

**Abigail Smith:**  
**A Decisive Early Influence on John Adams**

Wearing a silk dress and a pearl necklace in her portrait by Benjamin Blyth, Abigail Smith looked like an American princess.<sup>1</sup> In reality, her story is more complex. Born into an affluent family, she was a revolutionary thinker who inspired her husband as he played a crucial role in forming an American republic. Before John Adams married Abigail Smith, he wavered in many aspects of his life. During his courtship with her, John Adams learned how to connect with her and others more broadly. Once married, Abigail Smith (by then known as Abigail Adams) excelled as a mother, wife, and advisor. When the American Revolution came, Abigail encouraged John to promote independence, oppose slavery, and support women’s rights, securing her place as an important forward-thinking figure in U.S. history.

Before marrying, John Adams found his opinions, career, and romances in flux. In 1755, Adams wrote: “upon the stage of life, while conscience claps, let the world hiss!”<sup>2</sup> Four years later, Adams declared that “reputation ought to be the perpetual subject of my thoughts, and aim of my behavior.”<sup>3</sup> This instability did not apply only to his opinions. When Adams set up his legal practice in 1758, he did not win a single case for three years.<sup>4</sup> When Hannah Quincy ended her courtship with him in 1759, Adams even gave up drinking tea because it reminded him of her.<sup>5</sup> This fretful youth contrasts sharply with the image we have of a grand American Founder.

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<sup>1</sup> Library of Congress, “Portrait of Abigail Adams,” accessed December 30, 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/hec.13515/>.

<sup>2</sup> David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2001), 38.

<sup>3</sup> McCullough, 46.

<sup>4</sup> Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, “John Adams,” accessed December 25, 2021, <https://millercenter.org/president/adams>.

<sup>5</sup> R.B. Bernstein, *The Education of John Adams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 40.

The anxious shifts of a young mind found respite in Abigail Smith. A parson's daughter, Abigail came as close to being an aristocrat as any New Englander could.<sup>6</sup> She read and wrote tirelessly in her youth. Abigail also had a powerful wit, which she used to mock John Adams when they first met. At the time, he did not appreciate the comments.<sup>7</sup> Both his and her opinions changed over time, partly because, as historian R.B. Bernstein notes, "she was his intellectual equal."<sup>8</sup> Adams fell in love with her, and surprisingly, this love led to an increased patriotic sentiment on the part of John. He wrote to Abigail in 1763: "I begin to find that an increasing affection for a certain Lady... quickens my affections for every body else... A wonder if the fires of patriotism, do not soon begin to burn!"<sup>9</sup> In Abigail, Adams did not only find a friend and a fellow-thinker, but also a seed from which civic passion began to blossom. It would not be long before this passion would forge John Adams into the thinker that we remember.

Abigail proved to be an adept member of the Adams family. Even President John F. Kennedy hailed her in his *Profiles in Courage* as "an extraordinary mother" to her son John Quincy Adams, one of the titular profiles.<sup>10</sup> This makes Abigail one of only a handful of memorialized Founding Mothers. More importantly, as the wife of John Adams, she commanded John's trust. Historian David McCullough declares that "to no one but her could he ever complain."<sup>11</sup> The emotional bond went both ways, as Abigail expressed herself openly and frankly to John. She called him "My Dearest Friend."<sup>12</sup> In one letter to John, dated April 16,

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<sup>6</sup> Bernstein, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Bernstein, 40-41.

<sup>8</sup> Bernstein, 41.

<sup>9</sup> John Adams, "Letter from John Adams to Abigail Smith, 20 April 1763," *Massachusetts Historical Society*, accessed December 25, 2021, [https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17630420ja&bc=%2Fdigitaladams%2Farchive%2Fbrose%2Fletters\\_1762\\_1773.php](https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17630420ja&bc=%2Fdigitaladams%2Farchive%2Fbrose%2Fletters_1762_1773.php).

<sup>10</sup> John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1956), 32.

<sup>11</sup> McCullough, 478.

<sup>12</sup> McCullough, 55.

1764, Abigail wrote, “Courage is a laudable, a Glorious Virtue in your Sex, why not in mine? (For my part, I think you ought to applaud me for mine.)”<sup>13</sup> Abigail’s two sentences reveal both the candor and the playfulness that formed the basis of her marriage with John. This close, familial bond between Abigail and John Adams would enable them to contemplate critical issues together in later years.

As the question of independence loomed large in the early days of the American Revolution, Abigail and John Adams exchanged a series of historic letters. As early as November 1775, Abigail wrote to John, “I could not join to day in the petitions of our worthy parson, for a reconciliation between our, no longer parent State, but tyrant State, and these Colonies. -- Let us separate, they are unworthy to be our Brethren.”<sup>14</sup> This was many months before Congress declared American independence. As her note shows, Abigail held this opinion at a time when even esteemed community leaders supported British rule. In Congress, John worked to promote the cause of independence. In April 1776, he penned “Thoughts on Government,” proclaiming that “there is no good government but what is Republican,” agreeing with Abigail and casting off any former loyalty to the British Crown.<sup>15</sup> When the time came to debate the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson called John “the pillar of its support on the floor of Congress.”<sup>16</sup> John Adams championed self-rule at least partly because of Abigail’s influence, and this had a decisive effect on the history of the United States.

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<sup>13</sup> Bernstein, 43.

<sup>14</sup> Abigail Adams, “Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 12 November 1775,” *Massachusetts Historical Society*, accessed December 30, 2021, [https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17751112aa&bc=%2Fdigitaladams%2Farchive%2Fbrowse%2Fletters\\_1774\\_1777.php](https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17751112aa&bc=%2Fdigitaladams%2Farchive%2Fbrowse%2Fletters_1774_1777.php).

<sup>15</sup> John Adams, “Thoughts on Government,” *Founders Online*, accessed December 26, 2021, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-04-02-0026-0004#PJA04d040n1-ptr>.

<sup>16</sup> McCullough, 135.

Abigail and John both opposed slavery, but he couldn't sway Congress. Abigail noted in 1775 that "the Sin of Slavery ... is not washed away."<sup>17</sup> Abigail also mistrusted the delegation from Virginia, noting that she had "sometimes been ready to think that the passion for liberty cannot be equally strong in the breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow creature of theirs."<sup>18</sup> Her husband silently approved of this view. Although John Adams would not say so until later, McCullough affirms that John already believed "Negro slavery is an evil of colossal magnitude" in 1776.<sup>19</sup> Not everyone in Congress was of this opinion. Abigail was right to mistrust slave-holding delegates' support for freedom, but she had accused the wrong colony. It was Virginian slave-owner Thomas Jefferson who wished to attack the practice in the Declaration, only for his anti-slavery text to be shouted down by South Carolina and Georgia.<sup>20</sup> Emancipation would have to wait for nearly another century.

The one important issue that Abigail could not convince her husband about was women's rights. In a letter dated March 31, 1776, Abigail urged John to "remember the ladies" while creating his new government.<sup>21</sup> Abigail Adams had placed one of the most revolutionary ideas of her time before her husband. Unfortunately for Abigail, John did not heed her at all when it came to the subject of women's rights. Her husband's reaction to the letter was "I cannot but laugh."<sup>22</sup> The enfranchisement of women into the American Experiment would have to wait for centuries.

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<sup>17</sup> Abigail Adams, "Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 25 October 1775," *Massachusetts Historical Society*, accessed December 30, 2021, [https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17751025aa&bc=%2Fdigitaladams%2Farchive%2Fbrowse%2Fletters\\_1774\\_1777.php](https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17751025aa&bc=%2Fdigitaladams%2Farchive%2Fbrowse%2Fletters_1774_1777.php).

<sup>18</sup> McCullough, 103-104.

<sup>19</sup> McCullough, 134.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Wienczek, "The Dark Side of Thomas Jefferson," *Smithsonian Magazine*, accessed December 29, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-dark-side-of-thomas-jefferson-35976004/>.

<sup>21</sup> Abigail Adams, "Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March - 5 April 1776," *Massachusetts Historical Society*, accessed December 29, 2021, [https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760331aa&bc=%2Fdigitaladams%2Farchive%2Fbrowse%2Fletters\\_1774\\_1777.php](https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760331aa&bc=%2Fdigitaladams%2Farchive%2Fbrowse%2Fletters_1774_1777.php).

<sup>22</sup> McCullough, 105.

Abigail Smith helped transform the vacillating, uncertain John Adams of the 1750s into a patriotic and intellectually engaged Founding Father. Abigail inspired John Adams during their courtship, providing him the voice of an erudite and honest friend. As his wife, Abigail trusted John and earned his deep confidence. This bond would pave the way for a letter exchange that helped shape American history in 1776, as John helped to forge the American Republic. She voiced strong support for independence long before it was popular. So did John. She condemned slavery even as Congress failed to do anything about it. So did John. And finally, although she did not convince John to support women's rights, Abigail deserves enormous credit for having more prescient ideas than John Adams. Beyond having simply influenced John Adams, Abigail Smith Adams was a great figure of the American Revolution in her own right.

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This bibliography conforms to the Chicago Manual of Style.

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## **Applicant Biography**

**Academic Achievements:** Austin joined Wilmington Friends School in January 2017 for the second semester of 7th grade. He received the international Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize for a historical essay published in *The Concord Review* (“Georges Danton,” volume 31, issue 1). Austin is a Semi-Finalist for the National Merit Scholarship. He won the 2021 Wilmington Friends Jordan Wales ‘97 History Award and the 2021 Wilmington Friends Upper School Foreign Language Award.

**School Activities:** As the Founder and Senior Student Leader of the Wilmington Friends School’s Eco Team, Austin guided the school towards earning the Bronze Eco-Schools Award from the National Wildlife Federation. Inspired by George Washington, he trained a successor and stepped down nine months ago, now serving as a senior mentor for the team. Austin is also a co-leader of the Wilmington Friends chapter of Fridays for Future, a global environmental movement. He also serves as the clerk for the school’s Philosophy Club.

**Community Activities:** Austin’s Eagle Scout Project doubled the yield of the Wilmington Friends Organic Community Garden, with 220 total service hours. This won him the Delaware Governor’s Youth Volunteer Service Award. Austin is also a translator for Latinx patients at a vaccine clinic and serves as a door greeter at the Blood Bank of Delmarva.

**College Plans:** Austin is fortunate to have been accepted early decision to Brown University. It is his great hope to attend, provided that he can find the funds.