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NEWS

President of facility honoring Quincy presidents sets high expectation. What he aspires to



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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

The Adams Presidential Center held its first public event on Oct. 30, featuring a panel about John Adams' political and civic legacy.

The center's director, Kurt Graham, expressed his ambition to make the Adams Presidential Center as renowned as Mount Vernon and Monticello.

The center plans to host quarterly speaker series events exploring the lives and legacies of the Adams family.

QUINCY – On John Adams' 289th birthday, inaugural president of the Adams Presidential Center, Kurt Graham, made a bold statement about the organization's ambitions.

“We have every intention of putting the Adams Presidential Center on a par with Mount Vernon and Monticello,” said Graham, who directed the Harry Truman Presidential in Missouri for nine years, overseeing a massive, \$30 million renovation project.

The statement came during the Adams Presidential Center's first public event on Oct. 30, a panel about the political and civic legacy of Adams.

The event, attended by some 200 people and another 100 online, took place at Quincy High School because the Adams Center does not yet occupy a physical location. In an interview with The Patriot Ledger, Graham said he's excited to start something new.

"I see my work as a tremendous opportunity," he said. "Nothing is here yet, and we're going to build something from the ground up. We don't exist yet as a physical space. But there are

all types of programming and educational work we can do while we're building a research and educational facility."

John Adams' commitment to education and constitutionalism

Jeffrey Rosen, president of the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, began the discussion by describing the deep commitment of John and Abigail Adams to self-improvement and self-mastery, using an anecdote from their courtship to illustrate the point.

"What do they decide to do when they're dating?" Rosen asked rhetorically. "To make a list of each other's faults. They're getting this from (sixth-century Greek philosopher) Pythagoras, who has a system of self-accounting.

"Abigail recognizes that John is considered the most arrogant man of his time. ... And (John) said, 'Well, you should practice the piano more and read more, plus you're pigeon toed.'"

The flip side of Adams' belief in education was a profound distrust of human nature, Rosen said, which led to his antidemocratic leanings and insistence on a constitutional separation of powers. Adams' distrust ran so deep that he wanted to do away with what many consider the bedrock of liberal democracies – elections.

"He doesn't trust popular offices and wants to make them hereditary in order to resist corruption," Rosen said

Adams and Jefferson, America's founding frenemies

Adams' distrust of human nature put him at odds with the great Virginian diplomat Thomas Jefferson, according to Jane Kamensky, president of Monticello, Jefferson's estate in Charlottesville, Virginia.

"They famously fall out in the 1790s and don't speak for 11 years," Kamensky said. "The competing visions of the United States have come to seem so contentious that part of the revolutionary band of brothers, two-fifths of the drafting committee for the Declaration of Independence, can no longer speak (to each other)."

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But Adams and Jefferson eventually reconciled through their voluminous correspondence that lasted decades, in which they shared their views on government, philosophy, religion, family and more.

Kamensky said she finds hope in their ability to transcend deep political differences by "exploring ... where they and the country have been and where they and the country can go." Their example provides a model through which today's bitterly divided citizenry can reach a common understanding through dialogue, Kamensky said.

Adams' place in the history of American slavery and abolition

Harvard professor of history Danielle Allen, who sits on the Adams Presidential Center board of directors, noted that, unlike Washington and Jefferson, Adams never owned slaves. John, Abigail and later John Quincy Adams continuously opposed slavery, Allen said.

In an implicit criticism of the New York Times' "1619 Project," which claimed that the Revolutionary War was fought in part to preserve slavery from British abolition, Allen said that Adams put Massachusetts on the road to outlawing slavery.

"When Adams wrote the Massachusetts Constitution, he drew on the language of the Declaration of Independence," Allen said. "And of course the way he drew on that language provided the basis for the Massachusetts Supreme Court to declare enslavement counter to the Massachusetts Constitution."

Like Rosen, Allen stressed Adams' commitment to public education as the surest means to protect revolutionary gains.

"He was not a full democrat in his politics, but he was a full democrat in his commitment to an expectation of education for all," she said.

It's a commitment the Adams Presidential Center and Allen herself have undertaken. Allen advises the Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy, a K-12 framework for history and civics education created by more than 300 teachers, students, scholars and professionals from the private and public sectors, according to its webpage.

And the Adams Presidential Center, even as it fundraises and designs its future home, plans to continue the speaker series with quarterly events exploring the lives and legacies of John, Abigail, Louisa Catherine and John Quincy Adams.

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