

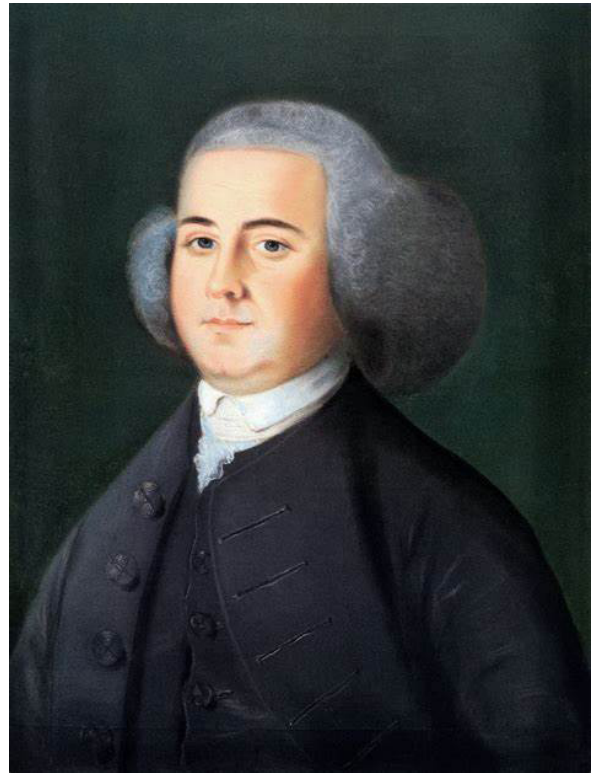
Handout A: Abigail Adams: “Remember the Ladies” Mini-DBQ Packet

Introduction:

To the modern reader, the marriage of John and Abigail Adams seems remarkable in several ways: He was ten years her senior, both were well read and well educated, they were completely devoted to each other, to their family unit, and to their public responsibilities. Abigail served as confidante and policy advisor to her husband at a time when women were discouraged from even thinking about political matters. John and Abigail Adams have been called one of America’s first “power couples”—two people who are each influential or successful in their own right. The Massachusetts Historical Society has preserved more than one thousand letters that John and Abigail exchanged between 1762 and 1801. Their letters often began with the salutation “Dearest Friend.”



(a)



(b)

These portraits of (a) Abigail Adams and (b) John Adams were painted by Benjamin Blyth in 1766.

Abigail Smith was born in 1744, met John Adams in 1759, and married him in 1764. They had six children, four of whom survived childhood, and their fifty-four-year marriage spanned the revolutionary and early republic eras of the United States. From 1774 to 1784, they lived mostly apart because of John’s responsibilities to the new nation. While Abigail stayed at the family’s farm in Braintree, Massachusetts, raising and educating their children, John at first rode the judicial circuit, earning the family’s livelihood as an attorney. Next, he served in the Massachusetts Assembly, and then in the First and Second Continental Congress in 1774 and 1776, respectively. In the early years of the new nation, John Adams served as commissioner to France and then as Minister to Great Britain.

After the Boston Tea Party of 1773, Boston remained the seat of opposition to British control of the colonies, with frequent clashes between those who supported the British and those who believed Parliament was violating the ancient rights of Englishmen. John and Abigail moved with their four children from Boston to the family farm at Braintree, thirteen miles away, because of the violent atmosphere in Boston. John served in the Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia and entrusted to Abigail the management of their children, farm, and financial affairs.

In this exchange of letters, Abigail famously protests coverture, laws that eliminated the legal personality of married women. Coverture was a principle of British common law. Under coverture, once a woman married, her husband exercised almost exclusive power and responsibility over her legal matters and property. A married woman could not sue or be sued, execute a will on her own behalf without her husband's consent, nor control her property. In essence, a women's independent legal status did not exist once she married.

The legal status of married women was a major issue in the struggle for women's suffrage in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

1. Who was the audience for these letters?
2. Where was John Adams and what was he doing when he wrote these letters?
3. What extraordinary challenges did Abigail have in caring for her family during the 1770s?
4. What is coverture?
5. Why do you think Abigail would protest coverture?

Document: John to Abigail, July 7, 1775 and October 29, 1775

Sources:

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17750707ja&numrecs>

<https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17751029jathird>

Text
<p>July 7, 1775</p> <p>It gives me more Pleasure than I can express to learn that you sustain with so much Fortitude, the Shocks and Terrors of the Times. You are really brave, my dear, you are an Heroine. And you have Reason to be. For the worst that can happen, can do you no Harm. A soul, as pure, as benevolent, as virtuous and pious as yours has nothing to fear, but every Thing to hope and expect from the last of human Evils.</p>
<p>October 29, 1775</p> <p>It should be your care, therefore, and mine, to elevate the minds of our children and exalt their courage; to accelerate and animate their industry and activity; to excite in them an habitual contempt of meanness [cruelty], abhorrence of injustice and inhumanity, and an ambition to excel in . . . every capacity, faculty, and virtue. If we suffer their minds to grovel and creep in infancy, they will grovel all their lives.</p>

1. John wrote this letter to Abigail in July 1775. What events were going on around the Adams's home during that time?
2. List at least three terms John uses to describe Abigail in his July 7 letter.
3. In this second letter, what does John say is his and Abigail's main responsibility?
4. Do you think this responsibility fell more to Abigail or John? Why?
5. Based on your answers to questions 3 and 4 above, what do these letters reveal about the role of women in the 1770s?
6. How do you think Abigail felt when she received these letters from her husband?

Document: Abigail to John, March 31 and April 5, 1776

Sources:

<https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760331aa>

Text

March 31, 1776

[1] I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it [slavery] is not founded upon that generous and christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us. . . .

[2] I feel very differently at the approach of spring to what I did a month ago. We knew not then whether we could plant or sow with safety, whether when we had toiled we could reap the fruits of our own industry, whether we could rest in our own Cottages, or whether we should not be driven from the sea coasts to seek shelter in the wilderness, but now we feel as if we might sit under our own vine and eat the good of the land. . . .

[3] I long to hear that you have declared an independency—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 favourable 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. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

[4] 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 the 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 immitation of the Supreem Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

April 5, 1776

[5] [Abigail described the serious illness suffered by several neighbors.] It rages much in other Towns. The Mumps too are very frequent. Isaac is now confined with it. Our own little flock are yet well. My Heart trembles with anxiety for them. God preserve them.

[6] I want to hear much oftener from you than I do. March 8 was the last date of any that I have yet had. . . . Adieu. I need not say how much I am Your ever faithfull Friend.

1. According to paragraph 1, what does Abigail think of slavery?

2. These letters were written in the spring of 1776. Where was John Adams during this time?

3. What troubles does Abigail have to deal with while managing the family home during this time, according to paragraph 2?

4. What specific actions do you think Abigail had in mind when she wrote her “Dearest Friend” and asked him to “Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors...?”

5. Before going on to the next document, explain what you think John’s response was to Abigail’s request regarding the legal position of women.

Document: John to Abigail, April 14, 1776

Sources:

<https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760414ja>

Text

[1] As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters.

[2] But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented.—This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it out.

[3] Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight. I am sure every good Politician would plot, as long as he would against Despotism, Empire, Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy, or Ochlocracy. —A fine Story indeed. I begin to think the Ministry as deep as they are wicked. After stirring up Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholicks, Scotch Renegadoes, at last they have stimulated the [women] to demand new Priviledges and threaten to rebel.

1. How did John respond to Abigail's suggestion in her April 5 letter asking him to "Remember the ladies"?
2. John implies that women seeking rights and protection will lead to what other effects in society?
3. What does this first paragraph reveal about the role of women in this time?
4. How do you think Abigail felt when she received this letter from her husband?
5. Considering documents 1, 2, and 3 together, what can you infer about the relationship between John and Abigail? For example, what emotions and attitudes do you believe were conveyed by each writer, and what emotions and attitudes were stirred in each recipient? To what extent do you think each respected the opinion of the other?

Document 4: Abigail to John, May 7, 1776

Sources:

<https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760507aa>

Text
<p>I can not say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to Men, Emancipating all Nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives. But you must remember that Arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken—and notwithstanding all your wise Laws and Maxims we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our Masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet</p> <p>“Charm by accepting, by submitting sway Yet have our Humour most when we obey.”</p>

1. What hypocrisy does Abigail point out to John in her letter?
2. The couplet at the end of this passage is a quote from Alexander Pope, a well-known British poet. Why do you think Abigail quoted him here? What point was she making by doing so?

Questions for Discussion:

- a. What was the overall tone of John and Abigail's correspondence? What does this reveal about their relationship?
- b. What specific passages in these letters reflect “job responsibilities” of women at the time of the revolution?
- c. How did Abigail Adams respond to these responsibilities? Cite specific passages from the document to support your answer.
- d. In what ways does this conception of the proper role of women reflect inconsistencies?
- e. How should the Declaration of Independence and/or the Constitution have “remembered the ladies?”
- f. How should the documents have remembered other marginalized groups, such as American Indians, enslaved individuals, and indentured servants?

Thesis:

On the basis of your reading of the documents and the class discussion, write a thesis statement that addresses the following prompt:

Analyze the nascent impact of the American Revolution on the status of women.

