John Adams acknowledged in his diary that it would require much "thought and care, as well as money… to assemble an ample and well chosen assortment of books." He took enormous pride in his library, and his books served as essential tools in his varied roles as student, lawyer, revolutionary, diplomat, president, and elder statesman. Toward the end of his life, Adams made arrangements for the library to continue serving the public good. At the age of 86, Adams deeded 2,742 volumes from his personal collection in 1822 to the Adams Academy, a boys' preparatory school to be built in his hometown of Quincy, Massachusetts.

Plans for the school languished and Adams's library, stored in a farmhouse behind the family home, remained unused for two decades after his death. In 1848, John Adams's grandson Charles Francis Adams arranged to transfer the collection to the Quincy Town House and later to the Town Hall. After the Adams Academy was finally completed in 1870, the books were installed in open stacks but sadly left exposed to theft and mutilation by students and autograph hunters.

In 1882, the John Adams Library was moved again to the new Thomas Crane Library in Quincy. It was carefully arranged, housed in a special alcove and marked with an elegant wooden plaque, but the collection received little public attention. Adams's great-grandson, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., ruefully noted that after ten years, the Adams Library had "been consulted by but two persons, one of the two being myself."

As the Boston Public Library's elegant new McKim building in downtown Copley Square neared completion in 1893, the Library Trustees approached the supervisors of the Adams Temple and School Fund in Quincy to ask if they might consider relocating the John Adams Library to a more central and accessible location in Boston. The supervisors agreed, and the books were formally transferred to the care of the Boston Public Library in 1894.

The collection is currently housed in the Library's Rare Books & Manuscripts Department, where it is still available for use by interested researchers and scholars. In 1982, the Boston Public Library established an in-house conservation lab funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and a staff of six conservators began the nine-year process of restoring the materials, including cleaning, resewing, and rebinding many of the volumes. However, financial considerations prohibited treatment of the entire collection during this period, and many items still require significant conservation. The David McCullough Conservation Fund was established in 2001 by the Associates of the Boston Public Library to provide a consistent source of funding for the restoration and preservation of this unique and important collection.