

COURSE TWENTY-SIX

The Lives and Letters of John and Abigail Adams

Have you ever been separated from a friend or family member for an extended period of time? To stay in touch, maybe you called, texted, or FaceTimed that loved one. Before such technology existed, people remained in contact with each other by writing letters sent by mail.

Two people famous for their letters today are the second President of the United States, John Adams, and his wife, First Lady Abigail Adams. Due to John's work, he and Abigail were often separated, but they expressed their affection for one another in the letters they constantly sent back and forth. Many of these eighteenth-century letters have been preserved, allowing people today to understand the Adamses' relationship and the couple's place in history.

On October 30, 1735, John Adams was born in Braintree, Massachusetts, on the family farm. His father, John Sr., worked as a farmer and shoemaker, in addition to serving as a deacon in the local Congregational church. John's mother, Susanna, was a homemaker who hailed from a well-to-do family. As a child, John loved the outdoors, often skipping class to fish and hunt. An exceptional student, John enrolled at Harvard College at the age of fifteen.¹

In nearby Weymouth, Massachusetts, Abigail Smith was born on November 22, 1744. In some respects, the Smith family was quite similar to the Adams family. Abigail's father, William, a devout Congregationalist himself, was a church minister. Abigail's mother, Elizabeth, came from the Quincy clan, a famous political family in Massachusetts. Unlike John, however, Abigail did not have the opportunity to pursue a formal education, despite being described as "intelligent, well read, and outspoken."² This is because girls, at this time, were viewed as intellectually inferior to boys. As a result, educational opportunities existed almost exclusively for boys.

After completing his studies at Harvard, John started work as a lawyer. In 1758, John moved to Boston and opened up a one-man law office. Despite his Ivy League training and a reputation for intelligence, John only managed to find one client his first year.³ Slowly but surely, John built his small office into a successful practice. Now with a steady income, John began to search for a wife with whom he could start a family. The budding lawyer started seeing Abigail Smith of Weymouth.

By 1764, John and Abigail were married. Over the course of the next eight years, the couple had five children [Editor's note: one died in infancy]. Meanwhile, the American colonists were in the initial stages of rebellion against Great Britain. Recall from our earlier lessons that after Britain passed the Stamp Act in 1765, colonists across the American continent protested this new tax on goods.

In Boston, John at first hesitated to join the rebellious movement, as he did not want his legal practice to suffer. Soon, though, John became convinced that his peers needed his help, and the talented writer started authoring anonymous newspaper essays in protest of mistreatment by the British.

With John lawyering in Boston most of the time and the rest of the family living on the farm in rural Massachusetts, Abigail and John began penning the affectionate correspondence for which they remain well-known today.

A September 1764 letter demonstrates John's early affection for Abigail, with the future president exclaiming, "Oh my dear Girl, I thank Heaven that another Fortnight will restore you to me."⁴ Abigail returned the favor without fail, writing equally loving letters to John: "I know from the tender affection you bear me, and our little one's that you will rejoice to hear that we are well."⁵

At the close of the 1760s, John had established himself as one of the most successful lawyers in Boston. Committed to justice, John put his revolutionary political beliefs to the side and defended the British troops that faced charges for their conduct in the 1770 Boston Massacre. Demonstrating his courtroom ability, John managed to persuade a Boston jury to acquit the redcoat soldiers at the height of colonial unrest. Despite his legal defense in this case, John remained a staunch supporter of the rebellious colonists.

In 1774, John faced a new opportunity that would take him even farther away from his family. He had been selected to represent Massachusetts in the First Continental Congress, a body tasked with representing the collective American conscience. John was initially unsure but set out for Philadelphia, rendering Abigail the new head of the household. From Braintree, Abigail encouraged him to serve his country, writing, "You cannot be, ... nor do I wish to see you an inactive Spectator."⁶

At this time, it was illegal for women to purchase land in their own name. To get around this, Abigail deftly purchased Massachusetts and Vermont farmland in John's name. From Philadelphia, John continued to write Abigail: "I thank you for all your kind favours. I wish I could write to you, much oftener than I do. I wish I could write to you, a Dozen Letters every day. But the Business before me, is so arduous and takes up my Time so entirely."⁷ Abigail missed John but carried on, fulfilling what she termed her "patriotic sacrifice."⁸

After the First Continental Congress did not bring about the changes the colonists desired, the colonies convened the Second Continental Congress in May 1775. Again, John represented Massachusetts at the Philadelphia meeting. John's reliance on Abigail for counsel is evident in the following excerpt from a 1775 letter sent to his wife: "We are distressed here for Want of Intelligence and Information from you and from Boston. ... We have no regular Advices."⁹ From Braintree, Abigail continued to advise John as to public sentiment. Representative of the Declaration of Independence that would come two months later, Abigail shared with John that "[a] Government of more Stability is much wanted in this colony, and they are ready to receive it from the Hands of the Congress."¹⁰ She also famously urged him to "Remember the Ladies" as the Congress made decisions and drafted new laws.^{11 12}

In June 1776, the Congress appointed the Committee of Five—Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams—to draft what would become the Declaration of Independence. The day before the Congress ratified the document on July 4, John excitedly informed Abigail of his view of the magnitude of the Declaration of Independence: “I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations. ... [This day] ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more.”¹³

With the passage of the Declaration of Independence, the American colonies began operating as a country independent of Great Britain. During the Revolutionary War, John earned important diplomatic roles in Paris and Amsterdam. He left North America in 1778 and did not see Abigail until 1784. Abigail referred to this difficult period as her “widowhood.”¹⁴

When John returned home from his diplomatic missions in 1788, he was not afforded very much of the family time that he craved. In 1789, John was elected vice president of the United States, serving as the inaugural officeholder. In 1791, Abigail, experiencing poor health, began spending much of her time back in Braintree. Once again, the Adamses were separated, and, once more, they regularly kept in contact via mail.

In 1797, John succeeded the retiring Washington as the second president of the United States. Though she was the first lady, Abigail opted to remain in Massachusetts. In time, however, John realized just how much he needed his wife by his side. In April 1797, John pleaded with Abigail, writing, “assist me with your Councils, and console me with your Conversation. Every thing relating to the Farms must be left to our friends.”¹⁵ Abigail acquiesced, joining John in the nation’s capital soon after.

During John’s one term as president, Abigail continued to advise her husband on a host of issues, earning the colloquial title of “chief domestic minister without portfolio.” In 1800, John lost reelection to Thomas Jefferson, his own vice president. Abigail and John had just moved into the White House as part of the capital’s shift from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C. After leaving the White House, John and Abigail moved back home to Braintree, part of which had broken off and been named “Quincy” in 1792 after Abigail’s grandfather. On October 28, 1818, Abigail passed away at the family’s Quincy home, addressing her final words to John: “Do not grieve, my friend, my dearest friend. I am ready to go. And John, it will not be long.”¹⁶

John died in Quincy on July 4, 1826, one year after seeing his son, John Quincy, become president.

As we learn from John and Abigail, sometimes our responsibilities take us far away from those we love. However, there are many ways to let these family members and friends know that you care about them. The next time you have some free time, think about someone that you care about who you haven’t seen in a long time. Write them a letter or give them a call, and let them know that just because you are apart, it does not mean that your hearts are very far.

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 2. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/adams-abigail/>
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