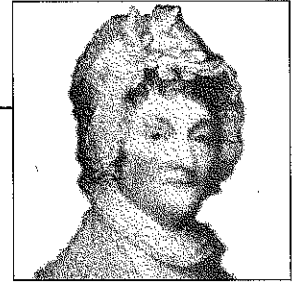


## Abigail Adams

### Woman of Letters

*Abigail Adams (1744–1818) played many roles—patriot, First Lady, and writer. Today her letters provide a vivid portrait of 18th-century life as a new nation was being born.*



**A**bigail Smith was the daughter of a minister, Reverend William Smith of Weymouth, Massachusetts. Their home was filled with books on Christianity, politics, and philosophy. During her childhood, Abigail spent many hours reading. Abigail also learned “womanly arts,” such as cooking and sewing, and taught herself French.

**Marriage to John Adams** When she was 15 years old, Abigail’s older sister Mary and her sister’s husband-to-be, Richard Cranch, introduced Abigail to a man about ten years older than she. His name was John Adams. He was a graduate of Harvard University and a famous lawyer. They both shared their love of reading. The two began to send each other letters—a habit they continued all their lives. In 1764, they were wed in her father’s church.

During colonial times, lawyers had to travel a circuit with the district judge, hearing cases in each of the towns along the way. During John’s absences, he and Abigail would exchange letters about politics, farm management, and the growing problems between the American colonies and Britain. John respected Abigail’s views. He also sought her advice on many issues.

In the 1700s, women were considered inferior to men. Women who dared to express political views were considered troublemakers. Abigail often kept her ideas to herself or shared them privately with John. Her letters to him allowed her to express her views. “My pen is always freer than my tongue,” she wrote. Abigail’s main concern was that her ideas were heard, not that she got credit for them.

Abigail also became pen pals with the playwright Mercy Otis Warren. Warren had her plays published under men’s names so that people would pay attention to her work.

**Observer of Revolutionary Times** In 1768, John moved Abigail and their children to Boston. It was an exciting time in the city. The French and Indian War had ended just five years earlier. Because Britain needed cash to pay for the expensive conflict, it began heavily taxing the colonies.

Abigail sensed that a war was brewing. She and John supported full rights for American colonists. They also insisted that protests should be conducted fairly.

In 1770, five colonists were killed by British soldiers after they attacked the soldiers with snowballs filled with large stones. The Sons of Liberty called this incident the Boston Massacre. John defended the British soldiers in court and made sure they received a fair trial. He argued that the soldiers were surrounded by an angry mob and believed their lives were in danger when they opened fire. Abigail supported John’s defense of the soldiers. She believed that John should do what he thought was right, even if it was unpopular.

That belief in the importance of good character was instilled into Abigail as a child by her parents and the books she read. As an adult, she worked many hours to teach her own four children the difference between right and wrong. In their letters and diaries, John and Abigail each expressed a conviction that education of the “head and heart” was a parent’s most important job.

**Political Views** In 1774, as conflicts with Britain grew, Abigail moved her family out of Boston. Meanwhile, John left for Philadelphia. There he served in the Continental Congress, which was working for American independence. Over the next ten years, Abigail and John had long separations from each other. During this period, they exchanged

more than 300 letters. Many of her letters encouraged him to devote himself to the cause of freedom. “Don’t fear for me!” she wrote. “I long impatiently to have you on the stage of action.”

In 1776 came the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Abigail was proud of the famous words by Thomas Jefferson: “All men are created equal.” Yet the Declaration did not address the problems of inequality within the colonies. Abigail made a plea for women’s rights. A few months before the Declaration was adopted, she had this to say to her husband:

#### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

And by the way in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies. . . . We . . . will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.

ABIGAIL ADAMS, letter of March 1776

While patriots were fighting for their independence, Abigail believed that slaves deserved freedom too. She wrote to John, “I wish most sincerely there was not a Slave in the province.”

**New Challenges** In 1789, George Washington was elected president, and John Adams became vice-president. John held this position for two terms. John and Abigail moved to New York City, the temporary capital.

In 1797, John was elected president of the nation. In November 1801, Abigail and he moved to Washington, D.C. She became the First Lady of the newly built White House. In a letter she described the president’s mansion. It was an uncomfortable place still under construction.

#### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

This House is built for ages to come. . . . Not one room or chamber is finished of the whole. It is habitable [only with] fires in every part, thirteen of which we are obliged to keep daily, or sleep in wet and damp places.

ABIGAIL ADAMS, reprinted in *Abigail Adams*

John and Abigail’s stay in the White House, though, was a short one. In 1801, John Adams lost his reelection bid to Thomas Jefferson. Afterward, the family retired to their home in Quincy, Massachusetts.

**Final Years** In 1818, when Abigail was 74 years old, she caught typhoid fever. With her family standing around her, she died on October 28. Abigail not only had promoted women’s rights but also had lived this cause. She raised four children, managed family business matters, and wrote letters about her strong opinions. She supported the colonists’ struggle for independence and spoke out against slavery and the lack of educational opportunities for women.

She encouraged another political star who was rising in the family. Her son, John Quincy Adams, became the sixth president of the United States in 1825. Abigail Adams was the only woman in U.S. history to be both wife and mother to presidents.

### Review Questions

1. What were Abigail’s attitudes toward learning?
2. What was Abigail’s position on the issues of women’s rights and slavery?
3. Why were Abigail and John Adams often separated during their marriage? How did they stay in touch with each other?

### Critical Thinking

4. **Making Inferences** What character traits of Abigail are revealed in her letters?
5. **Drawing Conclusions** Based on Abigail’s life, how would you describe the roles of women during colonial times?
6. **Analyzing Points of View** How does Abigail view John Adams’s political goals and ideas?