

# **ABIGAIL ADAMS: A WOMAN AHEAD OF HER TIME**

*By Lesley Messer*

"I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors... 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 (Levin, 82)." Abigail Adams, one of the most prominent figures in the early feminist movement, wrote these words in accordance with her belief that the same laws extended to men should apply to their female counterparts. Born in 1744 in Weymouth, Massachusetts to a mother who descended from the prestigious Quincy family and a father who was active in the esteemed Congressional ministry, Abigail was always very curious and had a strong desire to learn. Like most women of her time, she was not formally educated, but read literature and learned French at home with her two sisters. Her voracious reading habits helped her to forge a bond with a young Harvard law student, John Adams, whom she married in 1764.

Although much of her infamy comes from her role as the second First Lady and the mother of President John Quincy Adams, Abigail Adams is also renowned for her role as a strong and independent woman as well as for her prodigious letter writing. The first of her letters were written to her husband, John, during his service in the American Revolution. (However, as time passed, she began to write more frequently to various family members and friends about both mundane issues of her social life and political topics regarding national affairs.) During this time period, Abigail was forced to assume the more "masculine" role of breadwinner and support her family. She successfully ran her family's farm until she decided to sell it after four years, relying solely upon what domestic skills she had previously acquired to earn money during a time of inflation and scarcity of labor. Although such display may seem hypocritical coming from a feminist, Abigail Adams did not consider domesticity to be a sign of weakness or submission. In fact, she continually expressed dissatisfaction with the feminine role in society and was proud to support her family and her country in whatever way she could.

Besides managing her family farm, Abigail Adams exuded knowledge of entrepreneurship and economics. Withey says, "As prices and taxes continued to rise and paper money continued to depreciate, Abigail depended on her trading ventures to make ends meet (122)." Luxury items were often too expensive for most people in colonial America to afford, and therefore, Abigail requested that her husband order various items from Europe for resale in the United States. Usually, she sold the items herself and was able to make enough economic profit to make ends meet, however, she would also work through others if necessary.

Furthermore, during this time, Abigail Adams not only managed her family's domestic responsibilities and financial matters, but also real estate affairs. For example, Withey explains on page one-hundred-twenty-two, " ..Abigail took steps to improve the Adamses' long-term financial security. In the spring one of their neighbors died and his farm came up for sale. Knowing that John had long been interested in the property, she immediately began negotiating for the purchase without waiting for his advice. During the next several years she continued to acquire land when it became available, acting with the advice and assistance of Cotton Tufts but relying mostly on her own judgment. "Despite the troubles and hardships that Abigail Adams faced while trying to support her family; she firmly believed that such sacrifices ought to be considered her patriotic duty.

In addition to possessing a strange sense of independence, Abigail Adams expressed a strong distrust toward men. In one of her earliest letters to John Adams who was fighting for the patriots, she wrote, "Do not put such unlimited power in the hands of the Husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could (Gelles, 47)." Although she was not in a position to question male authority, she was deeply concerned with the injustices that were impressed upon women during the colonial era. She stresses this when she says, "Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity and impunity (Gelles, 48)." Although her Puritan background accounted for most of her suspicions regarding men, a great deal also arose from her belief that women were often abused and taken for granted by males. She concluded that women were subordinate to men, as she said, "Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness (Gelles, 48)." Metaphorically speaking, Adams says here that the relationship of men and women was comparable to that of human beings and a Supreme Being, insinuating that women were often mistreated and looked down upon due to their inferior stature. Thus, she continually argued for equal women's rights and exhibited unusual gender awareness for this time period. Perhaps this was best demonstrated in her fight for adequate women's education.

This subject was one that preoccupied Abigail Adams throughout her life. In fact, she felt so strongly about the issue that she recommended to her Presidential husband that the new body of laws that he and the other Founding Fathers were drafting should, "...be distinguished for learning and virtue... If we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen, and Philosophers, we should have learned women (Gelles, 48)." She justified this by explaining that education was compatible with domesticity. Because women had been viewed only as mothers and daughters before the war and society had adapted to such gender roles, Abigail did not envision a complete obliteration of such biases, but rather, hoped for an improved position. She held an opinion radical at that time: that women's minds were just as capable of absorbing knowledge as men's, and they too had the right to be educated.

Abigail Adams influenced the feminist movement that would emerge in the early twentieth century more than she ever could have imagined. The feminist movement that was so prominent

in the 1920's when women demanded the right to vote resurfaced in the 1960's and early 1970's. To combat discrimination in employment, adequate day care, meager professional opportunities and unequal pay, women followed the example of Abigail Adams and lobbied for equality. Refusing to be ignored, groups and unions were formed, and eventually, laws were passed and drastic changes were made in the legislature.

A woman truly ahead of her time, Abigail Adams was able to influence the politics of her husband, and consequently, the national government. With a keen sense of gender awareness, she was able to perceive the inequities that existed and refused to rest until action was taken to correct them. Abigail Adams, therefore, was not only an independent woman and radical thinker, but also a forerunner in women's fight for equality.

#### WORKS CITED

1. Akers, Charles W. *Abigail Adams: An American Woman*: Little, Brown & Co., Canada Ltd., Canada. 1980.
2. Gelles, Edith B. *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams*: Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN. 1992.
3. Levin, Phyllis Lee. *Abigail Adams: A Biography*: St. Martin's Press, New York, NY. 1987.
4. Whitney, Lynne. *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams*: The Free Press, New York, NY. 1981.