

JAMES OTIS (1725-1783)

FREEDOM'S PIONEER ADVOCATE

WE cannot more effectively introduce James Otis than in the words of President John Adams, who thus describes his famous speech on the "Writs of Assistance." "Otis was a flame of fire. With a promptitude of classical allusions, a depth of research, a rapid summary of historical events and dates, a profusion of legal authorities, a prophetic glance of his eye into futurity, and a rapid torrent of impetuous eloquence, he carried away all before him. American independence was then and there born. Every man of an immense crowded audience appeared to me to go away as I did, ready to take arms against Writs of Assistance. Then and there was the first scene of the first act of opposition to the arbitrary claims of Great Britain."

Otis, a native of Massachusetts, was a hard student in youth and became one of Boston's leading lawyers. He had a taste for literature also, and wrote as well as spoke ably. When opposition to the tyranny of King and Parliament began in Massachusetts, he was among its prominent advocates, and in 1761 was selected to defend the merchants against the Crown lawyers on the legality of the Writs of Assistance. This was the occasion of the great speech above eulogized. He afterwards became active in the legislature, but in 1769 was attacked by an enemy and so severely injured that his reason was shattered and his usefulness to his country destroyed. He lived to see the end of the Revolution.

THE WRITS OF ASSISTANCE.

[Hardly had George the Third come to the throne in 1760 when acts of oppression against the Colonies began. The severe and unjust commercial laws had roused much indignation, and smuggling had become so common that the duties on imports yielded little to the crown. The new king issued orders that gave the revenue officers