Abigail Adams

Abigail Adams holds a unique place in American history as both the wife of one president and the mother of another. In her own right, Adams was an ardent American patriot. Her perseverance during the American Revolution kept her family together and enabled her husband, John, to devote himself entirely to the patriot cause. Her letters provided her husband with information and shrewd insights into the political situation in Boston while he was absent. Adams remained a dedicated correspondent and apt political observer during the tumultuous early years of the nation until her death in 1818.

Adams was born Abigail Smith on November 22, 1744 in the town of Weymouth, Massachusetts. Her father, William Smith, was the town pastor, and her mother, Elizabeth Quincy Smith, was a descendant of a prestigious Massachusetts family. The second of three daughters, Adams was educated at home by her mother, like most young girls of her station. She learned to read, write, and cipher, as well as cook, clean, and manage a household. In addition, Adams, along with her three siblings, read from her father's extensive library. She proved an eager student, though she always regretted the lack of a formal education.

By the age of 17, when she met her future husband, Adams was not only well read, but clever and quick-witted. John Adams, then a young, aspiring lawyer, was promptly taken with the vivacious young woman. The two soon entered into a flirtatious, romantic courtship that often found expression in playful letters. The serious John wrote often to his Miss Adorable, offering her millions of kisses, and she returned his affections, informing him that he was always in her dreams.

The two were married on October 25, 1764 and settled on John's farm in Braintree, Massachusetts. They remained there for most of the next decade as John worked hard to build his reputation as a lawyer in town and in nearby Boston. Adams herself was busy raising a family, giving birth to five children between 1765 and 1772. During these years, she was kept busy by her domestic cares, but on the birth of her first child in July 1765, she found time to express to a friend her happiness that she was "Blessd with a charming Girl whose pretty Smiles already delight my Heart, who is the Dear Image of her still Dearer Pappa."

The Adams' domestic bliss, however, was interrupted by public events. As early as 1773, with her husband becoming an increasingly influential local leader in the political conflict with England, Adams began to fear the direction that events were taking; she wrote to her friend Mercy Otis Warren in regard to her fears that "The flame is kindled and like Lightening it catches from Soul to Soul. Great will be the devastation if not timely quenched or allayed by some more Lenient Measures." In 1774, John was elected as a representative to the First Continental Congress, which was to convene in Philadelphia. His departure proved the beginning of a decade-long separation for the couple, as John's growing national reputation drew him into even greater service to his country. This left Adams as the primary caretaker of her young family, a duty that would prove increasingly more difficult when war broke out in 1775.

Adams tackled her new role with spirit; taking over maintenance of the family farm, she wrote to John that she hoped to be as good a "Farmeress" as her husband could hope to be a good "Statesman." She wrote frequently to her husband, keeping him informed about political developments in Massachusetts. It was during this time that Adams
wrote to her husband reminding him that while obtaining independence for the men of the former colonies, he should also "Remember the ladies." The exigencies of the war made providing for her family very difficult, especially as food became scarcer and inflation made money practically useless.

Though she often commented that she felt unequal to the cares placed upon her, Adams discovered she had a knack for business and even speculated in land sales. When her husband was sent to Europe as an ambassador, she asked him to send her such goods as scarves, laces, and gloves, which she could sell locally for profit. Like many women during the revolution, Adams, while often feeling overwhelmed by her new activities, considered her personal sacrifices as her patriotic duty. In 1782, she wrote to her husband that she bore their separation by regarding it a contribution to the common good.

Though she bore his absence with patriotic fortitude, the separation proved extremely trying for Adams, particularly in such difficult times. In 1784, after a four-year absence from both John and her eldest son, John Quincy Adams, who had accompanied his father to Europe, she overcame her dislike for leaving home and set sail for Europe in the company of her daughter, Nabby.

The Adamses remained in Europe for some time, first in France and then in England, where John served as the American ambassador. Adams felt no affinity for life among Europeans; their manners and customs did not suit her Puritan sensibilities. During these years, however, she had the pleasure of developing a deep friendship with Thomas Jefferson, then ambassador to France. The two maintained a lively correspondence on politics and, even more so, on personal matters. Adams often sent the widower advice and insight on raising his three daughters. She even took charge of Jefferson's daughter, Polly, for a brief period while the girl was traveling to join her father in Paris.

After their stint in Europe, the Adamses professed a desire for retirement to their farm, but John felt compelled to continue his public service, first as vice president under George Washington and, from 1797 to 1800, as president. The couple continued to endure frequent absences from one another, while Adams divided her time between her Massachusetts home and the nation's capital. More trying for them, perhaps, was the political turmoil of John's presidency.

In February 1797, remarking on criticism of the president following the XYZ Affair, in which French officials purportedly tried to bribe American envoys, Adams wrote bitterly that the presidency was a mark at which envy, pride, and malevolence will shoot their envenomed arrows. Particularly bitter was the loss of their friendship with Jefferson, who proved a staunch opponent to the Adams administration and who won the presidency from him in 1800. The Adamses' dismay over John's political defeat was compounded by the death of their son, Charles, from alcoholism in November 1800. John, mourning his son and hurt by the years of political attacks, left the capital without attending Jefferson's inauguration.

In 1801, Abigail and John finally returned to private life on their Braintree farm, where they would remain in contented retirement for the next two decades. The peace of retirement helped heal old political wounds, and the Adamses repaired their friendship with Jefferson, an event in part precipitated by Abigail's note of condolence to Jefferson on the death of his daughter, Polly, in 1804. Adams was initially reluctant to write to Jefferson because of the political rift between them, but, she wrote, "I know how closely entwined around a parent's heart are those cords which bind the parental to the filial bosom; and when snapped asunder, how agonizing the pangs!" She would again feel these pangs herself when in 1811, her daughter Nabby was diagnosed with breast cancer. Nabby returned to Braintree during her illness to be cared for by her mother. After her death in July 1813, Adams confided to Jefferson that she suffered a great affliction for the loss of her "dear daughter."

Though in declining health herself, Adams remained active on the family farm and continued her lively
correspondence with close friends. On October 28, 1818, she passed away in Quincy, Massachusetts after a bout with typhus. John survived her for six years, always missing the companionship of his Miss Adorable.

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