

Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize 2000
©The Concord Review, Inc., 1998 (all rights reserved)

ABIGAIL ADAMS: THE FEMINIST MYTH

[8,167 words]

Jennifer Shingleton

For the past few decades, there has been an enormous increase in research pertaining to female historical figures. In an attempt to balance the seemingly endless information on male heroes, however, some historians have created false images of American heroines, such as Abigail Adams. Many recent historians, such as Lynne Withey and Richard B. Morris, have painted Adams's picture as a "fiery revolutionary,"¹ a "committed feminist,"² and "a prisoner of the times in which she lived."³ In her book, *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams*, Lynne Withey argued that Abigail attempted to expand her constrictive sphere by taking an active role in farm management.⁴ Historians such as Lynne Withey, Vera O. Laska, and Elizabeth Evans diminished Abigail's domestic roles as mother and wife by focusing on her political involvement.⁵ In addition, historian Alice S. Rossi distorted Abigail's relationship with her husband, John, in order to make Abigail appear revolutionary.⁶ Lastly, historians such as Lynne Withey, Vera O. Laska, and Lisa Tuttle claim that Abigail supported increased legal rights for women and constitutional equality.⁷ These portraits greatly misrepresent Abigail Adams, and eighteenth-century women in general. Like most women of her time,

Jennifer Shingleton graduated *summa cum laude* from Princeton. She is now at Harvard Law School. She wrote this paper for Mr. Victor Henningsen's History 31 course at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts during the 1997/1998 academic year.

Adams only assumed new responsibilities, such as managing the farm, when absolutely necessary. Furthermore, Abigail's primary role in life was not to serve as a political activist, but as a mother and wife. Finally, while she supported female education and the moderation of power within a marriage, she did not support equality for women. Abigail Adams was an extraordinary woman, but she was neither revolutionary nor feminist in her political beliefs and social attitudes.

Most historians who argue that "Abigail's life pointed the way toward feminism of the nineteenth and twentieth century"⁸ fail to define feminism or to consider the word's twentieth century implications. Historian Karen Offen analyzed the historical usage of the word "feminism" and determined that it had two main branches: individual and relational feminism.⁹ Individual feminism emphasized "the quest for personal independence (or autonomy) in all aspects of life, while down-playing, deprecating, or dismissing as insignificant all socially defined roles and minimizing discussions of sex-linked qualities or contributions, including childbearing and its attendant responsibilities."¹⁰ The most dominant form of feminism prior to the twentieth century, however, was relational feminism.¹¹ Relational feminism centered on a "gender-based but egalitarian vision of social organization"¹² with a "non-hierarchical, male-female couple as the basic unit of society."¹³ According to Offen's historical definition, feminist ideology "opposed women's subordination to men in the family and society...it thereby offers a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization, and control mechanisms."¹⁴ Both individual and relational feminist forms revolve around an ultimately revolutionary vision.¹⁵

Almost all historians would agree that Abigail Adams was far from an individual feminist. In fact, individual feminism never gained momentum until the 1920s.¹⁶ Since the 1970s, however, individual feminism has been the most prominent form of American feminism.¹⁷ Therefore, categorizing Abigail Adams as a feminist immediately evokes, in most modern Americans, the image of a radical feminist. Since most historians who study Abigail imply

that she was not as radical as individual feminists, many of them place Abigail under the heading of relational feminist. Such a heading appeals to the modern reader because it portrays Adams as a great leader of equality and a role model for those fighting the sexist world. Yet, while relational feminists challenge female submission and seek to eliminate sex-related injustice, Abigail Adams followed and supported the commonly accepted hierarchy within marriage. A careful analysis of Abigail's letters reveals that her views resembled neither the individual nor the relational feminist ideology. Identifying Abigail as feminist associates her with a twentieth-century egalitarian ideology that appeals to the public eye, but misconstrues her actual beliefs.

It is particularly inaccurate to regard Abigail Adams as a feminist because the term "feminism" was rarely used before the twentieth century.¹⁸ If one considers her a *forerunner* or *precursor* to the modern feminist movement, as many historians do, then one must examine the feminist studies of the twentieth century. According to one of the most widely recognized feminist works, the *Redstockings Manifesto* of 1968, "Women are an oppressed class...We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants, and cheap labor."¹⁹ As exemplified by the *Redstockings Manifesto*, most feminists feel restricted within their socially defined roles. According to historian Karen Offen, to be a feminist, from any time period, "is necessarily to be at odds with male-dominated culture and society"²⁰ in order to combat these feelings of repression and discrimination. Feminists in the twentieth century, while they range in their arguments, agree that a woman must break through the barrier of a restrictive sphere. Obviously, a woman's sphere has changed drastically from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century; hence, one can assume that a precursor to the modern feminist movement from the eighteenth century would have hoped to break free from her own sphere at that time.

Abigail Adams may have been as outspoken or as energized as modern-day feminists, however, that does not imply that she possessed an "earlier version" of their beliefs. Due to the

readily available information pertaining to Abigail and the relatively few documents pertaining to other eighteenth-century women, it has been easy for historians to portray Abigail as an early feminist. This vision of “radical Abigail” stems from the false assumption that most eighteenth-century women led rigid and sheltered lives. Compared with the typical nineteenth-century woman, Abigail’s attitudes were indeed advanced; however, the pre-industrial era was more liberal regarding women’s importance in society than many people appreciate. Analyzing Abigail’s thoughts and behavior within the proper context of the eighteenth century demonstrates that she accepted the eighteenth-century belief that a woman must remain in her own sphere.

The Necessity of Farm Management

A common vision of Abigail Adams, portrayed in biographies such as *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams* by Lynne Withey, is that of an advanced, independent woman who ventured far beyond the typical woman’s sphere through her management of the family farm. According to Lynne Withey,

Although [Abigail] never actually stepped outside of her role as wife and mother, she carried it to its limits. She managed all of the family property and investments, including buying land, planning additions to houses and farm buildings, hiring and firing farm laborers, contracting with tenants, and supervising farm work.²¹

Contrary to Withey’s argument, Abigail Adams’s successful farm management was not an attempt to expand her role beyond the strict confines of the home, but an act of necessity. When her husband John made his first trip to Philadelphia in 1774, the management of the farm fell directly to Abigail.²² Since the revenue from the farm provided the family with the majority of its income, Abigail had no choice but to assume her new duties. According to historian Edith B. Gelles, John’s departure “marked the end of normal domesticity for Abigail.”²³ This drastic change in lifestyle, however, did not change her domestic values nor did it challenge her domestic roles of wife and mother.

Historian Lynne Withey continued her argument by writing, “Most of [Abigail’s new responsibilities] were accomplished without John’s advice and in many cases without his knowledge. She often disagreed with him on the best way to invest their money, and she generally got her way.”²⁴ Withey was accurate in writing that Abigail often made financial and household decisions on her own, however, she wrongly implied that Abigail ignored her submissive position in the marriage to “get her way.” In fact, Abigail often proceeded without advice from John because she understood that John was busy with his own affairs. Abigail wrote to John, “I know the weight of publick cares lye so heavey upon you that I have been loth to mention your own private ones.”²⁵ Since John was so preoccupied with his political work, she viewed her solitary role in running the farm as a vital responsibility to maintain the family income, not as a quest for a more powerful, independent role as a woman. During the time that Abigail served as farm manager, she encountered many challenging and unfavorable conditions. In 1776, Abigail wrote to John, “Hands are so scarce that I have not been able to procure one, and add to this that Isaac has been sick with a fever this fortnight...In this Dilemma I have taken Belcher into pay, and must secure him for the season, as I know not what better course to steer.”²⁶ Abigail found it particularly difficult to support the needs of her children with the inflationary economy. During the war, Abigail said, “A Dollar is not equal to what one Quarter was two years ago.”²⁷ In order to compensate for the financial difficulties, Abigail learned, “Frugality, Industry, and economy are the lessons of the day — at least they must be so for me or my small Boat will suffer shipwreck.”²⁸ Abigail found it terribly stressful “not only to pay attention to my own indoor domestick affairs, but to everything about our little farm.”²⁹ Despite her difficult position, Abigail’s success was mandatory for the survival of the family.

Eventually the frustrations and stress of farm management proved to be intolerable, and Abigail regretted that John was not at home to help her with the family affairs. She said in a letter to a friend, “I miss my partner, and find myself unequal to the cares which fall upon me; I find it necessary to be the directress of our

Husbandry and farming.”³⁰ Abigail did not feel comfortable in her new role as “directress” of the farm, and she gladly would have handed her new responsibilities back to her husband had he been able to return home. On a number of occasions, Abigail directly confronted John with her concerns. On July 23, 1777, she wrote to him, “If you will come Home and turn Farmer, I will be dairy woman. You will make more than is allowed you, and we shall grow wealthy. Our Boys shall go to work with you, and my Girl shall stay in the House and assist me.”³¹ Abigail’s request to return to the domestic role of a “dairy woman” suggests that she was not concerned with the fight for woman’s greater independence. At times, Abigail’s tone was much harsher and more direct: “whilst you are engaged in the Senate your own domestick affairs require your presence at Home, and that your wife and children are in Danger of wanting Bread.”³² If Abigail is viewed as an early version of a feminist, then one would anticipate that she would have tried to maintain her extended responsibilities, as opposed to regularly expressing a desire to release herself from them. Hence, Abigail did not view her new role as farm manager as a chance to become an independent woman, but rather as a social and financial obligation.

After several years of tedious farm management, Abigail shifted her role from a “farmeress” to that of merchant in order to support the family.³³ When John was in France, he sent her European goods for shipment which she sold to the citizens of Braintree.³⁴ Abigail sent John long lists of goods including calico dresses, ribbons, handkerchiefs, and spices.³⁵ Abigail Adams’s business enterprise was successful enough to support the family, and since her complaints decreased, it appears that she preferred being a merchant to being a “farmeress.”³⁶ As Edith B. Gelles pointed out, “Had she been a man, she might have capitalized on these beginnings to become a merchant by profession.”³⁷ Abigail, however, did not dream of ever venturing into the work world, because she was a woman. When John was away, Abigail regarded her work as a means of sustaining the family, not as an opportunity to plunge into the business world.

Because of misconceptions about the time period, many people presume that Abigail had a radical role during John's absence. Since a middle and upper class woman in the mid-nineteenth century did not participate in work for the family subsistence, people assume that women of the eighteenth century were even more restricted. As historian Linda Grant DePauw noted, the late eighteenth-century women had a surprisingly high status "that would have shocked their nineteenth-century granddaughters."³⁸ Before the industrial era, for example, it was equally as expensive to buy corn from a woman farmer as it was to buy it from a man.³⁹ Historian Joan Hoff-Wilson wrote that even in the wealthy households, the woman was expected to complete much of the housework since "she occupied a position of unprecedented importance and equality within the...unit of the family."⁴⁰ While Abigail's active participation in the family economic affairs might seem radical at first, her role was actually relatively common in the revolutionary era.

Women who were separated from their husbands, like Abigail Adams, were even more involved in non-domestic affairs. Women who were widowed or whose husbands were away during the American Revolution often had to run the farms by themselves.⁴¹ Historian Joan Hoff-Wilson wrote, "it was not considered 'inappropriate' according to prevailing socioeconomic norms for women to engage in this wide variety of occupations, carry on the family business if widowed, or become a skilled artisan while still married."⁴² Historian Mary Beth Norton remarked, "In the midst of wartime trials, [white female Americans] alone had to make crucial decisions involving not only household and family but also 'outdoor affairs' from which they had been formerly excluded."⁴³ Due to the economic burden of supplementing the family income when the husband was absent, it was not uncommon for women like Abigail Adams to undertake typically male tasks. In addition, Abigail's tendency to make management decisions without the advice of husband was relatively common. According to Mary Beth Norton, "Initially, the absent husband instructed his wife to depend upon male friends and relatives for advice and assistance...But as time went on, women learned more about the

family's finances while at the same time their husbands' knowledge became increasingly outdated and remote."⁴⁴ This growth of responsibility and knowledge was not an early example of feminism but a common and necessary occurrence. Therefore, historians who claim that Abigail was a feminist not only distort her personal character, but also misrepresent her times.

Abigail's Political Involvement Within her Domestic Sphere

In an attempt to make Abigail Adams seem more like an exciting and radical woman, some historians weave their biographies around her political views and rarely mention her role as a mother and wife. Vera O. Laska, author of *"Remember the Ladies: Outstanding Women of the American Revolution"*, focused virtually her entire biography on Abigail's political involvement. She wrote that during John's absence "[Abigail] tried to occupy her mind by venturing to new fields of knowledge; above all, she wished for news and details about the meeting of colonial representatives."⁴⁵ Vera Laska's statement suggests that Abigail was more interested in politics than in her role as wife and mother. Laska even claimed that "with some practice Abigail Adams could have taken a seat and held her own among the delegates in Philadelphia."⁴⁶ Historian Lynne Withey stretched Abigail's political involvement by writing, "as a feminist [Abigail] was limited by the constraints of her time, that her professed distaste for politics was mostly talk."⁴⁷ Yet another historian, Elizabeth Evans, wrote that Abigail was an aggressive woman who "[refused] to be an obscure mouthpiece for her husband's views."⁴⁸ All of these portraits fail to view Abigail within her own times. These historians make Abigail's political involvement seem so important that they fail to focus on her primary concern: the family. Such portrayals incorrectly suggest that Abigail Adams's views pointed towards the later feminist ideology summed up in modern feminist Henrietta Rodman's comment: "If a woman stays in the home she fails to develop courage, initiative, and resourcefulness."⁴⁹ It is important to acknowledge Abigail as a dedicated mother and wife, rather than a

political activist, in order to avoid misrepresenting her as an anti-family radical.

Despite historians' attempts to create a political heroine, Abigail Adams was not revolutionary in her political involvement. Abigail Adams was active in the family political discussions because she enjoyed her "dish of politics."⁵⁰ In 1812, Abigail told her granddaughter that her involvement in political discussions was as natural as breathing.⁵¹ However, historians often neglect to notice that Abigail's political role remained largely domestic. While she felt free to discuss political questions within the confines of her home or in personal letters, Abigail believed that it was inappropriate for women to display their political views in public. When Abigail found out that she had been cited as an authority in a public meeting, she wrote, "I could not believe that any Gentleman would have so little delicacy or so small a sense of propriety as to have written a mere vague opinion and that of a lady too, to be read in a public assembly as an authority."⁵² Abigail was appalled, and even embarrassed, that her name had been associated with a public political discussion. In 1796, Abigail Adams clearly stated that women should not be involved in government and political roles, writing, "Government of States and Kingdoms, tho' God knows badly enough managed, I am willing should be solely administered by the lords of creation. I should only contend for Domestick government, and think that best administered by the female."⁵³ Abigail's involvement in politics was not a step out of her domestic sphere: she kept this aspect of her life within the walls of her own home.

While Abigail may have demonstrated talent in her perceptive analysis of political subjects, many of her eighteenth-century sisters were equally, if not more, involved in politics. According to Mary Beth Norton, "For the first time, women became active—if not equal—participants in discourse on public affairs and in endeavors that carried political significance. As they discussed politics with men and among themselves during the twenty years from the mid-1760s to the mid 1780s, they gained both sophistication in political analysis and a new sense of their

own role.”⁵⁴ In fact, *many* American men considered it appropriate to participate in private political discussions of the sort advocated by Abigail Adams.⁵⁵ Some women, on the other hand, were much more revolutionary in their views than Abigail Adams. For example, Anne Willing Bingham, a woman who expressed her beliefs regarding women in politics to Thomas Jefferson, wrote in 1787, “The Women of France interfere in the politics of the Country, and often give a decided Turn to the Fate of Empires...[T]hey have obtained that Rank of Consideration in society, which the Sex are intitled to...[Female Americans] are therefore bound in Gratitude to admire and revere them, for asserting our Privileges.”⁵⁶ Most eighteenth-century women would not have agreed with Anne Bingham that female Americans should follow in the footsteps of the French. Women like Anne Bingham, not Abigail Adams, could be considered radical in their attitudes toward women in politics.

Abigail’s Commitment as a Mother

Rather than dedicating her entire life to politics, Abigail was most concerned with her family. When John first left for Philadelphia, he wrote to Abigail with advice pertaining to the children, “The education of our children is never out of my mind. Train them to virtue. Habituate them to industry, activity, and spirit.”⁵⁷ As John requested, Abigail devoted herself to her children and their education. In a letter to John on July 17, 1782, Abigail indicated her sense of responsibility for their children as well as her deep affection when she stated, “I know not what to do with my Children. We have no Grammar School in the Town.... [yet] I know not how to think of their leaving home. I could not live in the House were it so deserted. If they are gone only for a day, it is as silent as a Tomb.”⁵⁸ Abigail Adams, unlike many modern feminists, did not regard her role as a mother as demoralizing, but took joy in the few years when her children were at home. To downplay Abigail’s role as a mother as insignificant wrongly implies that she was more concerned about her role as a political activist than as a mother.

Abigail Adams viewed the training of her children as one of her greatest contributions to society. When Abigail had her first few children, she and her sister, Mary, often read and discussed books about child-rearing and a woman's responsibilities in society.⁵⁹ Most other eighteenth-century women would have dedicated equal amounts of time and effort in learning the best way to raise children. Mary Beth Norton wrote, "Middling and well-to-do women...devoted a great deal of thought to the problems and pleasures of raising children. They understood...that mothers could, indeed would, have a major impact on their children, especially in their earlier years, and that women accordingly had to consider carefully and thoughtfully the methods they would use to raise their offspring." Abigail, like most women of the eighteenth century, believed that women had the greatest opportunity to influence the world through their raising of proper, virtuous children. Therefore, Abigail Adams never sought to diminish the importance of motherhood because she did not view such a role as a restrictive sphere, but as a respectable and important job.

Abigail's view that child-rearing was the most important aspect of her life was consistent with that of the average woman of the late eighteenth century. In the seventeenth century, children were seen as "miniature adults,"⁶⁰ therefore their innocence did not need to be preserved. In the eighteenth century, however, "the family's reason for being...was increasingly related to the proper rearing of children."⁶¹ With children at the center of the family unit, mothers became more involved in their children's lives. Historian Carl Degler accurately portrayed the eighteenth-century woman as the "bearer and chief rearer of the children, a task that was increasingly invested with high responsibility and therefore great respect, and even authority."⁶² Many women were so dedicated to their responsibility as mother that they began to use advice books on child-rearing in order to learn how to instruct their children correctly.⁶³ Abigail Adams, as concerned about her mothering responsibilities as other eighteenth-century women, read advice books such as *On the Management and Care of Children* (1754) before her children were born.⁶⁴ Since mothers, including Adams, fulfilled an important responsibility to their families and

a service to society, it would be inaccurate to portray Abigail's role as mother as a secondary aspect of her life.

Abigail's Commitment as a Wife

In addition to disregarding Abigail's important role as a mother, some historians misinterpret Abigail's relationship with John. In her book, *The Feminist Papers: from Adams to deBeauvoir*, historian Alice S. Rossi titled her chapter on Abigail Adams "Remember the Ladies: Abigail Adams vs. John Adams."⁶⁵ As the confrontational title of her chapter suggests, Rossi viewed Abigail Adams as a feminist, arguing that Abigail and John had a competitive relationship. Through the word "versus," Rossi argues that Abigail and John were like two members of opposing teams—fighting intensely for power in their relationship. In fact, this portrayal of their relationship is far from accurate. Abigail never questioned John's authority in the marriage; such behavior would have been most unusual in the eighteenth century. If anything, Abigail hoped that John would return to assume the traditional role as the more powerful head of the family, as opposed to leaving her with such an arduous task.

While Lynne Withey argued that "[Abigail] was nothing if not independent,"⁶⁶ in fact Adams was quite dependent upon her husband during their separation. In many letters she expressed her desire to have John return home to reunite the family and fulfill his role as father and husband. When her boys, John Quincy, Charles, and Thomas, were preparing to leave for the university, Abigail wrote to John, "I feel unequal to the task of guiding them alone, encompassed as I know they must be, with a thousand snares and temptations."⁶⁷ Since Abigail described herself as "unequal" in raising the boys by herself, it is evident that her view of John as the leading member of the family did not fade with his absence. While Abigail managed to maintain the relative stability of the family on her own, she continually believed that such a job was meant for two. Abigail's impression of the ideal relationship

was that of a hierarchical, yet interdependent, division of work, not a power hunt in which the male and female were at odds with one another.

While Abigail did express her grief when John did not write to her, in general they had a loving and trustworthy relationship. Abigail lamented at the thought of being separated from her loved one. On June 1, 1777, she wrote to John, “the Thought of three hundred miles distance are as Greivious as the peril I have to pass through.”⁶⁸ John and Abigail addressed each other as “Friend” and maintained their love, friendship, and commitment to one another through regular correspondence. In one letter, Abigail lovingly told John, “I wish any thing would bring you nearer.”⁶⁹ Although Alice S. Rossi described Abigail and John’s relationship as tense and competitive, in reality it was a vital, warm, and loving marriage that sustained itself through long separations. The thousands of loving and affectionate letters between Abigail and John provide the greatest proof that Abigail cherished her role as wife and happily accepted her subordinate position in the marriage.

Although Abigail Adams regretted the fact that her husband was continually absent from home, she accepted her difficult and lonely position as a duty to her country. On August 5, 1777, Abigail told John in one of her letters, “I consider it as a sacrifice to my Country and one of my greatest misfortunes [for my husband] to be separated from my children at a time of life when the joint instructions and admonition of parents sink deeper than in maturer years.”⁷⁰ It is significant that Abigail regarded her new role that incorporated both domestic and traditionally male activities as a sacrifice rather than a gain. Since Abigail viewed her sudden immersion in the male world as a “misfortune” and “sacrifice,” it is clear that her attitude was still consistent with the eighteenth century ideology that a woman should remain in her own sphere.

Abigail Adams was not alone in her separation from her husband. Hundreds of other women were separated from their husbands due to the war or by the nature of their husband’s job,

such as a sea-captain or politician. Most women urged their husbands to come home, as Abigail Adams did, and therefore expressed their dependency upon them.⁷¹ Most of these women felt that companionship within marriage was vital. One woman described marriage as a relationship “of mutual helpfulness.”⁷² According to historian Carl Degler, the combined dependency and companionship that wives felt for their husbands “had two sides to it: subordination undoubtedly, but also strength and self-reliance.”⁷³ This duality is particularly apparent in Abigail and John’s relationship where Abigail viewed John both as head of the household and companion.

Abigail’s Conservative View on Female Education

Abigail Adams, while she remained within her female sphere, did believe that women were intellectually equal to men and was an avid supporter of female education. However, some historians stretch her beliefs beyond the support of the evidence in order to categorize Abigail as an advocate of women’s legal equality with men. In fact, Abigail was not as liberal in her views regarding female education as many historians believe. Rosemary Keller, author of *Patriotism and the Female Sex: Abigail Adams and the American Revolution*, wrote, “Abigail sought legislation to benefit women, her first concern was for female education.”⁷⁴ Keller’s interpretation is slightly misleading, for Abigail Adams certainly emphasized female education, but she did not seek legislation benefiting women. Another historian, Lynne Withey, wrote, “She believed that women should have better education and more independence than the attitudes of the time permitted.”⁷⁵ In fact, Abigail Adams’s support of female education was not in conflict with her beliefs regarding female submission. Abigail Adams never hoped for the expansion of legal or social roles for women, but expected that a female’s improved education would serve as stimulation for the individual and the advancement of the existing society through wiser wives and mothers.

Abigail Adams's greatest regret was her own lack of formal education. As a child, her mother taught her how to read, write, and speak elementary French.⁷⁶ Her mother's education, however, was limited, therefore Abigail's education was far inferior to that of eighteenth-century men. Abigail Adams continually regretted the fact that she had such poor writing skills; her letters rarely contained commas, and she often made a number of grammatical and spelling mistakes. Due to her personal experience, Abigail pushed for further education of females. In a letter to John on June 30, 1778, Abigail wrote, "I regret the trifling narrow contracted Education of the Females of my own country...you need not be told...how fashionable it has been to ridicule Female learning."⁷⁷ Abigail Adams believed that women were entirely capable of advanced intellectual challenges; thus they deserved equal education. In a letter to John Thaxter, she wrote, "It is really mortifying Sir, when a woman possessed of a common share of understanding considers the difference of Education between the male and Female sex."⁷⁸ Abigail was certainly outgoing enough to voice her disapproval of the educational system; however, her vision of woman's intellectual equality with men complemented the beliefs of the times and did not threaten the hierarchical society.

While some historians argue that Abigail pursued legislation to benefit women through her support of female education, her views were much more domestically oriented. Abigail Adams regarded Rev. James Fordyce, an eighteenth century author who wrote about education for females, as a man "worthy...of admiration,"⁷⁹ but modern activists would never consider his writings seeds to the feminist movement. Rev. Fordyce wrote, "Be even careful in displaying your good sense. It will be thought you assume a superiority over the rest of the company. But if you have to have any learning, keep it a profound secret especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on women of great parts and a cultivated understanding."⁸⁰ If Abigail respected his work, then it is likely that she too supported a domestic version of education for women. Abigail Adams, while she often mentioned the need for more advanced female intellec-

tual development, would not have paraded around the town demanding these rights. In fact, Abigail warned her daughter not to tell people that she was learning Latin, “for it is scarcely reputable for young ladies to understand Latin and Greek.”⁸¹ Abigail was not a public advocate of female education, however in private she was a firm believer in intellectual equality.

When Abigail Adams expressed her hopes for the extension of women’s education, she did not seek to expand their roles beyond the normal domestic responsibilities. From the twentieth-century viewpoint, equal education appears to be a logical step towards increased opportunity for women, but Abigail Adams saw female education as an extension of the existing female role. On August 14, 1776, Abigail wrote, “If we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen, and Philosophers, we should have learned women...If as much depends as is allowed upon the early Education of youth and the first principles which are instilled take the deepest root, great benefit must rise from the literary accomplishments in women.”⁸² Abigail argued that the successful careers of men as “Heroes, Statesmen, and Philosophers” required learned women because mothers exercised the greatest influence over their sons at a young and impressionable age. Thus, Abigail supported advanced female education to benefit the *men* in society, not so women would be able to assume typically male offices and positions. Abigail’s philosophy was certainly not out of the context of her times, nor does it suggest that she sought an egalitarian organization of society.

Most eighteenth-century women pursued advanced education not to open more job opportunities, but to enhance their domestic lives. According to Mary Beth Norton, “Since it was commonly contended that men and women had different natures, corresponding to their divergent roles in life, most persons believed that woman’s intellect, though equal to man’s, had quite different qualities.”⁸³ Hence, female education in the eighteenth-century did not focus on woman’s ability to perform typically male tasks. As Rev. Penuel Bowen stated, “[T]o become *much* learned is not an essential requisite in a female. The professions are not

proper to the [female] sex, it is not looked for in you to be doctresses, teachers of the arts and sciences, politicks or laws.”⁸⁴ Instead, supporters of female education in the eighteenth century hoped that more advanced learning would make the women better wives and mothers. In 1814, Abigail Adams wrote, “It is very certain, that a well-informed woman, conscious of her nature and dignity, is more capable of performing the relative duties of life, and of engaging and retaining the affections of a man of understanding, than one whose intellectual endowments rise not above the common level.”⁸⁵ Therefore, Abigail’s support of female education was consistent with the common beliefs of the time period.

Women’s Rights Within a Hierarchical Household

The most well known writings of Abigail Adams concern her views of women’s rights. Most people immediately associate Abigail Adams with her widely quoted letter excerpt, “Remember the Ladies.”⁸⁶ When historians refer to this statement, however, they often disregard the last section of the letter. For example, in the 1995 encyclopedia, *Women’s World: A Timeline in History*, editors Irene Frank and David Brownstone chose to include only the first section of the famous letter:

I long to hear that you have declared an independancy—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 favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of Husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. 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, no Representation.⁸⁷

From this excerpt, it seems logical to assume that Abigail Adams sought equality under the law; indeed, most historians do make this assumption. According to historian Vera O. Laska, “[Abigail possessed a] moral courage to speak up on matters that women were not expected even to think about.”⁸⁸ Vera Laska incorrectly

assumed that Abigail's occasional requests were drastically revolutionary. In the 1986 *Encyclopedia of Feminism*, Lisa Tuttle wrote, "[Abigail Adams's] attempt, however, to use her influence to achieve equality for women under the new American Constitution did not succeed."⁸⁹ Although Tuttle claimed that the attempt was a failure, she started with the incorrect assumption that Abigail asked John for political equality of women. Closer examination of the documents reveals that such an interpretation twists Abigail's thoughts so that they correspond to the feminism of the twentieth century, instead of reflecting her own times.

Once the entire passage from Abigail's "Remember the Ladies" letter is revealed, the meaning immediately changes. Although many historians exclude this section, Abigail's letter continued as follows:

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 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.⁹⁰

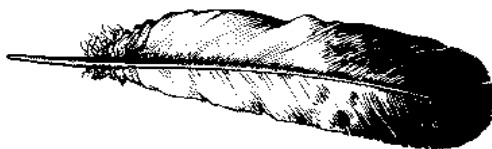
As opposed to popular belief, Abigail Adams did not ask for constitutional equality for women. According to historian Janet Wilson James, "Such an idea was so out of keeping with the eighteenth-century conception of woman's sphere and character that people never even joked about it."⁹¹ Abigail's reference to the "rebellion" was hardly serious, for she was much more concerned with changing the common law. As Mary Beth Norton pointed out, "Abigail Smith Adams thus revealed in forthright fashion her conclusion that the major problem facing women in the revolutionary era was their legal subordination to their husbands."⁹² In the beginning half of the letter, Abigail referred to the unlimited power of *husbands*. The last sentence particularly demonstrated Abigail's concern that the husband not abuse his power but use it for his wife's happiness. In fact, there are no indications in the

Adams papers that Abigail disapproved of the existing hierarchy within marriage. Thus Abigail did not request the equality of women in the “Remember the Ladies” letter, but asked only for a husband’s discretion regarding his power. Although Abigail and John’s relationship was relatively happy, there was reason for Abigail to be concerned with a woman’s position in marriage. When the colonists came from England, they brought with them the common law regarding marriage.⁹³ The husband had complete control over the wife’s body, the children, the property, and any inherited money. According to Mary Beth Norton, “[The married women] could not sue or be sued, draft wills, make contracts, or buy and sell property. If they earned wages, the money legally belonged to their husbands; if they owned property prior to marriage, any personal estate went fully into their husbands’ hands and any real estate came under the spouses’ sole supervision.”⁹⁴ As historian Janet Wilson James said, “in a legal sense, the wife did not exist.”⁹⁵ Although the marriage situation in the United States was not as one-sided as it was in England, there were a significant number of abusive relationships. Thus, while Abigail Adams did not experience serious marital problems, it is probable that she was aware of the harsh treatment that existed in many households. In an attempt to protect married women from harsh treatment, Abigail requested that John “remember the ladies.”

Even John did not take Abigail’s request seriously. He said, “As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh.”⁹⁶ In fact, John misinterpreted Abigail to ask for “Declaration of Independency” which he compared to the uprising of the “Indians” and “Negroes.”⁹⁷ Once Abigail received John’s opinion, she wrote an angry letter to Mercy Otis Warren and described John as “saucy.”⁹⁸ Elizabeth Evans, author of *Weathering the Storm*, exaggerated Abigail’s response by describing her as the “infuriated ‘lioness’.”⁹⁹ Although she was not content with her husband’s response, Abigail did not try to push the subject any further. In fact, Abigail Adams never again mentioned this topic of woman’s position in marriage. The letter that gained Abigail Adams recognition as a

“committed feminist”¹⁰⁰ was actually a solitary appeal to moderate the husband’s virtually unlimited powers.

With evidence from a deliberately limited selection of letters, modern historians often portray Abigail Adams as a forerunner to the modern feminist movement. They argue that she assumed male responsibilities, participated in political discussions, and requested that John “Remember the Ladies.” This common image of Abigail, while it appeals to modern readers, misrepresents her true character and that of the typical eighteenth-century woman. In order to support the family needs during John’s absence, Abigail stepped outside of her previously domestic life and became the farm manager. Although this period in Abigail’s life would have satisfied a feminist’s dream of an extended sphere, Abigail viewed her new position as a necessary sacrifice, not a gain. Abigail also demonstrated her support of a woman’s domestic life through her continuous dedication to the important roles of mother and wife. While many people believe that Abigail was most involved in politics and women’s rights, her primary concern was the success of the family. Abigail extended her views regarding a strong family unit to include all eighteenth-century households. She supported female education in order to satisfy women’s intellectual curiosity and to support the existing hierarchical society. In addition, Abigail requested that husbands exhibit discretion in the use of power over their wives in order to avoid abusive relationships. None of these philosophies challenged the typical beliefs of the times, nor do they correspond to modern feminist ideology. Had the feminist movement existed in the late eighteenth century, Abigail Adams would not have accepted the feminists’ controversial beliefs, nor would she have stepped outside of her domestic life to join their rallies.



- ¹ Lynne Withey, Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams (New York: The Free Press, 1981) p. ix
- ² Richard B. Morris, Seven Who Shaped Our Destiny (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) p. 84
- ³ Withey, p. xiii
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xi
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, (see above endnote); Vera O. Laska, "Remember the Ladies:" Outstanding Women of the American Revolution (Boston: Commonwealth of Massachusetts Bicentennial Commission, 1976); Elizabeth Evans, Weathering the Storm: Women of the American Revolution (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975)
- ⁶ Alice S. Rossi, The Feminist Papers: From Adams to deBeauvoir (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973)
- ⁷ Withey (see above); Laska (see above); Lisa Tuttle, Encyclopedia of Feminism (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1986), See article entitled "Abigail Adams"
- ⁸ Rosemary Keller, Patriotism and the Female Sex: Abigail Adams and the American Revolution (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1994) p. 186
- ⁹ Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society vol. 14, number 1 (Autumn 1988) p. 135
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 135
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 135
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 135
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 151
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 152
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 126
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 126
- ¹⁹ June Sochen, ed., The New Feminism in Twentieth Century America (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Co., 1971) p. xiv
- ²⁰ Offen, p. 152
- ²¹ Withey, p. xi
- ²² Edith B. Gelles, Portia: The World of Abigail Adams (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992) p. 36
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 3
- ²⁴ Withey, p xi
- ²⁵ L. H. Butterfield, ed., The Adams Papers: Adams Family Correspondence (New York: Atheneum, 1965) AFC, vol. II, p. 129 (from here on, AFC)

- ²⁶ AFC, II, p. 251 (April 7, 1776)
- ²⁷ AFC, II, p. 251 (June 1, 1777)
- ²⁸ AFC, I, p. 377 (AA to Mercy Otis Warren, April 13, 1776)
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 377
- ³⁰ Gelles, p. 42
- ³¹ AFC, II, p. 288 (July 23, 1777)
- ³² AFC, II, p. 128 (September 20, 1776)
- ³³ Gelles, p. 42
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42
- ³⁵ AFC, IV, p. 316 (April 25, 1882)
- ³⁶ Gelles, p. 44
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44
- ³⁸ Linda Grant DePauw, "The American Revolution and the Rights of Women: The Feminist Theory of Abigail Adams," The Legacy of the American Revolution Larry R. Gerlach, ed., (Utah: Logan, 1978) p. 199 (from here on, DePauw 1)
- ³⁹ Linda Grant DePauw and Conover Hunt, "Remember the Ladies:" Women in America 1750-1815 (New York: The Viking Press, 1976) p. 65
- ⁴⁰ Joan Hoff-Wilson, "The Illusion of Change: Women and the American Revolution," The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism Alfred F. Young, ed. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976) p. 394
- ⁴¹ Hoff-Wilson, p. 396
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 396
- ⁴³ Mary Beth Norton, Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980) p. 195
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216
- ⁴⁵ Vera O. Laska, "Remember the Ladies:" Outstanding Women of the American Revolution (Boston: Commonwealth of Massachusetts Bicentennial Commission Publication, May 1976) p. 9
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16
- ⁴⁷ Withey, p. x
- ⁴⁸ Evans, p. 5
- ⁴⁹ George MacAdam, "Feminist Apartment House to Solve Baby Problem," New York Times (January 24, 1915) Part V, p. 9, from George MacAdam, "Henrietta Rodman: An Interview With a Feminist" in June Sochen, ed. The New Feminism in Twentieth-Century America (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1971)

- ⁵⁰ DePauw 1, p. 207
- ⁵¹ Norton, p. 190
- ⁵² DePauw 1, p. 207
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 208. Quoted in Janet Whitney, Abigail Adams (Boston, no publisher given, 1947) p. 290
- ⁵⁴ Norton, p. 177
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 191
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 190-191
- ⁵⁷ Charles Francis Adams, Familiar Letters of John Adams and His Wife, Abigail Adams, During the Revolution (Cambridge: Hurd and Houghton and Co., 1875)
- ⁵⁸ L.H. Butterfield, The Book of Abigail and John (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975) p. 319 (July 17, 1782) (from here on, Butterfield)
- ⁵⁹ Withey, p. 31
- ⁶⁰ Carl N. Degler, At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) p. 69
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 73
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 68
- ⁶⁴ Withey, p. 31
- ⁶⁵ Rossi, p. 7
- ⁶⁶ Withey, p. x
- ⁶⁷ Butterfield, p. 369 (Nov. 11, 1783)
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 250 (June 1, 1777)
- ⁶⁹ AFC, II, p. 128 (Sept. 20, 1776)
- ⁷⁰ AFC, II, p. 301 (August 5, 1777)
- ⁷¹ Degler, p. 33
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 42
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 36
- ⁷⁴ Keller, p. 90
- ⁷⁵ Withey, p. xiii
- ⁷⁶ Gelles, p. 26
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90
- ⁷⁸ Gelles, p. 90 (Feb. 15, 1778)
- ⁷⁹ DePauw 1, p. 213; AFC, I, p. 61 (AA to Mary Cranch, Jan. 31, 1767)
- ⁸⁰ DePauw 1, p. 213. Quoted in Julia Cherry Spruill, Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies (Chapel Hill, no publisher, 1938) p. 189
- ⁸¹ DePauw 1, p. 213, AFC, I, p. 388 (April 18, 1776)

- ⁸² DePauw 1, p. 214, AFC, II, p. 94 (August 14, 1776)
- ⁸³ Norton, p. 264
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 267
- ⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 265
- ⁸⁶ Gelles, p. 1
- ⁸⁷ Irene Frank and David Brownstone, Women's World: A Timeline of Women in History (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995) p. 81
- ⁸⁸ Laska, p. 9
- ⁸⁹ Lisa Tuttle, ed. Encyclopedia of Feminism (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1986)
- ⁹⁰ Rossi, pp. 10-11 (March 31, 1776)
- ⁹¹ Janet Wilson James, Changing Ideas About Women in the United States: 1776-1825 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1981) p. 69
- ⁹² Norton, p. 50
- ⁹³ James, p. 70
- ⁹⁴ Norton, p. 45
- ⁹⁵ James, p. 70
- ⁹⁶ Rossi, p. 11 (JA to AA, April 14, 1776)
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 11 (JA to AA, April 14, 1776)
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 12 (AA to Mercy Otis Warren, April 27, 1776)
- ⁹⁹ Evans, p. 6
- ¹⁰⁰ Morris, p. 84

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Adams, Charles Francis, Familiar Letters of John Adams and His Wife, Abigail Adams, During the Revolution Cambridge: Hurd and Houghton and Co., 1875

Butterfield, L.H., ed., The Adams Papers: Adams Family Correspondence, in two volumes, New York: Athenaeum, 1965

Rossi, Alice S., The Feminist Papers: From Adams to deBeauvoir New York: Columbia University Press, 1973

Secondary Sources

"Abigail Adams," Encyclopedia of Feminism New York: Facts on File Publications, 1986 (editor: Lisa Tuttle)

Degler, Carl N., At Odds: Women and the Family in America From the Revolution to the Present New York: Oxford University Press, 1980

DePauw, Linda Grant, "The American Revolution and the Rights of Women: The Feminist Theory of Abigail Adams," The Legacy of the American Revolution Larry R. Gerlach, ed., Utah: Logan, 1978

DePauw, Linda Grant, and Conover Hunt, "Remember the Ladies:" Women in America 1750-1815 New York: The Viking Press, 1976

Evans, Elizabeth, Weathering the Storm: Women of the American Revolution New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975

Frank, Irene, and David Brownstone, eds., Women's World: A Timeline of Women in History New York: Harper Perennial, 1995

Gelles, Edith B., Portia: The World of Abigail Adams Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992

Hoff-Wilson, Joan, "The Illusion of Change: Women and the American Revolution," The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism Alfred F. Young, ed., DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976

James, Janet Wilson, Changing Ideas About Women in the United States: 1776-1825 New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1981

Keller, Rosemary, Patriotism and the Female Sex: Abigail Adams and the American Revolution Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1994

Laska, Vera O., "Remember the Ladies:" Outstanding Women of the American Revolution Boston: Commonwealth of Massachusetts Bicentennial Commission, 1976

Morris, Richard B., Seven Who Shaped Our Destiny New York, Harper and Row, 1973

Norton, Mary Beth, Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800 Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1980

Offen, Karen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, volume 14, number 1, Autumn 1988

Sochen, June, ed., The New Feminism in Twentieth Century America Lexington: D.C. Heath and Co., 1971

Withy, Lynne, Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams New York: The Free Press, 1981

The Concord Review

A quarterly journal of essays by high school students of history founded in 1987, we have published, as of the Fall 1998 issue, 385 exemplary essays (average 5,000 words) on a wide variety of topics by secondary students of history in 37 states and 23 other countries. Our authors have gone on to Berkeley(5), Brown(11), Cal Tech(1), Cambridge(3), Columbia(6), Cornell(7), Dartmouth(5), Harvard(47), McGill(2), MIT(2), Oxford(6), Pennsylvania(7), Princeton(15), Stanford(8), and Yale(39), among others. We can send your work to our subscribers in 42 states in the U.S. and in 31 other countries. One California school has 170 subscriptions.

Varsity Academics

The best way to judge the quality of the history essays we have published is to read one or more of the issues of the journal. If your school library or history department does not yet subscribe, please contact *The Concord Review* at (800) 331-5007 for information. We advise that the author should prepare with considerable reading on the topic and that the essay go through at least one draft before it is polished and proofread for submission.

Our website [<http://www.tcr.org>] includes:
the Form to Accompany Essays
Submission Guidelines
Subscription Form [*we have to pay our bills*]
Class Set Discount (33%)
Essays from the Special AP issue for The College Board (11)
Press Release on the Emerson Prize (\$3,000)
Emerson Prize Essays (10)
Other Sample Essays (9)
History of the Journal since 1987
Reviews by Diane Ravitch, David McCullough, and others
Feedback, Questions, and Comments Option

The Concord Review, P.O. Box 661, Concord, MA 01742 USA
(800) 331-5007, Web: <http://www.tcr.org>, E-mail: fitzhugh@tcr.org