



# Abigail Adams

***First Lady: 1797 to 1801***

***Wife of John Adams, 2<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States***

***Born: November 11, 1744 Died: October 28, 1818***



**Abigail Smith Adams** was the wife of the second President of the United States, John Adams and is seen as the second First Lady of the United States, though that term was not coined until after her death.

A woman of exceptional ability and acute political skill, she was an invaluable support to her husband throughout his political career. Indeed, as a couple the Adams's are an excellent example of the value of husband-wife partnership in public life. Moreover, Abigail Adams advocated and modeled an expanded role for women in public affairs during the formative days of the United States. She helped plant the seeds that would start women and men thinking about women's rights and roles in a country that had been founded on the ideals of equality and independence.

## Early life

Abigail was born as Abigail Smith on November 11, 1744, in Weymouth, Massachusetts, to the Rev. William Smith and Elizabeth Quincy. Abigail was raised simply and without pretension, though her relatives, especially on her mother's side, were among the leading families of their time. Her mother's relatives were descended from the Quincy's, a family of great prestige in the Massachusetts colony; her father and other fore bearers were Congregational ministers, leaders in a society that held its clergy in high esteem.

Like most girls of her time, Abigail received no formal education. Girls were taught reading and writing primarily so that they could read their Bible and write letters. They also learned basic arithmetic to help prepare them for their role as housewives, when they would be required to balance budgets and settle accounts. Although some Massachusetts towns did have primary schools for girls, called "dame schools," most families took responsibility for the education of their daughters at home.

The Smith girls were fortunate to have a father who loved learning and reading and who encouraged his children to share in this passion. To help with their education, William Smith gave his daughters and son full access to his extensive library of excellent books. Abigail shared her father's love of books and read widely in poetry, drama,

history, theology, and political theory. As she grew older, Abigail became increasingly determined to educate herself, and by the time she was an adult, she had become one of the best-read women of her time. She learned Shakespeare, Milton and Pope; taught herself French, and many of her suitors were intimidated by her learning, except John Adams, who was captivated by it, especially her love letters to him. It was this reading, combined with the many long sermons of her minister father, that prepared her for the intellectual tastes of this young lawyer, Adams, who courted Abigail for almost two years.

## Marriage to John Adams

Abigail Smith married John Adams on October 25, 1764. The young couple lived on John's small farm in Braintree (a small Massachusetts town), which later was renamed Quincy. Later John's law practice began to flourish which kept him and his family in Boston much of the time over the next ten years. In those ten years they had five children: Abigail Amelia, future President John Quincy Adams, Susanna Boylston, Thomas Boylston, and a daughter named Elizabeth who was stillborn.

When John Adams served in the Continental Congress, as well as his other political activities, Abigail would spend many months alone on the farm in Braintree. It would be Abigail alone who managed the farm and educated their five children born between 1765 and 1772. In her management of the farm and other business affairs, Abigail was so effective that she completely took over these duties, which gave her husband time for his public service.

They had a strong love that grew and provided a sturdy bond for their relationship. Abigail thought of John as her best friend, and as an old woman, she still remembered the thrill she felt the first time he held her hand. To John, the relationship was equally satisfying and important; as he carved out his successful career, he relied heavily on Abigail's advice, support, and companionship. John was proud of Abigail's abilities to manage a farm and raise a family without him during his long absences on the nation's business. He told her she was so successful in budgeting, planting, managing staff, regulating live-stock, buying

provisions, nursing and educating their children, that he knew she could handle their affairs in his absence.

Proficient at writing, she documented her life, to an exceptional degree over the years in more than two thousand letters, and is considered one of the best letter writers in America. It would be through her insightful and communicative nature that she described in vivid detail, clarity and humor, the new nation, the American family, the revolution and war, and the new capital.

Having written letters almost on a daily basis, she mentioned events, ideas, her impressions, and personalities. In one of her many letters to her husband when he was in Congress, she wrote, *"Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors...If particular care is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation."* Abigail, who was very well-informed, served as an advisor and alter ego to her husband throughout his career.

Abigail liked public life, and after the war, between 1784 and 1785 she was able to join her husband in France, and became the mistress of the Paris mansion. Within a year, her husband was appointed Minister to the Court of St. James, thereby moving them to London from 1785-1788. In England she tolerated royal contempt, but at the same time noted the dictatorship of the nobility, from which John Adams had helped free many Americans. After spending three years in London, John Adams decided that they would not return to their farmhouse in Braintree, but rather believed they should have a lifestyle that befitted their station in life.

Upon returning to the United States in 1788, they moved into the finest mansion they could find in Quincy. During the years before her husband would become president, Abigail spent her time managing their new home, devoting much of her time to her children and husband, including the years her husband was the vice-president, as well as her continued writing and involvement in women's issues.

### First Lady

When John Adams became President of the United States, he was inaugurated in Philadelphia, the then capital on March 4, 1797. Soon thereafter, when the capital was moved to Washington, D.C., Abigail became the mistress of the President's House. Here she undertook the enormous job of opening the new presidential mansion, which was not yet completed, that was later to be known as *The White House*.

The first First Lady to live in the White House, she resided there for four months, arriving in November 1800. She was quite inventive, having to use many makeshift ideas to get by, as well as use the unfinished East Room for clothes drying. Abigail entertained in the new White House on quite a number of occasions, and did so in a formal fashion. To accomplish this, she shut off many of the unfinished rooms and made use of the ones she was able to heat. In her entertaining, she shared the belief, and that of her husband, that the presidency should maintain the same dignity as the courts of Europe. However, since presidential families were responsible for covering the costs of their entertainments and the Adamses were enduring financial difficulties at the time of his presidency, Abigail creatively found ways to maintain dignity with frugality.

Highly conscious of her role as the president's wife, Abigail Adams saw her role largely as a hostess for the public as well as a symbol of the Federalist Party. In addition to entertaining, she also attempted to influence fashion, believing that the more revealing Napoleonic-style clothing then popular were too indecorous.

During the four years her husband served as President, Abigail Adams made a strong impression on the press and public. She was unofficially titled "Lady Adams," and encouraged such recognition by assuming a visible ceremonial role. Often mentioned in the press, her opinions were even quoted at a New England town hall meeting. A highly partisan Federalist, Mrs. Adams helped forward the interests of the Administration by writing editorial letters to family and acquaintances, encouraging the publication of the information and viewpoint presented in them.

### Later Life

In the election of 1800, Adams and his Federalist party suffered disastrous defeat. The couple returned to Quincy where they spent their remaining years. They lived peacefully together without the pressures and demands of political life or the necessity of any more long separations. Adams's last years, however, were not without hardship. Although she was near her family, her own chronic illness and the deaths of close relatives and friends, including her daughter, Nabby, to cancer, made life difficult.

She died on October 28, 1818, after a brief illness. Unfortunately, this occurred when John Quincy was secretary of state, thus she never lived to see her son as president, six years later. So far in America's presidential history, Abigail Adams was the only woman to have been the wife of one President, and the mother of another.

She is buried beside her husband in the United First Parish Church, Quincy (also known as the *Church of the Presidents*). Her last words were "Do not grieve, my friend, my dearest friend. I am ready to go. And John, it will not be long."

### Interesting Facts

- The Adams' would be the first family to take up residence at the White House.
- The home was not yet finished and with the absence of a roof over the East Room, Abigail found it a convenient place to hang the family laundry to dry.
- As a celebration of their marriage they granted two of their slaves freedom and paid for the education of one.
- John and Abigail were the first presidential couple to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary (50th anniversary) in 1814.
- Until the election of George W. Bush in 2000, Abigail Adams held the distinction of being the first woman who was the wife of a president and mother to another, John Quincy Adams, sixth president.

### Legacy of Letters

John Adams (1735-1826) and Abigail Smith Adams (1744-1818) exchanged over 1,100 letters, beginning during their courtship in 1762 and continuing throughout John's political career (until 1801). These warm and informative letters include John's descriptions of the Continental Congress and his impressions of Europe while he served in various diplomatic roles, as well as Abigail's updates about their family, farm, and news of the Revolution's impact on the Boston area.

As was the custom of the time, they adopted pen names:

- Abigail was Diana, after the Roman goddess of the moon and after the birth of their children, she adopted the pen name, Portia, the patient wife of the great Roman politician Brutus.
- John adopted the name, Lysander, after the Spartan war hero.

John often addressed his letters to his "Dear Adoreable" or "My dear Diana," or "My Dear Portia," but Abigail addressed her letters to John, as she would for the rest of her life, to "My Dearest Friend."

## Several Letters of Mr. and Mrs. Adams

**Sunday 18 June 1775 - Abigail to John**

**During the Battle of Bunker Hill**

Dearest Friend

**The Day; perhaps the decisive Day is come on which the fate of America depends.** My bursting Heart must find vent at my pen. I have just heard that our dear Friend Dr. Warren is no more but fell gloriously fighting for his Country -- saying better to die honourably in the field than ignominiously hang upon the Gallows. Great is our Loss. He has distinguished himself in every engagement, by his courage and fortitude, by animating the Soldiers and leading them on by his own example. A particular account of these dreadful, but I hope Glorious Days will be transmitted you, no doubt in the exactest manner.

The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but the God of Israel is he that giveth strength and power unto his people. Trust in him at all times, ye people pour out your hearts before him. God is a refuge for us. -- Charlestown is laid in ashes. The Battle began upon our entrenchments upon Bunkers Hill, a Saturday morning about 3 o'clock and has not ceased yet and tis now 3 o'clock Sabbath afternoon.

Tis expected they will come out over the Neck to night, and a dreadful Battle must ensue. Almighty God cover the heads of our Country men, and be a shield to our Dear Friends. How [many have] fallen we know not -- the constant roar of the cannon is so [distressing] that we cannot Eat, Drink or Sleep. May we be supported and sustained in the dreadful conflict. I shall tarry here till tis thought unsafe by my Friends, and then I have secured myself a retreat at your Brothers who has kindly offered me part of his house. I cannot compose myself to write any further at present. I will add more as I hear further.

**5 November 1775 - Abigail to John**

**As the war continues**

I HOPE you have received several letters from me in this fortnight past. I wrote by Mr. Lynch and by **Dr. Franklin**, the latter of whom I had the pleasure of dining with, and of admiring him, whose character from my infancy I had been taught to venerate. I found him social but not talkative, and, when he spoke, something useful dropped from his tongue. He was grave, yet pleasant and affable. You know I make some pretensions to physiognomy [*assessment of a person's character or personality from their outer appearance, especially the face*], and I thought I could read

in his countenance the virtues of his heart, among which, patriotism shone in its full lustre ; and with that is blended every virtue of a Christian. For a true patriot must be a religious man.

...Nothing new has transpired since I wrote you last. I have not heard of one person's escape out of town, nor of any maneuver of any kind.

I will only ask you to measure by your own the affectionate regard of your nearest friend.

### **Braintree, 31 March 1776 - Abigail to John** **As the war continues**

I wish you would ever write me a Letter half as long as I write you; and tell me if you may where your Fleet are gone? What sort of Defence Virginia can make against our common Enemy? Whether it is so situated as to make an able Defence? Are not the Gentry Lords and the common people vassals, are they not like the uncivilized Natives Britain represents us to be? I hope their Rifle Men who have shown themselves very savage and even Blood thirsty; are not a specimen of the Generality of the people.

...I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it is not founded upon that generous and Christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us.

Do not you want to see Boston; I am fearful of the small pox, or I should have been in before this time. I got Mr. Crane to go to our House and see what state it was in. I find it has been occupied by one of the Doctors of a Regiment, very dirty, but no other damage has been done to it. The few things which were left in it are all gone. Cranch has the key which he never delivered up. I have wrote to him for it and am determined to get it cleaned as soon as possible and shut it up. I look upon it a new acquisition of property, a property which one month ago I did not value at a single Shilling, and could with pleasure have seen it in flames.

...I feel very differently at the approach of spring to what I did a month ago. We knew not then whether we could plant or sow with safety, whether when we had toiled we could reap the fruits of our own industry, whether we could rest in our own Cottages, or whether we should not be driven from the sea coasts to seek shelter in the wilderness, but now we feel as if we might sit under our own vine and eat the good of the land.

I feel a gaiete' de coeur [*happiness of the heart*] to which before I was a stranger. I think the Sun looks brighter, the Birds sing more melodiously, and Nature puts on a more

cheerful countenance. We feel a temporary peace, and the poor fugitives are returning to their deserted habitations.

...I long to hear that you have declared an independency -- 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, 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. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but **such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend.** Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity.

Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. **Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness.**

### **14 April 1776 - John to Abigail** **John's response to Abigail's last letter**

You justly complain of my short Letters, but the critical State of Things and the Multiplicity of Avocations must plead my Excuse. You ask where the Fleet is. The enclosed Papers will inform you. You ask what Sort of Defence Virginia can make. I believe they will make an able Defence. Their Militia and minute Men have been some time employed in training themselves, and they have Nine Battallions of regulars as they call them, maintained among them, under good Officers, at the Continental Expense. They have set up a Number of Manufactories of Fire Arms, which are busily employed. They are tolerably supplied with Powder, and are successful and assiduous, in making Salt Petre [*used in gunpowder*]....

...You have given me some Pleasure, by your Account of a certain House in Queen Street. I had burned it, long ago, in Imagination. It rises now to my View like a Phoenix....

...Your Description of your own Gaiety de Coeur, charms me. Thanks be to God you have just Cause to rejoice -- and may the bright Prospect be obscured by no Cloud.

As to Declarations of Independency, be patient....

...As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government everywhere. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient -- that schools and Colleges were grown turbulent -- that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters.

But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented. This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I won't blot it out.

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would completely subject Us to the **Despotism of the Petticoat**, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight. I am sure every good Politician would plot, as long as he would, against Despotism, Empire, Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy, or Ochlocracy [*mob rule*]. -- A fine Story indeed. I begin to think the Ministry as deep as they are wicked. After stirring up Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholicks, Scotch Renegadoes, at last they have stimulated the [ladies] to demand new Priviledges and threaten to rebell.

### 3 July 1776 - John to Abigail

#### As the Continental Congress Debates the Declaration of Independence

Philadelphia July 3d. 1776

Had a Declaration of Independency been made seven Months ago, it would have been attended with many great and glorious Effects . . . We might before this Hour, have formed Alliances with foreign States....

...But on the other Hand, the Delay of this Declaration to this Time, has many great Advantages attending it. -- The Hopes of Reconciliation, which were fondly entertained by Multitudes of honest and well meaning though weak and mistaken People, have been gradually and at last totally extinguished. Time has been given for the whole People, maturely to consider the great Question of Independence and to ripen their judgments, dissipate their Fears, and allure their Hopes, by discussing it in News Papers and Pamphlets, by debating it, in Assemblies, Conventions, Committees of Safety and Inspection, in Town and County Meetings, as well as in private Conversations, so that the whole People in every Colony of the 13, have now adopted it, as their own Act. This will cement the Union, and avoid

those Heats and perhaps Convulsions which might have been occasioned, by such a Declaration Six Months ago. But the Day is past. The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival. It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shows, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.

You will think me transported with Enthusiasm but I am not. I am well aware of the Toil and Blood and Treasure, that it will cost Us to maintain this Declaration, and support and defend these States. Yet through all the Gloom I can see the Rays of ravishing Light and Glory. I can see that the End is more than worth all the Means. And that Posterity will triumph in that Days Transaction, even although We should rue it, which I trust in God We shall not.

### 13 – 14 July 1776 - Abigail to John

#### While Abigail and her children are in Boston going through a process of being inoculated against smallpox during a smallpox epidemic in Massachusetts

Boston July 13, 1776

I must begin with apologizing to you for not writing since the 17 of June. I have really had so many cares upon my Hands and Mind, with a bad inflammation in my Eyes that I have not been able to write. I now date from Boston where I yesterday arrived and was with all 4 of our Little ones inoculated for the small pox. My uncle and Aunt were so kind as to send me an invitation with my family.

...Our Little ones stood the operation Manfully. Dr. Bulfinch is our Physician. Such a Spirit of inoculation never before took place; the Town and every House in it, as are as full as they can hold. I believe there are not less than 30 persons from Braintree....God Grant that we may all go comfortably through the Distemper [*refers to the sickness brought on by the inoculation*], the phisick part is bad enough I know....The Soldiers innoculated privately, so did many of the inhabitants and the **paper currency spread it everywhere**. I immediately determined to set myself about it, and get ready with my children. I wish it was so you could have been with us, but I submit....

### Sunday July 14

By yesterday's post I received two Letters dated **3 and 4 of July** and though your Letters never fail to give me pleasure, be the subject what it will, yet it was greatly heightened by the prospect of the future happiness and glory of our Country; nor am I a little Gratified when I reflect that a

person so nearly connected with me has had the Honour of being a principal actor, in laying a foundation for its future Greatness. May the foundation of our new constitution, be Justice, Truth and Righteousness. Like the wise Man's house may it be founded upon those Rocks and then neither storms or tempests will overthrow it.

...Pray inform me constantly of every important transaction. Every expression of tenderness is a cordial to my Heart. Unimportant as they are to the rest of the world, to me they are everything.

...All our Friends desire to be remembered to you and foremost in that Number stands your Portia

## 20 March 1780 - Abigail to Son, John Quincy Adams

While John is in France on a diplomatic trip with son John Quincy Adams

MY DEAR SON,  
YOUR letter, last evening received from Bilboa, relieved me from much anxiety ; for, having a day or two before received letters from your papa, Mr. Thaxter, and brother in which packet I found none from you, nor any mention made of you, my mind, ever fruitful in conjectures, was instantly alarmed. I feared you were sick, unable to write, and your papa, unwilling to give me uneasiness, had concealed it from me ; ...Your father's letters came to Salem, yours to Newburyport, and soon gave ease to my anxiety, at the same time that it excited gratitude and thankfulness to Heaven, for the preservation you all experienced in the imminent dangers which threatened you.

You express in both your letters a degree of thankfulness. I hope it amounts to more than words, and that you will never be insensible to the particular preservation you have experienced in both your voyages. You have seen how inadequate the aid of man would have been, if the winds and the seas had not been under the particular government of that Being, who " stretched out the heavens as a span," who " holdeth the ocean in the hollow of his hand," and " rideth upon the wings of the wind."

If you have a due sense of your preservation, your next consideration will be, for what purpose you are continued in life. It is not to rove from clime to clime, to gratify an idle curiosity ; **but every new mercy you receive is a new debt upon you**, a new obligation to a diligent discharge of the various relations in which you stand connected ; in the first place, to your great Preserver ; in the next, to society in general ; in particular, to your country, to your parents, and to yourself.

**The only sure and permanent foundation of virtue is religion.** Let this important truth be engraven upon your heart. And also, that the foundation of religion is the belief of the one only God, and a just sense of his attributes, as a being infinitely wise, just, and good, to whom you owe the highest reverence, gratitude, and adoration ; who superintends and governs all nature, even to clothing the lilies of the field, and hearing the young ravens when they cry ; but more particularly regards man, whom he created after his own image, and breathed into him an immortal spirit, capable of a happiness beyond the grave ; for the attainment of which he is bound to the performance of certain duties, which all tend to the happiness and welfare of society, and are comprised in one short sentence, expressive of universal benevolence, " Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

...Justice, humanity, and benevolence are the duties you owe **to society** in general. **To your country** the same duties are incumbent upon you, with the additional obligation of sacrificing ease, pleasure, wealth, and life itself for its defense and security. **To your parents** you owe love, reverence, and obedience to all just and equitable commands. **To yourself**, here, indeed, is a wide field to expatiate upon. To become what you ought to be, and what a fond mother wishes to see you, attend to some precepts and instructions from the pen of one, who can have no motive but your welfare and happiness, and who wishes in this way to supply to you the personal watchfulness and care, which a separation from you deprived you of at a period of life, when habits are easiest acquired and fixed ; and, though the advice may not be new, yet suffer it to obtain a place in your memory...

...I will not overburden your mind at this time. I mean to pursue the subject of self-knowledge in some future letter, and give you my sentiments upon your future conduct in life, when I feel disposed to resume my pen.

In the mean time, be assured, no one is more sincerely interested in your happiness, than your ever affectionate mother,

A. A.

Do not expose my letters. I would copy, but hate it.