Mercy Otis Warren was a historian, as well as a poet and playwright, of the American Revolution era. She became well acquainted with many of the well-known figures of the revolution. Her three-volume history of the revolution, written in 1805 and entitled *A History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, provides insightful commentary on public affairs and personalities of the time.

Warren was born on September 25, 1728 in Barnstable, Massachusetts to the prominent family of James Sr. and Mary Otis. Her father was an influential lawyer and politician, and her brother, James Otis Jr., was a political activist who opposed the Stamp Act and was one of the first leaders of the American independence movement.

Unlike most young woman at the time, Warren was educated by private tutors along with her brothers. Both her father and her eldest brother encouraged her intellectual pursuits. Warren received a rigorous, classical education. Since she would not be going on to college (women were not accepted into colleges at that time), she did not study Greek or Latin. However, she learned ancient and modern history, studied the works of great English authors, and read translations of Greek and Roman literature. As a result, she developed a love for politics and for the study of history. She also became a talented writer. In 1754, she married James Warren of Plymouth, Massachusetts, a political leader of the radical wing of the patriot party. They raised five sons together.

Through her brother and husband, Warren met many of the prominent figures in the fight for American independence. During the revolutionary period, she regularly corresponded with John Adams, Samuel Adams, James Winthrop, John Dickinson, Thomas Jefferson, Elbridge Gerry, Henry Knox, and Catherine Macaulay (an English historian) regarding political matters. She was also a regular correspondent of John Adams' wife, Abigail Adams, another educated woman of the time. She was continually at the center of important historical events during the years 1765 to 1789. As a talented writer with access to the most important political leaders of her day, she became an important historian, poet, and playwright of the American Revolution. Much of her work helped generate a spirit of resistance to British tyranny.

Warren wrote several plays, including the *Adulateur* (1772). This work was a satirical attack on Massachusetts governor Thomas Hutchinson that foreshadowed the outbreak of the war. In *The Group*, Warren used satire to discuss what would happen if the King George III abrogated the Massachusetts Charter of Rights. *The Blockheads* (1776) and *The Motley Assembly* (1779) were published anonymously but have been attributed to Warren. She published *Observations on the New Constitution* in 1788, in which she argued against ratification of the federal Constitution because it lacked a bill of rights.

The publication of Warren's masterpiece, *A History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, in 1805 led to a quarrel with John Adams. He objected to her statements that "his passions and prejudices were sometimes too strong for his sagacity and judgment." Adams was also outraged that she wrote that since his residence in England (where he served as the first U.S. minister to Great Britain), he showed a leniency toward monarchy. Finally, Warren deeply offended him by writing that "pride of talents and much ambition, were undoubtedly combined in his character." The two continued a feud over these matters for five years until Gerry
interceded and a reconciliation was achieved. Even as their friendship revived, however, Adams confided in Gerry that he believed "History is not the Province of the Ladies. . . . Little Passions and Prejudices, want of Information, false Information, want of Experience, erroneous judgment, and frequent Partiality, are among [the History's] Faults."

Warren died at the age of 86 on October 19, 1814.

Further Reading


Select Citation Style: MLA