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Abigail Adams was one of only two women to have been both wife and mother to two U.S. presidents (the other being Barbara Bush). Often separated from her husband due to his political work, the self-educated Abigail oversaw the family’s household and largely raised their four children on her own, all the while maintaining a lively lifelong correspondence with her husband on the political issues of the day. She was also famous for her early advocacy of several divisive causes, including women’s rights, female education and the abolition of slavery. Abigail Adams: Early LifeBorn in 1744, Abigail Smith grew up in Weymouth, Massachusetts, a village some 12 miles from Boston. Her father, William Smith, was minister of the First Congregational Church there, and also made a living as a farmer.He and his wife, Elizabeth Quincy Smith, both belonged to distinguished families in New England. Elizabeth’s father, John Quincy, was active in the colonial government and served as Speaker of the Massachusetts Assembly for 40 years, and his career in public service greatly influenced his granddaughter.Educated at home, Abigail read widely from the family library. When she was just 11, she and her sisters began receiving tutoring from Richard Cranch, a transplant from England who later married Abigail’s elder sister, Mary.A friend of Cranch’s, a young lawyer named John Adams, met 17-year-old Abigail and fell in love. After a long engagement that her parents insisted on, they married on October 24, 1764, when Abigail was 19 and John was 28.Abigail Adams’ ChildrenJust nine months after their marriage, Abigail gave birth to the couple’s first child, Abigail (called Nabby). She would have six children in all; four lived to adulthood, including Nabby Adams, John Quincy Adams (born 1767), Charles Adams (born 1770) and Thomas Adams (born 1772).In 1774, as the tensions between the 13 colonies and Great Britain threatened to burst into violence, John Adams headed to Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress. He and Abigail began writing regularly to each other during this period, beginning what would become a voluminous and historic correspondence.ABIGAIL ADAMS Quotes: Remember the Ladies Abigail herself passionately supported independence, and famously argued that it should be applied to women as well as men. During the Second Continental Congress, as John Adams and his fellow delegates debated the question of formally declaring independence from Great Britain, Abigail wrote to her husband from their home in Braintree, Massachusetts, on March 31, 1776:“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 ... Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular attention 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, or Representation.”Though her husband replied somewhat jokingly to her appeal—expressing fear of the “Despotism of the Petticoat”—Abigail later pushed back, making it clear that she was serious about the implications that liberty from the British had for the status of women in a future independent republic.She also vigorously supported education for women, writing to John in 1778 that “you need not be told how much female education is neglected, nor how fashionable it has been to ridicule female learning.”Abigail Adams, First LadyIn the years after the Revolutionary War, John Adams served as the U.S. minister to France and then England. Abigail remained at home at first, keeping her husband well informed about domestic affairs in her letters.She joined him in Europe in 1784, and they remained abroad for five more years, returning home in 1789 so John could assume the vice presidency under George Washington. Over the next decade, Abigail divided her time between the U.S. capital (first New York and then Philadelphia) and Braintree, where she managed the family farm.In 1793, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson stepped down amid serious fissures between the Federalists and anti-Federalists (known as Jeffersonians) in Washington’s cabinet. When Washington announced his intention to retire in 1796, John Adams emerged as the leading candidate on the Federalist side, with Jefferson as his main opponent.Abigail, like her husband, had considered Jefferson a good friend, and regularly written letters to him, but their correspondence stopped once he and John Adams began competing against each other for the nation’s highest office.As first lady, Abigail maintained and voiced strong opinions about the political issues and debates of the day, including the Federalist vs. anti-Federalist struggle. She wrote at the time of her struggles to keep herself in check: “I have been so used to freedom of sentiment that I know not how to place so many guards about me, as will be indispensable, to look at every word before I utter it, and to impose a silence upon myself, when I long to talk.”Abigail spent much of her husband’s time in office at home in Massachusetts, but in 1800 she moved with him into the new presidential mansion in Washington, D.C., becoming the first first lady to live in the White House.She famously disagreed with her husband during the XYZ Affair, with Abigail thinking war should be declared against France. Abigail and John Adams did agree on the Alien & Sedition Acts of 1798, as Abigail saw The Sedition Act banning malicious anti-government writings as serving justice to those who published lies about her husband.Retiring From Public LifeDuring the bitterly contested 1800 presidential election, the Jeffersonian press attacked Abigail as being too outspoken and imperious. One opponent, Albert Gallatin, memorably wrote that “She is Mrs. President, not of the United States but of a faction...It is not right.”After Adams lost to Jefferson, Abigail wrote to her son that she had “few regrets” about retiring from public life. “At my age, and with my bodily infirmities, I shall be happier at Quincy [Massachusetts].”Their son Charles, who had struggled with alcohol abuse, died a few days before the election, which hit both Adamases harder than the loss of the presidency.Legacy of Abigail AdamsIn retirement, Abigail maintained a brisk correspondence, including a renewed relationship with Jefferson (with whom John Adams would exchange letters until they both died on the same day: July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence).She and John saw their son John Quincy’s political career prosper, including a diplomatic post in London and his appointment as secretary of state under James Madison in 1817. Unlike John, Abigail would not live to see John Quincy Adams elected as the nation’s sixth president in 1826. She died at home in Quincy in October 1818, at the age of 73 of Typhoid fever.Abigail Adams refused during her lifetime to allow her correspondence to be published, judging a woman’s letters to be a private matter. But in 1848, her grandson Charles Francis Adams (John Quincy’s youngest son) arranged the publication of her first volume of letters, preserving forever her unique experience and perspective on American life and democracy.Sources Diane Jacobs, Dear Abigail: The Intimate Lives and Revolutionary Ideas of Abigail Adams and Her Two Remarkable Sisters (Ballantine Books, 2014)First Lady Biography: Abigail Adams, National First Ladies’ Library.Abigail Smith Adams, National Women’s History Museum.The Adams Children, PBS: American Experience. John and Abigail Adams | Article Share: Copy Link Abigail Smith was born on November 22, 1744, in Weymouth, Massachusetts. Her father was a Congregationalist minister, her mother a member of the notable Quincy family. Like young girls of her time, Abigail lacked a formal education, but from youth she was intelligent, well read, and outspoken. Courtesy: Library of Congress Politics Prevailed On October 25, 1764, Abigail wed John Adams, commencing a partnership characterized, and perhaps enriched, by separation. Between 1765 and 1772, she bore five children, one of whom, John Quincy, would become the sixth president of the United States. During these years, John balanced his law practice and political activity with increasing difficulty. With his election to the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1774, politics prevailed. Abigail agreed he should go: “You cannot be, ... nor do I wish to see you an Inactive Spectator. ...” On Her Own With her husband gone, Abigail became head of the household. She educated the children, hired farmhands, coped with rampant inflation and deprivation, and staved off debt. She supplemented the farm income by selling and trading small European items that John procured for her. She also purchased land in Braintree and Vermont in John’s name, as it was illegal to do so in hers. Abigail considered her lonely duties loathsome and called them her “patriotic sacrifice.” Courtesy: Library of Congress Protecting Home and Country For John, patriotic and familial concerns were in separate spheres; for Abigail, they were intertwined. In the monumental summer of 1776, as John triumphantly made the case for independence in Philadelphia, smallpox struck Braintree. With Abigail and the children in Boston being inoculated, John wrote that he was sick with worry, but “I cannot leave this place, without ... injury to the public now. ...” In July 1777, alone, pregnant, and anxious because of rumors of an impending British attack on Boston, she wrote John of a “shaking fit. ... [She was] very apprehensive that a life was lost.” The baby, a girl, was stillborn. John again delivered his comfort by post; there was too much to be done in Congress. Courtesy: Adams National Historical Park A Long Separation From 1778 to 1783, John lived in Paris and Amsterdam on diplomatic missions, accompanied by John Quincy and Charles. Abigail called her husband’s sojourn to Europe her “widowhood.” When his letters dwindled, Abigail struck up a correspondence with James Lovell, a Congressman and thrice-married philanderer, ostensibly to get information about John during his long silences, but more likely to fill the void left by the absence of her “dearest friend.” Her “widowhood” ended in 1784, when she and Nabby sailed to Europe and were reunited with John. Adviser and Hostess In 1788 John and Abigail left England for Braintree, together at last. But conventional domestic tranquility would elude them. In 1789 John became vice president. Abigail had enjoyed New York, considering it a fine capital, but when the seat of government moved to Philadelphia, Abigail fled. She hated the weather and was frequently ill. When John’s was elected as president, Abigail remained in Quincy, apprising him of the public mood as she had since the Revolutionary War. But in 1797, John found that advice from afar was no longer enough. Lonely and despised by his cabinet, he begged Abigail to come and “assist me with your councils, and console me with your conversation.” She did go, and became his “chief domestic minister without portfolio,” according to historian Joseph J. Ellis. Abigail fulfilled a traditional hostess’ role too. As time went on, she told her sister Mary that she felt “a little more at home, and less anxiety about the ceremonious part of my duty.” Courtesy: Library of Congress Dark Days In November 1800 Abigail joined John at the new presidential residence in Washington DC. They would not remain there long. Soon after, John lost his bid for reelection. This unhappy loss was soon followed by another, the death of their son Charles, of alcoholism. Abigail bridled at her husband’s defeat and wept for her “poor unhappy child.” The last month of John’s presidency was unrelentingly dark. Courtesy: Adams National Historical Park Wife, Mother and Grandmother After March 1801, John and Abigail regained the “domestic felicity” that had characterized their first years together. As they entered their last days, John farmed and wrote. Abigail remained an avid newspaper reader and correspondent even as she devoted herself to domestic pursuits and her ever-present grandchildren. Abigail knew sorrow again during this period when daughter Nabby died of breast cancer in 1813. Five years later, nearly 74, Abigail contracted typhoid fever. She died on October 28, 1818, three days after her 54th wedding anniversary.



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