

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

From the creation of the United States, written documents have shaped our national culture. Unlike almost every other country, the United States began with a written statement of purpose – Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence – a "milestone" document that created the nation, providing its twin moral and political foundations. Jefferson, the primary author of the Declaration, first set out the theory of representative government on which the United States was built: that "governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Jefferson then articulated the moral theory on which representation had to be based: that we are all "created equal" and endowed with the "inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This is one of the many "foundational" documents in this series. Others include Virginia's Declaration of Rights, drafted by George Mason, some of the Federalist Papers, and George Washington's farewell address.

Documents can also illuminate the cultural, economic and social principles on which the nation was founded, as securely as it was founded on political freedoms and representative government. For example, the United States is still one of the most religious nation-states on earth, based on church attendance. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was a major influence on the way many English-born American colonists thought of their relationship to the unknown, whether it be God or the environment they had settled into. While he opposed American independence, in his letter to Lord North (1775), Wesley at least showed that he understood how and why the colonists – many of them Methodists – would consider rebellion against the British metropole. Likewise, the US became a world leader in industry because its people were inventive and innovative – like Benjamin Banneker, an African-American whose journal entries on cicadas (1800) would introduce planning to eradicate locusts from American agricultural fields in the century to come. A century later, Andrew Carnegie would try to show how the acquisition of wealth by one could become the foundation of a better America for all. And the journals and autobiography of Davy Crockett introduced the myth of rugged individualism as central to the development of an American culture.

Since the writing of the Declaration of Independence, many documents have influenced the history of the United States – constitutional provisions, political speeches and manifestos, judicial opinions, legislative acts, essays, and other writings. Because the United States is a democracy, written and spoken words have been particularly important

in the development of our political cultures and in stimulating social change. This collection includes numerous documents that illustrate social activism, such as Jane Addam's essay on the "Necessity for Social Settlements" (1892), Eugene V. Debs's essay on why he became a Socialist (1902), and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments presented at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. Speeches and essays by the key civil rights leaders and activists W. E. B. Du Bois, Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Alain Locke, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., help us understand the civil rights movement from their perspectives. These documents are supplemented by political documents about civil rights, among them, President Lyndon Baines Johnson's address to a joint session of Congress in 1965 in support of voting rights legislations and Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion in the pivotal anti-segregation case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). On the other side of the issue are statements by those who opposed civil rights, like Samuel F.B. Morse's Biblical defense of slavery (1863), President Andrew Johnson's vetoes of the Freedmen's Bureau Bill (1866) and the Civil Rights Act (1866) and Senator Strom Thurmond's keynote address at the States' Rights Democratic Conference (1948), arguing against federal encroachment on states' authority (particularly with respect to segregation).

Great speeches and documents have often inspired Americans. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech helped change the minds of millions of Americans about the fundamental injustice of segregation. Similarly, the addresses and writings of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton helped build public support for extending the right to vote to women. Speeches, pamphlets and reports, when widely circulated and read, have created groundswells of opinion that have led to policy and cultural changes. Horace Mann and Catherine Beecher championed the development of a public school system with women in prominent roles as teachers; today that role has become positively stereotypical. John James Audubon and John Muir taught Americans to value their continent's environmental diversity, celebrate it, and protect it. At the same time, the pleas of Native American leaders such as Ely Parker and Chief John Ross, labor activists like Eugene V. Debs and César Chavez, and populists like Huey Long as well as anarchists like Emma Goldman remind us that even the most passionately voiced arguments have not always found a sympathetic audience ready to take up the cause.

Legal documents have also dramatically altered the way Americans have viewed their rights and the rights of others.

Salmon P. Chase's *Reclamation of Fugitives from Service* helped lead antebellum northerners to see the unfairness and wrongness of the fugitive slave laws. Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion on *Miranda v. Arizona* had a somewhat different effect. Initially, Americans thought that the Supreme Court was being too lenient with criminals. Police officials were especially fearful that the new "Miranda warnings" would hamper law enforcement. But within a decade the nation's police forces came to accept the idea that even the accused had rights and that coercive police tactics were not consistent with democratic values.

Political life in America has always been tied to addresses in legislatures and assemblies, manifestos, essays, and public oratory. The events leading to the American Revolution included actions like the Boston Tea Party, but they also consisted of speeches, letters, and public pronouncements, like George Mason's letter to the Committee of Merchants in London (1766), Samuel Adams's instructions to Boston's representatives, and Patrick Henry's famous speech attacking the Intolerable Acts. The Boston massacre reflected public indignation at the presence of British troops in an American city, but John Hancock's Boston Massacre oration (1774) helped galvanize opposition to the British.

The interplay between the writings of different leaders illustrates the ebb and flow of political and social history. Abraham Lincoln's "house divided" speech had a profound effect on public sentiment and helped form the northern response to Chief Justice Roger Taney's opinion in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), which essentially denied citizenship status to slaves. A generation later, William Jennings Bryan's "cross of gold" speech dramatically affected the populist movement and national response to industrialization and the economic crisis of the 1890s. In the end, it did not carry the day, and Bryan lost the presidential race to William McKinley, whose speech in 1898 on intervention in Cuba set the stage for the Spanish-American War. In our own time, we have seen the clashing of ideas between George W. Bush's address to the nation on military operations in Iraq (2003) and Senator Robert Byrd's speech "The Emperor Has No Clothes" of the same year. Donald Trump's announcement of his candidacy for president in 2015 shows how disparate and fleeting the appeal of ideas can be to a voting public.

The war speeches of Presidents McKinley and Bush help us understand the role of foreign policy in American politics, as do James K. Polk's message to Congress on war with Mexico in 1846, Franklin D. Roosevelt's "four freedoms" message during World War II, and Harry S. Truman's report to the American people on Korea in 1951. These foreign policy speeches by presidents are supplemented by the documents of others who shaped our international relations, such as Henry Cabot Lodge's speech concerning President Woodrow Wilson's plan for a world peace (1917), George Kennan's "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" (1947), and Condoleezza Rice's "International Support for Iraqi Democracy" (2005). American priorities in foreign policy and maintenance of diplomats are highlighted in Hillary Rodham Clinton's speech to the Senate

investigation of the terrorist attack in Benghazi (2015). But elected and appointed officials are not the only leaders to influence foreign policy. On the eve of World War II, Walter Reuther, a key leader of the labor movement, promised that the members of his United Automobile Workers could produce "500 planes a day" as Americans began to put in place the "arsenal of democracy."

Beyond foreign policy we have many other statements by senators, political leaders, and presidents. Americans often pay particular attention to the speeches and political position papers of politicians. Elected officials have used the podium—what President Theodore Roosevelt called the "bully pulpit"—to sway political opinion. In times of crisis presidential inaugural addresses have served to inspire the nation. Thomas Jefferson's first inaugural helped heal the wounds caused by the vicious election of 1800 and the partisan prosecutions under the Sedition Act of 1800 when he declared, "Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists."

Similarly, Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural—in the wake of the secession of seven southern states—was a long plea to the South to return to the Union. He spoke about a shared history and appealed to patriotism to head off the coming war, and he closed with the memorable words

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone over all this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

The "better angels" would not return in Lincoln's lifetime, and his second inaugural was a masterpiece in explaining the carnage of four years of war and looking forward to the peace that would soon come. Having given moral meaning to the war and the huge loss of life, Lincoln closed by offering peace without vengeance. "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

In the twentieth century we remember Franklin Delano Roosevelt's inspiration to a nation in the throes of the Great Depression, with at least a third of the nation out of work. At this point in history, Roosevelt told the nation, "The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself." This was not entirely true—many Americans on that day feared not having enough to eat the next day. But the speech helped reassure Americans that the new administration would be working from day one to save the nation and the economy. John Kennedy's inaugural was memorable for its soaring rhetoric urging a new commitment to a better world: "Ask

not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

A short introduction to a large collection does not allow space to mention all of the leaders who have contributed to the key moments of American history or the words they spoke and wrote. Generals, labor leaders, social activist, and the wives of presidents all took an active role in political life. We have the speeches and writings of those who

succeeded and those who failed. There are both prophetic statements and bold predictions that never came about. Taken together, the documents in these volumes offer guideposts to our past and help us to better understand our present. They are the building blocks of American history and American life. The speeches and documents in these volumes guide us through our history, helping us see how language and ideas shapes our past and created out present.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Overview

Milestone Documents of American Leaders offers a unique biographical approach to the study of primary source documents. The 133 entries in the set cover notable Americans from the Revolutionary era to the twenty-first century, including presidents, senators, diplomats, Supreme Court justices, labor leaders, social activists, first ladies, presidential candidates, and religious figures. Through two discrete components—an in-depth original essay and a section of primary document text—each entry highlights the writings and speeches that helped establish each person's place in history.

Organization

The set is organized alphabetically in four volumes:

- Volume 1: Abigail Adams to Frederick Douglass
- Volume 2: W. E. B. Du Bois to John Jay
- Volume 3: Thomas Jefferson to James Polk
- Volume 4: Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., to Brigham Young

Entry Format

The entries in *Milestone Documents of American Leaders* follow a uniform structure using the same standardized headings. Following is the full list of entry headings:

- **Overview** gives a summary of the leader's life and describes the person's place in American history and the sorts of documents he or she produced.
- **Time Line** chronicles key events in the leader's own life and events in American history during the person's lifetime.
- **Explanation and Analysis of Documents** consists of a detailed examination of each featured document text.
- **Impact and Legacy** examines the historical influence of the leader, discussing the legacy of the person and lasting impact of the documents.

- **Essential Quotes** offers a selection of key quotes from the documents.
- **Questions for Further Study** poses study questions for students related to the leader and the documents.
- **Key Sources** is an annotated bibliography of the subject's writings, including library and online archives, autobiographies and memoirs, and letters.
- **Further Reading** lists articles, books, and Web sites for further research.
- **Document Text** gives the actual text of each primary document, along with a glossary defining important, difficult, or unusual terms in the document text. Each entry features the byline of the scholar who wrote the analysis. Readers should note that in many entries the "Document Text" section gives abridged text of the primary source document—especially in the case of lengthy documents such as Supreme Court decisions, which generally contain several parts (majority opinion, concurring opinions, dissenting opinions). In all instances where the document text has been abridged, readers will find ellipses (...) to indicate the location of truncated text.

A Note about Primary Document Text

In most cases, we have reprinted the primary documents as they originally appeared in their own time. Thus, throughout this set, readers will find that some documents contain typographical errors, grammatical oddities, and unusual spellings. This is especially true of documents from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the case of speech transcripts, however, we have generally repaired obvious errors of transcription.

Features

In addition to the text of the 133 entries, the set features over 250 photographs and illustrations. The front matter of Volume 1 includes a Publisher's Note to introduce and describe the set and how it has been organized, the Editor's Introduction, and a section of interest to educators: "Teachers' Activity Guides." This section comprises

eight distinct guides, all of which are tied to the National History Standards and which make use of the documents covered in this set. This section was written by James A. Percoco. At the end of Volume 4, readers will find a “List of Documents by Category” and a cumulative “Subject Index.”

Questions

We welcome questions and comments about the set. Readers may address all such comments to the following

MILESTONE DOCUMENTS OF AMERICAN LEADERS

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TEACHERS' ACTIVITY GUIDES

The following activity guides correspond to the National History Standards as published by the National Center for History in the Schools. The documents in *Milestone Documents of American Leaders* relate to most, though not all, of the eras and standards found in the National History Standards.

Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754–1820s)

Standard 1: The causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in forging the Revolutionary movement, and the reasons for the American victory

Focus Question: How did the major players of the American Revolution guide the United States through a new application of Enlightenment philosophy and a war that secured not only victory but independence as well?

- Review with students the major ideas of Enlightenment thinking with regard to natural rights, republicanism, and the social contract.
- Provide students with copies of Patrick Henry's resolutions in opposition to the Stamp Act, speech to the First Continental Congress, and speech to the Virginia Revolutionary Convention in opposition to the Intolerable Acts; Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence; George Mason's Fairfax County Resolves and Virginia Declaration of Rights; and George Washington's address to Congress on resigning his commission as well as his farewell address.
- Instruct students to examine these documents and determine how they align with Enlightenment philosophy, particularly as applied to national independence and republican forms of government.
- Ask students to review the two George Washington documents and determine how the actions associated with them—voluntarily resigning his positions as supreme military commander and president, respectively—reflect Enlightenment values concerning liberty and responsible government.
- Use the information derived from the sources to spark a discussion of civilian authority over the military and how Washington's actions created a tradition that has become a fundamental part of American political life.

Standard 2: The impact of the American Revolution on politics, economy, and society

Focus Question: What role did the leaders of the American Revolution play in shaping economic policy, putting the new nation on the road to a sound financial footing, and defining a framework for a national culture as applied to political and social interactions?

- Ask students to define in their own words the ideas of “sound financial footing” and “national culture.”
- Next ask them to discuss ways in which the government charts economic policy and to consider what role (if any) government plays in defining national culture and identity.
- Provide students with copies of Abigail Adams's 1776 letter to her husband, John Adams's *Thoughts on Government*, and Alexander Hamilton's “First Report on Public Credit.”
- Ask students to discuss how distinctions between public policy and private matters are established in these documents.
- Ask students to write a reply from John Adams to his wife in response to her letter.
- Have students create a compare-and-contrast list regarding John Adams's *Thoughts on Government* and Hamilton's “First Report on Public Credit” as to the role government plays in the lives of its citizens.

Standard 3: The institutions and practices of government created during the Revolution and how they were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system based on the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights

Focus Question: How did the American concepts of individual rights evolve over the period between the end of the Revolutionary War and 1815, and how did these concepts extend the influence of Enlightenment principles into the nineteenth century?

- Have students undertake basic research on John Adams, Samuel Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Mason with regard to their backgrounds, personalities, political beliefs, and positions on key issues of their time. Review the Bill of Rights with students.
- Provide students with copies of John Adams's *Report of a Constitution, or Form of Government, for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, Samuel Adams's comments to the Massachusetts Ratifying Convention,

Jefferson's Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom, Madison's Virginia Resolutions, and Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights.

- Have students role-play the different leaders, presenting their respective views on the idea of rights, with an emphasis on the influence of Enlightenment principles—particularly with regard to natural rights—on their own thinking.
- Have students write a persuasive essay either for or against the idea of an activist government that may deny citizens' individual rights in service to what its leaders regard as the greater public good.

Era 4: Expansion and Reform (1801–1861)

Standard 1: U.S. territorial expansion between 1801 and 1861 and how it affected relations with external powers and Native Americans

Focus Question: What effect did westward expansion have on the lives of American Indians? How did this expansion—combined with Americans' idea of Manifest Destiny—lead to a war with Mexico?

- Provide students with an introduction to the idea of Manifest Destiny. Refer them to the essays by the journalist John L. O'Sullivan in which the idea was first explicitly formulated—"The Great Nation of Futurity" (1839) and "Annexation" (1845).
- Show students an image of Emanuel Leutze's painting *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*.
- Review with students maps showing U.S. territorial expansion between 1801 and 1861. Be sure to point out the Louisiana Purchase, the Cherokee Trail of Tears, and the Mexican Cession.
- Provide students with copies of the following documents by John Ross: his memorial to Congress, his 1832 annual message to the Cherokee Nation, his letter to Martin Van Buren, and his addresses to the Cherokee Nation and to a general council of the Cherokee. Ask them to list three or four of Ross's main arguments with regard to federal treatment of the Cherokee people.
- Provide students with copies of Andrew Jackson's second annual message to Congress and ask them to identify its salient points regarding Indian removal. Next ask them to consider how Jackson's ideas fit within the tenets of Manifest Destiny.
- Provide students with copies of President James Polk's inaugural address and his message to Congress on war with Mexico as well as Henry Clay's letter to the editors of the *Washington National Intelligencer* on Texas annexation. Ask them to underline or identify phrases that support the belief in Manifest Destiny.
- Have students debate the merits of the Cherokee removal and the war with Mexico in terms of those

actions' ultimate positive benefit or detriment to the United States.

- Have students write newspaper editorials either in support of or in opposition to Cherokee removal and the war with Mexico.

Standard 2: How the Industrial Revolution, increasing immigration, the rapid expansion of slavery, and the westward movement changed the lives of Americans and led toward regional tensions

Focus Question: What was the response of American leaders to the various pressures generated by change as the nation matured during the middle of the nineteenth century?

- Ask students to research, investigate, and prepare mini-presentations on the following topics with regard to their influence on social pressures in the mid-nineteenth century: German and Irish immigration; emerging American nationalism; the market revolution and capitalism; the need for internal improvements; and new inventions of the era, including the cotton gin, telegraph, sewing machine, and mechanical reaper.
- Discuss the impact these pressures had on the sectional tensions within the country.
- Ask students to research and present the major national ideas of the "American triumvirate": Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and Daniel Webster.
- Provide students with copies of Calhoun's "On the Reception of Abolition Petitions" (sometimes called "Slavery a Positive Good"), Clay's Senate speech on the Compromise of 1850 resolutions, Andrew Jackson's proclamation to the people of South Carolina regarding nullification, and Webster's second reply to Robert Hayne. Ask them to determine which elements of these documents reveal an underlying theme of nationalism in the face of rapid social and political change.
- Have students create original political cartoons that reflect their understanding of Clay, Calhoun, Webster, and Jackson within the context of either these documents or the social and sectional pressures exerted on the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.

Standard 3: The extension, restriction, and reorganization of political democracy after 1800

Focus Question: How did the John Marshall Court shape the relationship between the individual states and the federal government?

- Ask students to review the constitutional provisions that established the separation of powers and organized a federal republic.
- Ask students to research the life of John Marshall and explain why he was a fervent member of the Federalist Party and a supporter of Hamiltonian principles of a strong central government.



Mrs. Abigail Smith Adams – 1766 Portrait by Benjamin Blythe

ABIGAIL ADAMS: ORIGINAL ANALYSIS

Wife of the Second President of the United States

1744–1818

Overview



Abigail Adams, the wife of the second president of the United States, was never a leader of any kind during her lifetime, except in the circle of her devoted family. But a generation after her death, Americans began to see her as a paragon of domestic patriotism during the Revolution. By the late nineteenth century she was widely regarded as one of America's finest letter writers. In the late twentieth century she took on a new role as a feminist heroine, and her current reputation—as a fully engaged patriotic wife and mother, as an accomplished literary correspondent, and as a powerful voice for all women in the pre-modern era—stands higher than ever.

Nearly every brushstroke in this striking portrait would have astonished Abigail Adams, although perhaps not her admiring husband, John. Born Abigail Smith in Weymouth, Massachusetts, in November 1744, to the town's leading pastor, the Reverend William Smith, and the well-born Elizabeth Quincy, she was raised in a modest but comfortable home. Although her parents were not wealthy, her father's profession and her mother's prominent family placed her squarely in the small upper-middle class of eastern Massachusetts's largely rural, agrarian society. Like nearly all eighteenth-century colonial women, Abigail was not schooled outside her home, but as the daughter of a learned minister with a large personal library, she was not only fully literate but relatively well read by her teens in literature and history, and she continued her reading in her lawyer husband's large library for more than two decades after her marriage.

Raised to be a dutiful wife and devoted mother, Abigail took on both roles without complaint or regret during her twenties and remained her husband's strongest supporter and closest confidant through every victory and defeat in his long career, until her death. Yet quietly, in her private letters to John, to her sisters, and to a few close friends, she gradually became an effective critic of eighteenth-century American society and particularly of the role that married women were forced to play in that traditional world. It was this critique, fused with a strong pride in New England's social virtues, that brought her letters to the attention of nineteenth-century American readers, both men and women, and commanded an even higher regard from twentieth-century women as they sought to recover an American past from which they could take both pleasure and instruction.

The course of Adams's life was fairly straightforward. A few facts are of the first importance in understanding her letters. In October 1764, just before her twentieth birthday, she married John Adams, an aspiring young Harvard-educated lawyer nine years her senior, and moved about five miles to neighboring Braintree, Massachusetts, the hometown of both her husband and her mother. She and John had four children who reached adulthood: Abigail (1765), John Quincy (1767), Charles (1770), and Thomas Boylston (1772). Adams lived mostly in Braintree, with shorter stays in Boston, until her voyage to Europe in 1784 to join her diplomat husband in France and then in England; and after their return in 1788, she resided seasonally in New York and Philadelphia and briefly in Washington, again to accompany John during his vice presidency and presidency, before their long retirement in Quincy (formerly Braintree), Massachusetts. She died there in October 1818, shortly before her seventy-fourth birthday, survived by her husband and her sons John Quincy (later the sixth president of the United States) and Thomas Boylston.

Explanation and Analysis of Documents

As a thoroughly domestic person throughout her life, Abigail Adams wrote no formal documents of any kind, but her private correspondence with every member of her family and with several prominent contemporaries, including Thomas Jefferson, was voluminous. Her sharp wit and discerning political and social observations, her paraphrases and quotations from her extensive reading in history and literature, and her deeply felt beliefs as a wife, a mother, and a woman appear in hundreds of passages throughout these letters. At their center is her correspondence with John Adams, beginning during their courtship in the early 1760s, when she was in her teens, and extending through more than a thousand exchanged letters before John's retirement in 1801.

Although the contents of Adams's letters to John, her children, other relatives, and friends, were wide ranging—from farm management and Braintree gossip to international news—she always regarded her entire correspondence as strictly private. Adams wrote for her own comfort and to both comfort and inform her husband, family, and other intimate acquaintances, and never for the public world. Adams always feared that any miscarriage or misplacement of her letters might place her and her family uncomfortably in the public gaze. As early as September 1774 she

instructed John to burn her letters lest they should fall into others' hands. Some twenty years later, after harshly criticizing Alexander Hamilton in a letter to her husband, she reiterated her plea to burn the letter. John Adams, however, had his own ideas about Abigail's correspondence. To the great benefit of his countrymen and countrywomen of later generations, John Adams apparently never destroyed a single letter from his wife.

Virtually all of Adams's letters remained closed to the public, who scarcely guessed at their existence, until 1840, when her admiring grandson, Charles Francis Adams, published a selection from her family correspondence. In 1848 he followed this with dozens of his grandfather John's letters to Abigail, a massive edition of John Adams's published works and more public letters in the 1850s, and finally a Revolutionary centennial edition of Abigail's and John's correspondence in 1876. Since the 1960s the editors of the Adams Papers project at the Massachusetts Historical Society have published annotated texts of virtually all of Abigail's letters up to 1789 and several of her best letters, without notes, from the 1790s. The five letters chosen for inclusion here, to four different correspondents, show her reacting to a range of historical and domestic challenges facing her and her immediate family.

◆ Letter to John Adams (1774)

Following her lively courtship correspondence in the 1760s, Abigail Adams wrote few letters to her husband until his first travel outside New England in 1774 forced her to develop her patience and skill as a long-distance correspondent. John Adams was elected a Massachusetts delegate to the First Continental Congress in June 1774 and departed for Philadelphia with his cousin, Samuel Adams, and two other delegates on August 10. In her letter to John of August 19, Abigail artfully blends her longing for him with her own musings on the sacrifices demanded of all lovers of liberty.

Her immediate concern was for her ability to endure her husband's long absence, but she was not entirely unfamiliar with this challenge. From the first year of their marriage, John Adams, like other ambitious lawyers, had traveled to the several county seats of eastern and central Massachusetts to attend court days and represent any clients there who wished to employ his services. His journeys to far-off Maine, then a part of Massachusetts, were the most tedious for both Adamses, but John apparently did not write to Abigail until his last northern journey early in the summer of 1774, and Abigail, not knowing just where he would be and when, did not reply.

In August 1774, however, Abigail knew that John would be in Philadelphia for weeks, and she began sending letters with that mix of wifely anxiety, domestic concern, and often deep loneliness that would fill many of her letters to John for the next eight years. In this letter, however, Abigail also reveals another dimension of her character that would appear throughout her correspondence and for which she would later become famous—her ardent patriotism. Educated to revere the political virtues of the ancient Greeks and Romans, she immediately connects the crises faced by

Time Line		
1744	November 22	■ Abigail Smith is born in Weymouth, Massachusetts.
1764	October 25	■ Abigail marries John Adams and moves to Braintree, Massachusetts.
1774		■ John Adams is elected to Congress and travels to Philadelphia; he serves in Congress until 1777, while Abigail stays in Braintree to raise the children and manage the farm and the family's finances.
1774	August 19	■ Adams writes to her husband, who had traveled to Philadelphia as a delegate to the First Continental Congress; she blends her longing for him with musings on the sacrifices demanded of all lovers of liberty.
1776	March 31	■ In a letter to John Adams, the most celebrated in her correspondence, Adams argues forcefully for equal marital rights for women.
1780	January 12	■ Adams writes to her son John Quincy in Europe concerning the opportunities and temptations of foreign travel.
1784		■ Adams and her daughter sail to England and travel to France to join John at his diplomatic post in Paris.
1784	September 5	■ Adams writes to her niece, Lucy Cranch, from Europe, criticizing France and the French.
1796	November 8	■ In a letter to her son Thomas Boylston, Adams speaks of America's partisan political divisions and of her husband's qualifications for the office of president.
1797–1799		■ Adams, quite ill, is a largely absent first lady during the presidency of John Adams but briefly visits Philadelphia as her health allows.



Time Line		
1800–1801		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adams resides in the newly built White House in Washington, D.C., during the last months of John’s presidency, after which John and Abigail retire to Quincy to enjoy the companionship that public life had denied them.
1818	October 28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adams dies in Quincy at age seventy-three.

several Greek city-states challenged by the conqueror Philip of Macedon (father of Alexander the Great) and later faced by Sparta, as they all struggled to preserve their ancient liberties, to America’s challenge, under the leadership of the First Continental Congress, to defend its own liberty. She further connects them to what she saw as Britain’s last chance, like Rome at the time of Caesar’s assassination, to hold on to its liberties by heeding Congress’s appeal for reconciliation.

◆ Letter to John Adams (1776)

Abigail’s letter to John written on March 31, 1776, sometimes referred to simply by its most famous phrase, “Remember the ladies,” is the most celebrated in her entire correspondence. Half its length is devoted to her reaction to news already familiar to John—the Revolutionary conflict in Virginia—and to fresher news that he was just beginning to hear of the evacuation of Boston by the British army on March 17. The most distinctive passages, however, are Abigail’s argument that America’s struggle for liberty from Britain was incompatible with its retention of racial slavery; her feeling of relief that Britain has finally left Massachusetts in peace; and, above all, her extended passage on the severely restricted rights of women within marriage.

Abigail’s ringing defense of women, extending from the sentence, “I long to hear that you have declared an independency,” to the letter’s end, has sometimes been misunderstood. She was not arguing for equal electoral rights—for the suffrage—for all or, indeed, any women, even though in the passage “we . . . will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation,” she seems to assume that women deserve this right. She is instead tackling the greatest obstacle to independence for women in eighteenth-century America: the powerful legal tradition of denying women control over their own property or even their own persons within marriage.

Abigail’s model for a civilized marriage was her own marriage, in which she felt that John was not her “master”—which he was under the law—but her “friend.” However, because so many husbands preferred inflicting emotional and even physical abuse to accepting this “more tender and endearing” role, she called for vigorous legal action. The new nation should legislate marital equality. Elsewhere in her correspondence Abigail stated her conviction that

a woman’s proper place was in the home but that home must be for her a place of honor and security. Nineteenth-century America did see the rise of a suffrage movement; but long before women’s suffrage became a reality, women began to achieve in law what Abigail had envisioned: the first foundations of equality in marriage, the control of their own property and respect for their security.

John Adams’s humorous but dismissive reply to Abigail’s appeal for sensitivity to the rights of women in his letter of April 14, 1776, disappointed Abigail, who complained of it to her good friend and a highly accomplished woman author, Mercy Otis Warren. But John’s unresponsiveness did not dampen Abigail’s concern for the role of women in American culture and society. In June 1778 she wrote a long letter to John, who was then in Paris, in which she responded to her husband’s praise of French ladies by lamenting the limited and circumscribed education of women in America. For Abigail, education was the solution to the low status of American women, both within marriage and in the larger society.

◆ Letter to John Quincy Adams (1780)

Abigail wrote many letters across several decades to all four of her children, but she wrote most often to her eldest son, John Quincy, to whom she seems to have been closest. Perhaps because he was the first to leave home, journeying with his father to Europe in February 1778, and again in November 1779, and stayed away the longest, on several different European assignments, he was often in Abigail’s thoughts.

Adams’s letter to her son, written on January 12, 1780, is characteristic of several that Abigail wrote to him from 1778 to 1783, when she felt that he, as a raw youth exposed to the temptations of Europe, was in the greatest need of her moral exhortations. But as this letter shows, Abigail’s concern for her son’s good character was fully equaled by her conviction that he had a rare opportunity to see the wider world and to learn and profit from it. Moreover, he was seeing the world at a most advantageous moment in history, for “these are times in which a genius would wish to live.” Young John must ever be mindful of this blessing. He would be challenged in his travels by adversity as few youth ever were, but if he met those challenges he would be greatly rewarded. Appealing again to the lessons of Roman history and the struggles of its great patriot orator Cicero, Abigail declares: “Great necessities call out great virtues.”

John Quincy Adams greatly admired his mother, but he did not always appreciate her anxious concern for his moral welfare or her ardent encouragement of his worldly career. In his mid-teens, while living in Holland, Russia, and France, he cut back on writing letters home and drew Abigail’s sharp rebuke. As late as his forties, when he was serving as America’s first diplomatic minister to Russia, he still had occasion to resent what he saw as Abigail’s interference in his career. But mother and son remained close over several decades, and John Quincy Adams would in time become the very model of the moral, upright statesman that Abigail hoped he would be.

◆ Letter to Lucy Cranch (1784)

In the summer of 1784, Abigail, who had never traveled outside eastern Massachusetts, left her two younger sons with relatives and sailed with her daughter Abigail (called Nabby in the family) to England to join her husband and her eldest son, John Quincy. In August the Adamses made the journey to France, described in a letter to her niece Lucy Cranach, so that John could join Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson in negotiating commercial treaties for America. The family occupied a large, elegant house in Auteuil, then a village four miles west of Paris where several French intellectuals and writers made their homes. They remained there until May 1785, when John Quincy returned to America to prepare for college and Abigail, John, and Nabby moved to London so John could begin his service as America's first diplomatic minister to Great Britain.

Abigail's letter of September 5, 1784, to Lucy was one of her earliest from France and is one of her most critical of that nation, castigating both the countryside and Paris, the general population and polite society, and even the horses. Within a few months, she would learn to tolerate Paris, to love the French theater, and to admire at least a few French women of a less eccentric and flamboyant character than Madame Helvétius, the rich, noble widow she had met at Franklin's home and whom she describes in her letter. But this letter is one of Abigail's most colorful and reveals much of her own character. In some twenty years as a correspondent to husband, family, and friends, she had seldom judged another woman in anything but the most positive terms, but when suddenly thrust, for the first time in her rather sheltered life, into the most foreign surroundings, she felt compelled to declare how a proper woman should behave.

It would be easy to dismiss this letter as the cranky complaint of a provincial New England minister's daughter, but in expressing her distaste so vividly Abigail powerfully conveys her idea of what a proper society and a healthy, prosperous nation should look like. In her nine months in Auteuil, Abigail would write some twenty long, detailed letters to her sisters and nieces in Massachusetts, and with each passing month France would appear in a more positive light. But neither the country nor its people ever won Abigail's heart; in her view, England was far superior. In the great bulk of her letters, however, America itself was better yet; if she did not find it perfect—and she never did—she always hoped for its improvement.

◆ Letter to Thomas Boylston Adams (1796)

In September 1796, President George Washington announced in a Philadelphia newspaper (in what came to be called his farewell address) that he did not want to serve a third term. America's first contested presidential election began at once, and in a field of several candidates from several states the most prominent were Vice President John Adams and the former secretary of state Thomas Jefferson. By the date of the following letter the election had already begun, but it would be about seven weeks before the final results—John Adams's election as America's second president and Jefferson's as vice president—were known.

In November 1796, Abigail's eldest son, John Quincy, was at The Hague as America's diplomatic minister to the Netherlands, and her youngest son, Thomas Boylston, was serving as his brother's secretary. Both the date and her correspondent prompted Abigail to devote a long letter, written on November 8 of that year, to one of her favorite subjects, national politics. Abigail makes no attempt to disguise her ardent support for her husband or her fear that America's growing partisan divisions might become even worse if he were defeated. She had not the slightest doubt that John Adams would make a better president than Jefferson or any other candidate. But in this and other letters of this year, she was at a loss to know whether it would be better for John to win the election and suffer four years of sharp partisan attacks to which even Washington, with all of his advantages (which she enumerates), had not been immune or to lose and enjoy a well-earned peaceful retirement in Quincy. This letter shows her struggling with the question, one that was nearly as interesting to her sons in Europe as it was to her.

Impact and Legacy

Abigail Adams achieved a quite different kind of historical significance from that of most American leaders, whether men or women. She was never a political leader or the head of any kind of social or cultural organization, and she never enjoyed, or sought, any social visibility beyond her family and town until the 1790s, when she occasionally shined, between serious bouts of illness, as a gracious hostess in Philadelphia during her husband's vice presidency and presidency. Yet as a wife and then as a mother, she exerted a greater influence on the course of American politics than any other woman born before the nineteenth century and perhaps before the twentieth century as well. This is no mere idle assertion. We cannot know whether John Adams would have triumphed as a congressman and diplomat and finally reached the presidency with some other wife or without a wife, but John himself was deeply grateful for Abigail's sacrifices for his public career and full of admiration for her penetrating political observations during the Revolution. No other presidential wife in any century has equaled both Abigail's influence on her husband throughout his career and the depth of her political perception. Again, we cannot know how John Quincy Adams would have fared as a public servant without his mother's steady advice and exhortations to excel, but her devotion to his success combined with his father's advice and example make the strongest political legacy passed on by any American couple to a son who sought a career in public service.

In the twentieth century, Abigail Adams's literary legacy began to affect directly America's other gender, an audience that was closed to her in her lifetime and for many years thereafter. As more of her letters appeared in print, American women discovered an exemplary traditional New England matron who had looked closely at America's domestic patriarchy and found it wanting. Abigail's proposed remedy

for abusive husbands and dependent wives was radical in her day, but she always saw a woman's primary role as domestic. Still, by asserting that women were morally equal to men, she assured later generations of women, married and single, that equality for women was the natural state of things, even in a society where the nuclear family remained the central pillar of the social order. For a quiet Braintree farmwife who carefully avoided any public role, Abigail Adams's influence on her country, through her husband, her son, and her superb letters, has been remarkable and has yet to run its course.

Key Sources

The bulk of Abigail Adams's letters and of those written to her are in the Adams Family Papers collection at the Mas-

sachusetts Historical Society in Boston. The American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, has a substantial body of letters from Abigail to her sister, Mary Cranch, and a few to other Cranch relatives. The fullest edition of Abigail's letters appears in *Adams Family Correspondence*, edited by Lyman Butterfield and his successors at the Adams Family Papers editorial project at the Massachusetts Historical Society. This edition, still in progress, currently extends to eight volumes, published between 1963 and 2006, and includes virtually all of Abigail's letters through 1789. Two shorter compilations of her letters by editors at the Adams Family Papers project are quite useful: L.H. Butterfield et al., eds., *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762–1784* (1975), and Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor, eds., *My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams* (2007).



Essential Quotes

“Did ever any kingdom or state regain its liberty, when once it was invaded, without bloodshed?”

(Letter to John Adams, 1774)

“The passion for liberty cannot be equally strong in the breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow-creatures of theirs.”

(Letter to John Adams, 1776)

“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 favorable 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 particular care and 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.”

(Letter to John Adams, 1776)