



The President, Yellow Fever and St. Paul's

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A combination of yellow fever and family ties led to the residence of President John Adams in the shadows of St. Paul's Church in the summer and fall of 1797.

The dreaded mosquito-borne viral disease, yellow fever often ravaged Philadelphia in the 1700s, and the epidemic that struck the City of Brotherly Love in 1797 was among the most deadly; even the city's Mayor perished. President and Abigail Adams abandoned Philadelphia -- the nation's capital at the time -- and sought refuge with their daughter Abigail (nicknamed Nabby) and son-in-law William Smith, a Revolutionary War officer. The Smiths lived in a large house on the road to Westchester Square, near today's intersection of E. 233rd Street and Provost Avenue in the Bronx, ¼ mile from St. Paul's, part of the historic Town of Eastchester.

One of the foremost heroes of the American Revolution, Adams was 62 and barely into his term as the nation's second President, after serving as George Washington's vice president for eight years. The Federalist candidate, Adams had defeated former friend and Republican standard-bearer Thomas Jefferson in 1796 in the first seriously contested election for President. Controversies spawned during that canvass, especially different views of the French Revolution, continued to shape the country's public life. Additionally, Adams faced the dilemma of a divided cabinet, with several secretaries more loyal to Federalist party chief Alexander Hamilton than to the President.

When President Adams lived near St. Paul's, and attended Sunday services, his major international challenge was the undeclared naval war with France. In case of urgent business, Adams informed his Secretary of State that he had "arrived here at Col. Smith's last night with my family and I shall make this house my home till we can go to Philadelphia with Safety. If you address your letters to me at East Chester and recommend them to the care of Charles Adams, Esq. of New York (one of the President's sons), I shall get them without much loss of time, but if a mail could be made up for East Chester, they might come sooner. I know not whether this can be done without appointing a postmaster at this place, and I know of no one to recommend. I shall divide my time between New York and East Chester till the meeting of Congress."

The domestic situation in the Smith house was tense. Nabby and William had become engaged in a whirlwind European romance, but married life was not charmed. William was frequently away, aboard, pursuing various schemes to wealth which did not materialize, and his absences bore heavily on Nabby. Their residence at the Eastchester

house was actually supposed to be a temporary situation while William constructed a mansion in New York City. Abigail anguished over her daughter's emotional health.

Accustomed to the excitement of the nation's capital, the First Lady also found her neighbors in the St. Paul's vicinity provincial and limited, as she informed her sister: "I have not yet been into New York, and one might as well be out of American as in this village only 20 miles distant from New York, for unless we send in on purpose we cannot even get a Newspaper out. Yet are we in sight of the post road. It is quite a village of Farmers who do not trouble their heads about anything, but the productiveness of their Farms."