



The President's Son

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Over the years, St. Paul's Church National Historic Site has been linked with many famous people, and witnessed many somber occasions. No episode so clearly combines those two themes as much as a funeral service held in the church on June 22, 1829.

John Quincy Adams had just been defeated by Andrew Jackson in his bid for a second term as President, ending a stormy and difficult tenure as the nation's chief executive. Years later Adams would return to public life as a crusading abolitionist Congressman. But on that June afternoon, when Adams and his wife came to the church for a late Sunday afternoon service, he was a grief stricken father, mourning the loss of one of their sons, 28-year-old George Washington Adams.

The church bore similarities to the edifice that exists today, particularly the 18th century stone and brick façade. The steeple President Adams observed would have been the wooden, largely open belfry erected after the Revolutionary War. The eastern addition was constructed in the 1850s along with the ornamental black iron fence that today guards St. Paul's. The President and Mrs. Adams walked in the entrance used today, greeted by the tall boxed pew arrangement that occupies the interior.

A Harvard educated lawyer and member of the Massachusetts state legislator, George Washington Adams was the son and grandson of Presidents, and perhaps the press of expectations bore too heavily on him. He was a deeply troubled young man with a tendency toward heavy drinking. In a probable suicide, he drowned in Long Island Sound, toppling overboard from his passenger ship on April 30. Five weeks later his lifeless body washed up on City Island, and was transferred to St. Paul's Church, the nearest cemetery. He was interred in a wooden coffin in the Drake vault, the only underground chamber in the burial yard.. Entries in the church Sexton's book record opening the vault several times on June 11 and 12 for "the President's son".

Aware of the episode, President and Mrs. Adams had been expecting the worst news, and they were in the New York City area in mid June when they received word about their son's fate. They traveled to Eastchester by horse-drawn carriage on the Post Road. The Rev. Lawson Carter led the religious service that afternoon and joined the President in the Drake vault where a brief prayer was offered, although the President could not bear to look inside the coffin.

To avoid moving the body in the warm weather, the coffin bearing Adams remained in the vault until November, when it was transported to the Adams home in Quincy,

Massachusetts, where it was buried in the family cemetery. As a token of thanks for the parish's services in the family's hour of grief, Mrs. Adams donated a lovely silver chalice to St. Paul's.