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## Women in History - Abigail Adams: Life, Accomplishments, and Ideas

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# Women in History— Abigail Adams: Life, Accomplishments, and Ideas

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Sharon K. Kenan

## Background

Abigail Adams's fame derives in large part from her marriage to the second President of the United States, John Adams (Freidel, 1989). However, she also had attributes of her own that made her an interesting and perennially famous woman in the history of the United States. One of her most enduring legacies is the volume of correspondence she wrote during lonely separations from her husband while he handled the nation's business and left her alone with four children. Firsthand accounts of the period leading up to, during, and following the American Revolution are available through those letters (Withey, 1981). Eventually her great-grandson, Henry Adams, continued the family tradition of writing about events in times of great change.

Born in 1744, Abigail Adams lacked a formal education, but she more than made up for that shortcoming with her love of reading, especially literature, and her interest in politics and events surrounding the young colonies. John Adams was first attracted to Abigail Adams due to her ability to converse with him on any topic (Waldrup, 1989). An enduring friendship with Mercy Otis Warren, historian and playwright, was another outlet for Abigail to share her intellect and her concerns about women's issues.

She spared no effort in ensuring one of her sons, John Quincy, was well educated and adequately prepared to become a future president, which he did in 1825. Abigail died in 1818 of typhoid fever, so she did not live to see John Quincy's election to the presidency.

## Accomplishments

Abigail Adams was supportive of the advancement of women. In fact, Levin (1996) calls her the "colonial foremother of the twentieth-century feminist movement . . . [and] America's first suffragette, who championed both the rights of women and the abolishment of slavery" (p. 43). Adams expressed concern about women's lack of education, and she admired strong women who could take care of their home and financial affairs the way she did much of her married life while her husband served America in different capacities in Europe. As Levin's description indicates, Abigail

## About the Author

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Adams was also an early advocate for abolishing the practice of slavery. She refused to own slaves, could see the Civil War coming, and made her farm a model for others to see that slavery was unnecessary.

Her efficient management enabled the farm to provide adequate food for family and friends during economically hard times. Much of her married life was financially difficult due to an inflationary economy in the colonies that eventually became a depression during the war with England. In spite of economic hardships, she was able to purchase 1,620 acres in Vermont—unfortunately, her husband was less than thrilled, since he wrote: “Don’t meddle any more with Vermont.” He explained to a friend that he wanted to live by the “scent of the sea” (Withey, 1981, p. 135).

Although Abigail was concerned about her lack of grammar and spelling skills, she persevered in corresponding with family, friends, and political figures of the time. Valuable primary source material, the correspondence has formed the basis of numerous texts, especially histories of the period. Weekly letters, written during John Adams’s presidency, later became known as the “bulletins” of a presidency (Levin, 1996, p. 39).

## Ideas

Abigail Adams’s actions in helping her family gain political power are admirable. She achieved much by maintaining a home for the politically powerful male members of her family. Akers (1980) states that Abigail Adams’s “aptitude was so great that she gradually enlarged her private political influence through a wide circle of correspondents and acquaintances. She became in time the nation’s best informed woman on public affairs . . .” (p. 33).

A bit of a Puritan, as evidenced by her shock at the “free and easy manners of French women,” which she observed while living in France for a short time with her husband, Adams was never one to be quiet when she had an opinion (Waldrup, 1989, p. 18). Her frankness was generally admired. When John became President of the United States in 1797, after serving as Vice President under George Washington, Abigail Adams made a determined effort to reflect well on her husband in his new position. For instance, she patterned her entertainment skills after Martha Washington,

and she worked hard to be understood. The press was sometimes less than accommodating, and this caused stress and illness. Eventually, Abigail learned to enjoy her role as first lady. Only after a disappointing election defeat did John and Abigail Adams return to their Braintree (now Quincy), Massachusetts, farm to assume a less public life (Withey, 1981).

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