities for recreation to “enliven(s) all the faculties of the body and of mind.” A day such as that could not be wasted.¹⁸³

Adams often craved long walks in nature, preferably near Peacefield. He particularly desired these when he served in the swampy city of Philadelphia during most of the 1790s.¹⁸⁴ Whenever he saw the, “beautiful...sky bespangled with cloud,” which gave, “healthy and enlivening air,” the opportunity was ripe for contemplation and exercise.¹⁸⁵ In Peacefield, his walks were often accompanied by Abigail and his children. He once wrote to Abigail when he was in the Continental Congress that he wanted to “walk in the garden...the plain, the meadow. I want Charles in one hand and Tom in the other, and walk with you, Nabby on your right hand, and John upon my left-to view the cornfields, the orchards...”¹⁸⁶ Adams felt that nature was an emotional place of familial connection and peace.

¹⁸⁰ JA, *Diary*, June 20, 1753, in “unnumbered John Adams diary (June 1753-April 1754, September 1758-January 1759),” in MHS-AFP.

¹⁸¹ JA, *Diary*, May 14, 1756, in “John Adams diary 1 (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756),” in MHS-AFP.

¹⁸² Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 100-101.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 100-101.

¹⁸⁵ JA, *Diary*, March 19, 1754, in “unnumbered John Adams diary (June 1753-April 1754, September 1758-January 1759),” in MHS-AFP.

¹⁸⁶ JA to AA, May 22, 1776, in MHS-AFP.

Echoing the classics, Adams believed that the poet, philosopher, and “man of pleasure” did their best work when surrounded by good weather and natural beauty.¹⁸⁷ Adams believed that man was composed of three main parts: mind, spirit, and body. He saw that nature could awaken higher forms of those elements in each individual. The human mind was elevated to its highest potential in nature, as he wrote, “The philosopher finds his passion all calm and serene...he finds no difficulty in subjecting the, to the subserviency of his reason...he can now contemplate all the gaudy appearances of nature, and like Pythagoras, bring philosophy down from heaven and make her conversable to men.” Simultaneously the Enlightenment utilitarian Adams could not let the opportunity of natural beauty slip away without putting it to human use. Human reason remained preeminent, and therefore reflected Adams’s environmental priorities. A divine sense of wonder and awe spoke to the human spirit and soul. Nature could provide experiences that came with an aesthetic spirituality of nature. In such circumstances, the poet of the soul found, “his whole soul at her [nature’s] disposal, and he no more retains the government of himself.” Lastly, the bodily element of man, or the “man of pleasure” could, “find such delicacies arising from the objects of sense as are adapted to produce the highest sensation of delight in him.”¹⁸⁸ Nature spoke to the mind, body, and spirit of the human person, and for that reason, nature was to be valued.

For Adams, it was through understanding and experiencing nature, that humanity could better understand and experience itself. Nature was a gift from the Creator to humankind, and understanding it was firstly guided by human reason. He knew that an aesthetic view of nature

¹⁸⁷ JA, *Diary*, March 19, 1754, in “in “unnumbered John Adams diary (June 1753-April 1754, September 1758-January 1759),” in MHS-AFP.

¹⁸⁸ JA, *Diary*, March 19, 1754, in “in “unnumbered John Adams diary (June 1753-April 1754, September 1758-January 1759),” in MHS-AFP [all preceding quotes are taken from this entry].

had to always be tempered with a practical one. He wrote that it was God who had given humanity the, “glorious shows and appearances [of nature], by which...our imaginations are so extremely delighted...” when reflecting upon, “the beautiful appearance of the flower...the prospect of forests and meadows, of verdant field and mountains...and the amazing concave of heaven sprinkled and glittering with stars.”¹⁸⁹ It was the goodness of God that had graced man with the natural gifts of “intelligence and reason,” to “take advantage of the power that we find in nature to avert many calamities...and to procure many enjoyments and pleasures...”¹⁹⁰

Adams’s preferred “natural” aesthetic was manicured nature, such as gardens, farms, and meadows. Even when he did praise the exquisiteness of more “wild” aspects of nature, such as forests, mountains, and sea, they were often appreciated by him from a position of comfort. These were aesthetic commodities and romantic hobbies. A wilderness of the forest, mountain, and raging sea, without recourse to civilization, farming, and a study ship, was a chaotic scene.

191

The beauty of nature, coupled with man’s practical reason, allowed for a certain kind of awe and romantic appreciation of nature and nature’s God. Those humans who refused to appreciate the aesthetic of nature were bemoaned by Adams. The landed gentry of the English countryside particularly troubled him. Adams saw their grand estates, manicured gardens, flocks of livestock, were simply brazen symbols of decadent opulence. He wrote, “beauty, convenience, and utility of these county seats are not enjoyed by the owners. They are mere ostentations of vanity...”¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ JA, *Diary*, August 22, 1756, in “John Adams diary 1 (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756),” in MHS-AFP.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ JA, *Diary*, June 15, 1756, in “John Adams diary 1 (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756),” in MHS-AFP.

¹⁹² JA, *Diary*, April 20, 1786, in “John Adams diary 44 (March 27, 1786-July 21, 1786),” in MHS-AFP.

He believed that instead of appreciating the natural beauty of their estates, the English elites participated in fouler human vices such as, “races, cocking, and gambling...”¹⁹³ Being a *good* human, and a moral and fulfilled one, required an appreciation of natural beauty. It was wholly within man’s nature to appreciate the beauty of the world beyond himself.

In rural Massachusetts, he appreciated the innate intricacies of the natural world. Near local ponds he delighted in the fact that, “The blackbirds [were] perched on the trees around the borders of the pond and singing.”¹⁹⁴ He was fascinated with the behavior of animals writing, “I saw a large flock of crow blackbirds alight on the ground, in search of grain or worms, I suppose... The birds that were behind were perpetually flying over the heads of all the rest, and alighting in the front of the flock, so that each bird was in the front rear by turns, and all were chattering.” Adams wrote these lines as New England was emerging out of its long winter, and this was, “the first vernal scene [he had] observed this season.” As the spring approached, he longed for its vibrancy and warmth. Spring was always his favorite season and he was annually “amused” by it. He appreciated the “young and sprightly grass and flowers, roses, leaves on the trees, and one-hundred species of birds flying in the air,” that warmer weather offered. Coming out of the cold New England winter, springtime offered new scenes and alternatives to the dreary landscape of the previous months, which Adams considered, “pale, lifeless, and dead... with very little beauty.” The verdant landscapes that Adams loved teemed with life and color, prompting him to write of the season in gleeful exclamation, “Oh nature! How beautiful thou art!”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ JA, *Diary*, March 14, 1759, in “John Adams diary 2 (October 5, 1758-April 9, 1759),” in MHS-AFP.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

Adams believed the experience of this sublimity, or as he called it, “the magnificence of nature,” led humanity to “sink down in profound admiration,” of a reality its imagination could not comprehend.¹⁹⁶ “Natural magnificence” was a close synonym of “the sublime” in his writings. Adams wanted to understand the inner workings of natural magnificence, or the “art of the sublime” in nature, and in the human person. In investigating this, he likely did not realize that he was at a crossroads of the intellectual trends of thinking about nature. Mixing Enlightenment scientific thinking and romantic sublimity, Adams considered the “rules...[to] help us to acquire [it, i.e. sublimity].”¹⁹⁷ Adams believed that sublimity was found in the effects of the, “sun, moon, the sky, earthquakes, thunder, tempests, comets...”¹⁹⁸ Adams desired to take the harmonious principles of sublimity and find them in speech, word, and sound. Understanding the sublime was a combination of practical and aesthetic thinking for Adams as he wrote:

...The art of the sublime, like the art of natural philosophy is in a science, and that experiment and observation are the natural means of improving both. We must make trial of the effects of different sounds, of different ideas and of different sentiments on the human senses, passions, imagination and understanding, to discover the general rules for producing the sublime...

Few examples in Adams’s environmental thinking are clearer than this in demonstrating his intellectual dichotomy between practical Enlightenment thinking and proto-Romantic aestheticism. Ultimately, sublime cosmological wonder gave way to an understanding of the

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ JA, *Diary*, n.d., in “A Letter to Richard Cranch about Orlinda, a Letter on Employing One’s Mind, and Reflections on Procrastination, Genius, Moving the Passions, Cicero as Orator, Milton’s Style, &c (October–December 1758),” in MHS-APDE, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-02-01-02-0010-0001-0003#sn=0>

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Divine ordering of creation. The Almighty's *Fiat*, for Adams, gave intelligibility, agency, and meaning to the vast array of material and moral nature.¹⁹⁹ Adams's Romanticism displayed profound respect for natural beauty in both the gentleness of nature and in a sublime sense of power and fear in nature. Appreciating nature for Adams was a fundamental tenet of being a human as nature, truth, and beauty were interconnected forms of being.²⁰⁰

Conclusion

John Adams was infused by Enlightenment utilitarian ideas of nature, but he simultaneously found himself pulled by Romantic sympathies towards it. Adams's worldview and approach to nature synthesized transatlantic Enlightenment and Romantic intellectual trends in a specific American context. Adam's ideas of nature are microcosmic of a general shift in American environmental thought during the transition between Enlightenment practicality and Romantic idealism. For him, nature was the unchangeable order of material reality and was made known to humanity through sensory empiricism and reason. He took an anthropocentric approach in framing a united idea of nature that incorporated both humanity and the natural world. For Adams, humanity was part of nature, but also stood above it in dignity and value. Adams saw humanity as rational, passionate, moral, and malleable by nature and believed a just society was best promoted by adherence to the natural law. In an environmental sense, Adams viewed the natural world with both practical and aesthetic, or Enlightenment and Romantic, ideas. While humanity could use and commodify the natural world, it also had the obligation to appreciate its

¹⁹⁹ JA, *Diary*, May 27, 1756, in "John Adams diary 1 (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756)," in MHS-AFP.

²⁰⁰ JA, *Diary*, May 11, 1756, in "John Adams diary 1 (November 18, 1755-August 29, 1756)," in MHS-AFP.

aesthetic and divine aspects. These complex ideas of nature warrant Adams recognition as one of the Early Republic's deepest environmental thinkers.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Archived Sources from MHS:

Adams, Abigail. Letters from Abigail Adams to John Adams, Massachusetts Historical Society, *Adams Papers Digital Edition* [APDE] [all correspondence from Abigail to John is linked from “Letters from Abigail to John,”]: [Adams Papers Digital Edition \(http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/browse/letters_AA.php\)](http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/browse/letters_AA.php)].

Adams, John. Autobiography of John Adams Part 1. Massachusetts Historical Society, *Adams Papers Digital Edition*, [Adams Papers Digital Edition \(www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/ADMS-01-03\)](http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/ADMS-01-03).

Adams, John. Autobiography of John Adams Parts 2-3. Massachusetts Historical Society *Adams Papers Digital Edition*, [Adams Papers Digital Edition \(http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/ADMS-01-04\)](http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/ADMS-01-04).

Adams, John. Diary of John Adams. Massachusetts Historical Society, *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive* [AFP], Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive, https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/browse/diaries_by_number.php

Adams, John. Diary of John Adams. Massachusetts Historical Society, *Adams Papers Digital Edition*, <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/>

Adams, John. Letters from John Adams to Abigail Adams, Massachusetts Historical Society, *Adams Papers Digital Edition* [all correspondence from John to Abigail is linked from “Letters from John to Abigail,” [Adams Papers Digital Edition \(http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/browse/letters_JA.php\)](http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/browse/letters_JA.php)].

Adams, John. Papers of John Adams Vol. 1. Massachusetts Historical Society, *Adams Papers Digital Edition*, [Adams Papers Digital Edition\(https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/ADMS-06-01\)](https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/volume/ADMS-06-01)

Individual Sources:

Adams, John to Adriaan van de Kemp, Francis, November 5, 1804; quoted in Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 161.

Adams, John to Adriaan van der Kemp, Francis, January 8, 1806; quoted in Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 161.

Adams, John to Addriaan van der Kemp, Francis, January 26, 1802; quoted in Wulf, *Founding Gardeners*, 161.

Adams, John to Cooper, Samuel, June 9, 1776. *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-04-02-0145>. [Original source: The Adams Papers, Papers of John Adams, vol. 4, February–August 1776, ed. Robert J. Taylor. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979, pp. 357–358.]

Adams, John to Hollis, Thomas Brand, December 3, 1788. *Founders Online*, National Archives, [Founders Online, National Archives\(https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-19-02-0256\)](https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-19-02-0256). [Original source: The Adams Papers, Papers of John Adams, vol. 19, February 1787–May 1789, ed. Sara Georgini, Sara Martin, R. M. Barlow, Amanda M. Norton, Neal E. Millikan, and Hobson Woodward. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016, pp. 356–357.]

Adams, John to Jefferson, Thomas, May 22, 1785 and May 23, 1785. *Founders Online*, National Archives, [Founders Online, National Archives\(https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-08-02-0113\)](https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-08-02-0113). [Original source: The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, vol. 8, 25 February–31 October 1785, ed. Julian P. Boyd. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953, pp. 159–160.]

Adams, John to Massachusetts Militia, October 11, 1798. *Founders Online*, National Archives, [Founders Online, National Archives\(https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3102\)](https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3102).

Adams, John to Taylor, John, March 5, 1815. *Founders Online*, National Archives, [Founders Online, National Archives\(https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6425\)](https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6425).

Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry in the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. 1757. hosted by University of Michigan, [University of Michigan\(https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004807802.0001.000?rgn=main;view=toc\)](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004807802.0001.000?rgn=main;view=toc).

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. 1651. hosted by Project Gutenberg Books, [Project Gutenberg Books,\(https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm\)](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm).

Jefferson Weather and Climate Records. ed. Princeton University, [Jefferson Weather and Climate Records\(https://jefferson-weather-records.org/\)](https://jefferson-weather-records.org/).

Obituary of Susanna Boylston Adams Hall, April 29, 1797. Adams Family Correspondence Vol. 12. Massachusetts Historical Society, *Adams Papers Digital Edition*, [Adams Papers Digital Edition\(http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-04-12-02-0062#sn=33\)](http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-04-12-02-0062#sn=33).

Reid, Thomas. *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, 1764. hosted by LibriVox, [LibriVox\(https://librivox.org/an-inquiry-into-the-human-mind-on-the-principles-of-common-sense-by-thomas-reid\)](https://librivox.org/an-inquiry-into-the-human-mind-on-the-principles-of-common-sense-by-thomas-reid)

Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments and on the Origins of Language*. 1759. hosted by Online Library of Liberty (OLL), [Library of Liberty \(https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/smith-the-theory-of-moral-sentiments-and-on-the-origins-of-languages-stewart-ed\)](https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/smith-the-theory-of-moral-sentiments-and-on-the-origins-of-languages-stewart-ed).

Washington, George to Hancock, John, December 4, 1775. National Archives, [National Archives\(https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/eyewitness/html.php?section=4\)](https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/eyewitness/html.php?section=4), [National Archives\(https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/index.html?dod-date=1204\)](https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/index.html?dod-date=1204).

Secondary Sources:

Anderson, Virginia. *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Bailyn, Bernard. "Butterfield's Adams: Notes for a Sketch." *William and Mary Quarterly* 3, no. 19 (1962): 239-56.

Beck, W. David. "The Thomistic Cosmological Argument." *Liberty University SOR Faculty Publication and Presentations* (2004): 95-107.

Coates, Peter. *Nature: Western Attitudes Since Ancient Times*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.

Cooper, Kody W., and Dyer, Justin Buckley. "Thomas Jefferson, Nature's God, and the Theological Foundations of Natural Rights Republicanism." *Politics and Religion* 10 (2017): 662-688.

Cronon, William. *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2003. First published in 1983.

_____. "The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (January 1996): 7-28.

Fiege, Mark. *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2012.

Forde, Steven. "John Locke and the Natural Law and Natural Rights Tradition." in *Natural Law, Natural Rights, and American Constitutionalism*, ed. Witherspoon Institute, 2011. [Witherspoon Institute \(http://www.nlnrac.org/earlymodern/locke\)](http://www.nlnrac.org/earlymodern/locke).

Johnson, Ronald Angelo. *Diplomacy in Black and White: John Adams, Toussaint Louverture, and Their Atlantic World Alliance*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2014.

Kirk, Russell. *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*. Washington, DC: Gateway Edition, 2019. First published in 1953.

Kraynak, Robert P. "Thomas Hobbes: From Classical Natural Law to Modern Natural Rights," in *Natural Law, Natural Rights, and American Constitutionalism*, ed. Witherspoon Institute, 2011. [Witherspoon Institute \(http://www.nlnrac.org/earlymodern/hobbes/\)](http://www.nlnrac.org/earlymodern/hobbes/).

Lamont, John. "The Fall and Rise of Aristotelian Metaphysics in the Philosophy of Science." *Journal of Science and Education* 18, no. 6-7 (2007): 861-884.

Marx, Leo. "The Idea of Nature in America." *Daedalus* 137, no. 2 (2008): 8-10.

May, Henry F. *The Enlightenment in America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1976.

McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2001.

Patchell, Thomas. "J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur" in *Early American Nature Writers: A Biographical Encyclopedia*, ed. Scott J. Bryson and Roger Thompson, and Daniel Patterson. Greenwood, CT: Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 2008.

Purdy, Jedediah. *After Nature: Politics for the Anthropocene*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

Reill, Peter Hanns. *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005.

Robinson, Daniel. "The Influence of the Scottish Enlightenment," in *Natural Law, Natural Right, and American Constitutionalism*, ed. Witherspoon Institute (2011), <https://www.nlnrac.org/american/scottish-enlightenment>.

_____. "The Scottish Enlightenment and the American Founding." in *Monist* 90, no. 2 (2007): 170.

Rous, Sarah A. "John Adams Reads Terence." in *The Classical World* 113, no. 3 (2020): 299-334

_____. "Stadium sine calamo somnium: John Adams's Favorite Maxim." in *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews* 31, no. 4 (2018): 226-234.

The Rubin Report, “Who was John Adams? C. Bradley Thompson | POLITICS | Rubin Report,”

YouTube video, February 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C52ZqjibU1M>

Ryerson, Richard Alan. *John Adams’s Republic: The One, the Few, and the Many*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2016.

Sayre, Gordon M. “Jefferson Takes on Buffon: The Polemic on American Animals in Notes on the State of Virginia.” *William and Mary Quarterly* 78, no 1, (2021): 79-116.

Scherr, Arthur. “Visions Judaïques”: John Adams on Judaism and Christianity.” *Cithara* 58, no. 1 (2018): 3-82.

Shaw, Peter. *The Character of John Adams*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1976; quoted in C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*. Lawrence KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998.

Slaughter, Thomas P. *The Natures of John and William Bartram*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1996.

Smith, John L. Jr. “The Remarkable Spanish Pilgrimage of John Adams,” in *Journal of the American Revolution* (November 23, 2016): <https://allthingsliberty.com/2016/11/remarkable-spanish-pilgrimage-john-adams/>.

Somos, Mark. *American States of Nature: The Origins of Independence, 1761-1775*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Stoll, Mark. *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Thompson, C. Bradley. *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998.

_____. "John Adams and The Spirit of Liberty." C-SPAN video, January 7, 1999, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?118219-1/john-adams-spirit-liberty>

_____. "John Adams and The Spirit of Liberty." C-SPAN video, March 4, 1999, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?121235-1/john-adams-spirit-liberty>

Thompson, Keith. *A Passion for Nature: Thomas Jefferson and Natural History*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Trees, Andy. "John Adams and the Problem of Virtue." *Journal of the Early Republic* Vol. 21, No. 3 (2001): 393-412.

Valsania, Maurizio. "Our Original Barbarism": Man vs. Nature in Thomas Jefferson's Moral Experience." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65, no. 4 (2004): 633.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Wulf, Andrea. *Founding Gardeners: The Revolutionary Generation, Nature, and the Shaping of the American Nation*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.