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REVOLUTIONARY WOMAN OR WOMAN OF THE REVOLUTION: AN ANALYSIS OF ABIGAIL ADAMS

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by

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ABSTRACT

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Abigail Adams has been personified in a variety of ways since the publishing of the family letters by her grandson. The most common of these personifications today is Abigail as a revolutionary women who actively sought out the expansion of women's rights into nontraditional roles of the time. Though it is true that Abigail was an avid supporter of female education, reading through her letters sent to family and friends reveal a different woman than some biographies portray. Abigail was a woman of wit, intelligence, kindness, as well as a jealous woman who often complained about her circumstances. Overall, Abigail's letters display a complex woman who, in hindsight, we can consider a revolutionary woman but not an individual who would have considered herself as such.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the years since her letters were published, Abigail Adams has been written about in a variety of ways. Oftentimes biographies on Abigail, and other women, have told the stories of women through the lens of the male figures in their lives. By following male achievements and work, the interests that drive men are used to categorize women. Biographies such as these reduce complex women such as Abigail into being a woman in a man's world, rather than a woman in a world that is her own. As times have changed, so have the biographies on these women to reflect a modernized idea of what they were like. However, this still places individuals into a mold that is not their own and thus, does not fit them correctly. In order to get a true sense of the person that Abigail was, her letters must be read.

The collection of letters written by Abigail Adams is one of the most extensive from the Revolutionary era. Mostly consisting of letters to and from her husband John, Abigail's writing offers an insight into what life was like before, during, and after the American Revolution in a way that is unparalleled by most other sources. These letters also display a woman of wit and emotion, who is domestic in her aspirations and activities throughout most of her life despite being hailed as an early Revolutionary woman of her time. Abigail's circumstances drive her into nontraditional roles that she neither wanted nor took joy in. Throughout the additional roles that she would take on during her husband's absences in the Revolution, her letters show a woman who was more than

willing to rise to the challenge of managing her household, finances, and children. Though willing as she was, Abigail also longed for the return of her 'dearest friend' and husband along with the days she looked forward to as a girl - being a wife and mother to a typical household in eighteenth century America. However, this was not her future. In her patriotic service to her country, Abigail would give up the traditional life she expected to have in exchange for one in which she would take over responsibilities traditionally assigned to her husband by overseeing workers on their farm, collecting rent, and even purchasing land. As the Revolution gained traction throughout the colonies, drawing her husband in as a politician, Abigail made a point to stay informed on the events of the Revolution while becoming immersed in the political and social ideology that came with it.

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were the fundamental ideals of the Revolution. They were included, most famously, in the Declaration of Independence but were also used throughout Revolutionary stories published in newspapers and pamphlets to garner support for the cause. Another key value of the time was the belief that representation in government was a fundamental right of those governed. As these ideas permeated American society, Abigail was exposed to them through newspapers and letters to friends and family. Being exposed to these ideals along with the political knowledge that was becoming increasingly widespread, Abigail became politically minded herself. This political Abigail now had another topic with which to converse with her husband about, but also a point with which to question social and legal traditions regarding women's rights. In modern times, Abigail has been hailed as an early feminist as a result of these ideas being expressed succinctly in one letter. In 1776, between the start of the Revolutionary War and America declaring independence, Abigail sent John a letter while he was attending

the Continental Congress. This letter discussed many things, the most remembered of which is Abigail's statement that John and the other delegates should "remember the ladies." At various points since the letters were published, this one phrase has been used to characterize Abigail as a revolutionary, a feminist, and a political being who attempted to influence the policies of her husband. However, what these characterizations have in common is that they are individually too simplistic to describe Abigail as a whole. In order to discover if Abigail can truly be considered a Revolutionary woman, one must analyze her values, beliefs, and actions in the context of the society she lived in. Throughout this essay, I will explore the question of Abigail Adams' revolutionary status by discussing New England society, her marriage and children, along with the letter and phrase she is most famous for in the context in which it was written.

CHAPTER 2

NEW ENGLAND SOCIETY

If we are to be able to understand the beliefs and values that are prevalent in Abigail's writing, it is first necessary to understand the society in which she lived. Abigail was born November 22, 1744 to William and Elizabeth Smith in Weymouth, Massachusetts. Her father was a Congregational minister in the area, who raised his four children to inherit his love of books and his religious doubts. The Congregational Church functioned on the belief that the members of the church should interpret the Bible themselves, which leaves room for the questioning of religious principles. In order for church members to interpret the Bible themselves, they would have to be literate. The inclusion of women and children set New England apart with about 40% female literacy; whereas, in most other areas women were only rudimentary literate.[1] The lack of female literacy in some areas of the colonies stemmed from the responsibilities of most women at the time. The majority of families lived and worked on farms, meaning that there was little need to be literate outside of religion. Women on farms had no need to be educated beyond the basics in reading and writing necessary to communicate with others, maintain and cultivate their faith, and begin the education of their children. Young girls were typically educated by their mothers in the home or by other family members, though there were some schools available. In the home, mothers served as role models for their female children

[1] Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 228. Joel Perlmann and Dennis Shirley, "When Did New England Women Acquire Literacy?" *The William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 48 No 1 (1991): 52.

who would learn from them the proper way to run a household and raise a family. Abigail Adams, for example, got most of her early education in the home from her mother, both social and intellectual. By the time Abigail left her parents' home she had become well versed in religion, classical and popular literature and also read some French.[2] While education often began within the home, children also learned from extended family members. From her grandmother, Abigail learned how to "discipline with justice and dignity," a skill she would need in her own future as a mother.[3] Her resoluteness in the values and ideas she would carry throughout her life was contributed to by her grandfather and his unwavering sense of public service and concern for the commonwealth. These values and ideas would be passed on by Abigail to her own children as she educated them in turn. Abigail also attributes some of her continued education and intelligence to discussions with her cousin, Isaac. Abigail and Isaac regularly engaged in intellectual discussions, through conversation and correspondence by letter. Through engagement with family, friends, and others around her, Abigail was introduced to a variety of materials outside of those available in her immediate household that expanded her knowledge and thirst for learning. The education that Abigail and her sisters received was above average compared to other women in the colonies. Most women of the time were only educated enough to take care of tasks and responsibilities they had within the home. These tasks, as they were delegated on the farm, were mostly gendered, based on physical differences between men and women, rather than a societal view of what was considered appropriate for men and women.[4] Men were typically stronger and taller than women, making it more

[2] Edith B. Gelles, "The Abigail Industry," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 45, No. 4 (1988): 658.
[3] Phyllis Lee Levin, *Abigail Adams* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 5.
[4] Gloria L. Main "Gender, Work, and Wages in Colonial New England," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 51, No. 1 (1994), 55.

practical for them to be in charge of tasks involving more manual labor such as tending to the fields. Tasks that women were responsible for typically took place in and around the home such as churning butter, making cheese, cooking, cleaning, and making items in surplus to be traded. Trade of surplus goods could be conducted by men or women depending on the area and the family, though trade conducted by women tended be in exchange for other goods and often went undocumented outside of scarce letters. Trade was one of the informal ways in which women could venture into the world of men, though it was not the only one. While women did not typically own businesses, there is documentation and evidence of women owning taverns, shops, and other businesses following the death of their husbands.[5] The key similarity between women who took on traditional responsibilities and those who ventured into more nontraditional roles, is that they were often the result of the men they married.

Marriage changed a woman's legal and economic status, as well as her role within the family and community.[6] Once married a woman took on the status of *feme* covert, meaning that they were legally bound to their husband and had no legal identity outside of the marriage. For couples who married in the eighteenth century, women's status changed to that of *feme covert* meaning that anything the woman brought into the marriage became the property of her husband unless a marriage contract was signed. Marriage also had the potential to raise the status of a young man or woman, depending on the person they chose to link their lives with. Most had partners of similar social status, as it was more likely for these young men and women to be in contact with one another. Courting processes in

[5] Merril D. Smith, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century America* (Santa Barbara" Greenwood Press, 2010), 61.
[6] Ibid, 1.

eighteenth century New England were largely independent of parental involvement, though some Puritan ideals lingered such as meeting parents and obtaining the blessing of the father before marriage. Though some Puritan traditions were in place, New England society no longer found it necessary to monitor courting couples at all times. In fact, there were regular gatherings where young men and women were able to meet and mingle with little supervision from parents or guardians.[7] This rise in the lack of parental supervision of courting pairs also led to a rise in premarital pregnancy in the beginning of the eighteenth century, though this trend would shift in the years following the Revolution due to a rising emphasis on female virtue. In the case of Abigail and John, it is most likely that they met either through his acquaintance with her father or her sister's fiancé. Their first meeting, when Abigail was fifteen, did not go well and John found he was not fond of her or the other Smith sisters. John's original assessment of the sisters was that they were "not fond, not frank, not candid;" observations that would not have been rejected by the sisters.[8] The Smith daughters were keenly aware of the teachings to display little emotion that had been enforced throughout their childhood, though all the sisters felt deeply. John and Abigail were reintroduced two years later, a meeting which led to a very different result and began a correspondence that would span almost four decades and give remarkable insight to life in Revolutionary America. From the beginning of their courtship the pair's relationship is sweet and flirtatious, referring to each other as "Diana" and "Lysander."[9] These nicknames were the first of many that the two would give each other in their letters. The letters sent between the two were "highly valuable" in Abigail's eyes as the pair spent much of their

[7] Ibid, 8.
[8] Levin, *Abigail* Adams, 7.
[9] Abigail Smith to John Adams August 11, 1763.

early years apart.[10] Abigail and John had true partnership and friendship in their marriage, due to Abigail's intelligence and willingness to both expand her knowledge and express her opinions on a variety of issues. As much of a partnership as it was, their marriage was skewed in John's favor due to traditional marital law along with the beliefs Abigail had grown up with concerning marriage and her role within her own.

Once married, women were legally under the protection of their husbands. While New England values saw marriage as more of a civil contract, meaning that divorce was rare but possible, married women were still expected to obey and submit to their husband and had no legal identity of their own. Legally, there were few rights that women held for themselves. They could not own property separate from their husband in most cases, and could not collect their own wages or make contracts. This meant that, at least in theory, women were economically dependent on their husbands. In practice, most women helped support the family economically through work in and around the home. The level of work women were responsible for was dictated by the class of the family they married into. Women who married into wealthy or middle class families may have had servants or slaves to help with or complete housework, while those who married into or within the lower class may only have the immediate family to assist with tasks. Though they may not have servants or slaves, middle and lower class families did had the added assistance of children once they reached an age at which they were able to help. No matter the class a woman married into, they were expected to begin having children as soon as possible after the marriage. Doing so not only fulfilled their duties as a wife, but also gave an opportunity to have help with tasks in the future, assuming the mother and the child survived the

[10] Abigail Smith to John Adams April 12, 1764

pregnancy. Since most people knew someone who lost a wife or child after birth, the birthing process often brought as much anxiety as it did joy due to the possibility of the mother or child dying during the pregnancy or childbirth.[11] Despite the perceived dangers of giving birth and the possibility of offspring dying in childhood, most women in the eighteenth century could expect to have 5-10 pregnancies in her life and to have 3-8 children survive, if she married in her early twenties.[12] The process of giving birth was sacred to women and often a private event that men did not partake in. When giving birth women were surrounded by female friends and family to support and encourage the mother. It was also a time when women were able to reveal information away from the ears of men such as the identity of the father, should the baby be born out of wedlock or illegitimately.[13] Bearing children was a sisterhood shared among women, as an experience only women could share. Because of this, it followed that when women found that they were expecting a child, close female friends and family were among the first told. Women shared advice and tips on how to best manage pregnancy, labor, and, among circles of younger women in the eighteenth century, methods of terminating the pregnancy. While modern abortion methods did not yet exist, women of the time were aware of herbal and medicinal mixtures, known as abortifacients, to take that would cause a miscarriage.[14] In the New England area, savin and pennyroyal were common herbal abortifacients taken by

[11] Smith, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century America*, 11. It is an interesting note in this section that it is likely that the perceived mortality rate due to child birth was much higher than it actually was. Since most people of the time knew a woman who died giving birth, it is likely that birth-related deaths were thought to occur much more often than they actually did, bringing more anxiety to expecting parents especially once labor started.
[12] Ibid, pg 11.
[13] Smith, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century America*, 12.
[14] Cornelia Hughes Dayton, "Taking the Trade: Abortion and Gender Relations in an Eighteenth Century New England Village," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 48 No. 1, 19.

women to avoid having to manually induce a miscarriage, though this also occurred.[15] Miscarriages were often attempted by women who fell pregnant out of wedlock with a man they did not intend to marry, or a man who did not intend to marry them. Miscarriages that were purposefully brought on often resulted in deep feelings of guilt on the part of the women involved, due to the belief that they were sinning by ridding themselves of a child or assisting others with abortion efforts.[16] Natural miscarriages and stillbirths brought on the belief that the mother had failed, or done something wrong while pregnant, that led to the death of their child. These events had a profound effect on the women who experienced them, including Abigail Adams who had a stillborn daughter in 1777. The child was born with her eyes closed "as tho they were only closed for sleep," a sight that was troubling to Abigail whose "Heart was much set upon a Daughter" though she suspected the child would be stillborn some months into her pregnancy.[17] In total, Abigail gave birth six times, three boys and three girls, though only four survived into adulthood. Though she lost two children, one stillbirth and one in infancy, Abigail attempted to remain optimistic, knowing that she had "so much cause for thankfullness amidst [her] sorrow."[18]

In marriage, women were expected to obey and submit to their husbands, though this did not mean that men had free reign to treat their wives however they pleased. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, it was relatively common to see husbands 'correct' undesired behaviors displayed by their wives in methods that would be considered abusive in modern times.[19] That being said, it is important to note that society today has a broader

[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid, 40.
[17] Abigail Adams to John Adams, July 16, 1777.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Smith, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century America*, 36.

definition as to what behaviors fall under 'abusive' than eighteenth century Americans would have. Although men were permitted to 'correct' the behavior of their wives, this does not mean that men were given legal permission to excessively abuse their spouses. New England had more relaxed divorce laws compared to other colonies, at least in theory. This was due to the fact that the legal system in New England viewed marriage more as a civil contract between two people than a sacrament, making it easier for men or women to end an unsavory marriage.[20] Divorce could be granted to women whose husbands' had deserted them for more than four years, leaving their wives to rely on extended family. Divorcing due to desertion also gave women the option to remarry, benefitting both the woman and society, as remarrying meant that she was less likely to begin an extramarital affair that would threaten the community's stability.[21] Since Puritan beliefs were still engrained in New England society at the time, divorce may have seemed easier to obtain, but it was not often granted. When contesting for divorce, the offending actions had to be proven in court which was not always easy. Evidence of adultery, desertion, and other offenses could be difficult to obtain. Due to this, couples were more likely to separate in bed and board, meaning that the pair no longer lived together but were still bound legally. In New England, divorces were not ideal according to Puritan values, but the faith did recognize that they were sometimes necessary.

While divorce was theoretically easier in New England, it was still rare. Women in the area were more likely to remain in unhappy marriages in the hopes that their situation would get better, or otherwise enlist or get the help of friends and family. Because of this, women had little interaction with the legal system in which they lived. Traditionally, men

[20] Smith, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century America*, 35.
[21] Ibid.

conceived, wrote, and enforced the laws and government of an area and gave women few independent rights. In most colonies, women had no separate legal status and were seen as being one with their husband in the eyes of the law. This made it difficult for women to enact, or even suggest, policy changes to expand their own rights. As the ideals and values that would bring about the American Revolution gained traction, the colonies seemed to operate with the goal of increasing knowledge of politics among the general population.[22] Knowledge of political actions that caused a rise in tension between England and the colonists also came with knowledge of the political ideas that would grow into the movement towards Revolution. New England women, who were traditionally educated to be able to read and begin the education of their children in social traditions and values, saw the Revolution as an opportunity to change policies to offer women more opportunities in terms of education. One particular value that gained traction leading up to the American Revolution was the idea that public virtue was necessary in order for a republican society to function. Since virtue was a necessity, the people of the republic had to be educated in the virtues that were valued by the society. This meant that children had to be taught from a young age about these virtues, a responsibility that would fall to the mothers. The idea that virtue must be taught to young children gave birth to the ideal Republican Mother. The Republican Mother was the ideal wife - competent, confident, rational, independent and educated to teach her children the necessary values to allow society to continue functioning through the generations.[23] The key to the success of Republican Motherhood was the education of the mother that was to be used in the service of teaching and ensuring the civic

[22] Jack P. Green, "Values and Society in Revolutionary America" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 426, 56.
[23] Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America,* 228.

virtue of the family.[24] Many women of the time used the premise of the Republican Mother to push for standardized education of women from a young age. They argued that, if women were to begin their children's education, they themselves should be adequately educated to accomplish this goal. For many this meant being able to read and write, which was still uncommon in some areas at the time of the American Revolution.

Abigail Adams was one such woman who argued for the rights of women at the time of and after the American Revolution. Growing up in a New England family, Abigail was more educated than women in other areas of the colonies, though not to the same standard as the male members of her family. Abigail's education during her childhood, and the encouragement from her husband to continue to learn throughout her life, made her one of the most remembered advocates for women's rights and education.

[24] Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

MARRIAGE, REVOLUTION, AND SHIFTING RESPONSIBILITES

Abigail and John married on October 25, 1764 and quickly moved to Braintree, Massachusetts, where John grew up. Throughout these early years, their marriage grew to be very different than what Abigail had imagined when she was a girl. Basing her expectations on the relationships around her, including her parents and grandparents, Abigail expected that her new husband would be largely responsible for tending the farm he inherited from his father. She expected that her own responsibilities would include cooking and cleaning for the household along with bearing, raising, and educating children. Abigail was more than prepared to begin this simple lifestyle and took great interest in the farm from the early days of their marriage.[25] For the family, and Abigail, the farm they lived and worked on was a source of sustenance, survival, and pride that should be kept up either by themselves or tenants that that rented homes on the land.[26] In the months before their marriage, while John was working the court circuit, Abigail was steadily making plans for housekeeping. Since it would be just her and John for the early years of their marriage with no children old enough to assist Abigail with household tasks, John agreed to take on a servant girl, Judah who his mother said would "do very well for [Abigail's] service" in the winter following their marriage.[27] While the keeping of a servant did not necessarily align with the ideals of the Revolution that were quickly gaining traction in colonial

[25] Levin, *Abigail Adams*, 13.
[26] Ibid, 12.
[27] John Adams to Abigail Smith, Sept 30, 1764

society, it was common for the time and having someone to assist with running the house would be helpful until their own children were old enough. Given the flirtatiousness of their courtship, and the lack of parental supervision that was typical among New England families of the time, it would not have been overly scandalous in the larger society if Abigail had fallen pregnant in the few month before her wedding. However taking into account her father's position as a minister in the church and her steadfast readings and beliefs in the teachings of the Bible, Abigail and John chose to wait until after their marriage to consummate their relationship, though Abigail admits a few months before their marriage that her "thoughts are often Employ'd about Lysander" when she was not otherwise occupied.[28] Abigail found herself pregnant almost immediately after the marriage, a full transition from being a young woman living in her fathers' home to being a wife and expecting mother.

The life that Abigail led on the farm was one she had dreamed about throughout her childhood, though the details were different from the beginning due to the profession of her husband. After their marriage, John left Abigail in Braintree to continue his work on the court circuit and was absent for all but one month of her first pregnancy, and possibly the birth of their first child.[29] In his absence, Abigail often felt lonely though she did write letters to family, such as her cousin Isaac in England. In these letters she instructed him to record the things he observed, remarking that while women were "considerd as Domestick Beings…they inherit an Eaquel Share of curiosity" as men.[30] During the months of John's absence, Abigail preoccupied herself with her tasks in running the household in John's

[28] Abigail Smith to John Adams, April 12, 1764.
[29] Charles W. Akers, *Abigail Adams: A Revolutionary American Woman* (Pearson Education, Inc., 2007), 21.
[30] Abigail Adams to Isaac Smith Jr. April 20, 1771

absence along with turning to books for comfort. One such book she turned to during her second pregnancy in 1766 was James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* which acknowledged the traditional differences between men and women while also encouraging women to take more of a prominent role in their own lives and households. Fordyce encouraged women to become active within the household, perfecting skills needed to perform tasks such as needlework. He also went as far as to suggest that women should also exercise their mind, praising some of Abigail's favorite authors and reminding women that their intellect would remain when their youth did not.[31] The two volumes Fordyce published connected with Abigail in a variety of ways, but most particularly in the way that religion is joined with principles of Natural Religion that emphasized morality instead of theology. This idea, aligned with her upbringing in the Congregationalist Church that encouraged the individual thinking of church members, was essential in Abigail's acceptance of her life as the wife of a husband who was increasingly called away from the home.

In the early months of their marriage, it is likely that John delegated as few tasks as possible to his bride who was adjusting to life as a wife and an expecting mother. Though it is unlikely that it took Abigail long to adjust to these changes, she hoped for a time when John would be present at home more often than not. Throughout their long separations Abigail often expressed her wish for John to come home, writing "I dare not Express to you at 300 hundred miles distance how ardently I long for your return."[32] Despite the many times Abigail expressed this wish, it would be many more years before the couple lived consistently in the same place. By the time Abigail was pregnant with her second child,

[31] Ibid, 24.
[32] Abigail Adams to John Adams October 16, 1774,

management of the farm fell to her more and more as John was away with his work, a circumstance Abigail accepted due to the economic necessity. The passage of the Stamp Act in 1765 drew John into politics, diverting the course of both his and Abigail's lives.[33] As John's career progressed along with colonial tensions with Britain, John made the decision to move the family to Boston in the spring of 1768. This decision was made to bring John closer to important clients, though Abigail benefited from the move in her own way. Not only was she able to consistently live under the same roof as her husband for a time, she was also able to access news in a timely manner than was not available in Braintree. News travelled inconsistently across the colonies and, while in Braintree, Abigail could never be sure if the newspaper for any given day would be delivered in a few days or in a few weeks.[34] In Boston, Abigail read four weekly newspapers as they were printed Monday or Thursday without having to wait to receive them in letters from John, who sent her news when she was not in the city.[35] The reliability of consistent information was essential in Abigail staying up-to-date on the happenings and state of affairs in colonial society. This followed along with the trend that seemed to develop at the time of the Revolution to increase political knowledge among colonials, and later citizens.[36] The ultimate goal of this was to create a government that could be held accountable by those it governed, a goal that was accomplished through published works in newspapers and pamphlets such as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Life in Boston made information more readily accessible to Abigail than it had ever been, while also giving her firsthand experience with town mobs full of slaves, young men, sailors, and some middle-class

[33] Levin, *Abigail Adams*, 18.
[34] Ibid, 28.
[35] Abigail Adams to John Adams November 27, 1775
[36] Green, "Values and Society in Revolutionary America," 56.

citizens that were a political force in the area. Mobs that formed in Boston during the time that Abigail and the children resided in the city mostly banned together for the purpose of taunting and attacking British soldiers in protest of Acts passed by the British government.

While life in Boston was a whirlwind for the part of Abigail that relished being in the same city as her husband once more with increasing access to books and political action, these years were not without hardship. The family moved twice while living in Boston due to disruptions and in the time Abigail and the children spent in Boston, the Adams family would continue to grow as Abigail gave birth twice between 1768 and 1770. Having two children in quick succession was difficult physically and mentally for Abigail, especially given the anxiety that childbearing caused at the time. Added to this was the loss of the family's third child, a daughter named Susanna, at thirteen months old. While Abigail had experienced loss within her family, nothing could have prepared her for the loss of one of her children. There is little reference to Susanna in the surviving family letters, only scarce references of John asking Abigail "to kiss my little Suky for me" along with mentions of the child in John's autobiography.[37] Of Abigail's surviving letters, there is no reference of her second daughter or her death. The sorrow that came with losing a child stayed with her over the next years, and the grief she felt over the daughter she lost in infancy was greater than that she felt for her stillborn daughter in 1777. Though they had just lost a child, John rode the court circuit in order to support the family. John's absence only added to the feelings of anxiety and loneliness that Abigail felt during this time as she journeyed through her fourth pregnancy. Still living in Boston, Abigail was surrounded by the heightening tensions between British redcoats and patriots. The family resided in Boston until 1771,

[37] John Adams to Abigail Adams June 29, 1769.

through the Boston Massacre, which saw John rushing home to ensure the safety of his family and the subsequent trial in which John defended the British soldiers involved. These events also coincided with the birth of Abigail and John's second son, Charles, which was no doubt more pressing on Abigail's mind than the proceedings of the court though in a different way. The Boston Massacre trail increased John's reputation as a politician and lawyer in the colonies and set in motion a series of events that would lead to Abigail more or less running the household and family for the coming years.

In the time between moving the family back to Braintree in April 1771 and returning to Boston in August 1772, Abigail gave birth to a fifth child, a son named Thomas Boylston. While John was preoccupied with his clients in Boston, Abigail was busy raising the pair's children. Their first child Abigail, known as Nabby, was now seven and her five year old brother, John Quincy, were both set to begin their education. To Abigail, it seemed that the two younger sons were not far behind in their educational needs and it would be up to her to ensure that these needs were met. Abigail understood very well the responsibility that fell to her in the education of her children, though she felt unqualified for the job, writing that while she was "very uneaquel to it, tis still incumbent upon me to discharge it in the best manner I am capable of."[38] In this most important aspect in her life as a mother she reached out to Mercy Otis Warren, a published political writer and close friend. The two had been friends for a number of years, writing letters to each other on subjects such as child rearing, the state of the colonies, the economy, and other topics that give insight as to the feelings and opinions of women at the time. Mercy is one of the few women in the Revolutionary era that can be ranked as highly educated and influential as a

[38] Abigail to Mercy Otis Warren, July 16, 1773.

woman. Like Abigail, Mercy also wrote on the subject of women's education as an advocate for its extension. The education of children was a duty left to the mother who, before the time of the Revolution, may or may not have been educated herself. Abigail and Mercy, along with other New England women, were more qualified than most to begin the education of their children, though many women were only literate enough to read the Bible and occasionally correspond with family. This lack of formal education paired with the expectation that women would begin the education of male children in particular was the cause for more than one woman to question societal expectations of women. Two of these women were Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren. The issue of women's education is one that Abigail is often connected with, as it was a topic for which she felt strongly. According to tradition, it was the responsibility of the mother to bring up their children to "do honour to their parents" and to instill the necessary values to function in society and raise the next generation.[39] This responsibility was not taken lightly by Abigail who "persuaided Johnny to read [her] a page or two every day" from a history book sent to her by John in the hopes that he would develop "a fondness for it."[40] Later in his education Abigail would send John Quincy to John Thaxter, a friend of her husband, to receive further education.[41] Though John Quincy's education seems to be most written about, Abigail was just as invested in the early education of her younger sons and that of her daughter, especially when it came to morality and virtues. It was Abigail's belief that is was "of very great importance that the children should in the early part of life be unaccustomed to such examples as would tend to corrupt the purity of their Words and

[39] Ibid.
[40] Abigail Adams to John Adams August 19,1774.
[41] Abigail Adams to John Adams September 16, 1774.

actions" in an attempt to instill a deep and life-long morality.[42] Though she felt herself ill-qualified for the position, Abigail did the best she could to teach her children using her connections and intelligence to instruct them. She was particularly invested in guiding John Quincy, who she saw much of her husband in. Upon sending him to Europe to spend time with his father, she wrote that he should learn as much as he can from the experience as he is one of the few who has "a parent who has taken so large and active a share in this contest" between America and Britain.[43] She also discusses that she expects him to remain true to her teachings on being virtuous while abroad and that she hopes he will "add justice, fortitude, and every Manly Virtue which can adorn a good citizen" as he goes through his jouney and the rest of his life.[44] Through letters to John Quincy, Abigail's dedication to the education of her children can be seen. In the existing letters between the two, Abigail offers advice on a variety of matters while also offering suggestions of observations he should make and draw conclusions on, much in the way her husband did for her. The lack of formal education she received only fueled her desire to educate her children well and to expand women's educational rights and norms.

By 1774, Abigail and John had been married for ten years and were once again separated by John's work. This time at the Continental Congress, Abigail and the children had been moved back to Braintree where John had purchased his father's homestead, enlarging the property that the family was responsible for. While John felt more comfortable leaving his family on the farm than in Boston, Abigail had more responsibilities in Braintree than anywhere else. Throughout their marriage, Abigail had

[42] Ibid.
[43] Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams January 19, 1780
[44] Ibid.

taken to heart everything her husband taught her from history and government, to how to manage their farm, with his praise making her want to preform her tasks as well as she could in his absence.[45] When managing their affairs Abigail felt that John's praise "sufficently compensates, for all [her] anxieties, and endeavours to discharge the many duties devolved upon [her]" in his absence.[46] The First Continental Congress marks the beginning of Abigail taking over the farm for the coming years as John's involvement with the Revolution led him elsewhere. Between ensuring that the farm and household were running smoothly and the continued education of her children, Abigail had quite enough to keep her busy in John's absence, though she still yearned for his return to ease some of her responsibility.

The beginning of the American Revolution brought a shift in the roles of women across the country. From the time of the Stamp Act and the subsequent boycotts that followed, women were essential in the success of protests. Boycotts and the non-importation movement were particularly reliant on the support of women, as they could refuse to boycott certain items if they were deemed necessary in daily life. When the non-importation agreements of 1768 was signed, women were relied on to make or substitute items that were not accepted from British merchants such as home-spun cloth. This was recognized by newspapers who, knowing of their female audiences, urged women to partake in boycotts of British goods. If white women and their daughters had decided to ignore actions of protest against the British in the form of boycotts and fasting, these techniques would not have been effective.[47] Traditionally, women were not considered part

[45] Levin, *Abigail Adams*, 13.
[46] Abigail Adams to John Adams June 17, 1776
[47] Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: the Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston-Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 155.

of the political sphere and even at the time of the Revolution men often did not consider women as having the ability to form political opinions. However, since the culture of the Revolution primarily spread through the use of newspapers, pamphlets, and other printed materials that were widely circulated, women became just as committed to the revolutionary cause as men were. Women such as Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren became aware and well-versed in the political climate of their country, forming their own opinions and sharing them with friends and family. Abigail often wrote to John about various political issues, including the longing for "a government of more stability" in the New England area along with other actions she received information on throughout the colonies.[48] Many women of the time also felt a sense of patriotic duty, even if that duty took the form of participating in boycotts and sewing soldiers' uniforms. One woman even refused to brew John Adams tea even though it had "been honestly smuggled" or had "paid no Duties" to the British government.[49] As the country became engulfed in the Revolution, many women's roles shifted within the home. Husbands left for war and it was often uncertain if they would return. There were constant questions and concerns about invasions, diseases, and the possibility of accompanying their husbands to war. Abigail Adams expressed her own concerns to John after the British invasion and destruction of Charlestown in 1775 writing that they "[lived] in continual Expectation of Hostilities."[50] Without the husband, or other male head of family, there to run the household these duties fell to the women. Harvesting crops, making financial decisions, dealing in money or trade, decisions regarding the couple's children were all traditionally handled by, or taken charge

[48] Abigail Adams to John Adams, May 7, 1776.
[49] John Adams to Abigail Adams July 6, 1774.
[50] Abigail Adams to John Adams June 25, 1775

of, by the husband. Women left at home while men were fighting in the war took control of these decisions and duties, learning new trades and becoming versed in roles they were unfamiliar with. In Abigail Adams' case, she would run the family farm while John was away on diplomatic missions. In this role Abigail supervised the harvest, collected rent from tenants and evicted those who did not pay upon John's instruction. While it was necessary for Abigail to take over these roles as John was not present to do so, there were tensions caused by Abigail giving instruction to men who felt that it was not her place and refused to take her seriously. By the end of the war, Abigail learned how to run the farm efficiently, though it was sold during the war, as well as becoming an entrepreneur of sorts selling items John sent from Europe and speculating in purchasing land. One such speculation resulted in Abigail purchasing land located in Vermont in John's name as she was not permitted to purchase land herself. Imagining a pleasant retirement home where she would be able to enjoy time with her husband, John was less enchanted with the idea and chastised Abigail's decisions, though the land was not sold until years later.

Women left by their husbands to fight in the war relied on networks of family and friends in keeping up-to-date on news and ensuring that the family was taken care of. This support system, especially among women whose husbands were elsewhere, aided in the rising confidence levels among women of the time. Throughout the period of the Revolutionary War, women across the colonies gain a newfound sense of confidence in themselves and their abilities. By learning and practicing duties traditionally ascribed to their husbands, women found themselves able to handle responsibilities regarding everything from finances to supporting suitable partners for their children. The increasing responsibilities held by women, and their confidence in their ability to perform these tasks

well, led to a change in women's roles following the Revolution. Though women were not suddenly allowed full access into the male sphere after the war, husbands became aware of their wives intelligence regarding finances and the values of the Revolution which encouraged them to place more stock in the idea of a mother who was educated and worldly enough to instill in her children the values and morals necessary to function in post-revolutionary society. This idea would grow in the years following the Revolution and influence the role that women held in the newly formed American society.

CHAPTER 4

REMEMBER THE LADIES: LEGACY OF THE REVOLUTION

John's participation in the First Continental Congress in 1774 marked the beginning of a long period of separation from Abigail, though they were not aware of it when he first left. The Congress met with the goal of protesting the Coercive Acts and advocating for colonial rights; however, tensions and conflicts had been rising since the Boston Massacre in 1770. Though there had been conflict between British red coats and colonials since 1770, the war only gained momentum in 1775. As the war continued and the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, it became clear that delegates to future Congress meetings would be in charge of designing and writing the laws and system that would govern the new nation. It is in 1776, between the war raging on and the Declaration of Independence, that Abigail sends the letter that she is most known for today. For Abigail, writing letters was a therapeutic practice that allowed her to voice thoughts, opinions, and feelings that otherwise would have remained private. It is important to remember that, although Abigail and John's marriage was viewed by both individuals as more of a partnership than others of the time, they still lived in a society in which it was not appropriate for women to have a public life separate from their husband.[51] Through her letters Abigail was able to discuss her opinions on a variety ofissues that she may not have felt comfortable bringing up in regular conversation. Even in letters to her husband, Abigail

[51] Edith B. Gelles, *Abigail Adams: A Writing Life*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 4.

finds that "my pen is always freer than my tongue. I have wrote many things to you that I suppose I never could have talk'd."[52] The letters that Abigail wrote served two purposes in this sense- they allow her to discuss her thoughts and opinions with others, while also acting as a diary to record her feelings on various matters.

In the midst of the Continental Congress, the values and ideas of the Revolution were spreading across the colonies. These ideas encouraged all colonials to be politically knowledgeable and brought upon the idea that societal virtue and morality was necessary if the republic was to function.[53] The key element in societal morality was in mothers. It was the expectation that children would begin their education under the watchful eye of their mother, who would teach them the virtues necessary to ensure the survival of the republic. It was believed that if America was to be successful, both men and women had to be virtuous. Women so that they may be good mothers and teachers to their children, and men so that they may be virtuous enough to put the needs of the country before themselves. These things would be taught by the mother along with religion, values, and societal norms as children grew and expanded their knowledge. The education of children was often seen as one of the most important aspects of a mother's life as it was her responsibility to raise and begin the education of the next generation. Should a mother not educate their child, the next generation could come of age unprepared to keep the newly formed nation running independently. Due to the importance assigned to this task, Abigail felt an immense pressure to educate her children well enough to become functioning members of society. Abigail's primary concern was that she was not qualified enough to teach her children adequately despite being more educated than most women of the time.

[52] Abigail Adams to John Adams, October 22, 1775.
[53] Green, "Values and Society in Revolutionary America," 65.

Abigail's upbringing in a church that encouraged individual thinking, along with her father's insistence that she learn more than what was necessarily required for her to function in her primary roles as a wife and mother, instilled a love of learning that carried Abigail through her life. This passion was encouraged and expanded throughout her marriage with John who recommended books for her to read along with accepting and encouraging her correspondence with a variety of persons. Though Abigail maintained correspondence with a number of people, male and female, who all had an influence on her life none of them were as dedicated as her correspondence with John.

Abigail and John's letters span almost four decades and provide one of the most comprehensive accounts of America from pre- to post-Revolutionary times that exists. If there is one letter between the two that is most widely known, it is one sent by Abigail to John in March 1776. This letter can be viewed as being revolutionary for a variety of reasons. Written shortly after the British evacuation of Boston, Abigail is among the first to put into writing the wish that the Convention has "declared an independancy" from Britain.[54] This point alone displays an insight to the feelings of colonial communities during the Revolution, as there were some that still hoped for a reconciliation with Britain. Abigail also shows remarkable foresight into issues that the future nation will struggle with over the next two hundred years, such as slavery, writing that she has "sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Eaquelly Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs."[55] Though she does not seem to be completely convinced of the idea that Africans should be treated equally it is clearly an idea that had been on her mind, as it was on many others minds in the very

[54] Abigail Adams to John Adams March 31, 1776.
[55] Ibid.

beginnings of what would grow into the abolitionist movement. In the same portion of this letter, Abigail asks that John keep something in mind when he and his fellow delegates are writing the new laws that will govern the country other than slight suggestions towards abolition. The portion of the law making progress for the new nation that particularly interested Abigail were those involving women's legal rights and status. The lack of power given to women in traditional law made it difficult for women to accomplish anything in their own right, as they legally had no identity of their own. All Abigail asked that John do was to "Remember the Ladies" when they wrote their laws. It is important to note that in this moment Abigail was not asking for equal rights between men and women. In truth, she was only asking that the defenselessness of women in the law be recognized in order for the restriction of power men had over women to be implemented.[56] This was not a plea for women's suffrage, equal property rights, or legal equality between the sexes. Abigail only wished for the protection of women to be written into the law so that husbands would not have unlimited power over their wives. In the consideration for women's rights, Abigail also campaigned to her husband for increased educational rights for women. Since it was the responsibility of women to educate their children, Abigail believed that every woman should receive the basic education required to teach their children until such a time that they would either move to primarily helping with household tasks in the case of female children or go on to further schooling in the case of males. Thus, the primary meaning behind Abigail asking her husband to "Remember the Ladies" was born out of a desire to ensure that women were protected from the tyranny of their husbands in the law, along with the additional possibility of expanding educational rights so that women could be

[56] Edith B. Gelles, *Abigail Adams: A Writing Life*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 16.

better wives. When these thoughts were put into writing Abigail was aware that her husband would not likely take her concerns seriously and thus, after asking him to think of women as the new laws were written, Abigail joked that should women not garner more legal protection under the new government they may start their own revolution.[57] While the issue and question of women's rights was not a matter to joke about for Abigail, she understood that presenting her concerns in this way allowed her to begin discourse with her husband over an issue that would have otherwise been dismissed immediately.

In the case of whether or not Abigail is or is not a revolutionary woman, this letter is of paramount importance. It is true that the beliefs Abigail held in terms of the expansion of women's rights in the law would have been considered revolutionary, even at the time they were written. However, revolutionary as they may be, few people of the time were privy to these thoughts. As the values of the Revolution swept the nation, America seemed to operate with the goal of spreading political knowledge far and wide in order to create a government that could be held accountable to the people it represented.[58] As political knowledge spread, it followed that those it reached would develop opinions based on the knowledge they gathered which was mostly targeted towards men. As information moved within communities, women were exposed to more political information than ever and no doubt formed opinions on the state of affairs between Revolutionary America and Great Britain. Abigail Adams was one such woman and made a point to ensure she was as up-to-date on the political, military, and social events surrounding the Revolution as possible. This was partly due to the Revolutionary fever that gripped her along with the rest of the country and also selfish reasons. While Abigail and John clearly had a strong connection

[57] Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776.
[58] Green, "Values and Society in Revolutionary America," 56.

from the early days of their relationship, connections can only go so far in fostering a lasting relationship. Abigail's interest in politics likely began from it being the best hold she had onto her husband, who was often more interested in participating in public affairs than he was in his responsibilities on the farm he trusted Abigail to manage. While it may have begun through politics being the chosen career of her husband, Abigail's interest quickly grew beyond using the topic to foster conversation with her husband. It was Abigail's belief that all women should participate in discussions of the politics that impacted their lives and that women should form their own opinions on the subjects they discussed. These opinions, however, should be kept private between close friends and family.[59] This belief in the private political thinking of women is displayed by Abigail throughout her life. In the case of discussing women's rights, Abigail only discussed the issue in one other letter to her close friend, Mercy Otis Warren, in which she discussed her letter to John and his rather unsavory response.[60] John's reaction to being asked to include women when writing the code of laws for the newly formed American government, is what would have been expected by Abigail when the initial letter was written. In his response, John dismissed Abigail's claims that women have no power over their lives and in marriage. He counterclaims that the "masculine system" that existed at the time was little more than a theory in the face of reality.[61] John also pointed out that women were by no means a minority and that they did wield some power within the marriage. In his letter responding to the Abigail's concerns, the issue is quickly dismissed and it is uncertain whether or not John ever mentioned his wife's concerns to other delegates. Rather, those

[59] Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: the Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750*-1800, 190.
[60] John Adams to Abigail Adams April 14, 1776.
[61] Ibid, 17.

attending the Continental Congress chose to focus on more pressing issues regarding declaring independence and forming an alliance with France.

While the response Abigail got was not the one she hoped for, there is some truth to John's statements. As previously discussed, marriage in the New England area tended to resemble more of a partnership than the law would suggest, especially in terms of family economics. Middle and lower class men and women worked together to ensure they had enough to sustain themselves and any children the pair may have. While traditionally this meant that the females of the house produced extra goods to be traded, this trade was not limited to men. Women of the time were willing and able to trade goods they made in the home among people in the area, though these transactions were often not documented. There was also evidence of divorce being granted across the colonies, with more open laws being in New England. Prominent churches in New England recognized that divorce was sometimes necessary, and did grant couples the right on the occasion that a couple wished to separate. Though divorce was possible, this does not mean that it was more common. Women in the New England area were hesitant to divorce their husbands, even if they would have the ability to remarry afterwards, often due to any children the couple had. Even in cases of abuse or desertion, most women chose to remain in unhappy marriages in the hopes that things would get better while enlisting the help of family and close friends.[62] The flaw in John's argument is seen in the laws of the time. In New England, as with the rest of the colonies, married women had no legal identity of their own. After marriage, women were seen as a subset of their husband in the eyes of the law and therefore had no means of influencing the policies and practices that would govern them throughout their

[62] Smith, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century America*, 36.

lives unless their husband supported policy changes in their favor. If women had any power for themselves, it was power within their marriage itself that did not often carry over into other spheres of influence outside the home. Since there was no female representation at the Continental Congress, it was unlikely that these laws and traditions would change. The influence women could have over the proceedings of the Congress were limited to the letters and correspondence between female family members and the male delegates at the convention. This is the way in which Abigail attempted to influence her husband to change the traditions around women's rights and education. Though Abigail's suggestions were largely ignored, there was a change in female educational rights and expectations after the Revolution.

Before the American Revolution children's education was "haphazard at best" and largely depended on family and local circumstances.[63] In these times more care was taken in the early education of male children before they graduated on to higher education outside the home, though the level of education received by male and female children was mostly dependent on their socioeconomic status and the feelings of the family regarding education. For female children, the options for higher education were slim to none. Most women were educated enough to perform the tasks necessary to run the household and no further. Any opportunities for women to expand their knowledge in pre-Revolutionary times were through a woman's personal initiative, the feelings of her parents, and the proximity to information.[64] Abigail Adams is an example of a woman for whom these circumstances aligned perfectly allowing her to expand her education a great deal with the blessings and

[63] Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: the Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, 256.
[64] Ibid, 259.

encouragement of her father and, later, her husband. The events and circumstances of the revolution convinced many that women were capable of taking over expanded responsibilities and should be educated enough to take over traditionally male roles, should it be necessary. This paired with the shift in the ideal American woman being an independent thinker and patriot, a virtuous wife, competent manager of the household, and a knowledgeable mother.[65] Combined, these shifting ideologies did more for women's educational rights than anything else could have at the time, possibly due to men seeing the evidence of women's abilities for themselves in the aftermath of the Revolution.

Post-Revolutionary America was a place of extended educational opportunities for male and female children. Public elementary schools were established, opened and accepted children of both sexes from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, though notably it was less likely for a well to do family to send their children to public schools. For families that were better off, private academies were opened in the 1780s and 90s that offered an expanded curriculum for male and female children. Due to the increased options available for schooling outside the home, post-revolution children made up the first generation of educated females. Republican girls of middle- and upper-class families who had the time and means to attend schools became authors, teachers, and early leaders of the nineteenth century abolitionist and women's rights movements. Although these children would be educated in a school, they still began their educational experience in the home. Mothers were responsible for teaching their children the basics in manners and good behavior if the children were ever to attend schools outside the home, as primary schools of the time required that their students know good manners and behavior, the "basics."[66]

[65] Ibid, 256.
[66] Ibid, 258.

Mothers who had multiple children of various ages had an advantage that mothers of one child or many young children did not. Older siblings, or literate parents, were able to begin teaching younger children how to read and write. However since most mothers of the time only gained a perfunctory education, if they received one at all, those in the role of the teacher often felt a sense of inadequacy. Abigail Adams once expressed her fears that she was not suited for the job of educating her children, as did Nelly Curtis Lewis who once stated that she was "not well calculated for an instructress."[67] Through their feelings of inadequacy, women across the colonies made do with the little education they did receive along with the advice and help from family and friends simply because there was no other option. Early reformers in the education movement argued that if women's education was made standard across the newly formed American nation, women would be better wives, mothers, and household mistresses. The balance that was found was on the idea of expanding women's education but limiting how far it could expand. While men were supportive of female educational rights in order to create a well-rounded moral society, it was still widely believed that the woman's place was in the home. By limiting how far women's education could expand, reformers were able to garner more male support for the education movement. One of the largest influences on the support for the movement came from the idea that in order for the new republican government to succeed, the society it governed would have to have an underlying morality. If this was done properly the whole of the society would operate with more or less the same moral code, thus creating a society in which everyone was working towards similar goals using similar morals to guide them. This idea meant that, even if children were not aware of it, one of the primary topics they

[67] Ibid, 257.

learned about mostly from their mother was that of morality. Educated mothers passed on the values and morals of society on to their children, creating a never ending cycle of societal morality so long as women were educated with the same core morals.

Even if Abigail Adams was not able to individually influence the laws of the new American government, she was part of the movement that allowed for the expansion of educational rights for women all over the colonies. Women like Abigail Adams proved to men that not only were women willing to expand their intelligence to spheres that were traditionally male, they were capable of moving into these spheres and navigating them as well as any man. Throughout her life, Abigail displayed interests in topics ranging from social structures between men and women, to the politics that her husband's career centered around. It is often questioned whether or not women were aware of the educational inequality prevalent in society before the Revolution. Abigail is one of the few existing examples of a woman who was keenly aware of the difference, as many women likely were. The largest difference is that Abigail was one of the few who wrote about it. In a letter to John Thaxter written in 1778, Abigail discussed the "mortifying difference" between the education men received compared to that of women, even in such families that did attend to women.[68] Abigail, though she did not cite them directly, likely looked to her own family as an example citing that "every assistance and advantage which can be procured is afforded to the sons, whilst the daughters are totally neglected in point of Literature."[69] In her youth Abigail was more educated than most young women at the time, though she still was not permitted to expand herself into higher education the way her brother and cousin were. It is women like Abigail who recognized the inequality of

[68] Abigail Adams to John Thaxter February 15, 1778.
[69] Ibid.

educational experiences and had the boldness to not only push past barriers to prove her own intelligence and capabilities, but to also share her opinions with others that can be credited with the beginning of a movement that would push for equality in all aspects of American life.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The answer to the question of Abigail's status as a Revolutionary woman lies in the era in which she lived. Abigail Adams lived in a time of immense change in American history. The Revolutionary era saw an entire generation of individuals rise up against Britain due to the lack of representation in government that led to a list of grievances. In order for the Revolution to succeed, patriots had to have the backing of fellow colonials from across the colonies. Garnering this support was no easy feat, and was largely accomplished through the publishing of pamphlets, articles, and other documents geared towards convincing individuals to join the movement. Somewhere along the line when these ideas were being distributed and acted upon, those at the head of the Revolutionary fever realized that they would need the support of the women if they were to accomplish their goal. Boycotts, strikes, and the war itself all relied on the support of women to have an impact. Women often bought and traded goods for the family, and thus had to agree to stop purchasing British goods and begin to make others themselves such as clothing in order for British merchants to notice a difference in sales. As men left to fight in the war, women were left to manage households, farms, and businesses on their own. Many of these women had little to no experience managing these tasks without their husbands and were forced to make do in order to rise to the occasion. And rise they did. Over the course of the Revolution women all over the colonies proved that they were capable of doing the jobs required of them and capable of doing them well. While in the beginning, these tasks may

have been performed on the instructions and advice of men, women quickly learned how to accomplish the necessary tasks to keep their families as stable as possible during the Revolution.

Abigail Adams is a prime example of how women took on greater responsibilities during the war. From the time of the first Continental Congress Abigail took over management of the farm the family lived on including supervising work, settling labor problems, and collecting rent.[70] These may seem to be simple tasks, especially given the advice that John sent Abigail in letters while he was away, but women in the colonies did not always have an easy time taking over management of their husbands' affairs, especially when those affairs involve supervision of men. Abigail, for example, had trouble with tenants and laborers who were not keen to listen to the instructions of a woman, even if they did come from her husband. As many families of the era lived and worked on farms, other women of the time shared similar experiences with Abigail. Mary Fish, a Connecticut woman, was pleased to find that she was capable of overseeing farm chores, keep accounts, and deal with the household repairs left for her by her husband.[71] These women across the colonies kept their communities running while their husbands, brothers, and fathers were fighting the war. These moments, where women took over the responsibilities of their husbands, form the crutch of arguments for Abigail Adams being a revolutionary woman.

It is true that Abigail took on a great deal of responsibility from the early years of the Revolution and even before when John would leave to work the court circuit. These added responsibilities were a challenge that Abigail was more than willing to rise to. As

[70] Gelles, *Abigail Adams: A Writing Life*, 23.
[71] Joy Day Buel and Richard Buel, Jr., *The Way of Duty: A Woman and Her Family in Revolutionary America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1984), 108.

she continued to rise to challenges placed in front of her and gain confidence in her abilities, she began to form the opinion that women should not be as limited in their educations as they are capable of doing similar things as men. Her own educational experience was above average for women of the time, yet Abigail yearned for a formal education that was offered to the male members of her family. Later in life, Abigail would point out the vast inequalities between male and female education, writing that boys are offered every opportunity and assistance they need in order to excel whereas girls are only offered the basics in literature to serve as their education, rarely even learning to write. These conditions, combined with the fact that women had few legal protections from their husband should he desert her, abuse her, or commit adultery made it unlikely for women to seek divorce. Since divorce was difficult to attain many women chose to stay in unhappy marriages rather than attempt separation in the hopes that the situation would improve. Separations that did occur were often not legal divorces, but instead separations of bed and board in which the couple remained legally married but did not live in the same house. Abigail felt strongly about these issues as they related to the lives of women around her and across the colonies, however there were few ways for her to discuss these ideas in a way that would have been deemed appropriate by herself. Abigail was a very private woman. She was of the opinion that a woman should be educated and that she should have political opinions, but that these opinions should either be kept private or only shared among family and close friends. Abigail only shared her opinions with those she kept correspondence with and while this grew to constitute many people who respected her and her opinions, she would not have wanted her letters published. More than once she asked that John burn her letters so that no one other than him had the opportunity to read them.

The question comes down to a matter of perspective. Can Abigail be seen as a Revolutionary woman if her opinions and calls to action never reached a wider audience or does her desire to keep her political thoughts private keep her from attaining revolutionary status? Since their publication by her grandson, Abigail's letters have been read by thousands of people doing research about her, for school assignments, or simply to learn about one of the most well-known and respected women of Revolutionary America. In her life, Abigail came to be respected not just as the wife of a president but as a political thinker in her own right. She corresponded with diplomats, politicians, and a great many other people including Thomas Jefferson who, even if he did not agree with her thoughts, respected her nonetheless. Abigail's foresight into issues regarding women's rights, abolitionism, and educational rights were among the first recognitions of these struggles that would grow into larger movements over the next century. Even if Abigail would have been mortified to know that her letters were published, they display a legacy and an insight into life before and after the American Revolution in a way that no other source manages to accomplish. They show the story of a complex woman who is intelligent, jealous, kind, and insightful. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a revolutionary as someone who is engaged in a revolution or an advocate of revolutionary doctrines, which seems to describe Abigail fairly well. However, this is not the way Abigail would have seen herself. Abigail believed that her patriotic service to her country was the sacrifices she made while John was away. As Abigail wrote of herself, she had "sacrificed a large portion of [her] peace and happiness to promote the welfare of [her] country." She believed that this type of sacrifice was largely ignored by men as "patriotism in the female Sex is the most

disinterested of all virtues."[72] Abigail Adams may not have had the opportunity to fight for American independence the way a man could. She may not have had the peace of mind and willingness to publish her thoughts and opinions on political matters the way men did. For Abigail, her political thoughts were private ones that should be kept between herself and close family or friends. However, these things do not keep her from attaining Revolutionary status. They may not make her a Revolutionary woman, but they do make her a woman who is a product of her time. Though she held fast to the conservative principles of her upbringing, the ideals and values of the time shaped her throughout her life into a woman of the American Revolution, in every sense.

[72] Abigail Adams to John Adams June 17, 1782

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Alexis Austin received an Honors Bachelor of History in May. Her love for the subject stems from watching documentaries on Egypt with her father and trips to the library with her parents. Her research has included papers on Revolutionary America to the Civil War, the Holocaust, and Transnational history. Austin's hobbies include writing and photography. Her extensive experience with *The Shorthorn*, the UT Arlington student newspaper, has earned her state, regional, and national accolades. Judges note her ability to see through a scene and capture critical moments. When she's not studying, she spends time cooking and playing with her cat.