

JULY 4, 1826: EXPLAINING THE SAME-DAY DEATHS OF JOHN ADAMS AND THOMAS JEFFERSON*

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John Adams and Thomas Jefferson died on the same day, July 4, 1826. Both were old men—Adams was 90, and Jefferson was 83—and both were ill, though Adams had been in comparatively robust health until just a few months earlier and Jefferson had been ill for an extended period. They had been rivals, indeed enemies, for some time; Jefferson had defeated Adams in the presidential election of 1800. But they had repaired their differences and had pursued an active correspondence with each other in the years before their deaths. On that

final day, the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Adams died at his home in Quincy, Massachusetts, and Jefferson died at his home in Monticello, Virginia, the two separated by hundreds of miles and by many days of overland travel time.

Although the fact that Adams and Jefferson died the same day is taught to practically every schoolchild, asking why is not. What could explain this? There are at least six principal avenues to explore, but *all* of them raise further issues.

Explanation 1: Coincidence

That the two deaths occurred on the same day could be a coincidence, as it is often assumed. But if so, it is a coincidence of considerable magnitude, since it involves three distinct components: same day; same significant date (July 4, Independence Day); and same historic anniversary (fifty years). That any individual dies on a given day of the year has, on average, a probability of about 1 in 365,

though in 19th-century Massachusetts deaths typically peaked during the winter and then spiked again during the summer. The statistical probability that two individuals die in the same year is a function of age and health status as well as the size of the background population. Jefferson was seven years younger than Adams, but his overall health was worse. The probability that the two would die on the same significant date is more difficult to quantify, and there are other significant dates in the American calendar—Christmas, Easter (Lincoln would be assassinated on Good Friday), Thanksgiving—but Independence Day would have been the date of greatest importance to figures in political life, indeed, former presidents. And the fact that the death dates for both Adams and Jefferson fell on an historic anniversary—the 50th anniversary, not the 49th or 51st—may seem to stretch beyond the point of sheer plausibility the claim that this was mere coincidence. But when appeals to coincidence are insufficient, we must look for explanations in common circumstance or common cause, or for causa-

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tion from one case to the other.

Explanation 2: Divine Intervention

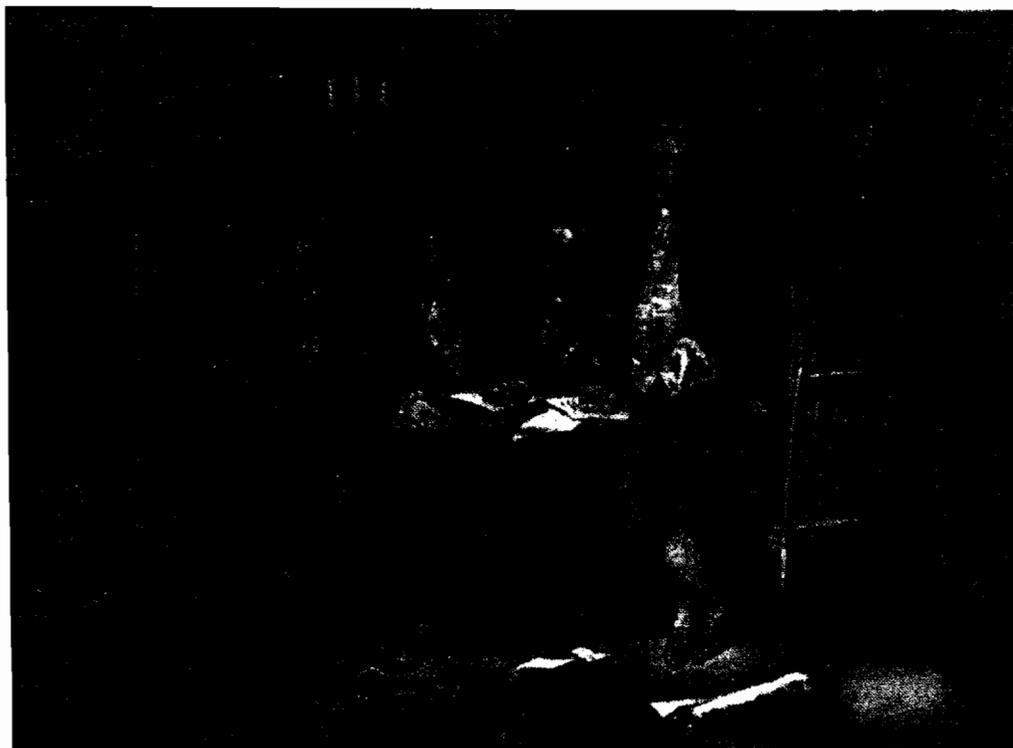
As the news of the two deaths reached the public, the same-day demise was widely interpreted as a matter of divine intervention. John Quincy Adams, John Adams's son and by then himself president, wrote in his diary the night he heard the news that the fact that his father and Jefferson had died on the same day and that it was the 4th of July could not have been a mere coincidence but was a "visible and palpable" manifestation of "Divine favor."¹ In Baltimore, Samuel Smith delivered a eulogy that attributed the timing of Adams's and Jefferson's deaths to an "All-seeing Providence, as a mark of approbation of their well spent lives"² In Boston, Daniel Webster delivered a two-hour eulogy in Faneuil Hall, insisting that the fact that the deaths had occurred on the nation's 50th birthday was "proof" from on high "that our country, and its benefactors, are objects of His care."³

Explanation 3: "Hanging On"

Perhaps the two old men were simply hanging on, waiting for the same important anniversary. When they reached it, they just gave up on the same day and died. There are several possible variations of the "hanging on" explanation: that each was independently hanging on, trying to reach the significant anniversary; that each was waiting to die but hung on because the anniversary was near; or that they were in effect competing with each other to remain alive until the important day but would each give up if they made it. Indeed, Adams's next-to-last words are said to have been "Thomas Jefferson survives," though the last word may have been indistinct.⁴ Jefferson, on the evening of the 3rd and then again after midnight, asked "Is it the 4th?"⁵ Clearly the anniversary would have had a great deal of meaning for each of them. Each had been invited to participate in the 50th anniversary celebrations, for which there was

a great deal of public anticipation: Adams's son, John Quincy, would be officiating as president, and Jefferson wrote his famous defense of self-government, though it was only a short letter and even so he would not be able to deliver it.

Some contemporary writers interpreted the deaths in this way. In a eulogy delivered in New York City about two weeks after the deaths, C. C. Cambreleng said of Jefferson that "The body had wasted away—but the energies of a powerful mind, struggling with expiring nature, kept the vital spark alive till



Augustus Tholey's 1894 depiction of John Adams, Robert Morris, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson at the Continental Congress. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZC4-7216].

the meridian sun shone on our 50th Anniversary—then content to die—the illustrious Jefferson gave to the world his last declaration."⁶

The biopsychosocial model of health and illness purports to show that the "will to live" is an important factor in remaining alive—"that our minds are powerful in determining life and death, health and well-being."⁷ Recent studies have attempted to document the phenomenon of "hanging on," presumably followed by giving up, in connection with birthdays, religious holidays, or other important events. For example, a 1972 study found that for three groups of well-known men, the most famous were least likely to die in the period before their birth month—indeed, they were five times less likely to die in the month before their birthdays than the average person. Another study looked at pat-

terns of death for Jewish men around the time of Passover, a religious family celebration in which the male head of the household plays a major role: it found a 24% decrease in the week before a weekend Passover and a 24% corresponding increase in the week afterward, a pattern interpreted as showing that Jewish men "delayed" their deaths until after this event of personal significance. Yet another study found that mortality from natural causes in elderly Chinese women dropped by more than a third in the week before the Harvest Moon Festival and increased in the

week after it by 35%.⁸ However, observations of patterns of delay and date-timing of deaths, whether in heart disease, cancer, or other conditions, nevertheless do not explain precisely how this effect occurs, if indeed it does; a 2004 analysis of Ohio cancer deaths between 1989 and 2000, responding to these and similar studies, found no evidence that patients are able to postpone their deaths to survive Christmas, Thanksgiving, or their own birthdays.⁹

Explanation 4: Being Allowed or Caused to Die by Others

Perhaps, instead, other people were involved. One

possible explanation suggests that there could have been a silent conspiracy among physicians, family members, and other caregivers to help their patient "make it" to the 4th, an effort discontinued when that goal was reached. A more active account asks whether Adams's and Jefferson's respective physicians, Amos Holbrook and Robley Dunglison, could have played a role in their patients' deaths, either inadvertently or deliberately—not out of malice, but perhaps seeking to relieve the sufferings of the dying, and choosing the historic anniversary as the appropriate occasion? Adams wrote to Benjamin Rush in 1810: "You Physicians are growing so familiar with Hemlock, and Arsenick, and Mercury Sublimate, and Laudanum, and Brandy and every Thing that used to frighten me, that I know not what you will do with us."¹⁰ Could Adams and/or

Jefferson have been administered substances—perhaps laudanum, an alcoholic tincture of opium—in an attempt to control pain, with an extra-heavy dose on that historic day? Adams's granddaughter Susan Boylston Clark, who was living in the Adams household at the time, reported that the doctor gave her grandfather a "medicine" the day before he died, saying both that "I should not be surprised, if he did not live twenty-four hours" but also that "[i]f the medicine which I shall give him operate favourably, he *may* live a week or two" [her italics].¹¹ Dr. Holbrook told John Quincy that his father had "suffered much" the night before he died; this would make the administration of a heavy dose of opium even more plausible.¹² "Double-effect" intervention by physicians resulting in death, though not intentionally, would be in keeping with contemporary attitudes about the permissibility of the overuse of morphine or other opioids for the control of pain, "foreseeing though not intending" that they may cause death; direct intervention by physicians or others to bring an easier—or perhaps more symbolic—death might also be in keeping with some practices in contemporary medicine, either where euthanasia is underground or where it is legal. Could physicians or family members have done essentially the same thing?

In a letter to his friend Dr. Brockenborough, John Randolph of Roanoke, who had been on an ocean voyage and datelined the letter The Hague, Tuesday, August 8, 1826, wrote: "And so old Mr. Adams is dead; on the 4th of July, too, just half a century after our Declaration of Independence; and leaving his son on the throne. This is Euthenasia, indeed. They have killed Mr. Jefferson, too, on the same day, but I don't believe it."¹³

However, there is no direct evidence for either a "double-effect" or euthanasia. We do not know what drug Adams was given. Whether Jefferson was given any new medication before his death is not known; indeed, Jefferson is known to have refused the laudanum he had been taking the night before he died.¹⁴

Explanation 5: Allowing Oneself to Die

In 1813, at age 77—some thirteen years before he actually died—Adams wrote a letter to the physician Benjamin Rush (a mutual friend of both Adams and Jefferson), a letter ostensibly penned by his horse Hobby. Perhaps I should do him a favor, Adams imagines Hobby as saying: perhaps I should stumble (and thus cause his death). Could this provide evidence that Adams hoped his death would be brought about or that circumstances would be set up that would allow him to die? Hobby is foreseeing his master's future burden of years:

Add such another 12 [years] and you make him 89: withered, faded, wrin-

Adams's concerns might be interpreted in a variety of ways: that Adams wished to die, that he perceived himself as a burden, that he feared the illness and decrepitude that old age would bring, that he was depressed.

kled, tottering, trembling, stumbling, sighing, groaning, weeping! Oh! I have some scruples of Conscience, whether I ought to preserve him: whether it would not be Charity to stumble, and relieve him from such a futurity . . . Remember too it is a Horse that asks the question, and that Horse is Hobby.¹⁵

Adams's concerns, translated into Hobby's words, might be interpreted in a variety of ways: that Adams wished to die, that he perceived himself as a burden, that he feared the illness and decrepitude that old age would bring, that he was depressed. But they also hint at one mechanism of "allowing to die": exposing oneself to the risk of death that might come about through a carefully disguised "accident"—for example, one brought about knowingly and deliberately, indeed loyally, by Adams's trusted horse.

Jefferson also had concerns about the debilities of aging. In a letter dated June 1, 1822, Jefferson wrote to Adams describing the evidently senile Charles Thomson, who was then about 93:

It is at most but the life of a cabbage, surely not worth a wish. When all our

faculties have left, or are leaving us, one by one, sight, hearing, memory, every avenue of pleasing sensation is closed, and athumy, debility and malaise left in their places, when the friends of our youth are all gone, and a generation is risen around us whom we know not, is death an evil?

When one by one our ties are torn,
And friend from friend is snatched
forlorn

When man is left alone to mourn,
Oh! then how sweet it is to die!

When trembling limbs refuse their
weight,

And films slow gathering dim the sight,
When clouds obscure the mental light

'Tis nature's
kindest boon to
die!¹⁶

C o u l d
Jefferson's wish
to die have been
an active one? In
a eulogy delivered
in Richmond a
week after the

deaths, John Tyler said of Jefferson, "One other theme dwelt on his lips until they were motionless—It was the Fourth of July—He often expressed the wish to die on the day."¹⁷ Could Jefferson's refusal to take his medications in his last hours be interpreted as a more direct effort to allow his own death to occur, or even to bring it about? Of course, it cannot be supposed that the medications were actually efficacious in keeping him alive; nevertheless, the refusal of further medication might seem to be evidence of what contemporary bioethicists would describe as "withholding or withdrawing treatment" or "allowing to die." However, the historical record provides no more direct evidence for this explanation or any indication of Jefferson's intention to refuse medication.

In mid-June 1822, about ten days after Jefferson had written to Adams with the poem just quoted, Adams, also clearly burdened by ill health, replied:

I answer your question, Is Death an Evil? It is not an Evil. It is a blessing to the individual, and to the world. Yet we ought not to wish for it till life becomes insupportable; we must wait the pleasure and convenience of this

great teacher. Winter is as terrible to me, as to you. I am almost reduced in it, to the life of a Bear or a torpid swallow. I cannot read, but my delight is to hear others read¹⁸

What remains unclear is whether Adams's view that "one ought not to wish for [death] till life becomes insupportable" would or would not countenance allowing oneself to die, whether by refusing medication or in any other way: ought one not wish for it at all, or not wish for it until truly bad circumstances prevail?

Explanation 6: Causing Oneself to Die.

Could the two old men have hastened their own deaths, or deliberately brought them about? They might each have seemed to have some reason for suicide. Adams was familiar with tragic, apparently self-caused death in his family. His son Charles had been driven to an early demise, ending his life in an alcoholic stupor in 1800. His grandson, George Washington Adams, may have committed suicide in 1829 by jumping off a ship in Long Island Sound. Adams's daughter Abigail died from breast cancer in 1813, having already had a breast removed without anesthesia, and his wife Abigail died in 1818. Meanwhile, Jefferson, who had also lost a child during his presidency, was afflicted by many troubles toward the end of his life in addition to his failing health: his political world was collapsing; enrollments were poor at the institution he had been heavily involved in founding, the University of Virginia; and his debts were so substantial that a public raffle was instituted to try to save Monticello.

Of course, causing oneself to die need not carry the pejorative label *suicide*; it can be seen, rather, as a matter of self-deliverance in preference to the sufferings and indignities of protracted dying. Adams, a deeply religious man, would probably not have conceived of ending his life in a comparatively deliberate way as suicide, something that was universally denounced by the clergy of the era. Jefferson's religiosity was far more idiosyn-

cratic. Still, it is not clear that their religious views would have played an active role in ending their own lives.

Indeed, some writers have intimated that these men did play active roles in their own deaths. Among the eulogists of the time, Caleb Cushing hints at this in saying that these lines could truly have been written of each:



President John Adams. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-3992].

Nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it.
He died
As one that had been studied in his
death.¹⁹

Joseph Ellis calls Adams's expiring on the 4th "the last and most symbolic act of his life," particularly because he was willing to die on the 4th, not the 2nd (Adams had initially viewed July 2 as the date of real importance in the birth of the United States, since it was on that date that he had persuaded the Congress to adopt the Declaration of Independence; the document was merely signed on the 4th). Ellis also describes

Adams, who was sitting in his favorite chair in his upstairs study on the morning of the day he would die, as perhaps trying to "resist the swells of satisfaction he might be expected to feel on that special day"²⁰—though this hardly explains how he could go from a condition of such alertness and good feeling to death within a few hours: Adams was dead by 6:20 that evening. And Fawn Brodie writes, "If ever two men in history chose and controlled the moment of their dying, they were John Adams and Thomas Jefferson."²¹

While such comments may seem to be sheer speculation, perhaps there is something to the argument that Adams and/or Jefferson hastened their own deaths. Adams was apparently familiar with lethal drugs. In 1811 he wrote to Benjamin Rush in connection with Rush's anti-alcohol campaign that "The Table of Cyder and Health and Poison and Death I have given to Dr. Tuft [Dr. Cotton Tufts], who will propagate it. It is a concise but very comprehensive Result of long Experience, attentive observation and deep and close Thought."²² In 1813 Jefferson wrote to Dr. Samuel Brown about the matter of lethiferous drugs:

The most elegant thing of that kind is a preparation of the Jamestown weed ["Jimson weed"], *Datura Stramonium*, invented by the French in the time of Robespierre. Every man of firmness carried it constantly in his pocket to anticipate the guillotine. It brings on the sleep of death as quietly as fatigue does the ordinary sleep, without the least struggle or motion. Condorcet, who had recourse to it, was found lifeless on his bed a few minutes after his landlady had left him there, and even the slipper which she had observed half suspended on his foot, was not shaken off. It seems far preferable to the Venesection of the Romans, the Hemlock of the Greeks, and the Opium of the Turks. I have never been able to learn what the preparation is, other than a strong concentration of its lethiferous principle. Could such a medicament be restrained to self-

administration, it ought not to be kept secret. There are ills in life as desperate as intolerable, to which it would be the rational relief, *e.g.*, the inveterate cancer²³

However, there is no evidence that either Adams or Jefferson took such a drug on July 4, 1826.

Each of these six explanations for the same-day deaths of Adams and Jefferson is inadequate on its face: the coincidence is too great; divine intervention requires background theological assumptions beyond the scope of rational explanation; “hanging on” and “giving up” require pathophysiological assumptions not well understood; and the various forms of direct-causation explanations, including inadvertent or deliberate allowing to die, physician or family-performed euthanasia, and suicide, all suffer from a lack of compelling evidence. It isn’t necessary that the explanation of the cause of death be the same for both Adams and Jefferson; yet whatever each explanation involves, it must attend to the remarkable synchrony of their deaths.

Furthermore, the issue of synchrony—whatever the individual explanations for their deaths—also leaves us with the further question of coordination. Did Adams and Jefferson think alike but act independently? Could they have had some joint understanding, reached perhaps in 1813—when each had been corresponding with a physician, Adams with Benjamin Rush about a horse’s deliberate stumble and Jefferson with Samuel Brown about lethal drugs—that they then recalled later on? Did their physicians or families think alike but act independently, or perhaps in concert? Could their families and caregivers have lied about the precise dates of their deaths, seeking to lend their demises a greater grandeur? Or was there a more orchestrated plan here, known only to these two men or to their physicians and families, that accounts for the extraordinary “coincidence” or “grand design” of their deaths? Could it have been the mode, so to speak, to die on the 4th if at all possible, by

whatever means? After all, not just Adams and Jefferson, but *three* of the first five presidents of the young United States died on the 4th of July. In 1831, just five years after the deaths of Adams and Jefferson, James Monroe, the fifth president, did so as well.

Given the insufficient historical evidence available, we can’t know the truth about why Adams and Jefferson died on the same day. But we can reflect on whether it would make

ately gives up or actively brings about death. Where we stand with respect to these two basic postures may influence how we explain the deaths of Adams and Jefferson.

On the one hand, if we assume that Adams and Jefferson simply let death come to them, we need a more persuasive account of either coincidence or divine intervention. Or, on the other hand, could some more active process have been at work? Did physicians or family caregivers play a causal role in the deaths of Adams and Jefferson, deliberately allowing or helping them to die? Did Adams and Jefferson themselves not only will themselves to die on that day but do something to make it occur? Did they refuse treatment with that intention? Suppose they took a drug like Condorcet used: would we count that as suicide or self-deliverance, and if so, should that have bearing on the currently volatile issue of physician-assisted suicide? If we think they could have done this, even discreetly and without clear evidence in the historical record, why shouldn’t we allow ourselves to die in the same way?

Thus what we say about Adams and Jefferson, in the absence of compelling historical evidence, may in the end reflect what we want to say about ourselves. In our current legal and political climate, in which the original intent of the Founding Fathers is treated with extraordinary gravity, what we believe about the deaths of Adams and Jefferson (and Monroe) may play a very large role in our views about what we call “the right to die.”

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Thomas Jefferson, a philosopher, a patriote [sic], and a friend, circa 1800-16. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZC4-7084].

a difference to us if one or another of these explanations turned out to be true. After all, the six possibilities these explanations raise are central to the very questions about death and dying that are so controversial today: disputes over withdrawing and withholding treatment, allowing to die, the overuse of morphine, terminal sedation, physician-assisted suicide, and euthanasia.

Two quite different postures are in competition in these disputes. One insists that the patient play a comparatively passive role in accepting death when it comes—whether it is explained as the product of divine intervention, sheer coincidence, or failure to hang on. The other casts the patient in a potentially active role, as the intender or designer or cause of his own death, whether he deliber-

¹ Allan Nevins, ed., *The Diary of John Quincy Adams, 1794-1845* (Scribner, 1951), 360, cited in David McCullough, *John Adams* (Simon &

Schuster, 2001), 647.

² Baltimore, Maryland, July 20, 1826, in *A Selection of Eulogies, Pronounced in the Several States, In Honor of Those Illustrious Patriots and Statesmen, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* (Hartford, 1826), 88-89.

³ Boston, Faneuil Hall, August 2, 1826, in *A Selection of Eulogies*, 156.

⁴ Susan Boylston Adams Clark to Abigail Louisa Smith Adams Johnson, July 9, 1826, A. B. Johnson papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, cited in McCullough, *John Adams*, 646; Andrew Burstein in *America's Jubilee: How in 1826 a Generation Remembered Fifty Years of Independence* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 266-274, examines the evidence for this claim and finds it wanting; it is established only that Adams spoke the name "Thomas Jefferson" but what followed apparently was inarticulate.

⁵ Burstein, *America's Jubilee*, 263.

⁶ C. C. Cambreleng, *Selection of Eulogies*, 66.

⁷ Oakley Ray, "How the Mind Hurts and Heals the Body," *American Psychologist* 59 (January 2004):37.

⁸ Studies cited in Ray, "How the Mind Hurts and Heals the Body," 37.

⁹ Donn C. Young and Erin M. Hade, "Holidays, Birthdays, and Postponement of Cancer Death," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 292 (2004): 3012-16.

¹⁰ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, August 6, 1810, in Alexander Biddle, *Old Family Letters* (Philadelphia, 1892), 23.

¹¹ Susanna Boylston Adams Clark to Abigail Louisa Smith Adams Johnson, July 9, 1826, Quincy, Mass., Massachusetts Historical Society.

¹² Burstein, *America's Jubilee*, 266.

¹³ Hugh A. Garland, *The Life of John Randolph of Roanoke* (New York, 1850) 2: 273.

¹⁴ Sarah N. Randolph, *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson* (University Press of Virginia, 1978), 428, cited in McCullough, *John Adams*, 646.

¹⁵ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, January 4, 1813, in Biddle, *Old Family Letters*, 333-34.

¹⁶ Jefferson to Adams, Monticello, June 1, 1822, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* (University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 578.

¹⁷ John Tyler, pronounced at Richmond, Virginia,

July 11, 1826, in *Selection of Eulogies*, 16.

¹⁸ Adams to Jefferson, Montezillo, June 11, 1822, *Selection of Eulogies*, 579.

¹⁹ Caleb Cushing, pronounced at Newburyport, Massachusetts, July 15, 1826, in *Selection of Eulogies*, 22-23.

²⁰ Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage. The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (Norton, 1993), 234, 215.

²¹ Fawn M. Brodie, *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (Norton, 1974), 468.

²² John Adams to Benjamin Rush, Quincy, Mass., July 31, 1811, in Biddle, *Old Family Letters*, 342.

²³ Jefferson to Dr. Samuel Brown, Monticello, July 14, 1813, in Albert Ellery Bergh, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Definitive Edition* (The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907), 13: 310-11.