

## The Adams Family

Abigail Adams was an interesting woman. Not only was she the wife to a president, but was also the mother of one. She was also very opinionated and spirited, a trait that was not common for women of the era. Abigail was a preacher's daughter, a housewife, a mother, and the second first lady ever. Adams believed that women should be able to be heard and should have better education, but was not a full out revolutionary for the complete rights of women, and believed in the traditions of marriage which she followed in her own marriage, specifically during the time of the American Revolution.

Abigail Smith was born in 1774, and she was the daughter of Elizabeth and Reverend William Smith in Weymouth, Massachusetts. Her grandfather, John Quincy, was the Speaker in the House of Representatives. Her family was a prestigious one, since the Quincy's had moved to the Massachusetts Bay Colony only three years after it had been established. Quincy was a man who was not necessarily a cheerful man, but as Abigail describes it, "[He] was remarkable for never parsing any Body, He did not often speak evil, but he seldom spoke well"<sup>1</sup>. While Reverend Smith had similar views of Mr. Quincy, Reverend Smith did not silence his daughter's thoughts, but he told them to watch what they say, and to "not speak ill" of others.<sup>2</sup>

When Abigail was young she got really sick and was not able to go to school. The reason for this was supposedly because diphtheria, but Abigail believed that she was actually left out school due to her gender, and school for women at the time was basically just reading and writing and nothing more. This caused Abigail later in life to strongly advocate for her own

---

<sup>1</sup> Holton, Woody. *Abigail Adams*, (New York: Free Press, 2009), 7

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-10

daughter to have a good education.<sup>3</sup> Abigail Smith and John Adams exchanged letters for a while, and after John got very sick, Abigail realized that she was in love with him. John at the time was just a lawyer with low prestige. On October 25, 1764, Smith and Adams were married in her father's parsonage. Just a few months later she had her first child, Abigail (Nabby).<sup>4</sup> After Nabby was born, Abigail's life as a wife and as a mother soon took off.

Abigail was a supporter of John in everything he did. Even when he was away, she did not get cross or mad. She missed him, and hated that he was so far away from him, but she also encouraged him to what he was doing, especially when it came to the revolution. She encouraged him to go on in this war for rights and independence, and at one point she told him, "'You must not think of us first' she said. 'in times like these. The challenge has been made, and I am glad that you are needed to meet it!'"<sup>5</sup> She was proud to be the wife of someone who was capable and brave enough to make a difference in the world, and she was proud to be able to be married to a man who was so great.

John and Abigail Adams had a good marriage, but because of his career in the law field and the American Revolution, John was away for long periods of time at conventions, and because of this, Abigail became an untypical kind of housewife. She did the normal domestic household duties: cleaning, cooking, sewing, taking care of the children, teaching them, etc. She was not only in charge of the typical domestic household duties, but because of John's constant

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 13-20

<sup>5</sup> Whitney, Janet. *Abigail Adams*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1947

absences, she was now in charge of everything, including the farm and the finances.<sup>6</sup> She was a good mother, and it's been said that some of her letters to John Quincy at a young age were full of encouragement. John Quincy was away with John Sr. to further his education. Abigail wrote him telling him to keep pursuing his education and to remember, "The only sure and permanent foundation of virtue is religion".<sup>7</sup>

While John was away, he would send Abigail letters, and often times they would have details about things that he needed her to do around the farm. For example, on June 23, 1774, he wrote in his letter that, "We have had a vast Abundance of Rain here this Week and hope you have had a Sufficiency with you. But the Plenty of it, will render the Making of Hay the more critical, and you must exhort Bracket to be vigilant, and not let any of the Grass suffer, if he can help it".<sup>8</sup> Abigail was a very strong willed though, and was very capable of keeping up with all the work that needed to be done.

Abigail and John were very much in love, and a lot of this was because John treated Abigail with a lot of respect and love. John was constantly in the loop on the current events, and he did not stifle Abigail's curiosity to know things that he knew. She often read articles from *The Gazette*, and John himself even published some articles in it, such as A

---

<sup>6</sup> Young, Alfred F., Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael. *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011. 27-287.

<sup>7</sup> Banks, Louis Albert. *The Religious Life of Famous Americans*. Boston: American Tract Society, 1904.

<sup>8</sup> John Adams to Abigail Adams. June 23, 1774.

*Dissertation on the Feudal and Canon Law*, which he discussed why the colonists had settled in America. John also often had people over, and Abigail was quick to serve and respect the men. She not only took care of the house, the farm, and her family, but also, “It seemed to her that she was feeding half, if not all, of the influential colonists who came to call”.<sup>9</sup> A lot of reason Abigail was able to express herself as a woman was because of her husband, and her life would have been drastically different if her husband was reserved, and did not let other people into their lives.

Abigail was also very helpful to John, not only around the house, but intellectually. When he was away for long periods of times, Abigail would send him word about what was going on back home. She sent various letters talking about the revolutionaries back home, the taxes and how people were boycotting them, and she also was not afraid to tell him how she truly felt. In her March 27 letter in 1775 she said, “. . . I feel anxious for the fate of our Monarchy or Democracy or what ever is to take place. I soon get in a Labyrinth of perplexities, but whatever occurs, may justice and righteousness be the Stability of our times, and order arise out of confusion”.<sup>10</sup> She talks about how she is worried about the fate of the countries, because of the radical and dramatic things happening, such as The Stamp Act and The Boston Tea Party.

Although Abigail had a lot of love and respect for her husband, and was obedient and a very good housewife, this does not mean that she blindly followed John and never questioned him or spoke her own opinions. Abigail Adams was a very opinionated and “spirited” woman,

---

<sup>9</sup> Levin, Phyllis Lee. *Abigail Adams: A Biography*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987.

<sup>10</sup> Abigail Adams to John Adams. November 27, 1775.

and had been since she was young. Abigail's mother said she had a "wild side", and this gravely concerned her mother.<sup>11</sup> Since Abigail was sick and was not able to go school when she was younger, she had a strong desire for education, not just for her own children, but for the women who did not get proper education. She wanted women to be able to think clearly, and to be able to think reasonably. The most famous example of this is in her letter March 31 letter in 1776, typically called "Remember the Ladies", in which she asks John to, "Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable 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".<sup>12</sup> This is not a call for complete and total women's revolution. This is just a reminder for John to remember that the women are there too, and that there are things that women should be able to do better, such as have a better education. She is saying that men would just completely control women with no regard for their choices if women are not allowed to be heard.

Abigail was not trying to command or control John though, and was not trying to be a rebellious feminist. She was just telling her husband how she felt. Abigail and John had a very open relationship, and Abigail always felt like she could talk to him about how she truly felt. Abigail didn't

"feel anxious lest he should do or say the wrong thing, make mistakes, offend people, be foolish or boorish, or commit himself to a course of which her judgement disapproved.

Her confidence in him was not a half-pretense, to boost him up; not the result of a theory of wifely duty, not a submissive unintelligent ignorance of what he was about. It was a

---

<sup>11</sup> Holton, Woody. *Abigail Adams*. New York: Free Press, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> "Remember the Ladies." Abigail Adams to John Adams. March 31, 1776.

full, co-operative, entire agreement with the whole of his point of view, and an admiration of his methods and actions”.

Abigail wants more rights for women, but also seems to respect the traditions and customs that are already in place. Her letter seems to be an example of the revolutionary spirit of not being oppressed without being able to be represented (“no taxation without representation”). Even though Abigail was opinionated and independent for a woman of that era, she was not a rebellious or radical woman. She did not denounce marriage, or try to get rid of old ways. As seen, she had a good traditional marriage full of love, and, “Abigail seems to have wanted to have preserve the idea of male cover or protection of women in marriage. She does not use any derivative of the word equal”.<sup>13</sup> Abigail does not seem to call for a complete women’s right movement, but just for more opportunities for women.

Abigail Adams wanted women to be able to have better education privileges, which is why she allowed for her own daughter to be educated in things such as Greek and Latin. Abigail does not seem to be a complete advocate for women to have all rights though, and this is clear by how she interacts with her husband, and how much she respects him, his opinions, and his life. Abigail was a wonderful woman though, who did a lot to help the revolution by supporting her husband.

---

<sup>13</sup> Schloesser, Pauline E. *The Fair Sex: White Women and Racial Patriarchy in the Early American Republic*. New York: New York University Press, 2002.

Bibliography

Abigail Adams to John Adams. November 27, 1775.

Banks, Louis Albert. *The Religious Life of Famous Americans*. Boston: American Tract Society, 1904.

Holton, Woody. *Abigail Adams*. New York: Free Press, 2009.

John Adams to Abigail Adams. June 23, 1774.

Levin, Phyllis Lee. *Abigail Adams: A Biography*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987.

"Remember the Ladies." Abigail Adams to John Adams. March 31, 1776.

Schloesser, Pauline E. *The Fair Sex: White Women and Racial Patriarchy in the Early American Republic*. New York: New York University Press, 2002.

Whitney, Janet. *Abigail Adams*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1947

Young, Alfred F., Gary B. Nash, and Ray Raphael. *Revolutionary Founders: Rebels, Radicals, and Reformers in the Making of the Nation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.