

DISCOVER AMERICA

Course 26 - Teacher Guide



Distance and Devotion: The Letters of John and Abigail Adams

Table of
Contents

Themes & Values

Learning Objectives

Key Terms

Introduction

Lesson

Pen Pals with John and Abigail Adams

Multiple Choice Activity

Answer Key

Resources

Notes

Third 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 and the roles they played in shaping American history.
- 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.



Credit: New England Historical Society

John and Abigail Adams - Third 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 **public:** having to do with all members of a community.
- 07 **rebellion:** an armed fight against one's government.
- 08 **Second Continental Congress:** a gathering of delegates who decided to create an organized army of colonists to fight in the war.
- 09 **Stamp Act:** Britain's first direct tax on the colonies which taxed newspapers, almanacs, pamphlets, legal documents, and playing cards.

John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade

Introduction

TELL Students

I have something very special to share with you today. Have you ever received a letter from a friend or family member? Well, imagine if I told you about a time when people didn't have phones or computers to talk to each other. Instead, they wrote letters.

ASK Students

Have you ever received a letter from someone?

TELL Students

Today, we are going to learn about two important people named John and Abigail Adams who wrote a lot of letters to each other. They 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 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.



Credit: Smithsonian Magazine

John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade

Introduction

ASK Students

What do you know about John and Abigail Adams?

TELL Students

Today, each of you are going to imagine you are John or Abigail. You will write a letter to a friend, just like they did. You can tell your friend or family member about your day, share a story, or just let them know how much you appreciate them. Are you ready to start learning about writing letters? Let's see what wonderful letters you can create!

ASK Students

Who will you write your letter to? Is it faster to call, text a friend, or write a letter?

TELL Students

That is right! Texting is much faster! But, John and Abigail Adams did not have that option. 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 they lived a long time ago, they are still famous today for something very special—writing letters! John had a very important job, so he had to travel a lot. But that didn't stop him and Abigail from staying close. They wrote letters to each other all the time, sharing stories, secrets, and a lot of love. And guess what? Many of these old letters are still around today, like treasures from the past!



John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade

Introduction

ASK Students

What do John and Abigail Adams' letters tell us about their life?

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. Let's watch another episode of Star Spangled Adventures to learn more about John and Abigail Adams.



WATCH

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



John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade Lesson

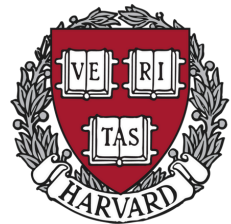
TELL Students

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?



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.

John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade Lesson

ASK Students

How are John and Abigail's families similar and different?

TELL Students

After finishing his studies at Harvard, John started working as a lawyer. In 1758, he moved to Boston and opened a one-man law office. Despite his Ivy League education and reputation for intelligence, John only managed to find one client in his first year. However, he gradually built his small office into a successful practice. With a steady income, John began to search for a wife to start a family with and began seeing Abigail Smith from Weymouth.



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 - Third Grade Lesson

ASK Students

Why was John Adams initially hesitant to join the rebellion?

TELL Students

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, they 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. 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.



National Museum of American History

John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade Lesson

ASK Students

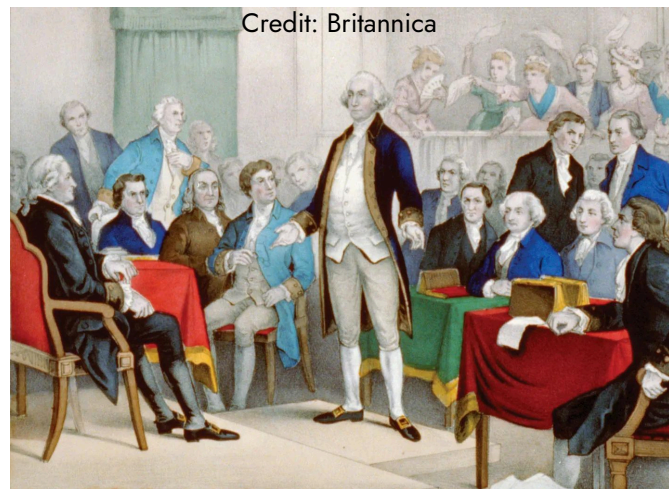
Why did John Adams defend the British soldiers?

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, his wife, encouraged him to do his 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!"



ASK Students

What did Abigail inspire John to do in her letter?

TELL Students

During this time, women were not allowed to buy land in their own names. So, Abigail found a clever way around this by purchasing farmland in Massachusetts and Vermont under John's name. Even though they were separated, John wrote to Abigail from Philadelphia, thanking her for her kindness and expressing his wish to write to her more often, but his busy work made it hard. Despite missing John greatly, Abigail continued to fulfill what she called her "patriotic sacrifice."

John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade Lesson

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, Abigail, he expressed how much he relied on her advice. Abigail kept John updated on public feelings. **Public** means having to do with all members of a community. Abigail told him that the colonies were ready for a more stable government from Congress.



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

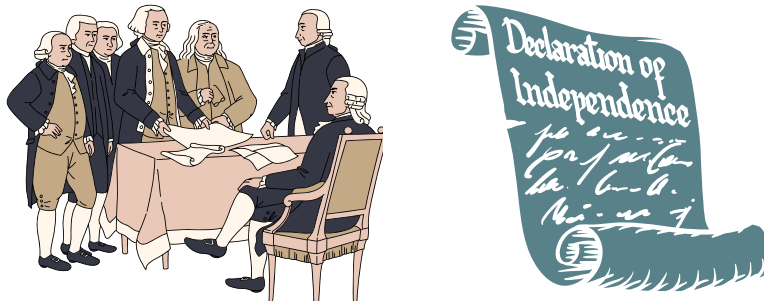
ASK Students

What information did Abigail provide to John in their letters?

John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade Lesson

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 - Third Grade Lesson

TELL Students

With the Declaration of Independence, the colonies became independent from Great Britain. During the Revolutionary War, John took on important diplomatic roles in Paris and Amsterdam. Someone who is **diplomatic** is able to control a difficult situation without upsetting anyone. He did not see Abigail again until 1784, which she referred to as her "widowhood." Upon returning home in 1788 from his diplomatic missions, John didn't get much family time. In 1789, he became the first Vice President of the United States.



ASK Students

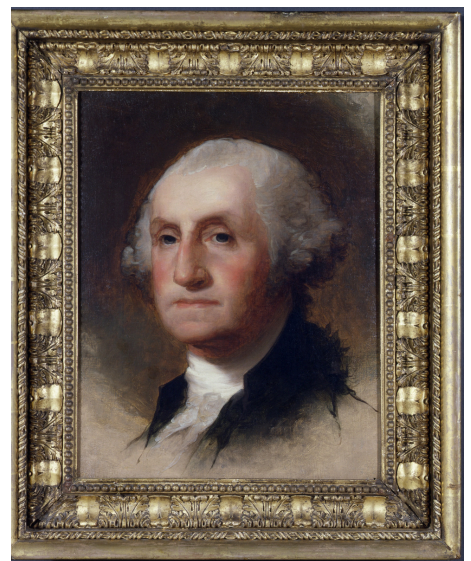
What kept John away from Abigail during this time?

TELL Students

In 1797, John became the second President of the United States after George Washington's retirement. Although Abigail chose to stay in Massachusetts, John realized he needed her by his side. He pleaded with her to join him in the nation's capital, and she agreed.

ASK Students

Why did John need Abigail?



John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade Lesson

TELL Students

During John's presidency, Abigail became known as the "chief domestic minister without portfolio," advising him on many issues. However, John lost his bid for re-election in 1800 to Thomas Jefferson. After leaving the White House, they returned to their home in Massachusetts, which was later named "Quincy" after Abigail's grandfather.

ASK Students

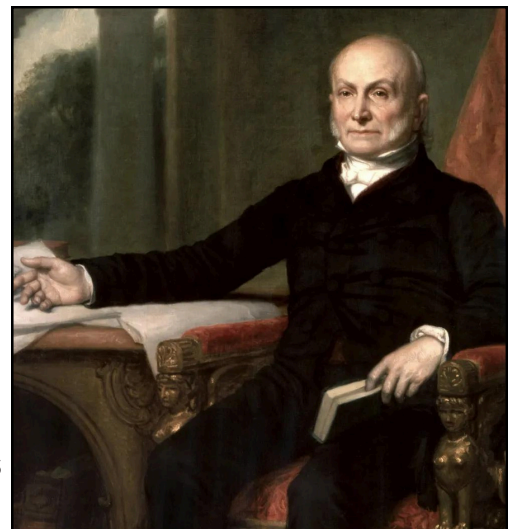
Why do you think John and Abigail returned to Massachusetts?

TELL Students

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.

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?



Credit: The White House

TELL Students

From John and Abigail's story, we learn that even when separated because of responsibilities, there are many ways to show our loved ones we care. Whether through letters or calls, we can bridge the distance and keep our hearts close.

John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade Lesson

WATCH

Learn More With Liberty: Defending Liberty: Courage of John Adams



John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade

Pen Pals with John and Abigail Adams

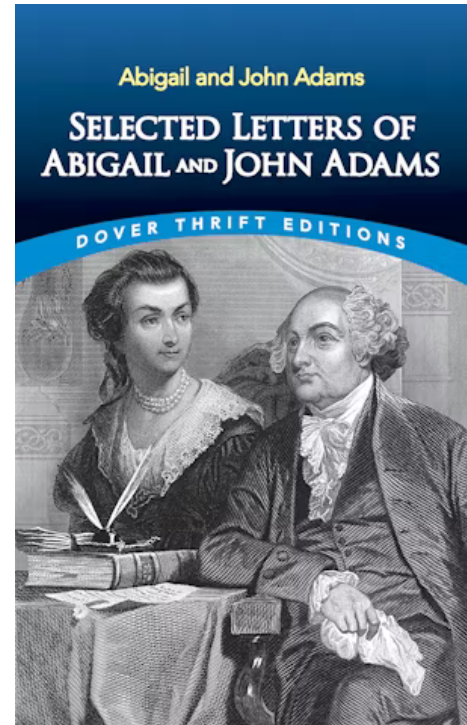
Objective: To learn about the letters exchanged between John and Abigail Adams and understand the importance of communication in history.

Materials Needed:

- Paper
- Pencils or crayons
- Printed copies of excerpts from John and Abigail Adams' letters
- Envelopes (optional)

Introduction

Start by introducing John and Abigail Adams as important figures in American history who exchanged letters with each other. Explain that they were a married couple who lived during a time when written letters were the main form of communication.



Reading Activity

Provide each student with a printed excerpt from one of John or Abigail Adams' letters. Encourage the students to read the excerpt carefully and discuss with their classmates what they think the letter is about.

[You can view excerpts in *Selected Letters of Abigail and John Adams*. Preview available here: <https://books.google.com/books?id=ZAQbEAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>]

Discussion

Facilitate a class discussion about the letters. Ask questions such as:

- What do you think John and Abigail were writing about?
- Why do you think they wrote letters to each other?
- How do you think they felt when they were apart?

John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade

Pen Pals with John and Abigail Adams (Continued)

Writing Activity

Have the students imagine they are either John or Abigail Adams. Using the included worksheet, ask them to write a short letter to their "partner" (another student in the class) expressing their feelings about being apart and sharing some news from their day.



Sharing

Allow the students to share their letters with the class. Encourage them to use their imagination to write as if they were living during the time of John and Abigail Adams.

Extension Activity (Optional)

If time allows, have the students decorate envelopes and exchange their letters with their "pen pals" in the class. This will give them the experience of sending and receiving letters, similar to how John and Abigail communicated.

Conclusion

Summarize the activity by discussing the importance of communication and how letters were a crucial way for John and Abigail Adams to stay connected despite being apart. Emphasize how their letters provide valuable insight into their lives and the historical context of their time.

This activity not only helps third graders learn about history but also encourages empathy and creativity as they imagine themselves in the shoes of John and Abigail Adams.



Pen Pals with John and Abigail Adams Letter Worksheet

Dear

Regards,



John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade

Multiple Choice Activity

Instructions: Take your time to carefully read each question and its corresponding answer choices, then select the correct response.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What did John Adams enjoy as a child?

- A) Reading books indoors
- B) Playing video games
- C) Fishing and hunting outdoors
- D) Doing homework

2. How are John and Abigail's families similar and different?

- A) Both families were farmers.
- B) Both families had fathers who were church ministers.
- C) John's family had more educational opportunities.
- D) Abigail's family had more children.

3. How did John Adams exhibit perseverance?

- A) By giving up on his studies
- B) By starting a successful business immediately
- C) By enrolling in Harvard College at a young age
- D) By gradually building his law practice despite initial setbacks

4. Why was John Adams initially hesitant to join the rebellion?

- A) He was afraid of British soldiers.
- B) He worried about his legal career.
- C) He disagreed with the colonists' cause.
- D) He wanted to join but couldn't find the right time.

5. How did John and Abigail Adams keep their love strong?

- A) By sending each other gifts
- B) By writing heartfelt letters
- C) By going on romantic vacations
- D) By spending all their time together

6. Why did John Adams defend the British soldiers?

- A) He believed they were innocent.
- B) He wanted to join the British army.
- C) He didn't like the colonists.
- D) He was paid to defend them.

7. What did Abigail inspire John to do in her letter?

- A) Be an inactive spectator
- B) Join the British army
- C) Fight for their country
- D) Stop writing letters

John and Abigail Adams - Third Grade

Multiple Choice Activity

8. What does patriotic sacrifice mean?

- A) Giving up one's country
- B) Serving one's country
- C) Ignoring one's country
- D) Forgetting one's country

9. What information did Abigail provide to John in their letters?

- A) Public feelings
- B) Recipes for food
- C) Weather forecasts
- D) Fashion advice

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

- A) Christmas, yes
- B) Thanksgiving, yes
- C) Independence Day, yes
- D) Halloween, no

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

- A) His love for his work
- B) His fear of traveling
- C) His dislike of Abigail
- D) His need to serve his country

12. Why did John need Abigail?

- A) To cook for him
- B) To advise him
- C) To do his work
- D) To entertain him

13. Why do you think John and Abigail returned to Massachusetts?

- A) They missed their home
- B) They wanted warmer weather
- C) They didn't like Washington, D.C.
- D) They had no choice

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

- A) Yes
- B) No
- C) Maybe
- D) I don't know

Multiple Choice Activity Answer Key

1. C) Fishing and hunting outdoors
2. C) John's family had more educational opportunities.
3. D) By gradually building his law practice despite initial setbacks
4. B) He worried about his legal career.
5. B) By writing heartfelt letters
6. A) He believed they were innocent.
7. C) Fight for their country
8. B) Serving one's country
9. A) Public feelings
10. C) Independence Day, yes
11. D) His need to serve his country
12. B) To advise him
13. A) They missed their home
14. A) Yes

John and Abigail Adams - Third 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/>

