

DISCOVER AMERICA

Course 26 - Teacher Guide



Distance and Devotion: The Letters of John and Abigail Adams

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Fifth Grade Teacher Guide



Credit: PBS

Key Themes

- Adaptability and Creativity in Communication
- Connection Across Time and Space
- Leadership and Sacrifice
- Resilience

Core Values

- Community
- Faith
- Life

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to

- Summarize the historical events surrounding John and Abigail Adams' lives, including the tensions leading up to the American Revolution, their roles during the Revolutionary War, and their contributions to shaping American history beyond the Revolutionary War, up until their deaths.
- Identify how Abigail Adams supported and encouraged John Adams in his endeavors, such as representing Massachusetts in the First Continental Congress and the Second Continental Congress.
- Explain the significance of communication in maintaining relationships, as demonstrated by the heartfelt letters exchanged between John and Abigail Adams during times of separation and challenges in their lives.
- Compare and contrast the early lives of John and Abigail Adams by examining the similarities and differences between their families.
- Analyze the motivations behind John Adams' representation of the British as legal counsel.
- Explain how the letters exchanged between John and Abigail Adams offer intricate details and profound insights into their lives, while also serving as valuable historical artifacts that continue to illuminate aspects of American history today.



John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

Key Terms

- 01 **Boston Massacre:** a confrontation in Boston between British troops and colonists, where British soldiers fired into a threatening crowd, resulting in the death of five individuals.
- 02 **Declaration of Independence:** the document that proclaimed that the 13 original colonies were “free and independent states.”
- 03 **diplomatic:** able to control a difficult situation without upsetting anyone.
- 04 **First Continental Congress:** a meeting of delegates from each of the thirteen colonies.
- 05 **First Lady:** a title given to the wife of the President of the United States.
- 06 **rebellion:** an armed fight against one’s government.
- 07 **Second Continental Congress:** a gathering of delegates who decided to create an organized army of colonists to fight in the war.
- 08 **Stamp Act:** Britain’s first direct tax on the colonies which taxed newspapers, almanacs, pamphlets, legal documents, and playing cards.

John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

Introduction

TELL Students

Imagine you're holding a special kind of treasure map. But instead of leading to buried gold, it guides you to a treasure trove of words and feelings exchanged between two remarkable people: John and Abigail Adams.



Credit: Massachusetts Historical Society

In a time before emails and text messages, John and Abigail stayed connected through something extraordinary — letters! These weren't just any letters. They were like windows into their hearts, carrying messages of love, wisdom, and encouragement across the miles that separated them. As you open one of these letters, you're transported back in time, standing beside John as he writes about his adventures and challenges, from his bustling life in Boston to his important work in shaping a new nation. Then, you journey to Abigail's side, reading her thoughtful words filled with warmth and insight, supporting John through every trial and triumph. Through these magical letters, you'll discover the bond between John and Abigail, a bond that transcended time and distance.

ASK Students

Have you ever received a letter from someone?

TELL Students

John and Abigail Adams were an extraordinary couple who lived a long time ago when America was just beginning. Even though they could not talk to each other like we do now, they wrote letters all the time. In their letters, John and Abigail
(continued)

Introduction

TELL Students (Continued)

talked about everything! They shared stories about their day, their dreams for the future, and even their feelings. And you know what? Many of these letters still exist today, like little time capsules that let us peek into their lives.



ASK Students

What do you know about John and Abigail Adams?

TELL Students

In the complex story of John and Abigail Adams, their bond served as a crucial support system. John's various roles in serving his country frequently required him to be far from home. Unlike today's instant communication, where a text or phone call is just a tap away, back then, staying connected meant relying on letters and patience.

ASK Students

What do you think John Adams did to serve his country? What do you think Abigail Adams did to serve her country?

TELL Students

John was the second President of the United States, and Abigail was his wife and the First Lady. The **First Lady** is a title given to the wife of the President of the United States. Even though John and Abigail Adams lived in a different era, their legacy remains alive today because of something extraordinary they did—writing letters! Despite John's frequent travels, he and Abigail stayed (continued)

John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

Introduction

TELL Students (Continued)

connected through their letters. These letters were more than just words on paper. They were filled with stories, secrets, and an abundance of love. Remarkably, many of these old letters have survived through the years, acting as precious treasures from the past that provide us with a glimpse into their lives and their enduring bond.

ASK Students

What do John and Abigail Adams' letters tell us about their lives and their service to our country?

TELL Students

Even though John and Abigail lived in a different time, their letters help us understand how much they cared for each other and how important they were in history. Through their letters, we learn about their strong bond, the challenges they faced, and the support they provided each other. Their letters also tell us about their thoughts, feelings, and the historical events they experienced. Overall, these letters give us a glimpse into their lives and their significant contributions to American history. Let's watch another episode of Star Spangled Adventures to learn more about the lives and sacrifices of John and Abigail Adams.

WATCH

Star Spangled Adventures Cartoon Ep. 26: [John and Abigail Adams](#)



John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

Lesson

TELL Students

On October 30, 1735, John Adams was born in Braintree, Massachusetts, on his family's farm. His father, John Sr., worked as a farmer and shoemaker, and also served as a deacon in the local Congregational church. John's mother, Susanna, came from a well-to-do family and was a homemaker. As a child, John loved the outdoors and often skipped class to fish and hunt. Despite this, he was an exceptional student and enrolled at Harvard College at the age of fifteen.



ASK Students

What did John Adams enjoy as a child? What insight does his graduation from college at the age of 15 give us?

TELL Students

Meanwhile, in nearby Weymouth, Massachusetts, Abigail Smith was born on November 22, 1744. The Smith family was similar to the Adams family in many ways. Abigail's father, William, was a church minister and a devout Congregationalist. Her mother, Elizabeth, came from the Quincy family, a well-known political family in Massachusetts. Unlike John, Abigail did not have the opportunity to pursue a formal education, even though she was described as "intelligent, well read, and outspoken." At that time, girls were often seen as intellectually inferior to boys, and educational opportunities were mostly available to boys.

ASK Students

What similarities and differences can we identify between John and Abigail's families?

John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

Lesson

TELL Students

After completing his studies at Harvard, John embarked on his journey as a lawyer. In 1758, he established a solo law practice in Boston. Despite his prestigious Ivy League education and well-earned reputation for intelligence, John faced a difficult challenge when he encountered a lack of clients in his first year. This initial setback could have left him feeling disheartened and uncertain about his future. However, John persevered with unwavering determination. Gradually, through his dedication and hard work, he transformed his modest office into a flourishing legal practice. As his career gained momentum and stability, John turned his attention to personal matters, seeking a wife with whom to share his aspirations and build a family. It was during this time that he crossed paths with Abigail Smith from Weymouth, marking the beginning of a significant chapter in both of their lives.



ASK Students

How did John Adams exhibit perseverance?

TELL Students

In 1764, John and Abigail were married, starting a beautiful journey together. Over the next eight years, they welcomed five children into their family. Meanwhile, across the colonies, tensions were rising against Great Britain. When the Stamp Act was passed in 1765, causing colonists to protest against the unfair taxes, John initially hesitated to join the rebellion. A **rebellion** is an armed fight against one's government. John worried about his legal career in Boston. The **Stamp Act** was Britain's first direct tax on the colonies which taxed newspapers, almanacs, pamphlets, legal documents, and playing cards. However, as the call for freedom grew louder, John realized he couldn't stay silent. He began writing powerful essays in newspapers, fighting for justice against British mistreatment.

John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

Lesson

ASK Students

Why was John Adams initially hesitant to join the rebellion?

TELL Students

Please read the following passage to learn more about John and Abigail Adams. [Teachers: Please print and disseminate the student text print-out included in the lesson guide.]

Even with John busy in Boston and the rest of the family living on their rural Massachusetts farm, their love stayed strong. Through heartfelt letters, John and Abigail shared their affection and longing for each other. In a September 1764 letter, John expressed his deep love for Abigail, eagerly awaiting her return. Abigail reciprocated with equal warmth, reassuring John of their well-being and their shared love for their family. These letters, filled with love and devotion, remain a testament to their enduring bond.

ASK Students

How did John and Abigail Adams keep their love strong?

TELL Students

In the late 1760s, John became well-known as a top lawyer in Boston. He believed strongly in fairness and justice. Even though he believed in the revolutionary ideas of the time, he put them aside to defend British soldiers accused in the 1770 Boston Massacre. In 1770, before the Revolutionary War, the **Boston Massacre** marked a confrontation between British troops and colonists in Boston, where British soldiers fired into a threatening crowd, resulting in the death of five individuals. (continued)



National Museum of American History

John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

Lesson

TELL Students (Continued)

John was really good at persuading people, and he convinced a jury in Boston to declare the soldiers innocent during a time when tensions were high between the colonies and Britain. But even though he defended the soldiers, John still supported the colonists' fight for freedom.

ASK Students

Why did John Adams defend the British soldiers?

TELL Students

In 1774, John got an important opportunity to represent Massachusetts in the First Continental Congress. The **First Continental Congress** was the first government of the United States. This meant he had to leave his family and go to Philadelphia. While he was away, Abigail encouraged him to fulfill duty for their country. She wrote to him, "You cannot be, ... nor do I wish to see you an inactive Spectator." Abigail was telling John, "You can't just sit and watch, and I don't want you to. You have to help!"



Credit: Britannica

ASK Students

What did Abigail inspire John to do in her letter?

John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

Lesson

TELL Students

Please read the following passage to learn more about Abigail Adams. [Teachers: Please print and disseminate the student text print-out included in the lesson guide.]

During that time, women were restricted from directly owning land. So, Abigail devised a clever workaround by acquiring farmland in both Massachusetts and Vermont under John's name. She wanted to purchase land to ensure financial stability and security for their family in case of unforeseen circumstances or hardships. Even though they were physically separated, John took the time to express his gratitude to Abigail from Philadelphia, where he was attending to his duties. Despite the challenges and her longing for John's presence, Abigail remained resolute in her commitment, referring to her actions as her patriotic sacrifice.

ASK Students

What does patriotic sacrifice mean?

TELL Students

After the First Continental Congress didn't bring the changes the colonists hoped for, they gathered again for the Second Continental Congress in May 1775. The **Second Continental Congress** was a gathering of delegates who decided to create an organized army of colonists to fight in the war. Once more, John represented Massachusetts in Philadelphia. In a letter to his wife, he expressed how much he relied on her advice. Abigail kept John updated on public feelings. She told him that the colonies were ready for a more stable government.



Second Continental Congress Adopts Declaration of Independence by John Trumbull (U.S. Capitol)

John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

Lesson

ASK Students

What information did Abigail provide to John in their letters?

TELL Students

That is right! Abigail expressed how the public felt in her letters to John. This was very helpful as he represented the colonists in the Second Continental Congress. John also represented the colonists in a special group called the Committee of Five, which included Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. This group was chosen by Congress to write the

Declaration of Independence.

This document proclaimed that the 13 original colonies were “free and independent states.” The day before Congress officially approved the document on July 4th, John eagerly shared his belief with

Abigail that this day would be celebrated for generations to come. He imagined grand celebrations across the continent, filled with solemn acts of devotion, parades, games, bells, bonfires, and illuminations.



ASK Students

What holiday did John imagine would be celebrated for years to come? Was he correct?



John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade Lesson

TELL Students

John Adams also played vital roles in diplomatic missions to Paris and Amsterdam during the Revolutionary War. Being **diplomatic** means someone is able to control a difficult situation without upsetting anyone. However, this meant he was away from home for long periods. Abigail referred to this time as her "widowhood," signifying the loneliness and sense of loss she experienced while John was abroad. When John finally returned home in 1784 after



his diplomatic missions, their reunion was likely joyous but also marked by the challenges of readjustment. Despite his return, John's duties as Vice President, which began in 1789, kept him busy, limiting the time he could spend with his family. This period would have been difficult for Abigail, as she navigated the responsibilities of maintaining their household and supporting John's endeavors while longing for more time together as a family.

ASK Students

What kept John away from Abigail during this time?

TELL Students

Please read the following passage to learn more about John and Abigail Adams and their service to our country. [Teachers: Please print and disseminate the student text print-out included in the lesson guide.]

In 1797, John Adams became the second President of the United States after George Washington's retirement. Despite Abigail's initial decision to stay in Massachusetts, John soon realized how much he needed her by his side. He earnestly asked her to join him in the nation's capital, where his duties as President awaited. (continued)

Lesson

TELL Students (continued)

Understanding the importance of their partnership, Abigail agreed to accompany John to the bustling hub of the young nation's government. Abigail's decision to join John in the nation's capital was not merely an act of companionship. It was also a testament to her commitment to serving her country. As the First Lady, Abigail took on numerous responsibilities, supporting John in his presidential duties and serving as a trusted advisor. Her insights and wisdom were invaluable to John's decision-making process, and her dedication to the well-being of the nation mirrored his own. Together, John and Abigail Adams formed a formidable team, united in their service to their country and their shared vision for a better future.

ASK Students

How did John serve his country? How did Abigail serve her country? How can you serve your country?

TELL Students

During John's presidency, Abigail Adams took on an important role as the "chief domestic minister without portfolio." This meant that she played a significant part in advising him on various matters related to running the country, even though she did not hold an official government position. Abigail's keen intellect and sound judgment made her a trusted confidante to John, and he often sought her counsel on matters both big and small. Despite their efforts, John ultimately lost his bid for re-election in 1800 to Thomas Jefferson. After leaving the White House, John and Abigail returned to their beloved home in Massachusetts. Interestingly, their hometown was later renamed "Quincy" in honor of Abigail's grandfather, making it a fitting tribute to her family's legacy.



John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

Lesson

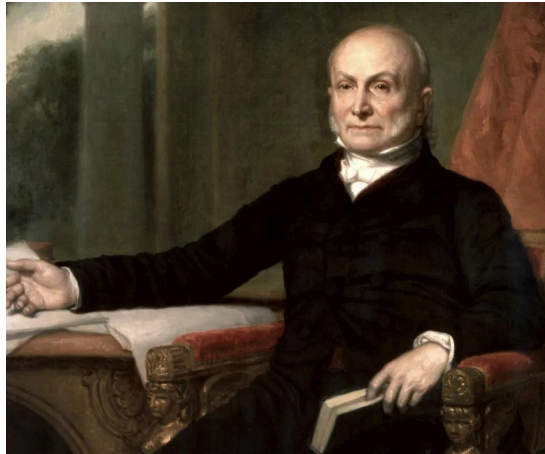
ASK Students

Why do you think John and Abigail returned to Massachusetts?

TELL Students

Please read the following passage to discover more about John and Abigail Adams. [Teachers: Please print and disseminate the student text print-out included in the lesson guide.]

Back in Massachusetts, John and Abigail settled into a quieter life away from the political spotlight. However, their dedication to public service did not wane. They continued to be active in their community, offering their wisdom and support whenever needed. Even in their retirement years, John and Abigail remained committed to making a positive impact on the world around them, leaving behind a lasting legacy of service and leadership. On October 28, 1818, Abigail passed away at their Quincy home, speaking her final words to John. John himself died on July 4, 1826, exactly one year after his son, John Quincy, became president.



Credit: The White House

ASK Students

Do you think John and Abigail Adams inspired John Quincy Adams to work hard and serve his country as President of the United States?

Lesson

TELL Students

From the remarkable journey of John and Abigail Adams, we discover a valuable lesson on staying connected despite being apart due to responsibilities. Their story highlights the importance of letters in maintaining relationships, even when faced with distance and obligations. In a time without modern technology, John and Abigail relied on handwritten letters to share their love, thoughts, and support. While today's world may offer faster ways to communicate, the essence of their letters remains timeless. Whether through handwritten notes or digital messages, reaching out to loved ones shows a commitment to staying close, no matter the miles between. Thus, the tale of John and Abigail Adams teaches us that the power of communication and love can endure, transcending any distance or obstacle.

Student Text

Passage 1

Even with John busy in Boston and the rest of the family living on their rural Massachusetts farm, their love stayed strong. Through heartfelt letters, John and Abigail shared their affection and longing for each other. In a September 1764 letter, John expressed his deep love for Abigail, eagerly awaiting her return. Abigail reciprocated with equal warmth, reassuring John of their well-being and their shared love for their family. These letters, filled with love and devotion, remain a testament to their enduring bond.

Passage 2

During that time, women were restricted from directly owning land. So, Abigail devised a clever workaround by acquiring farmland in both Massachusetts and Vermont under John's name. She wanted to purchase land to ensure financial stability and security for their family in case of unforeseen circumstances or hardships. Even though they were physically separated, John took the time to express his gratitude to Abigail from Philadelphia, where he was attending to his duties. Despite the challenges and her longing for John's presence, Abigail remained resolute in her commitment, referring to her actions as her patriotic sacrifice.

Passage 3

Back in Massachusetts, John and Abigail settled into a quieter life away from the political spotlight. However, their dedication to public service did not wane. They continued to be active in their community, offering their wisdom and support whenever needed. Even in their retirement years, John and Abigail remained committed to making a positive impact on the world around them, leaving behind a lasting legacy of service and leadership. On October 28, 1818, Abigail passed away at their Quincy home, speaking her final words to John. John himself died on July 4, 1826, exactly one year after his son, John Quincy, became president.

John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

Analyzing John and Abigail Adams' Letters

Objective: Students will analyze letters exchanged between John and Abigail Adams to understand how historical documents from the past can provide insights into the present.

Materials Needed:

1. Copies of selected letters between John and Abigail Adams (accessible online or from historical archives)
2. Whiteboard and markers
3. Pen and paper for each student
4. Projector or screen (optional, for displaying letters)

Introduction

1. Begin by reviewing John and Abigail Adams as historical figures who played significant roles in shaping American history.
2. Explain that John and Abigail Adams were a married couple who lived during the American Revolutionary period.
3. Discuss the importance of primary sources in history, such as letters, diaries, and speeches, in understanding the past.
4. State the objective of the lesson: to analyze letters exchanged between John and Abigail Adams to learn about their lives and how historical documents can provide insights into the present.

Activity

1. Divide the class into small groups and distribute copies of selected letters between John and Abigail Adams to each group.
2. Instruct each group to read the letters carefully and discuss the following questions:
 - What do these letters tell us about John and Abigail Adams' relationship?
 - What insights can we gain about their daily lives, emotions, and challenges from these letters?
 - How do you think communication between people has changed since the time of John and Abigail Adams?

John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

Analyzing John and Abigail Adams' Letters (Continued)

Activity

3. Encourage students to take notes and share their observations with the class.
4. After the group discussions, reconvene as a class and invite each group to share their findings.
5. Facilitate a whole-class discussion based on the following prompts:
 - How do the letters between John and Abigail Adams compare to communication methods today, such as text messages or emails?
 - What can we learn from studying historical letters about the importance of communication in relationships?
 - How might the themes and experiences described in John and Abigail Adams' letters be relevant to our lives today?
6. Use the whiteboard or projector to highlight key points and insights shared by students.

Conclusion

1. Summarize the main findings of the lesson, emphasizing the importance of historical letters in understanding the past and drawing connections to the present.
2. Encourage students to reflect on how they can apply the lessons learned from John and Abigail Adams' letters to their own lives.
3. Conclude by reinforcing the idea that studying history helps us gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

Assessment

Observe students' participation in group discussions and their ability to analyze the content of the letters. Evaluate their understanding of the significance of historical letters in providing insights into the past and present through their contributions to the whole-class discussion and any written reflections or extension activities.

Extension Activity (Optional)

Invite students to write their own letters to a family member or friend, reflecting on their experiences, thoughts, and emotions. Encourage students to share their letters with the class and discuss how the act of writing and exchanging letters can foster connections and understanding in relationships.

Name: _____ Date: _____



John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade



Instructions: Read each question carefully and answer based on the information provided in the lesson.

1. What roles did John and Abigail Adams play in serving their country?

2. What did John Adams enjoy doing as a child, and what does his college graduation at the age of 15 tell us about him?

3. How were John and Abigail's families similar and different?

4. How did John Adams exhibit perseverance in his career as a lawyer?

John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

5. Why was John Adams initially hesitant to join the rebellion against Great Britain?

6. How did John and Abigail Adams keep their love strong despite being physically apart?

7. Why did John Adams defend the British soldiers involved in the Boston Massacre?

8. What inspired John Adams to participate actively in the First Continental Congress?

John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

9. What was Abigail Adams' patriotic sacrifice, and why did she purchase land under John's name?

10. What information did Abigail provide to John in their letters during the Second Continental Congress?

11. What holiday did John Adams imagine would be celebrated for years to come?

12. What kept John away from Abigail during his diplomatic missions?

John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade

13. How did Abigail Adams serve her country as the First Lady?

14. Why do you think John and Abigail returned to Massachusetts after John's presidency?

15. Do you think John and Abigail Adams inspired their son, Quincy, to work hard and serve his country as President of the United States?

16. How did John and Abigail Adams use letters to maintain their connection despite their responsibilities and distances?

John and Abigail Adams – Fifth Grade

Answer Key

1. John served as the second President of the United States, while Abigail served as his wife and the First Lady. John also represented Massachusetts in the First Continental Congress.
2. John enjoyed outdoor activities as a child, and his college graduation at the age of 15 demonstrates his exceptional intellect and determination.
3. John and Abigail's families were similar in their religious backgrounds but differed in their educational opportunities.
4. John exhibited perseverance by overcoming the challenge of having no clients in his first year as a lawyer.
5. John was initially hesitant to join the rebellion against Great Britain due to concerns about his legal career.
6. John and Abigail kept their love strong through heartfelt letters.
7. John defended the British soldiers involved in the Boston Massacre to uphold the principle of justice and fairness.
8. Abigail inspired John to participate actively in the First Continental Congress by encouraging him to fulfill his duty to their country.
9. Abigail's patriotic sacrifice involved purchasing land under John's name to ensure financial stability for their family.
10. Abigail provided information about public sentiments to John during the Second Continental Congress.
11. John imagined that Independence Day would be celebrated for years to come.
12. John's diplomatic missions kept him away from Abigail for long periods.
13. Abigail served her country as the "chief domestic minister without portfolio" by advising John on various matters as the First Lady.
14. John and Abigail returned to Massachusetts after John's presidency to retire and continue their community service.
15. Students' opinions may vary regarding whether John and Abigail Adams inspired their son, Quincy, to serve as President of the United States.
16. John and Abigail Adams used letters to maintain their connection by sharing their love, thoughts, and support despite their responsibilities and distances.

John and Abigail Adams - Fifth Grade Resources

1. <https://millercenter.org/president/adams/life-before-the-presidency>
2. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/adams-abigail/>
3. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0038>
4. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0049>
5. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0116>
6. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0110>
7. <https://millercenter.org/president/adams/family-life>
8. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0138>
9. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-01-02-0259>
10. <https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760331aa>
11. <https://ellistheelephant.com/remember-the-ladies/>
12. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-12-02-0042>
13. <https://newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/john-quincy-adams-grieves-mother-abigail-adams/>

