

John Adams and the Camino de Santiago

"I have always regretted that We could not find time to make a Pilgrimage to Saint Iago de Compostella."

Those of you who have read David McCullough's† excellent biography of John Adams [1] were perhaps astonished to read the recounting of Adams journey to Paris December 1779 into January 1780, a journey that finds Adams and his party working their way overland eastward along a major length of the Camino *francés*. Was Adams aware of the pilgrimage route to Santiago? What were the conditions that he described along the way, the conditions that would have been experienced by any late 18th-century pilgrims?

In October 1779 Adams was appointed by Congress to return to France as minister with the specific charge of negotiating treaties of peace and commerce with Great Britain. Although this was a post that he had neither requested nor particularly desired, he accepted. In addition to an official secretary, Adams decided to take with him his two sons, John Quincy, aged 12, and Charles, aged 9. Adams had made the trans-Atlantic crossing in mid-winter before and he had no illusions about the difficulties and immense dangers of this voyage. His wife, Abigail would again remain at home. And so on November 15, 1779 aboard the frigate *Sensible* he was headed eastward across the ocean.

Two days out of Boston, the ship, carrying some 350 people, began to leak seriously. First one pump was put into service and then a second and after more than three weeks of day and night struggling to keep ahead of the water the captain put in at El Ferrol on the northwestern coast of Spain the 8th of December, 1779. The pumps were stopped on reaching port and in less than an hour there was seven feet of water in the hold. Being told that even if the ship were not condemned, repairs would take at least a month, Adams inquired about making the remainder of the journey overland. He decided to risk the latter rather than sit in port.

So at dawn the 15th of December Adams, his two sons, his secretary, servants, and hired Spanish guides and muleteers set off, one of the party noting that it was very much like a scene from *Don Quixote*. Adams mentions in his *Diary and Autobiography* that that in the time since putting ashore he had hardly slept a wink, so terrible was the plague of fleas and bedbugs, Spain's "innumerable Swarms of Enemies of all repose." [2, p. 213] This would not be the last mention of these tiny pests. Indeed they "persecuted me through the whole Kingdom of Spain to such a degree that I sometimes apprehended I should never live to see France." [2, p. 213]

After spending about 12 days getting to and in O Coruña their route passed through Betanzos, Lugo, O Cebreiro, Astorga, Burgos and then northeasterly up to Bilbao.

† No relation to the author of this article.

Shortly after getting underway Adams offers a description of the accommodations they were afforded. Imagery like this was repeated numerous times along the route. But let's let Adams tell the story in his own words. From his autobiography he writes:

Monday, December 27, 1779: We travelled from Betanzos to Castellano. ...The House in Castellano where We lodged was of Stone, two Stories in height. We entered into the Kitchen, where was no floor but the Ground and no Carpet but Straw trodden into mire by Men, Hogs, horses and Mules. In the middle of the Kitchen was a Mound raised a little above the Level of the Ground with Stones and Earth, on which was a fire, with Potts, Kettles, Skillets &c. of the fashion of the Country, over it, and round about it. There was no Chimney [so smoke] filled the room and if any of it ascended, it found no other passage to the open Air, but through two holes drilled through the Tyles of the roof, not perpendicularly over the fire, but at Angles of about forty five degrees. On one Side was a few Oven, very large, black, smoaky and sooty. On the opposite Side of the fire was a Cabbin filled with Straw where I suppose the Patron del Casa, that is, the Master of the House, his Wife and four Children, all lodged and slept together. On the same floor or rather on the same level of Ground, with the Kitchen was the Stable. There was indeed a Door which might have parted the Kitchen from the Stable: but this was always open, and indeed it would have been impossible to see or breath with it shut: and the floor or ground of the Stable, was covered with miry Straw like the Kitchen. ...The Smoke filled every part of the Kitchen, Stable, and all other parts of the House, and was so thick that it was very difficult to see or breath. There was a flight of Steps of Stone covered with Mud and Straw, from the Kitchen floor up into a Chamber. On the left hand as you ascended the Stairs, was a Stage, built up about half Way from the Kitchen floor to the Chamber floor. On this Stage was a bed of Straw and on the Straw lay, a fatting hog. Around the Kitchen fire were arranged the Man and Woman of the House, four Children, all the Travellers, Servants, Mulateers &c. Over the Fire was a very large Kettle, like a Pot Ash Kettle, full of Turnips and Onions, very large and very fine boiling for the Food of all the Family of Men and Beasts inhabiting both the Kitchen and the Stable, and the Stage. [2, p. 214]



The 1801 John Cary map of northern Spain showing Adams' route (solid black line) and the modern Camino *francés* (solid and dotted blue line).

Adams was apparently well aware of the pilgrimage to Santiago and its significance.

Tuesday, December 28, 1779: I have always regretted that We could not find time to make a Pilgrimage to Saint Iago de Compostella. We were informed, particularly by Mr.

Lagoanere, that the Original of this Shrine and Temple of St. Iago was this. A certain Shepherd saw a bright Light there in the night. Afterwards it was revealed to an Archbishop that St. James was buried there. This laid the Foundation of a Church, and they have built an Altar on the Spot where the Shepherd saw the Light. In the time of the Moors, the People made a Vow, that if the Moors should be driven from this Country, they would give a certain portion of the Income of their Lands to Saint James. The Moors were defeated and expelled and it was reported and believed, that Saint James was in the Battle and fought with a drawn Sword at the head of the Spanis[h] Troops, on Horseback. The People, believing that they owed the Victory to the Saint, very chearfully fulfilled their Vows by paying the Tribute.... [2, p. 217]

Adams was always the caustic, acerbic New Englander and he had little use for clergy generally. He certainly did not spare Catholic clergy and his narrative is laden with excoriating remarks.

Thursday, December 30, 1779: We went from Lugo to Galliego and arrived in good Season, having made six Leagues and an half† from Lugo. ...I saw nothing but Signs of Poverty and misery among the People: a fertile Country not half cultivated: People ragged and dirty: the Houses universally nothing but mire, Smoke, Soot, fleas and Lice: nothing appeared rich but the Churches, nobody fat but the Clergy. Many of the Villages We passed, were built with Mud filled in between joists, Nine tenths of them uninhabited and mouldering to dust. Yet in every one of these Scenes of desolation, you would see a splendid Church, and here and there a rosy faced Priest in his proud Canonicals rambling among the rubbish of the Village. [2, p. 218]

The party passes through O Cebreiro, Villafranca and Rabanal del Camino to Astorga.

Friday, December 31, 1779: We rode from Galliego to Sebrero, seven Leagues. Our journey was more agreable this day, than usual: the Weather was remarkably fair and dry, and the roads not so bad as We had expected. There was the grandest profusion of wild irregular Mountains I ever saw: yet laboured and cultivated to their Summits.... [2, p. 218]

Saturday, January 1, 1780: We arrived, from Sebrero, at Villa Franca, seven Leagues. ...The Houses had been uniformly the same, through the whole Country hitherto. Common habitations for Men and Beasts. The same smoaky, filthy Dens. Not one decent house had I seen, since I left Corunna. [2, p. 219]

Monday, January 3, 1780: We rode to Astorga. We passed through the Town and Country of the Marragattoes. The Town is small and stands on a brook in a great Plain. As We went into Astorga, We met Coaches and genteel People. [2, p. 220]

The party arrives in Astorga and Adams makes perhaps his first positive remarks about the journey and the towns and villages they were passing through.

Tuesday, January 4, 1780: At Astorga, We found clean Beds and no fleas for the first time since We had been in Spain. Walked twice round the Walls of the City, which are very ancient. We saw the Road to Leon and Bayonne and the road to Madrid. There is a pleasant Prospect of the Country from the Walls. Saw the Market of Vegetables. The Onions and Turnips were the largest and finest I ever saw. The Cabbages, Carrots &c. appeared very good. Saw the Markett of Fuel, which consisted of Wood, Coal, Turf and Brush.

† 1 league = 3 statute miles or about 4.8 km

We went to see the Cathedral Church which is the most magnificent I had yet seen in Spain. [2, p. 220]

Wednesday, January 5, 1780: We rode from Astorga to Leon, Eight Leagues. This was one great Plain, and the road through it was very fine. We saw large Herds of Cattle and immense flocks of Sheep. The Sheep were of an handsome Size, and their fleeces of Wool thick, long and extremely fine. The Soil appeared to be rather thin and barren. We passed several small Villages, the vast range of Asturias Mountains all covered with Snow on our left hand. ...Leon, which We entered in the night, had the Appearance of a large City. [2, p. 221]

Adams attends Mass in León and attracts the attention of the Bishop, not favorably.

Thursday, January 6, 1780: We went to see the Cathedral Church at Leon which though magnificent, is not equal to that at Astorga, if it is to that at Lugo. It was the day of the Feast of the King and We happened to be at the celebration of High Mass. We saw the Procession of the Bishop and of all the Canons, in rich habits of Silk, Velvet, Silver and gold. The Bishop as he turned the Corners of the Church spread out his hand to the People, in token of his Apostolical Benediction; and those, in token of their profound gratitude for the heavenly Blessing prostrated themselves on their Knees as he passed. Our Guide told Us We must do the same. But I contented myself with a Bow. The Eagle Eye of the Bishop did not fail to observe an Upright figure amidst the Crowd of prostrate Adorers: but no doubt perceiving in my Countenance and Air, but especially in my dress something that was not Spanish, he concluded I was some travelling Heretick and did not think it worth while to exert his Authority to bend my stiff Knees. His Eyes followed me so long that I thought I saw in his Countenance a reproof like this "You are not only a Heretick but you are not a Gentleman, for a Gentleman would have respected the Religion of the Country and its Usages so far as to have conformed externally to a Ceremony that cost so little." [2, p. 221]

Friday, January 7, 1780: From Mansillas We rode to San Juan Segun. [2, p. 224]

The party passes over the *meseta*.

Saturday, January 8, 1780: We rode from San Juan Segun to Paredise de Nava. ...The Villages all appear going to decay and crumbling to dust. Can this be the ancient Kingdom of Leon? Nevertheless every Village has Churches and Convents enough in it, to ruin it, and the whole Country round about it; even if they had nothing to pay to the King, or the Landlords. But all three together Church, State and Nobility exhaust the Labour and Spirits of the People to such a degree, that I had no Idea of the Possibility of deeper Wretchedness. ...There were in this little Village four Parish Churches and two Convents one of Monks and one of Nuns, both of the order of St. Francis. [2, p. 224]

From Astorga to this place Paredise de Nava, the Face of the Country was a great plain, and a striking Contrast to all the rest of the Country We had passed from Ferrol. But there was little Appearance [of] Improvement, Industry or Cultivation. Scarcely any Trees. No Forrest, Timber or fruit Trees. No Fences except a few Mud Walls for Sheep folds. This night We reached Sellada el Camino. [2, p. 225]

The party arrives in Burgos and Adams is led to make further biting remarks about the Church and the clergy.

Tuesday, January 11, 1780: We arrived at Burgos, from Sellada el Caminos, four Leagues. We had fog, rain, and Snow all the Way, very chilly and raw. ...We went out to

see the Cathedral which was ancient and very large. The whole Building was supported by four grand Pillars the largest I ever had seen. [2, p. 225]

For more than twenty Years I had been almost continually engaged in Journeys and Voyages and had often undergone severe Tryals, as I thought; great hardships, cold, rain, Snow, heat, fatigue, bad rest, indifferent nourishment, want of Sleep &c. &c. &c. But I had never experienced any Thing like this journey. If it were now left to my Choice to perform my first Voyage to Europe with all its horrors, or this journey through Spain, I should prefer the former. ...In my whole Life my Patience was never so near being totally exhausted. [2, p. 225]

There were some few Trades and a little Appearance of Business here; but the principal Occupation was Religion. Upon my expressing some Curiosity to [know] the Number of Religious Houses in Burgos, which appeared to me to be enough to devour a whole Country for an hundred miles round, our Guide went out and procured me the following Information. [Adams then lists 33 monasteries, convents and churches.] ...what an Army of Ecclesiasticks is this for so small a Town as Burgos. [2, p. 226]

The next day Adams' party left the present-day Camino *francés* route heading northeast then north, arriving in Bilbao on Saturday, January 15, 1780. They continued on to Paris arriving on February 9th after a journey of two months. In his first letter to Congress upon arriving in Paris he reported that they were all "in tollerable health, after a journey of near four hundred Leagues in the dead of Winter, through bad roads and worse Accommodations of every kind. We lost no time more than was indispensable to restore our health, which was several times much affected and in great danger: yet We were more than twice as long in making the journey by Land, as We had been in crossing the Atlantic Ocean." [2, p. 240]

So the Camino was in 1790 certainly alive enough that John Adams was aware of its existence. In fact about Santiago he remarks: "...there are great numbers of Pilgrims, who visit it, every Year, from France, Spain, Italy and other parts of Europe, many of them on foot." [2, p. 217] And he was aware enough of its importance to have remarked "I have always regretted that We could not find time to make a Pilgrimage to Saint Iago de Compostella." [2, p. 217] Also scattered throughout his account are descriptions of conditions along the route at that time, conditions that can only be described as horrific.

Adams' New England cynicism about clergy, Catholic clergy in particular, is more than evident in his account. Indeed while he places the blame for the conditions that he encounters — poverty, misery, hopelessness — on the collective shoulders of the "Church, State and Nobility" [2, p. 224] he singles out the clergy for special condemnation and excoriation. "People ragged and dirty: the Houses universally nothing but mire, Smoke, Soot, fleas and Lice: nothing appeared rich but the Churches, nobody fat but the Clergy. ... in every one of these Scenes of desolation, you would see a splendid Church, and here and there a rosy faced Priest in his proud Canonicals rambling among the rubbish of the Village." [2, p. 218]

For those of you with an attachment to Rabanal del Camino, you should take note that Adams and his party passed through that village on Monday, January 3, 1780. It is amusing to create a mental image of his entourage—a goodly number of mules, a wagon, three calashes (a light, small-wheeled four-passenger carriage with a folding

top)—rattling down the cobblestone street of Rabanal past the 12th-century church of Santa María de la Asunción, probably past numerous ruins of buildings and on down the hill to head off eastward on the road toward Astorga.

In the 18th century the Hospital de San Gregorio was the pilgrim refuge in Rabanal as it had been for many centuries. There are records of its existence in the 1720s and again in the early 1800s. Records in 1804 and in 1832 indicate a fair number of pilgrims on the road. [3, p. 280] This would imply that Adams would have surely encountered numerous pilgrims during his 12 or 13 days on the route between O Cebreiro and Burgos.

If this causes you to want to read more of Adams' account or perhaps even his entire diary and autobiography, fascinating reading, they are available on the Website of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Father John also required that 12-year old John Quincy keep a diary which is also available on this site. Please see the section "Further Reading" below.

References:

1. McCullough, David (2001). **John Adams**. Simon & Schuster. ISBN 0-684-81363-7.
2. Adams, John (1961). **Diary and autobiography**. Vol. 4. Autobiography, 1777-1780. L.H. Butterfield, editor. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
3. Gitlitz, David & Linda K. Davidson (2000). **The Pilgrimage Road to Santiago: The Complete Cultural Handbook**. St. Martin's Press. ISBN: 0-31225416-4.

Further Reading:

The Massachusetts Historical Society. John Adams' autobiography:
<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/autobio/>

The Massachusetts Historical Society. John Quincy Adams' diary:
www.masshist.org/jqadiaries

The Massachusetts Historical Society:
www.masshist.org

—Gene McCullough