

A Woman's Place According to the Second First Lady

Introduction

When Abigail Smith began to write letters to her friends and relatives at a young age she undoubtedly did not expect for generations of researchers and historians to read and interpret her words. At the time Abigail was married and became Abigail Adams, she did not picture herself as one of the nation's original first ladies – she may not have even been able to conceptualize the office of the President at all. She was raised in a country that was reinventing itself. Abigail's extensive network of communications, which continued throughout her entire life, paints a picture of Revolutionary War era life in the United States. Abigail's letters are significant because they allow readers to see through her eyes during a time when the roles of men and women in society were rapidly changing and adapting to a new political model. Abigail demonstrated her views on how the social, educational, political, and domestic lives of women ought to be carried out. Changes can be seen in how she viewed women's roles as she aged and experienced the Revolutionary and Post-Revolutionary era in the United States. Not only did her role as a wife and mother change during this busy and important period, but her perceptions of herself and her role in the family and world of women also changed.

Abigail Adams was born Abigail Smith in the year 1744. Her parents were Reverend William Smith and Elizabeth Quincy.¹ She was raised alongside two sisters, Mary and Elizabeth, and a brother named William.² The family was not poor, but not the richest of folk either. Her mother Elizabeth was from a prominent family with members who had been well educated at

¹ Paul C. Nagel, *The Adams Women: Abigail and Louisa Adams, Their Sisters and Daughters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 2.

² Nagel, *The Adams Women*, 2.

institutions like Harvard.³ Abigail grew up in New England in her father's parish. She would go on to marry John Adams, a fellow New Englander, and start a family with him. John would later become the second President of the newly formed United States of America, and Abigail the second first lady. Throughout five stages of her life, we can see changes in how she viewed her status in life through the lens of her sex - her early childhood, her early marriage to John, the Revolutionary War era, John's presidency era, and her late life.

Early Childhood

Abigail began to form a self-concept, or self-consciousness at an early age. She did not accept the conventions of female in her time period in the same manner that those around her did. Her desire for education, and unconventional sassy attitude challenged her parents and the expectations of her peers. In other ways, however, she very much subscribed to the ideals of womanhood that she was taught to conform to and performed all the tasks a young woman would have been expected to during her youth. Though there is not a lot of letters surviving from this time in Abigail's life, historians have been able to provide insight into the way Abigail's mind worked during this period in her life.

Education was one of the major areas in which Abigail was deprived because of her female status. Male members of her extended family had gone to grade schools and colleges for generations. However, Abigail's parents made the decision to not send any of their daughters to formal schooling.⁴ Even though the Smiths were in a position to financially support schooling, the nearest schools were somewhat far away from their home, and they preferred not to educate

³ Woody Holton, *Abigail Adams* (New York: Free Press, 2009) 2.

⁴ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 7.

their daughters.⁵ Their views on schooling fit the norms of the time period. Not many families were sending their children to school. In fact, there were no schools around for women during the time. One of the Smith sisters stated at a later age that, “it was not in fashion for females to know more than writing and a little arithmetic. No books on female education were then in vogue, no academies for female instruction were then established.”⁶

Not only was there not a real cultural trend towards education, or any availability of schools, there was also a lot of excuses made as to why the daughters would not be educated by the Smiths. Abigail, later in life, stated, “I never was sent to any school, I was always sick. Female education in the best of families went no further than writing and arithmetic.”⁷ This idea that Abigail was ‘sick’ and could not go to school has not been substantiated. Abigail did contract rheumatic fever at a young age, but this did not consume her life to the point where she would not have been able to go to school.⁸ More likely, her parents used sickness as an excuse to keep their daughter at home. Similarly, it was simply considered enough for women to observe the church and home life around them as a form of education during the time period.⁹

Even though education was not immediately presented to her, Abigail rebelled from the system of exclusion by pursuing knowledge in other forms. She thought she was still entitled to learning and took a lot of care to refine her reading and writing skills. Even at a young age, Abigail was critical of the differences between female and male education in letters to her friend Isaac. In the letter Abigail discussed how she would be less likely to learn French well than her friend.¹⁰ Without directly saying so, Abigail was comparing the lot of women to the lot of men

⁵ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 7.

⁶ Nagel, *The Adams Women*, 10.

⁷ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 7.

⁸ Edith B. Gelles, “*First Thoughts*”: *Life and Letters of Abigail Adams* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998) 19.

⁹ Nagel, *The Adams Women*, 10.

¹⁰ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 11.

and acknowledging that there was better instructional opportunity for men. Nevertheless, Abigail continued to seek out educational opportunities. She engaged with her sister's husband Richard Cranch and received books and poetry from him.¹¹ In the end, Abigail was taking a lot of initiative to learn and absorb knowledge from the resources she could get. She recognized the value of education. By and large, her efforts were not wildly out of character for women of her social standing and age at the time. It would be hard to call her radical or unusual for pursuing the educational routes that she did. Her small questions about the nature of educational inequity between men and women, however, show that she was thinking in a progressive manner. These were early inklings of Abigail's views which prove that she did not completely buy into the system she was born into.

The adolescent years of Abigail's life were undoubtedly full of influence from her mother. One important part of her mother's role was that her mother subscribed to the idea that a woman's role in society was to serve her husband. Historians commonly point out the fact that the Smith girls were trained to be women by their mother.¹² The reason this is important is because her mother spent the majority of her time doing charity work and performing the duties of a minister's wife.¹³ This meant making house calls, caring for the sick, elderly, and poor, as well as keeping up the home. In doing this, Abigail's mother was teaching her daughters that they also ought to serve their husbands once they were wives. At this time, "women's roles were repeated by successive generations, and the critical part of female learning involved training for practical domestic work."¹⁴ In other words, the domestic sphere was reserved for women and they were expected to be able to perform household tasks after being taught by their mothers.

¹¹ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 10.

¹² Nagel, *The Adams Women*, 12.

¹³ Nagel, *The Adams Women*, 9.

¹⁴ Gelles, "*First Thoughts*", 19.

While Abigail learned some of these lessons from her mother, her father was also teaching her. For example, he advised her against speaking badly about others, and taught her that this was necessary to be well liked.¹⁵ Abigail was learning that a woman was to be mild mannered, and charitable, as well as attentive to the needs of her household.

As Abigail grew into a young adult, she did not necessarily conform to the standards of mild-mannered conduct that she had been taught. In fact, Abigail earned herself a reputation for being ‘saucy’ and brash. One person who commented on this behavior early was Abigail’s future husband, John. John’s first opinion of Abigail was that she was too prone to teasing, and too judgmental for a woman of her age and class.¹⁶ Similarly, Abigail’s mother thought she was a lot to handle growing up.¹⁷ It could have been for this reason that Abigail spent a lot of time with her grandmother Elizabeth Quincy in her youth. Though Abigail was known to be rowdy, she was still learning how to be a woman from both her mother and her grandmother as a child. Her boldness arguably stayed with her for the rest of her life, but it was dulled with maturity, and often times only shared with a trusted few.

In summary, the views Abigail held about the position of women in society during the time before her marriage to John Adams were minimal. She conformed to the traditional gender roles of her time by learning domestic skills from her mother and grandmother. She further learned how a woman was to act in terms of virtue and manners from her father. She was kept out of school like other women of her time. She broke from the norm, however, by educating herself in poetry, writing, and philosophy. She did not act in ways that were considered

¹⁵ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 5-6.

¹⁶ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 7.

¹⁷ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 4.

acceptable for women in her society when she was brash and opinionated. She had begun to question the inequalities around her, simply by not conforming to them.

Early Marriage to John

By the time Abigail Adams was courted by John Adams she was of advanced age for a woman of her time. At only 17, Abigail was behind many of her counterparts who had already married.¹⁸ Her family's status may have played a role in this. Abigail blamed her lack of marriage offers partially on her small dowry offering.¹⁹ When she met John Adams, she began a flirtation relationship with him that blossomed into a romance. Although John had found Abigail too opinionated as a child, he found her to be changed in adulthood. Abigail had "learned to temper her wit with more traditional feminine virtues."²⁰

When it came time to marry John, Abigail willingly made the commitment. This fact in itself shows that her feminine rights opinions were not all consuming. Historians point out that "once married, she had little control over the kind of work she performed or over her reproductive life. Marriage, with its obligations, became her destiny in that world. Her identity became subsumed with John's."²¹ In the time period Abigail lived in, all rights and obligations were forfeited to the husband in a marriage. Woody Holton commented in his biography of Abigail that "marriage was anything but liberating, since it gave her husband nearly total power over her... numerous girls in her situation were nonetheless impatient to escape their parent's yoke and choose their own masters."²² In other words, women, when choosing to marry, were choosing a new master.

¹⁸ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 11.

¹⁹ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 12.

²⁰ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 12.

²¹ Gelles, "*First Thoughts*", 21.

²² Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 22.

They never truly had the power to control their affairs, either before or after marriage. So when Abigail chose John this power dynamic overarched their relationship.

John and Abigail had a non-traditional marriage in the sense that they exchanged a very open and blunt dialogue as they were courting each other, as well as once they were married. An example of this can be seen in one of their early letters to each other, where Abigail teased John, “But for Saucyness, no mortal can match him, not even his Diana.”²³ Abigail and John used pen names such as Diana and Lysander affectionately in their letters. When they were not referring to each other that way, they often called each other ‘Friend’ or ‘Dear’.²⁴ An outsider looking in would notice that both Abigail and John were good writers, and used lengthy statements, as well as formal English to express themselves. A big reason this banter was unique is because not many women of Abigail’s time were so good at written communications. Very few records exist from other prominent couples during the Revolutionary period which were so extensive or well written. Each letter between them in their early years of conversing had a teasing, flirtatious vibe.

Not only did Abigail feel comfortable teasing John, but she also felt comfortable expressing controversial opinions in front of him. She was even so bold as to compare the virtues of the sexes early in their relationship. She stated, “courage is a laudable, a glorious virtue in your Sex, why not in mine? (For my part, I think I ought to be applauded for mine.) – Exit Rattle.”²⁵ This particular excerpt is significant in two ways. First, it shows that Abigail was questioning why men were the only ones considered courageous in her society at her time. Second, it shows that even when Abigail was expressing her true opinions, she felt the need to downplay them so she did not over-step her boundaries. By ending her statement with ‘Exit

²³ John Adams and Abigail Adams, *The Book of Abigail and John* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975) 41.

²⁴ Adams, *The Book of Abigail and John*, 9-13.

²⁵ Adams, *The Book of Abigail and John* 33.

Rattle' she was belittling her opinions and calling them futile, simply a meaningless rant. While it was still bold of Abigail to share her opinions on the differences in sexes at all, or to even be thinking about these differences critically, she knew the limits of her thoughts were determined by her ultimate subservience to the man who was courting her.

Abigail's openness with John had some limits. Though she may have believed that women had equal ability to hold virtues to men, she also very much acted subservient to John and his opinions in their early marriage. For example, she asked him to critique her personality, and he had no qualms telling her exactly how he felt. She sent him a letter where she stated, "you tell me that you sometimes view the dark side of your Diana, an there no doubt you discover many Spots -which I rather wish were erased, than conceal'd from you."²⁶ She continued by saying that she would rather be thought of well by John than "by the greater part of the world beside"²⁷ Abigail, in this statement, was showing her loyalty to John and was again belittling herself in front of him, claiming that she must have faults and wishes she could erase parts of herself. The letter asked John for a list of 'Spots' on her personality that she could correct. John directly replied by telling her that she could use better manners at formal events, that she ought to be more musically inclined, that she slouches too much, should not sit with her legs crossed, and should not walk with her toes pointed in.²⁸ John's suggestion reflected his expectations of his future wife. She had to, first and foremost, look presentable and poised. He did not offer many critiques that did not revolve around her physical appearance and abilities. While John would have seemed rude today for commenting on all of these faults, at the time he was writing it was perfectly normal for a man to let a woman know how she needed to act.

²⁶ Adams, *The Book of Abigail and John*, 28.

²⁷ Adams, *The Book of Abigail and John*, 28.

²⁸ Adams, *The Book of Abigail and John*, 41.

When the roles were reversed, however, and Abigail tried to critique John, she did so in a very subtle way that could not be traced back to her directly. Abigail wrote her critiques in a way that made it seem like they were the general opinions she had over-heard from an anonymous other.²⁹ Her critiques were that John was arrogant, and that he could be intimidating and daunting to those who did not know him.³⁰ Not only did Abigail pretend that the criticisms were not her own, she made a statement about how wrong people who believed those things about John were. Abigail wrote, “I am certain that is a mistake, for if I know any thing of Lysander, he has as little of that in his disposition, as he has of Ill nature.”³¹ In saying this last phrase, Abigail was complimenting John and playing into his ‘arrogance’, rather than being bold and stating her true opinion. Though it was unique that she did offer this criticism to John, she hid behind the guise of an anonymous other so as to not overreach her influence and upset her husband. At the end of the day, she was conceding personal power to her husband, silencing her own voice.

One unique aspect of Abigail and John’s relationship that began with their early marriage and continued throughout was that when it came to performing tasks to make their household function properly, they treated each other as equals. Abigail made it very clear from the beginning that she and her husband needed each other in marriage, and each played a crucial, God-given role in the marriage.³² She believed each sex had specific duties that could only be filled by the husband or wife, and that they needed to rely on each other. Even though patriarchy was the norm during her time, “she had leverage within the marriage bond because of both her character and John’s, and because the patriarchy that existed in New England was flexible.”³³

²⁹ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 28.

³⁰ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 28.

³¹ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 28.

³² Nagel, *The Adams Women*, 5.

³³ Gelles, “*First Thoughts*”, 22.

John actually ended up teaching Abigail a lot during their marriage. Though she would never speak out against him directly during this time, she felt comfortable sharing opinions with him and learning from what he knew. Both Abigail and John “required intellectual parity in a mate, and they came to depend on each other for dialogue. Rather than contracting under the weight of domestic drudgery, Abigail developed her intellect in marriage so that she became wise and erudite.”³⁴ In summary, even though there was a patriarchy structure in society generally when Abigail and John wed, they chose to engage with each other frequently and learn from each other. They shared the tasks associated with married life, and enjoyed exploring new concepts together.

Despite all of their banter and sociopolitical discourse, the bulk of Abigail and John’s early marriage included running their farm and raising their family. Abigail performed traditional female roles during this period. She cared for the home, helped run the farm, and produced four children for John. Their children were Abigail (Nabby), John Quincy, Charles, and Thomas. All were born between 1765 and 1772.³⁵ There was one other child, Susanna, born in 1768, who only lived to the age of two.³⁶ Children and home life were the largest priority for Abigail for the majority of her life. Abigail made it clear that she desired to be “a ‘dairy woman’ while ‘our boys shall go into the field and work with you, and my girl shall stay in the house and assist me’.”³⁷ In this way, she conformed to typical gender roles of her time. She was “pre-occupied with domestic activities” during this period.³⁸ Even if Abigail did have big ideas about women, education, and virtue, she did not want to branch out into the type of work that men were

³⁴ Gelles, “*First Thoughts*”, 22.

³⁵ Gelles, “*First Thoughts*”, XV.

³⁶ Gelles, “*First Thoughts*”, XV.

³⁷ Nagel, *The Adams Women*, 20.

³⁸ Gelles, “*First Thoughts*”, 22.

assigned during her time. Abigail “recognized early that managing [her] offspring as well as her home and farm would largely be her lot as she watched John... strive as a ‘practitioner at the bar’.”³⁹ John performed his lawyering job away from home and frequently traveled, while Abigail tended to the farm and children.

Abigail’s early relationship and marriage with John is where her ideas about the place of women in society began to grow. She differed from her other female counterparts by having a very open and fairly equitable dialogue with her husband. She was bold enough to bring up issues that concerned her and question the differences between expectations for both sexes. She did not, however, refrain from acting subservient to her husband. She allowed him to criticize her openly, and even invited this critique, yet she hid behind anonymity when it came time to offer her own critiques. She belittled her own opinions by referring to them as ramblings. She continued to try and educate herself by learning from her husband and wrote letters that demonstrated an extraordinary skill for written communication that many women of her time would not have been able to match. In the end, however, her words about equality and questions about women’s status were not echoed in her actions. Abigail spent the majority of her time working to maintain the household and raise her children, and believed her role in her marriage was to be doing those tasks. She did not wish to hold any role or career men held in society such as a lawyer, businessman, or other gendered profession.

Revolution

The Revolutionary War tested Abigail’s beliefs like no other time period in her life before. During the War Abigail was forced to spend extended periods of time away from her

³⁹ Nagel, *The Adams Women*, 19.

husband and conduct the business of the Adams household and farm. Abigail experienced the birth and loss of a daughter as John was away, and saw battle come to her doorstep as the war raged on around her.⁴⁰ Her patriotic spirit was strong during this time. She corresponded with friends, family, and her husband throughout the war and was even so bold as to express concerns about women being represented fairly in new and old legislation. This was arguably the peak of Abigail's anti-traditionalist sentiment towards women's role in society.

Abigail was almost forced into patriotic service to her family during the war. While men fought on the battlefields and made decisions in makeshift legislatures, many women of her time were charged with managing their households and running their farms. In the early years of the war, John put Abigail in charge of the family farm.⁴¹ Women could not own property or wealth, but Abigail was a businesswoman during this time. John even entrusted her to force the farmhands living on their property to pay rent.⁴² This was outside of a woman's traditional sphere of influence. It was surprising that Abigail was able to step into the shoes of a man and run the farm, along with maintaining the family wealth during this period. On the home front, Abigail was also charged with raising the family as she saw fit. Having final say on how children were raised was traditionally a man's role during this time, however, Abigail usurped John's authority during his period of absence and made large decisions about their children's futures. In fact, "the Adams marriage had diverged from the patriarchal ideal. Under the English common law, John enjoyed as complete control over the Adams children as he did of the family's property, but in actual practice, Abigail had no thought of deferring to her husband when it came to the children's education."⁴³ Abigail made the decision to educate her sons, hiring a private

⁴⁰ Gelles, *First Thoughts*, xv.

⁴¹ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 59.

⁴² Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 59.

⁴³ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 70.

tutor to do so because she believed that being exposed to other children in the classroom would corrupt a child's mind.⁴⁴ Though Abigail had earlier advocated women's education, she did not in the end make the same efforts for her daughter to be educated as she did for her sons. This is telling of the fact that even during this time period, she still believed that a woman's place at home was different from a man's.

During the war, Abigail's patriotic fervor and sacrifice caused her views on women to shine through in a very direct manner. Abigail's voice was the strongest it ever would be during this period when it came to advocating for women. The example of such advocacy she is most remembered for was her "Remember the Ladies" letter. John Adams was a key contributor to the Declaration of Independence drafting as well as the Constitutional Convention which took place several years later.⁴⁵ In 1776, Abigail wrote to John urging him to consider a few issues when drafting the constitution. She gently pleaded,

"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, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors... Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could."⁴⁶

This was a fairly bold statement from Abigail, especially because she was in essence saying that men's nature is to be tyrannical and unfair. Though she did not directly suggest giving women full rights, or propose specific legislation to help her sex's lot, she was being very forward with a man who, in theory, actually had the power to change the situation she was in. Abigail was not

⁴⁴ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 60.

⁴⁵ Gelles, "First Thoughts", xv.

⁴⁶ Abigail Adams, *The Quotable Abigail Adams* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009) 357.

simply stating these things once to get them off her mind either. She continued to bring up the subject in subsequent letters, stating “I can not say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to Men, Emancipating all nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives... we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our Masters and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet.”⁴⁷ This excerpt demonstrates a subtle threat. Though Abigail often addressed her husband in a joking manner, especially when discussing serious or controversial issues, this threat still carries weight. It shows that even though Abigail may have been approaching the matter in a teasing manner, it was important enough to her for her to bring the subject up on multiple occasions.

As the war dragged on and began to come to an end, Abigail began to grow frustrated with her increasing role at home and in the public eye and did not believe that she and other women like herself were getting ample credit. In one of her strongest statements to her husband she said:

“Patriotism in the female Sex is the most disinterested of all virtues. Excluded from honours and from offices, we cannot attach ourselves to the State of Government from having held a place of Eminence. Even in the freest countrys our property is subject to the countroul and disposal of our partners, to whom the Laws have given a sovereign Authority. Deprived of a voice in Legislation, obliged to submit to those Laws which are imposed upon us, is it not sufficient to make us indifferent to the publick Welfare? Yet all

⁴⁷ Kaminski, *The Quotable Abigail Adams*, 358.

History and every age exhibit Instances of patriotick virtue in the female Sex; which considering our situation equals the most Heroick of yours.”⁴⁸

This statement clearly communicated not only a recognition of the inequality of Abigail’s situation during the war, but it also acknowledged the plight of women throughout all of history as they maintained the home front while their men were away fighting wars. To question the laws of the country in such a way was an extremely non-conventional action.

It can be argued that, in the void created by no new legislation being produced to change the lot of women, Abigail simply took power for herself. Abigail, for example, took the initiative to become a merchant in her husband’s absence. As soon as 1775, she was having John send her products from the cities he resided in to sell at home.⁴⁹ Abigail took advantage of the high inflation of products and made profits off of the products she sold, which kept her family afloat while John could not provide income from his inactive law practice. During this time, “Abigail Adams became, as did other women during the Revolutionary War, the breadwinner in a single parent household. She and other women learned to perform work that had previously been socially ascribed to men but that in those extraordinary times lost masculine symbolism and became androgynous.”⁵⁰ Not only was Abigail bold on the business front, she also took liberties with her children’s health. As stated earlier, a man was supposed to have dominion over his children. During a dysentery outbreak in 1775, however, Abigail took all of her children to be inoculated without asking John’s permission.⁵¹ This and her business ventures show that Abigail

⁴⁸ Kaminski, *The Quotable Abigail Adams*, 365.

⁴⁹ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 77.

⁵⁰ Gelles, “*First Thoughts*”, 24.

⁵¹ Gelles, “*First Thoughts*”, 25.

was unafraid during the Revolutionary period to go against the grain and take the actions she deemed necessary to keep her family alive, and afloat financially.

Abigail made an important friendship at the beginning of the revolutionary period that would continue to influence her throughout the rest of her life. She came to know and correspond with Mercy Otis Warren during this period. Mercy was a poet, historian, and writer who was married to a prominent member of society.⁵² Warren was one of the only other women of her time who was documented questioning institutions like the education of women, and critiquing the political actions of the revolutionary period. She was outspoken and “exhibited, in her own clumsy way, an acute consciousness of the ties of feminine solidarity.”⁵³ The two women had no troubles discussing political instances such as the Boston Tea Party. Abigail boldly expressed her patriotic beliefs to Mercy, writing things such as, “Great will be the devastation if not timely quenched or allayed by some more Lenient Measures... What a pity it is, that we can dye but once to save our Country.”⁵⁴ It was easy to see that Abigail looked up to Mercy and desired to be the kind of woman she was. This was true in discourse as well as in the realm of the home. Along with exploring political opinions with Mercy, Abigail also asked her for advice about how to parent and run a home. Adams wrote in her first letter to Warren, “I was really so well pleased with your little offspring, that I must beg the favour of you to communicate to me the happy Art of ‘rearing the tender thought, teaching the young Idea how to shoot, and pouring fresh instruction o’er the mind.’”⁵⁵ In other words, even when corresponding with one of the only

⁵² Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 51.

⁵³ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 52.

⁵⁴ Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams Letters* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2016) 26.

⁵⁵ Adams, *Abigail Adams Letters*, 20.

other women of her time who was outspoken in the realm of politics and gender, Abigail never failed to put her domesticity on display and search for ways to be a better wife and mother.

While Abigail may have made some strides during the revolutionary period, and even expressed strong views, she was, in the end, most desirous for her old way of life to be returned to her. She had an extremely difficult time being separated from her husband and pleaded frequently for him to return, write more, or give her good news. In the early years of their separation, Abigail wrote, “The distance between us makes time appear very long to me... The great anxiety I feel for my Country, for you and for our family renders the day tedious, and the night unpleasant.”⁵⁶ This theme of depression and anxiety during John’s absence can be seen in nearly all communication with him during the war. The extent of her anxiety is well demonstrated by an excerpt where she states, “Many have been the anxious hours I have spent since that day the threatening aspects of our publick affairs, the complicated distress of this provence, the Arduous and perpelexed business which you are engaged, have all conspired to agitate my bosom, with fears and apprehensions to which I have heretofore been a stranger.”⁵⁷ In other words, despite her belief in the cause that she was sacrificing being with her husband for, she had a lot of doubt and fear of what the outcome of the war would be, and desperately longed for her life to return to normal. This emotional dependence on her husband often made her concerns about women and their rights secondary. And though she was an active correspondent with family and activist friends during this time, she focused much more frequently on the importance of John’s return to the household in her letters than she ever did on political and social issues.

⁵⁶ Adams, *Abigail Adams Letters*, 30.

⁵⁷ Adams, *Abigail Adams Letters*, 30.

Presidency

Seemingly, no time period inconvenienced Abigail Adams more than John's presidency. Abigail, who had grown used to maintaining the family farm in John's extended absences, was briefly forced to move to Philadelphia, act as a stateswoman, and perform an entirely new set of duties. Personal struggle followed her to the nation's capital. She dealt with the loss of her son to alcoholism, and the strife of her financially struggling family members, all while trying to come up with money of her own to pay her overdue taxes and debts.⁵⁸ During this time, however, Abigail also continued to be an unusual woman of her time. She handled money in a way that could only have been assumed appropriate for men during her time, stood behind her husband fervently as he faced wild disapproval while in office, and found time to advise John in some of his biggest decisions as President. Abigail's years of activism and outspoken-ness were not yet behind her.

The largest evidence that Abigail was acting in a non-conventional way during her time as the First Lady related to her role on the family farm. Abigail's duties had expanded to include even more than they had during the Revolution. Hers were essentially the duties of 'head of household', a title almost exclusively reserved for the man of the house during her era. While John was away acting as Vice President and being elected President initially, Abigail was in charge of negotiating terms with the tenants at the Quincy homestead, finding individuals to run the farm when she had to be away, determining lease agreements for the family properties, and hiring laborers.⁵⁹ John had a considerably small role in the business of the farm, hardly helping Abigail at all. Not only was Abigail being business-savvy during her stint without John, she was

⁵⁸ Gelles, "*First Thoughts*", xv.

⁵⁹ Lynne Withey, *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002) 245.

also actively disagreeing with neighbors, which showed her outspoken nature had not died. For example, when Abigail tried to send her African American indentured servant James to a local school, she received backlash from her neighbor who was the instructor. In response, she stated, “merely because [James]’s face is black, is he to be denied instruction? How is he to be qualified to procure a livelihood?”⁶⁰ Though it was still said that “Abigail... was no advocate of race equality,” she “did believe in education for everyone.”⁶¹ The fact that Abigail was still advocating for rights like education, even in the face of opposition by prominent men in her community, shows how adamant she was about her beliefs, even at this point in her life.

One important aspect of the family’s life that Abigail controlled for the most part was their finances. Not only was she able to secretly make purchases with discreet accumulated wealth, she was also forced to reconcile the family debts because of John’s refusal to assist her with such matters. During John’s time away Abigail was able to put a secret addition on their home. She, “in effect, controlled most of the family’s money... She managed to pay for [additions] to the house in this manner.”⁶² She was able to do this because, “for years she had run the family without significant interference from anyone. As she grew older she became more, outspoken, more opinionated, and much more willing to assert her views on the way things ought to be done.”⁶³ Not only did Abigail secretly add on to the Adams homestead, she also made secretive decisions not to invest money as John asked her to. During the years her family members were struggling with financial difficulty, Abigail developed an aversion to the idea of financial speculation.⁶⁴ She even had a close friend manage her ‘own’ money. He “managed her

⁶⁰ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 305.

⁶¹ Withey, *Dearest Friend*, 246.

⁶² Withey, *Dearest Friend*, 253.

⁶³ Withey, *Dearest Friend*, 253.

⁶⁴ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 310.

money for more than two decades, as her ‘trustee’. [This] moved Abigail a little closer to claiming ownership of a portion of the property that, by law, belonged to her husband.”⁶⁵

Legally, women could own no property, yet Abigail still managed to stake a claim for herself.

As before in her life, Abigail put a large emphasis on serving her husband during his Presidential term. She assumed the responsibilities of a First Lady immediately and dedicated every day to those duties once she moved to Philadelphia. During her first days in the capital she was “wholly absorbed in receiving company.” Her responsibilities were, “to write letters and complete other tasks before breakfasting with the family at eight and then taking up her duties as head of household. She was required to receive company from noon until two – sometimes until three. Dinner was at three, and after that she went for a long carriage ride until about sundown.” Additionally, she had to attend receptions, as well as converse with diplomats and public officials.⁶⁶ Her days, in essence, were completely filled with duties to her husband. She placed heavy emphasis on her role as the First Lady and often was self-effacing when she became reflective about her womanly diplomatic role. She once stated to John, “A mere American as I am, unacquainted with the Etiquette of courts, taught to say the thing I mean, and to wear my Heart in my countenance, I am sure I should make an awkward figure. And then it would mortify my pride if I should be thought to disgrace you.”⁶⁷ Seeing her role as a woman in such a public position as highly important, she placed the reputation of her husband above that of her own and wished to conform to the version of herself that most pleased him and made him proud.

A very unusual aspect of John’s Presidency is the evidence that Abigail played an enormous advisory role in relation to his decision making. In fact, “other people recognized her

⁶⁵ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 340.

⁶⁶ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 311.

⁶⁷ Gelles, “*First Thoughts*”, 125.

great influence over John. She received frequent letters from office-seekers asking her to intercede with the President.”⁶⁸ The fact that it was so well known that Abigail had strong influence over John undoubtedly presented a unique power dynamic to the public eye. Abigail took the role of chief advisor, even though there were men elected to play that role in the government. There is evidence that Abigail embraced this role. John even began to call her ‘Presidante’.⁶⁹ “By the time she became ‘Presidante’... she had overcome scruples about advising [John] on matters of public policy.”⁷⁰ Nothing could have been more unusual at the time period than for a woman to be a strong advisor in public policy. Abigail was really working outside the bounds of traditional femininity by doing so.

Compounding the fact that Abigail was helping John make decisions by often giving her stamp of approval was the fact that she fiercely defended him to the public as he faced large disapproval. An example of this was her loyalty to John when he played an instrumental role in the passing of the Alien Sedition Acts, which made it extremely difficult for immigrants to become citizens of the United States.⁷¹ This legislation was later seen as very detrimental, yet Abigail defended it on John’s behalf. When John was working on public policy, Abigail was also known to send letters, or opinion pieces, to newspapers which praised John’s work anonymously.⁷² She would disguise herself in her writing so it could not be traced back to her, giving the impression that members of the country who were not related to John were approving of his policies. These acts of protection and support for John showed that she viewed her role as a wife as one of unquestioning loyalty. She even conceded some of her female power to John in

⁶⁸ Withey, *Dearest Friend*, 253.

⁶⁹ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 308.

⁷⁰ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 308.

⁷¹ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 317.

⁷² Withey, *Dearest Friend*, 253.

her words and expressions during the time period of his presidency. As far as her views on women went, “she had never expected women to obtain men’s permission to hold office or even vote, she had never demanded either right, and by the time she became first lady, she had even ceased to complain about these two injustices.”⁷³ Abigail even went so far as to say to her daughter, “if man is Lord, woman is Lordess – that is what I contend for.”⁷⁴ She reasserted her view that women were submissive to men, and began to retreat from some of her previous advocacy as she became disillusioned with both politics and public life.

Late Life

Exiting public life proved to be one of the largest conservative leaps Abigail would take as far as her advocacy and conviction about the rights of women were concerned. In the years after her husband’s presidency, Abigail began to grow old but did not lose her spirit for running her household. She witnessed the deaths of nearly all of her loved ones, was finally able to consistently live with her husband, and nurtured her family up until her death came.

The opinions and fire Abigail had maintained in her youth and young adult life began to taper off as she and John retreated from the publicly exposed, policy-influencing parts of their lives. As she got older, “Abigail became more tolerant in her opinions and behavior...she became more moderate in her political views and less hostile to political opinions different from her own.”⁷⁵ As she left her life with John in the capital, she wrote in her correspondence,

⁷³ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 318.

⁷⁴ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 317.

⁷⁵ Withey, *Dearest Friend*, 299.

“We retire from public Life: for myself and family I have few regrets; at my age and with my bodily infirmities I shall be happier at Quincy. Neither my habits nor my Education or inclinations have led me to an expensive Stile of living; so on that score I have little to mourn over; if I did not rise with dignity, I can at least fall with ease.”⁷⁶

This sentiment shows how pleased Abigail was to be out of the public eye. Her years of private advocacy and fierce opinions were dying down. She was retreating to the life she knew well and was comfortable living.

Abigail devoted the rest of her life to her family and her daily household tasks. She took in several family members and their children as they faced financial strife and illness. It is said that “neither age nor threat of illness slowed down Abigail’s daily pace... she was back to her old habits of working too hard around the house and trying to keep track singlehandedly of all the members of her far-flung family.”⁷⁷ She wished her son John Quincy would return home, and tried to act on his behalf to have him returned from diplomatic missions.⁷⁸ Overall, Abigail dedicated a large portion of her time and energy to her household, keeping up with her children, and raising her grandchildren. When her daughter Nabby died, she lost her strongest female companion, and, “no amount of fortitude or faith could overcome the harsh reality that her beautiful, selfless, devoted daughter, still in the prime of her life, had been taken from her.”⁷⁹ After this point in her life, Abigail did not formally express any views on women and their place in the world.

⁷⁶ Adams, *Abigail Adams Letters*, 710.

⁷⁷ Withey, *Dearest Friend*, 309

⁷⁸ Nagel, *The Adams Women*, 6.

⁷⁹ Withey, *Dearest Friend*, 306.

In her advanced age, Abigail chose to reconnect with old friends who she had fallen out of touch with. She rekindled her friendship with Mercy Otis Warren, which had fallen to the wayside due to differing opinions in years prior. John Adams was unhappy with Warren for writing what he deemed to be an unfavorable history of the revolution.⁸⁰ Abigail conceded some dignity and wrote to Warren, “I determined once more to address you, and with a disposition to forgive, as I hope to be forgiven – and to assure you that there Still exists the ancient friendship in [my] Bosom.”⁸¹ John Adams and Mercy Otis Warren did not settle their differences, but Abigail chose to put their problems aside in the interest of the friendship. Abigail may have known her time was running short, and that if she did not make amends with old friends, she might never.

One last rebellious act on Abigail’s part was her decision to write a will. In 1816, two years before her death, Abigail composed a handwritten document which designated her property and money to members of her family and friends.⁸² Historically, during Abigail’s time,

“If a married woman brought to her marriage, or later acquired, personal property... it, along with the income generated by her real estate, went to her husband, to dispose of as he pleased. Thousands of spinsters and widows left wills to giving away their belongings, but married women were not permitted to distribute their real estate.”⁸³

In other words, women had no property or ownership rights in the eyes of the law. That Abigail felt comfortable and within her right to compose a will was a testament to how she viewed herself in relation to her husband. Her early life complaints about how women did not have

⁸⁰ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, 380.

⁸¹ Adams, *Abigail Adams Letters*, 797.

⁸² Holton, *Abigail Adams*, xvii.

⁸³ Holton, *Abigail Adams*, xvii.

rights to their own property once married were manifesting themselves in her actions. She was reclaiming what she thought was rightfully hers, even after enough time had passed for her outspoken nature to mellow.

Abigail died after a brief bout of sickness in October 1818.⁸⁴ She had lived a long life for a woman of her generation. Her correspondence with her husband and friends was published posthumously by her descendants. Abigail never would have imagined her letters would be read and analyzed. During the time they were published, the majority of individuals who were getting their letters and memoirs published were men.⁸⁵ In this way, even after death Abigail was defying gender norms and making a name for herself. Her views, which would have seemed controversial to many at the time, which she never intended to reach past her close circle of friends and family, were available for all to read, exposing the woman she really was.

Conclusions

When examining Abigail's lifetime in its entirety, a few conclusions can be drawn. Abigail very much conformed to the typical gender norms of her time period in her youth. She was educated only informally, learned how to run a household by following her mother's instruction, and participated in all of the stereotypical courting rituals of her time, eventually settling into a marriage and giving up her rights to much of her autonomy. In marriage, she served her husband and knew the extent to which her opinions would be taken seriously by him. In late life, she surrounded herself with children and entertained as well as ran her household the way she would have been expected to in her time. Abigail did, however, differ significantly from

⁸⁴ Gelles, *First Thoughts*, xv.

⁸⁵ Gelles, *First Thoughts*, 3.

other women of her time in the sense that she was very vocal about the inequality of men and women's situations.

Though she may not have acted in an extraordinarily rebellious manner, Abigail pushed the boundaries of her limited social set. She blatantly stated that she thought women should not be subject to man's tyranny, that they ought to be able to claim ownership over what was theirs, and that they ought to be guaranteed some rights in the new country that was being formed. Her actions as well were often controversial. She took great lengths to educate herself beyond what others of her social class considered sufficient, became a businesswoman, made important decisions about her children's upbringing without consulting her husband, and even went so far as to claim property as hers to distribute when writing her will.

Abigail's political fervor was strongest around the years of the Revolution, when change was the easiest to conceptualize, and her influence over a prominent politician gave her an outlet for her frustrations. As she continued to be involved in public life, she made her opinions essential to her husband's diplomatic functioning. As life wore on, however, it was clear that being at home with family was most important to her, and she was not willing to sacrifice the life she loved to make too large of a fuss about the issues she cared for. Abigail was unique in her time, in part because of her position of influence on one of the founding fathers of the country. She stepped beyond the traditional bounds of her gender, but remained faithful to her role as a domestic servant for her family. Her story illuminates the unrest that many women of her time must have been experiencing as the world changed around them without including them entirely in its new promises of freedom.

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