

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: **ABIGAIL ADAMS**  
**Erin Marie Lloyd, MA, 2004**

Thesis Directed By: **Dr. Whitman Ridgway, Department of History**

Abigail Adams was the key to the success of her husband's life and career. By studying the roles she played in her adult life, as a mother, a farm manager, a political advisor, a first lady, and a politician, one will see that Abigail Adams was more than a wife and mother. She was a multifaceted woman, who was the integral part of major success in President John Adams career.

ABIGAIL ADAMS

By

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## Preface

My interest in Abigail Adams began as a junior at Mercyhurst College in a course on the American Revolution. My professor, Dr. Belovarac, showed the class the musical, 1776. While it was a typical musical, the subjects and events were far from typical; the characters existed and the main events actually occurred. I began reading biographies about John Adams and the Revolutionary generation. The more I read about John, the more I wondered about Abigail. Who was she, what did she do during the Revolution, and why is the correspondence between Abigail and John so legendary.

After reading David McCullough's John Adams, I felt I had a complete, although positive, picture of John Adams life, but I was missing Abigail's part of the story. Over these past two years, I hoped to try to discover Abigail and paint a more complete picture of her than I thought existed. Through an intensive study of the published letters Abigail wrote to her sister Mary Cranch by Stewart Mitchell and the electronic version of the correspondence between Abigail and John from the Adams Papers, I have gained a unique insight into the life of Abigail. She was a woman of her generation placed in extraordinary circumstances. In each instance, she rose to the occasion and supported her husband during his public service. Through examining the roles Abigail played in her adult life as a mother, a farm manager, a First Lady, a politician, and a confidant, I hope to develop the story of a traditional New England woman, who lived a non-traditional life.

## Dedication

This thesis and this degree are dedicated to my family and friends. For every course and every grade, they have been there to support me. In a sense, they are all graduating with me. This is for my Mom who has inspired me, for my Brother who never let me quit, my future Husband who has been there for the tears and the laughter (yes, I know there are no equations or charts in this paper), for all my Teachers who challenged me every step of the way, for my Friends who have helped me remember to laugh at my exploits, and for my Dogs who were always there for a nice distraction. It has been a long, crazy trip and after five minutes of rest, it will be time to set out on the next adventure. For all those that said that it would be impossible for me to work full time and complete two degrees, Abigail Adams is the testament that it can be done and I did it.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Whitman Ridgway, for his support and encouragement in discovering the real Abigail Adams. I would also like to show my appreciation to the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Ridgway, Dr. Olson, and Dr. Henretta, for their time, their dedication, and their expertise.

I want to thank my family (Mom, Gram, Trevor, Glennen, Dave, and Lou), my friends (there are just too many of you to list), God (thank you for looking out for me), and my father (I hope you are smiling down on me).

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# Chapter 1: Abigail Adams

## Introduction

American Forefather, John Adams, dedicated himself to public service and the formation of the new government as a patriot leader, a member of the Continental Congress, a Diplomat, Vice-President, and President. Historians have written about the accolades of this patriot, but often lose sight of the importance of his wife, Abigail, and her contribution to John's success. Their story was one of personal sacrifices for the good of a struggling nation in its formative years. Abigail was more than the matriarch of the Adams family; she was John's political ally, the manager of the family farm, the family caretaker, the wife of the Vice-President, and the second First Lady. For every success and failure of John Adams, Abigail was there to promote and console him. During the defining years of Adams' career in the Executive Branch, (1788 to 1801), Abigail proved to be the most instrumental in the roles her husband played for the fledgling United States. Without her assistance, John would not have succeeded in the offices he was elected to serve. As an elected official, he needed someone to be his diplomatic hostess, his political advisor, and his most trusted confidant. Abigail excelled in each of these positions and their son, John Quincy Adams, acknowledged the dedication and loyalty his mother provided his father throughout their marriage. As one of the few individuals who truly understood their relationship, John Quincy poured his thoughts about Abigail into his diary,

She had been fifty-four years the delight of my father's heart, the sweetener of all his toils, the comforter of all his joys. It was but the last time when I saw my father that he told me, with an ejaculation of gratitude to the Giver of every good and every perfect gift, that in all the vicissitudes of his fortunes, through all the good report and evil report in the world, in all his struggles and in all his sorrows,

the affectionate participation and cheering encouragement of his wife had been his never-failing support, without which he was sure he should never have lived through them.<sup>1</sup>

John Quincy's feelings clearly expressed his intimate knowledge and appreciation of his parent's relationship. For the greater part of fifty years, he recognized that Abigail was the source of John Adams's strength. She was the woman he and his father trusted to be the cornerstone of the family. She was a source of solace, advice, and inspiration. Upon her death, on October 28, 1818, the Christian Disciple reported, "Her acquisitions and her virtues, the devotion of her time and faculties to the great purpose of her being . . . she possessed a mind elevated in its views, and capable of attainments above the common order of intellect."<sup>2</sup> By studying the roles she played in her adult life, as a mother, a farm manager, a political advisor, a first lady, and a politician, one will see that Abigail Adams was more than just the wife of the second President and the mother of the sixth President. She was an intelligent, savvy, strong-willed, and formidable individual, who was instrumental in her husband's career.

### *Historiography of Abigail*

The Adams family has recently become popular characters among American biographers. Curiosity about this formidable woman has led historians to try to define her and neatly place her in categories. In the historiography of Abigail, one will find her characterized as a feminist based on the letter she wrote to John in 1776, to remind the politicians in Philadelphia to remember the ladies when the new

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<sup>1</sup> The Diary of John Quincy Adams, 1794-1845, ed, Allan Nevins (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1951), 202-203.

<sup>2</sup> "Madame Abigail Adams," Christian Disciple (1813-1818), Boston December 1818, Vol 6, Issue 12, 365.

government is formed. Some authors characterize her as a prudish Puritan from New England; while conversely others portray her as a contemporary woman influenced by European culture. What the historiography of Abigail Adams omits is that she was a combination of all of these characteristics. She was headstrong, modern, and traditional. Taken individually, these personality traits paint a distorted picture of Abigail, but merged together, they create a more complete, truer image of Mrs. Adams.

Historians, such as Edith Gelles, attempt to abstract Abigail from her husband's life and to tell her story without relying on John's career. While the concept of looking at this woman disconnected from her husband is an intriguing notion, it does not apply to Abigail. Without John, she may not have had the chance to experience the joys, sorrows, and excitement of the life she led. However with John as her husband, she had the opportunity to run the family farm, meet with dignitaries, travel to Europe, and take part in the formation of the new country. One could only speculate as to what Abigail's life would have been like had she not married Adams. The daughter of a well-respected Puritan minister and well-known family, Abigail may have married a prominent townsman and led a simple yet distinguished life in Quincy. Abigail needed John as her catalyst to become the strong woman historians have chosen as their subject.

A number of historians have taken Abigail's comment about the place of women in the new government, in March of 1776, to be her cry for women's rights.

They have time and warning given them to see the Evil and shun it. -- I long to hear that you have declared an independency -- and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would

Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands.<sup>3</sup>

While Mrs. Adams made an assertive statement, she does not make any additional requests of this nature during John's illustrious career. Lynn Withey's Dearest Friend refers to Abigail as a feminist by referring to the famous "Remember the Ladies" quotation. Withey placed Abigail at the cusp of a new type of politically involved woman. However, she acknowledges that this is not a cry for women's suffrage, but the start of a movement.<sup>4</sup> This movement was not for voting rights, but for women to become more involved in politics.

Rosemary Keller writes about the life of Abigail from her marriage to John to her trip to Europe to be with him in 1784. Her Abigail is brazen, headstrong, and ultimately a feminist. Keller's editor summarizes that, "Abigail Adams emerges from this study as a woman going as far as it was possible to go within the limits of the gender conventions of her time and struggling valiantly, through influencing her husband, to extend these gender conventions."<sup>5</sup> The author portrays her as a strong, young mother left to care for the children and farm by herself. In reading Keller, the reader gets the impression that John Adams is akin to a modern "absentee father." While Abigail was a capable woman, she would be the last person to express that John was too absent in their lives. In addition, Abigail was not pushing the boundaries of what a woman could or could not do; she was simply adapting to the circumstances of her life. The remarkable correspondence that existed between the

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<sup>3</sup> Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31, March 1776, 1789 [electronic edition]. Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive. Boston, Mass: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Lynne Withey, Dearest Friend, (New York: Touchtone, 2001), 81-82.

<sup>5</sup> Patriotism and the Female Sex, editor's introduction, xii.

Adams tells a different story of their lives and marriage than is portrayed by many authors.

To further counter the feminist opinion of Abigail, there is no evidence that Abigail felt her own daughter, Nabby, was an oppressed woman. Even though Nabby was in an unhappy marriage to a man who could not provide for her, Abigail never suggested any radical thoughts about Nabby leaving her husband or finding work to support her family. She provided her daughter the example of a dutiful wife, who remained faithful to her marriage. There was nothing unusual or old fashioned about a wife remaining dedicated to her husband and family in the late 1700s.

Historians need to be careful not to define Abigail's personality with modern 21<sup>st</sup> century terms. She was a woman of the 18<sup>th</sup> century catapulted into a life she never intended. Without John and his involvement in the war, Abigail may not have asserted herself as a farm manager. She may have never realized what it would have been like to function as a woman in a male atmosphere. She would never have experienced the frustrations of trying to do the work of a man, such as buying land, selling goods, and handling tenants. Furthermore, Abigail may never have had the opportunity to become politically knowledgeable. Susan Branson's These Fiery Frenchified Dames depicted the lives of prominent Philadelphia women during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Like the women of France, these women created a parlor culture where they could freely discuss politics and attend theatrical productions. While Philadelphia was serving as the Nation's capital, Abigail found herself within this culture. Women, who were politically educated, surrounded her in the society. These refined women of the Revolutionary War generation were the rule, not the exception.

Thus, Abigail was a woman of her generation and not an iconic female. As much as Abigail was a participant in the parlor life as a political hostess, she was more conservative than these women, who were maturing in the post-Revolutionary War era. In a letter to her sister, Mary Cranch, Abigail favorably comments on an article about the inappropriate dress of the young women of Philadelphia, “the semblance of modesty is wanting, there is strong ground to presume the absence of virtue itself . . . Is there virtue in the women who artfully seeks to display natur’s Charms.”<sup>6</sup> Abigail clearly thought the French like fashions of many of these young women were pushing the boundaries of indecency. Abigail used Martha Washington as an example of how to be a dignified first lady. She then incorporated that experience into her own zest for politics and created her own parlor life. Abigail was a cross between the personality and style of her predecessor Martha Washington and the first ladies like Dolly Madison, who were to follow. She was a woman of her generation playing roles and being placed in extraordinary circumstances.

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, March 15, 1800, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, Edited by Stewart Mitchell. (Westport, CT: Goodward Press, 1973), 241. . The Mitchell book is a compilation of letters discovered by a relative of Mary Cranch. They serve as a diary of the events of Abigail Adams in the Executive Office. There are gaps in the letters, which are an indicator of Abigail’s illnesses and time spent at home in Quincy: April 1792 to June 1795; June 1795 to April 1797; July 1798 to January 1799.

## Chapter 2: The Woman

### Abigail Defined

Nothing in Abigail's upbringing could have prepared her for the role she was to play in history, yet she rose to the occasion to be more than a wife and a mother. By the time John Adams became Vice-President, Abigail had long become accustomed to the roles as wife, mother, farm manager, and politician.

Born Abigail Smith on November 11, 1744, in Weymouth, Massachusetts, Abigail Adams was one of four children born to the Reverend William and Elizabeth (Quincy) Smith.<sup>7</sup> Abigail did not receive a formal education in her youth, yet as an adult she was recognized as a woman of high intellect. Though self-study and the instruction of family members, she had become well versed in classic literature as well as current political events.<sup>8</sup> Her future brother-in-law, Richard Cranch, who was a well read, Harvard graduate, farmer, and local judge.<sup>9</sup> Cranch introduced young Abigail to subjects such as English poetry, literature, and letter writing, which would stay with her throughout her life.<sup>10</sup> Her love of poetry led to her memorization of their works and the enjoyment of the theater. Abigail was an avid writer and it is through her writings that the world has gained insight into her life. Her enjoyment in writing, not withstanding idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation, led to a lifetime of insightful correspondence with family, friends, and politicians. Fearful of scrutiny,

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<sup>7</sup> Laura E. Richards, *Abigail Adams and Her Times*, (Ann Arbor: Plutarch Press, 1971), 282.

<sup>8</sup> John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1996), 31.

<sup>9</sup> Phyllis Levin, *Abigail Adams*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Akers, *Abigail Adams: An American Woman*, (New York: Longman, 2000), 9-10.

she requested her family to, “Pray burn all my Letters.”<sup>11</sup> Fortunately, her wishes were ignored and most of her letters survived to tell the tale of an unassuming woman from a town north of Boston.

On October 26, 1765, Abigail Smith married John Adams of Braintree, Massachusetts. John had first met Abigail, while he was courting her cousin, Hannah; Abigail was 14-years old at the time. From all accounts, John was not initially taken with Miss Smith.<sup>12</sup> However, three years after their initial meeting, John’s friend, Richard Cranch, reintroduced them at her sister’s wedding. John began courting Abigail shortly after the occasion. At the time of their marriage, John was a young lawyer trying to make a name for himself in Boston and not exactly what his future father-in-law had hoped for in a son-in-law. Eventually, the couple married two years later and moved to a modest farmhouse that John inherited from his father. The house was located next to his childhood home, which John’s mother, Susanna, still occupied. Over the next seven years, the Adams’s had five children: Abigail Jr. (Nabby), John Quincy, Susanna (died in infancy), Charles, and Thomas.

The couple was in the early years of their marriage when John first became involved in the patriot movement which was advocating independence from Great Britain. John was called to Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and other small colonial cities on various official duties throughout the American Revolution. For most of their married life, John heeded the call to help the formation of the new government, while Abigail remained at their Quincy farm. She tended the farm along with the children, while he tended to his duties in public service. As an assertive and capable

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<sup>11</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 5 May 1789, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>12</sup> David McCullough, [John Adams](#), (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2001), 52.

manager, Mrs. Adams made the farm prosper and raised their children.<sup>13</sup> After the initial years of separation, Abigail rarely needed to seek advice from her husband in the running of the household. She had become a savvy farmer and managed to acquire additional land in her husband's name. Despite the miles that separated them, the couple maintained a furious correspondence with each other that kept the couple united in word, if not location.

As the fires of the revolutionary war slowly burnt out, John was dispatched to Europe, to help negotiate a peace with England, and to create alliances with other nations. When John was commissioned to serve for the government, his assignments were never clear as to how long he would be required to serve in that post. In 1783, John was assigned to stay an additional year in Europe. He pleaded to Abigail to brave the voyage and travel with the children to join him.<sup>14</sup> "I have only to repeat my earnest Request that you and our Daughter would come to me as soon as possible. The Business that is marked out for Us, will detain me in Europe as least another Year."<sup>15</sup> Despite Abigail's insecurities about fitting in with the European royal courts, she voyaged to John.<sup>16</sup> Once she arrived in Europe, John discovered that Abigail was as invaluable in diplomatic situations abroad as she was managing the farm in Quincy. As John's career in public service increased, his need to have Abigail at his side also increased. After returning to the United States, John was elected to two

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<sup>13</sup> Ferling, 231-233.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 232. John Quincy and Charles joined their father in his dispatch to the Netherlands in 1780.

<sup>15</sup> John Adams and Abigail Adams. *The Book of Abigail and John, 1762-1784*. Edited by J.H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender, and Mary-Jo Kline. (Boston: Northeastern University, 2002), October, 14, 1783, 364.

<sup>16</sup> When John requested that Abigail and his daughter, Nabby, join him in Europe, she feared that she was not ready for society and the Courts of Europe. "But as a mere American as I am, unacquainted with the Etiquette of the courts . . . I am sure I should make an awkward figure, and then it will mortify my pride if I should thought to disgrace you." *The Book of John and Abigail*, December 15, 1783, 372.

terms as Vice-President and one term as President. In all cases, Abigail played the roles of wife, hostess, and confidant.

### **The Matriarch**

Separated from her husband during wartime, Abigail's role as a mother was not an easy one to play. She raised the children with little parental assistance from John, who was consumed by the development of the new nation. Mrs. Adams gave birth to five children, but Susanna died in infancy—a common occurrence during the Colonial period. Fortunately for the Adams family, four of their five children survived to reach adulthood. Yet it was their adult lives that caused their mother the most grief as both Nabby (Abigail Jr.) and Charles' deaths preceded their parents. Thomas also died as a young adult due to alcoholism. Only one child, John Quincy, accomplished the greatness that was expected of all of the Adams children. In understanding Abigail Adams and her life, it is imperative to gain knowledge of her children, the lives they led, and how that affected Abigail.

The oldest of the Adams children, Nabby was born in 1765. A less assertive woman than her mother, she married Colonel William Smith in 1786. Smith achieved the rank of Colonel in the War for Independence and exhibited great promise to provide a suitable life for Nabby. Despite all the appearances of greatness and opportunities for prosperity, Col. Smith was a disappointment as a businessman, a husband, and a father. He squandered large amounts of money, consorted with unsavory characters, had difficulty retaining a job, and abandoned his family for long periods of time. Abigail wrote to her sister, "I have a source of anxiety added to my portion on my dear daughters account, Col. Smith having saild last week for England.

His going was sudden and unexpected to us . . . I do not know what has really been the cause why he has been so poorly provided for in the distribution of offices.”<sup>17</sup>

Abigail did her best to help her disappointing son-in-law and her daughter. She would have Nabby and the children stay with her for long periods of time and would seek employment for him. At his wife’s prodding and in the best interest of his daughter, John Adams provided numerous employment opportunities for Smith during his Vice Presidency and Presidency. Smith’s unstable financial character and egotism prevented him from succeeding in the positions. After one particular appointment, John Adams made it clear that Smith and his behavior humiliated him and that he would not subject himself to that again.<sup>18</sup> Smith never managed to achieve the promise he showed as a young man. After a disappointing marriage, Nabby died of breast cancer at the family home in Quincy in 1818; she was 47 years old.

Born in 1767, John Quincy Adams was the first-born son and the most successful of the Adams’s children. He followed in his father’s footsteps as a lawyer and a public servant for life. He served as a Diplomatic Minister, as Secretary of State, as a Member of the United States House of Representatives for two nonconsecutive terms, as a Senator and as President.<sup>19</sup> After serving as the Sixth President, John Quincy returned to the House of Representatives to serve from 1831 until his death at the age of 81. After collapsing on the floor of the House Chamber,

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<sup>17</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, December 12, 1790, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 66.

<sup>18</sup> McCullough, 520.

<sup>19</sup> “John Quincy Adams,” Online Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, <http://bioguide.congress.gov>. Until the election of 2000, John Adams and John Quincy Adams were the only father and son to serve in the Office of the President.

John Quincy died in the United States Capitol Building. While John and Abigail had several reservations about the marriage of John Quincy to Louisa Johnson in 1797, they grew to appreciate the match. The Johnson family was nearly bankrupt when Louisa and John Quincy were wed. The family was facing financial ruin in the United States and chose to move to London. The abrupt departure led to speculation as to the Johnson's status in America, which troubled Abigail.<sup>20</sup> However, the only true worry Abigail suffered over John Quincy was deeply rooted in his positions as Ambassador. Living in foreign lands and traveling the unpredictable high seas, she feared for her son's life and worried that her daughter-in-law, Louisa may die from illness and leave John Quincy alone.<sup>21</sup> Fortunately, none of Abigail's fears were realized and John Quincy safely returned from Europe to the United States to become a prominent statesman.

Born in 1770, Charles Adams proved unable to live up to the high expectations of the family and lived in the shadow of his brother, John Quincy. He was a very social and charming young man, yet highly irresponsible. Early in his life, Charles developed a drinking problem, which was first noted when he was an undergraduate at Harvard. Throughout his life, he relied on his wit and charm to carry him through the problems of his life. In an act of faith, John Quincy placed Charles in charge of his savings and other finances in America while he remained in Europe. Charles managed to squander a large sum of the money in bad investments and fast living. Despite his attempts to rectify the situation, he was unsuccessful and Abigail felt it was her duty to intercede with John Quincy on Charles's behalf.

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<sup>20</sup> McCullough, 481.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, October 31, 1799, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 211.

Abigail wrote about the situation and expressed that she was, “with distress for the only child to whose conduct ever gave me pain.”<sup>22</sup> Years later, it seemed that Charles was finally maturing, when he married Sally Smith, the younger sister of Colonel Smith. The family was hopeful that this marriage would put an end to his loose living and create stability in Charles’s life. Sadly, marriage and family was not enough to save Charles from ruin. On a trip to Quincy in 1800, Abigail stopped to visit her son and his family. She found him, at the age of 30, on his deathbed living with his wife and two children at the home of a friend. After seeing Charles in such a state, she determined not to tell John, who was overwhelmed with the end of his Presidency.

At New York I found my poor unhappy son, for so I must still call him, laid upon a Bed of sickness, destitute of a home. The kindness of a friend afforded him an assylum. A distressing cough, an affection of the liver and a dropsy will soon terminate a Life, which might have been valuable to himself and others. You will easily suppose that this scene was too powerful and distressing to me...his Physician says he is past recovery.<sup>23</sup>

The early death of Charles left Abigail and John beside themselves with questions about their parental skills and the lives they created for their children.

Born in 1772, Thomas Adams was the third son of John and Abigail. He was a combination of his two older brothers. He was as intelligent as John Quincy yet was as charming and prone to suffering set backs similar to Charles. Against his wishes, his parents forced him into the family trade of practicing law.<sup>24</sup> When John Quincy was appointed a Minister in Europe, Thomas jumped at the opportunity to escape the life created for him in America and to serve as a secretary and companion to his brother. Upon his return to the United States Abigail remarked, “He will rise

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<sup>22</sup> McCullough, 514.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, November 10, 1800, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 255.

<sup>24</sup> Ferling, 322.

superior to his troubles. He has no vices to disgrace himself and Family. His misfortunes haven arisen from trusting to the honesty of others.”<sup>25</sup> After returning to the States, Thomas worked as a law clerk and had glimmers of a successful career during the Adams’s administration. Abigail hoped that Thomas would soon strike out and develop his own law practice, but she was eventually disappointed.<sup>26</sup> In 1805, he married Nancy “Ann” Harrod, a traditional New England woman, who was very similar to Abigail.<sup>27</sup> The Adams were optimistic that Nancy could assist Thomas in his life decisions and take care of him. Despite the promise of a successful life, Thomas never managed to create a flourishing career. Towards the end of John Adams’s life, the only way Thomas could provide for himself and his family was to work at his father’s farm in Quincy.<sup>28</sup> He had succumbed to the family disease of alcoholism and died in 1832.<sup>29</sup>

For much of their children’s formative years, Abigail was alone to make decisions concerning her children’s health and education. A year after the British invasion of Boston, small pox invaded the city. During the epidemic of 1776, Abigail took it upon herself to travel with her young children to Boston to have them inoculated against the disease.<sup>30</sup> The immunization was a risky procedure, but as a young mother, Abigail thought the benefits outweighed the risks. From the couple’s letters, John, who was in Philadelphia at the time, had no knowledge of Abigail’s intention to get the children immunized. From second hand accounts, John

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<sup>25</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, October 31, 1799, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 212.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, November 26, 1799, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 217.

<sup>27</sup> Withey, 392.

<sup>28</sup> McCullough, 634.

<sup>29</sup> It is rumored that Abigail’s uncles suffered from alcoholism.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth A. Fenn, Pox Americana, (New York: Hill and Wang), 36.

discovered what his wife had done. Abigail wrote to John on July 13<sup>th</sup> of 1776, “I must begin with apoligising to you for not writing since the 17 of June. I have really had so many cares upon my Hands and Mind, with a bad inflamation in my Eyes that I have not been able to write. I now date from Boston where I yesterday arrived and was with all 4 of our Little ones innoculated for the smallpox.”<sup>31</sup> John found out about the procedure and wrote Abigail before he received her letter informing him of her action and whereabouts,

In a Letter from your Uncle Smith, and in another from Mr. Mason which I received by this days Post I am informed that you were about taking the Smallpox, with all the Children . . . It is not possible for me to describe, nor for you to conceive my Feelings upon this Occasion. Nothing, but the critical State of our Affairs should prevent me from flying to Boston, to your Assistance.<sup>32</sup>

John clearly was concerned about Abigail’s bold decision to inoculate the children, but John was powerless to do anything about the situation. It was only days after the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the colonies were in a state of turmoil. In addition, John was wanted for treason by the British crown for his actions in Philadelphia.

I suspect, that you intended to have run slyly, through the small Pox with the family, without letting me know it, and then have sent me an Account that you were all well. This might be a kind Intention, and if the design had succeeded, would have made me very joyous. But the secret is out, and I am left to conjecture. But as the Faculty have this distemper so much under Command I will flatter myself with the Hope and Expectation of soon hearing of your Recovery.<sup>33</sup>

John understood the dangers of the disease and does not doubt Abigail’s decision to receive the treatment along with the four, young children. He had the very same

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<sup>31</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 13 July 1776, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>32</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 16 July 1776, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>33</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 20 July 1776, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

procedure almost a decade earlier and knew what to expect. However, John would have preferred to be consulted about the risky matter. John received word of Abigail's actions from a family friend and her uncle. The writing of those letters illustrated the seriousness of the smallpox disease and the immunization against sickness. There is no record of Abigail dwelling on the decision or consulting anyone to undergo the inoculation, but the talk of the spread of smallpox does concern her in the letters leading up to July 1776. In fact, when she wrote John to discuss the smallpox, Abigail was very nonchalant about the side effects for her and the children. In Abigail's eyes, the vaccination was necessary to protect her children and she was not going to let anyone change her mind about the decision.

With Abigail caring for their children, John was free to fulfill his obligation as a public servant. She provided for their children and consulted him when she needed guidance. Firm believers in a classical education, John wrote instructions to Abigail on how to educate their children and she executed the plans. The Adams provided the best education and opportunities for their children, but unfortunately, not all the Adams children were as successful in life as their parents had hoped. Abigail perceived their failures as her own and struggled to assist them with their lives.

### **The Farm Manager**

With John Adams focusing on politics and State affairs, Abigail found herself alone in managing the farm and the family's finances. As a capable woman, Abigail was able to release John of his home commitments so that he may pursue his public service obligations. Throughout their marriage, she had grown accustomed to making decisions with little or no help from her husband. Unlike Martha Washington, who

had very little to do with the running of Mount Vernon due to a very large staff of hired hands and slaves, Abigail had to rise to the occasion and oversee the farm. Women of Abigail's stature were not commonly involved in the details of property, planting, and provisions. Traditionally, women were concerned with the domestic affairs of the home, such as planning dinner functions and the hiring of help. However, Abigail found herself juggling both the male and female roles at the home.

While John was serving as Vice-President and President, the Adams owned a small mansion, as well as, two small, Quincy farmhouses located in the rolling hills of Braintree, MA. Abigail's uncle, Cotton Tufts, assisted her in keeping the farm functioning and out of debt while John fulfilled his civic duty on the national level. With the law of the land granting property rights to men alone, Cotton Tufts performed the official duties of purchasing land, purchasing goods, and formally handling tenants for Abigail, whom was restricted due to her status as a woman in the legal system. She never imagined when she married John that she would be supervising the family's farm. Overseeing the properties included a large variety of tasks, which ranged from buying livestock and grain to leasing the two older Adams farms. When Abigail was first given control over the farm, she was unsure of her decisions and often requested her husband's opinions and directions on farm matters. Even with these inquiries to John, Abigail usually had her mind made up before she wrote to her husband for advice. Overtime, Abigail became a shrewd farm manager, but regularly penned John with details regarding their finances and purchases. She wrote, "I know I must sometimes perplex you with domestic matters. I would not do

it, but that I wish you advice and direction.”<sup>34</sup> As time passed, she became more confident with her decisions, but still required John’s approval. In a February 1793 letter, she addressed John,

Few domestick concerns occur that I wish to mention. Dr. Tufts desires me to mention to you Clover seed. He wishes Brisler to inquire the Price and if it can be purchased as low as 10 pence or a shilling pr pound . . . would not be adviseable to purchase a Strong Farm Horse in Conneticut and let Brisler take home the Chaize. . . He solisited me to let him go to Abington and try. I consented and he last night brought home a yoke comeing seven Years for which he gave 58 dollars. He says they are right Handsome cattle used to make stone Wall kind and smart in very good flesh &c. I hope what I have done will meet your approbation, which will always recompence me for whatever exertions I may make.”<sup>35</sup>

Abigail’s skills in maintaining the household and dedication to the family’s domestic concerns prevented the farm and family from going into bankruptcy.

There is little evidence of John ever showing displeasure with any of Abigail’s decisions regarding the farm. Despite the lack of criticism from her husband, she continued to address concerns to her husband.

I was very sorry to learn by your last Letters that you had little hopes of getting home til May. There are so many new Arrangements to make upon our places that I really feel unequal to the Task, but if it must be so, I will do the best I can according to my Ability, and if I fail in the execution, You must at least allow for the intention. I would wish you to think what you would have done upon the several Farm's:<sup>36</sup>

John was pleased with Abigail’s handling of the farm and continued to encourage her.

You go on in the Conduct of your Farm with so much Spirit, amidst all your melancholly avocations, that it is a noble Regale to read your Letters. Plant the Ground which broke up last fall with corn. Sow Barley, where We had corn last Year. Plant again the lower Garden. Potatoes again at the Beach Meadow. Plant ~~again~~ again Farons last Years Corn field. Buy as many Cows and young Stock as you can keep in plenty. Send the sheep as soon as convenient to the Pasture by

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<sup>34</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 5 May 1789[electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 18 February 1793, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 8 February 1794, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

~~Harmans~~ Harmans. I shall send you some Money in a fort-night or three Weeks.  
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Despite Abigail's success at managing the farms, she did need John to continue supplying her with advice and money for farm provisions. Abigail provided John with lists of items she needed and he tried to grant her requests. "You will be weary of hearing of my wants, and of Supplying them, but I find we want for the Two Farms a Wheelbarrow for each place 2 Spades 2 forks 2 Shovels 2 axes 2 hoas . . . I wish you to Inform me whether for the corn land which is broken up here, the manure is to be Spread as the last year."<sup>38</sup> Even with all of the requests, John continued to support Abigail and her judgment throughout his time in the Executive Office. In 1794 John wrote,

The more I am charmed with Bravery and Activity in farming the more I am mortified that my Letters in Answer to yours are so insignificant and insipid. I must leave all your Agriculture to your Judgment and the Advice of your Assitants. I sent you more Grass seeds with the Furniture, which I hope has arrived before now.<sup>39</sup> I am delighted with the Activity and Energy with which the affairs of the farm have been conducted, since I left you. A few years of such Exertions will make the Place productive of most of the Necessaries of Life for Us and I hope We shall be indulged with the quiet Enjoyment of it for as many Years as We can be useful to our Country, our Friends or ourselves."<sup>40</sup>

Despite the reassurances of John, Abigail worried about the farm and whether she made the wisest decisions. Because women of the 18<sup>th</sup> century lacked business experience, Abigail was not confident in finalizing many decisions without John's approval. Even though she sought John's opinion on matters, she managed to keep the farms running for the family throughout John's political career.

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<sup>37</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams 11 March 1794, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 26 March 1794, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>39</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 3 April 1794, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>40</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 25 December 1794, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

Even when she was with John in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, Abigail managed the farm via letters to her sister and brother-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Cranch and her Uncle, Cotton Tufts. She instructed her sister in the work that was to be done for the farms and the extension she was having built onto their mansion. “I have some directions to write Dr. Tufts upon the subject. The House is to be painted, the Garden fence new sit, and every proper repair made to render it decent & comfortable—But I am a loss to know what to do with Mr. J. Q. Adams’s books.”<sup>41</sup> Even as First Lady, the domestic concerns of the Braintree home occupied her busy schedule.

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<sup>41</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, 15 March, 1800, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 240.

## Chapter 3: The Making of a First Lady

### John's Plea for Abigail

As Vice-President, John Adams found himself in desperate need of his wife. After nearly surviving 16 years of an interrupted marriage, the couple had reunited in Europe during John's stay as Ambassador. The Adams's wanted to avoid long periods of separation, but in 1789, John once again found himself in New York City without Abigail. He was in need of his confidant and political advisor. He wrote, "I must now Seriously request you to come on to me as soon as conveniently you can. Never did I want your assistance more than at present, as my Physician and my Nurse."<sup>42</sup> From the moment he arrived in New York, John began requesting that Abigail join him. Over the course of three months, the two debated the subject through their letters. Abigail hesitated to go to New York because she was torn between leaving their new home, their farms, their family, John's sick mother, and their friends. She had recently returned to her life in Braintree from Europe and now she had to exchange that life for the life of political hostess in the capital city of New York.

On a brisk, late spring morning, Abigail wrote John from their Braintree farm. Knowing she could only postpone the trip for a short period of time, she would inevitably have to repack her belongings, let the farm, and journey once again to a new city to join John. Abigail wrote, "I say nothing about comeing, You will know

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<sup>42</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 6 June 1789, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

when it will be proper and give me timely notice.”<sup>43</sup> John replied, “I have taken an House, now wish you to come on.” and “The Place must be left, as you can. I can form no judgement about it. Charles must come with you . . . My Garden is preparing for your Reception, and I wish you were here.”<sup>44</sup> Abigail continued to procrastinate in leaving the farm and replied to John’s letter, “It is a very unpleasant Idea to me, to be obliged to pull down and pack furniture which has already suffered so much by Removal just as I have gotten it well arranged. It is no trifling affair and will require no very short time to accomplish.”<sup>45</sup> John continued his request for his wife and demanded she join him in New York as soon as possible. “I expect you, here indeed in a Week or ten days at the farthest, from this date.”<sup>46</sup> “It has been a great damage that you did not come on with me.”<sup>47</sup> Sensing the urgency in her husband’s letters, Abigail could no longer stall but relented to her husband’s wishes and traveled to New York to be with him, leaving the domestic details to be handled by others.<sup>48</sup> Abigail’s reluctance to leave the farm and allow someone else to oversee the moving of her belongings was an indication of her independent control over the household, and possibly an indication of her insecurity about leaving the Quincy farm to serve as a hostess for the new government.

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<sup>43</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 1, May 1789, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>44</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 24 May 1789, 14 May 1789, and 13 May 1789, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>45</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 26 May 1789, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>46</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 30 May 1789, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>47</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 4 June 1789, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>48</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 14 June 1789, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

### *The Wife of the Vice-President and First Lady*

Overcoming her reluctance to leave her new Braintree home, Peace Field, Abigail traveled to New York City to be with John. She stayed with him for the majority of his first term as Vice-President and returned to him again as he served as President. Abigail served as the wife of the Vice-President for eight years (1789-1797), and First Lady for the following four years (1797-1801). Even though the family forayed into the various courts of Europe, Mrs. Adams was not entirely prepared for the undefined roles she had to play in the new nation. She wanted to be careful not to overstep the new First Lady, Martha Washington, and struggled to find her proper place. Abigail wrote, “Is Mrs. Washington arrived yet? I wish she would get there before me. I dont very well like all I see in the papers.”<sup>49</sup> Reassuringly, John replied, “Mrs. Washington, will be here before you, without doubt.”<sup>50</sup> Once Abigail arrived in New York City, she quickly found her place at Mrs. Washington’s side.

The first families strove to find a balance in the new republic between commonality and the monarchy that America had won its freedom. When first arriving in New York City, Abigail became the understudy of the First Lady, Martha Washington. Living in Virginia planter society, Mrs. Washington was accustomed to lavish social parties and hostess duties that were necessary for the new political society. President Washington and Mrs. Washington set the stage for the social structure that developed in the early republic and in some cases carry on

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<sup>49</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams , 16 May 1789, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>50</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 29 May 1789, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

to modern times.<sup>51</sup> In 1790, Abigail wrote to her sister and confidant, Mary Cranch,

In the Evening I attended the drawing Room, it being the Mrs. Washington's publick day. It was as much crowded as Birth Night at St. James, and with company as brilliantly drest, diamonds, & great hoops excepted. My station is always at the right hand of Mrs. W.; though want of knowing what is right I find it sometimes occupied, but on such occasion the President never fails of seeing that it is relinquished for me, and having removed Ladies several times, they have now learnt to rise and give it to me, but this between our selves, as all distinction you know is unpopular.<sup>52</sup>

With only the royal courts of Europe as a model, it was difficult to develop a formal system of entertainment that did not appear too regal or too common. Most Americans feared the return of the regal extravagance associated with the monarchy. The leading American ladies came from opposite ends of the new country in both social and geographic spectrums. Martha Washington hailed from Southern Aristocracy and Abigail from a Puritan middle class family. The Washington's were accustomed to lavish lifestyles while the Adams, being given a taste of the opulence of Europe, were still only beginning to experience the luxuries of the upper class. Despite the different cultures, both Martha and Abigail agreed purposely to keep their dress plain to avoid speculation and criticisms about their roles as the wife and hostess. It was not until the era of Dolly Madison that the First Lady became more akin to lavish parties and a more royal dress.<sup>53</sup> Throughout their tenure together, Abigail enjoyed the friendship she developed with Mrs. Washington and looked to her for guidance and support.

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<sup>51</sup> Susan Branson, These Fiery Frenchified Dames, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 129. 1

<sup>52</sup> Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, Edited by Stewart Mitchell. (Westport, CT: Goodward Press, 1973), January 5, 1790, 35.

<sup>53</sup> Catherine Allgor, Parlor Politics, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 90.

Abigail and Martha forged a strong, genuine friendship that existed outside of the social requirements of the position. As indicated by the letters between John and Abigail, Mrs. Washington and Mrs. Adams frequently inquired of each other's well being as well as corresponded to each other.<sup>54</sup> John Adams wrote, "The President and his Lady enquired kindly after your Health."<sup>55</sup> Abigail replied to her husband and expressed her feelings towards her friend, "Remember me to Mrs. Washington most affectionatly. I respect and love that good Lady. You have never said a word about and his Lady. I presume you have exchange visits."<sup>56</sup> John reassured his wife that the First Lady did inquire about her, "The President and Presidentess always send their Regards to you. Madam invites you to come next Summer to Mount Vernon and visit the Faederal City."<sup>57</sup> Although no letters between the women have been located, they clearly had become fast friends and allies during their time together. Through the letters of John and Abigail, Abigail and Martha maintained their friendship during Abigail's time in Braintree.

### **Mrs. Adams' Parlor**

Mrs. Adams was quickly overwhelmed with the schedule she needed to keep as the wife of the Vice-President. In a letter to her older sister, Abigail apologized for her lack of correspondence. She cited "visiting which was indispensable, having more than fifty upon my list, my Time has been so wholly occupied that I have not

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<sup>54</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 6 March 1797, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>55</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 11 November 1794, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>56</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 24 December 1794, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>57</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 28 September 1795, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

taken a pen.”<sup>58</sup> At their Richmond Hill home in New York, Abigail’s typical day began before sunrise, which enabled her to keep up with her vast correspondence. She then oversaw the household business of preparing food lists, household chores, and overseeing the staff of servants. This activity continued until the time had come to prepare for afternoon visitors. After the guests departed, Abigail would then prepare herself for evening dinner or visiting. On a typical public evening, ladies and gentleman would gather for discussion and refreshments. The gatherings of Mrs. Washington and other prominent women were as described by Abigail, “One last[s] two & other perhaps three hours. She [Mrs. Washington] gives Tea, Coffe, Cake, and Lemonade & Ice Creams in summer. All the other ladies who have public Evenings give Tea, Coffe & Lemonade, but one only who introduces cards, and she is frequently put to difficulty to make up one table at whist.”<sup>59</sup> In a letter to her sister, Abigail stated that she preferred less formal gatherings to formal dinner parties.<sup>60</sup>

I have never before been in a situation in which morning noon & afternoon I have been exposed to company. I have laid down one rule which is, not to make any morning visits myself, and in an afternoon after six oclock I can return 15 or 20 and very find any Lady to receive me. But at Richmond Hill it is expected that I am at Home both to Gentlemen and Ladies when ever they come out, which is almost every day since I have been here, besides it is a sweet morning ride to Breakfast. I propose to fix a Levey day soon. I have waited for Mrs. Washington to begin and she has fixd on every fryday 8 oclock.”<sup>61</sup>

However, hosting formal dinner parties for government officials at the residency of the Vice-President quickly became a requirement of Abigail’s position. Following

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<sup>58</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, July 12, 1789, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 14.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, July 27, 1790, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 55.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, August 9, 1789, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 19.

the lead of Mrs. Washington, she systematically managed to invite all the Senators and their families to dine at their home.<sup>62</sup>

Unfortunately, the infant government did not provide the necessary funding for the type of entertaining that is now expected of the First Families. Unlike the modern Office of the President and Vice-President, the First Families had to provide a large enough wage to cover the furniture, fineries, and staff that were necessary to run the executive home.<sup>63</sup> In the early years of the Executive Branch, the salary and benefits of the President dramatically outweighed that of the Vice-President. By the end of Adams' first term as Vice-President, the family had gone \$2,000 in debt.<sup>64</sup> Even with John's salary of \$5,000 as Vice-President and \$25,000 as President, Abigail, who was notoriously frugal, struggled to maintain a balanced budget. There was no recorded amount of debt that the Adams incurred as the First Family. However, it was noted that both Washington and Jefferson incurred large amounts of debt during their Presidencies.<sup>65</sup> At the new capital in Washington, D.C., Abigail remarked to her sister that the amount of work needed to make the new Executive Home completely inhabitable was well beyond the salary of the President.<sup>66</sup> To further the Adams' financial woes, the Washingtons expected John and Abigail to purchase the furnishings they had used during the General's two terms for their

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, October 25, 1790, 63, and December 12, 1790, 65, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801. With each move of the Nation's capital, Abigail had to arrange for the shipment of the family's furniture and fixtures. Neither Richmond Hill, Bush Hill, nor the present day White House, was furnished..

<sup>64</sup> Akers, 149.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, November 21, 1800, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 259.

executive home. John wrote Abigail about the necessary expenses of being the President.

The Prices of Things are so extravagantly high that We shall be driven to Extremities to live in any decent style. I must hire and maintain secretaries as well as servants and the purchase of Horses, Carriage, Furniture and the Rent of a House 2666 Dollars & 2/3 a year will Streighten Us and put Us to all manner of shifts. I have a great Mind to dismiss all Levees, Drawing Rooms and Dinners at once. Dinners upon Washingtons Scale I will dismiss and only entertain a few select Friends. They shall have a Republican President in earnest.<sup>67</sup>

He knew that the Washingtons spent far more money on the Presidency than the Adams family could afford. As much as John hoped to scale back the social obligations of the President, it was the skills of Mrs. Adams that kept the family from financial ruin.

As the highest-ranking women of the new Republic, Mrs. Adams and Mrs. Washington were quickly entrenched into an elite class of women in both New York and Philadelphia. These women enjoyed attending public functions as well as attending popular events at the theater.<sup>68</sup> Attending the theater had become a respectable and expected event for even the First Lady. Both Martha Washington and Abigail Adams frequented the theater and often sat together in a private “Presidential” box.<sup>69</sup> In a letter to her sister, Mary, on April 26, 1798, Abigail wrote about a pleasurable experience at the theater. She described to her sister an event in Philadelphia and hearing the recently composed “President’s March.” She closed the letter remarking on an incorrect newspaper account of her actions at the play.

P.S. Since writing the above song is printed. Bache [the editor of the republican *Auror*] says this morning among other impudence that the excellent Lady of the Excellent President, was present, and shed Tears of sensibility upon the occasion.

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<sup>67</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 31 January 1797, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>68</sup> Branson, 108.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

That was a lie. However I should not have been ashamed if it had been so. I laughed at one scene which was playd, {to} be sure, until the tears ran down, I believe. But the song by the manner in which it is received, is death to their Party. The House was really crowded, and by the most respectable people in the city.<sup>70</sup>

Attending the theater in New York and Philadelphia allowed Mrs. Adams to once again enjoy the pleasure of the fine arts as she did during John's career in Europe and to visualize the dramas she had read as a young girl.

Arriving in Philadelphia as the First Lady in 1797, Abigail quickly began the appropriate social schedule set in place by Mrs. Washington. Precedent had been set; the First Lady was expected to be a diplomatic hostess. The job of entertainer was done without the assistance of the President or Vice-President. The women's schedules were just as rigorous and draining for them as the schedules were for their husbands. Explaining her typical schedule, Abigail stated, "From 12 until 2 I receive company, sometimes until 3. We dine at that hour unless from company days which are tuesday & thursday.... Tomorrow we are to dine the Secretaries of State &c with the whole Senate."<sup>71</sup> Abigail worked hard to maintain an acceptable social schedule. Years later as John Quincy Adams and his wife, Louisa, were playing a more pivotal role in Washington politics; Louisa requested advice from her mother-in-law on entertaining. Abigail assured her not to worry too much about the protocol of visits and visitors; there would always be conflicts. She did recount, "In my day, if so much stile, pomp and Etiquette had been assumed the cry of Monarchy, Monarchy would have resounded from Georgia to Maine."<sup>72</sup> Abigail was trying to reassure her daughter-in-law that the expectations and limitations of the First Lady had changed

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<sup>70</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, April 26, 1798, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801 166.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., May 24, 1797, 91.

<sup>72</sup> Withey, 313.

dramatically since her day. The Washington of Louisa Adams' day permitted prominent ladies to have more latitude in the grandeur of their social engagements.

As a member of the Executive Branch in the new government, the Adams home was one in constant motion. From the example set by Martha Washington, Abigail continued to have a public day set aside for visiting, to host dinners for Representatives and Senators, and to hold an annual Independence Day festival. On rare occasions, there were dances held at their home. Abigail remarked to her sister that her son, Thomas, asked permission to have a dance at the end of the dinner party with many of their friends. Abigail easily relented to her son's request and recounted that, "At 8, the dancing commenced. At 12, it finished. More pleasure, ease, and enjoyment I have rarely witnessed."<sup>73</sup> The social aspect of the office had become more important than was first imagined. The Washington's set a precedence for an annual 4<sup>th</sup> of July Celebration at the Executive Mansion. As the First Lady, Abigail both embraced and cursed the tradition,

Then comes the 4 of July which is still more tedious day, as we must have not only all of Congress, but all the Gentleman of the city, the Governor and officers and companies, all of whom the late President used to treat with cake, punch and wine . . . I have been informed that the day used to cost the late President 500 dollar . . . You will not wonder that I dreaded it, or think President Washington to blame for introducing this custom.<sup>74</sup>

Continuing in her 1818 letter to Louisa Adams, Abigail remarked that the new First Lady, Mrs. Monroe, would not be able to eliminate the aspect of the social gatherings in the Office of the Executive. She suggested that after Mrs. Madison, lavish parties

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<sup>73</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, April 26, 1800, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 247.

<sup>74</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, July 23, 1797, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 98-99.

could not be done without.<sup>75</sup> The First Lady's role in what was to become the White House had evolved into a greater position than Martha Washington or the Abigail Adams ever anticipated.

Abigail noted that as First Lady, she received more respect and recognition than as the wife of the Vice-President. "In short we are now wonderfully popular except with Bache & Co who in his paper calls the President old, querulous, Bald, blind, crippled, Toothless Adams."<sup>76</sup> Bache & Co referred to Benjamin Franklin Bache, an editor of the Philadelphia *Aurora*. The opposition newspaper relentlessly opposed Adams, a federalist, during his Vice-Presidency and Presidency.

Despite the hesitation to join her husband in the various capital cities of the new republic, Abigail conquered her feelings of insecurity and homesickness to serve at John's side during his Vice-Presidency and Presidency. In a letter to Mary Cranch, she wrote in 1797, "I begin to feel a little more at Home and less anxiety about the ceremonious part of my duty, tho by not having a drawing Room for the summer I am obliged every day, to devote two Hours for the purpose of seeing company."<sup>77</sup> Even though she referred to their duties as a "splendid misery," overtime Abigail grew accustomed to the lifestyle of a political hostess.<sup>78</sup> However, within the 12-year period of his service, Abigail was not always by her husband's side. Mrs. Adams suffered from a weak constitution and would need to return to Quincy farm.

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<sup>75</sup> Withey, 313.

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, April 28, 1798, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 167.

<sup>77</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, May 24, 1797, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 91.

<sup>78</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, May 16, 1797, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 90.

### Abigail's Illness

Throughout Abigail's life, she had been plagued with various illnesses. As a young girl, she was thought to be too sickly for formal school. As an adult, she went through many bouts of sickness with some of the more serious cases leaving her convinced that she was on her deathbed. She often referred to her illnesses as rheumatism and an "intermitting fever."<sup>79</sup> Abigail was a strong believer of the bloodletting method of healing and relied upon the family friend, Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, for advice.<sup>80</sup> At home in Quincy, the farm continued to function during her illness, but it was while serving as an official hostess in the capital that the business of the household would halt around her. Abigail was sometimes unable to play her part as the wife of the Vice-President or President.<sup>81</sup> There were cases where the entire household would come down with illness. Abigail would find herself trying to assist her household, servants included, while attending to herself. The humid summer climates of both New York City and Philadelphia were more susceptible than Quincy to illness. Abigail's delicate health suffered under these harsh conditions. When outbreaks of yellow fever occurred, typically in the summer, the Adams would return to Quincy to wait out the epidemic. Even the importance of the July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration could not keep the Adams at the seat of government in the summer. There is evidence that John and Abigail spent three Independence Day

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<sup>79</sup> Ralph Adams Brown, The Presidency of John Adams, (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1975), 77.

<sup>80</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, December 12, 1790, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 66.

<sup>81</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, December 12, 1790, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 66.

celebrations at the capital in 1789, 1790, and 1798.<sup>82</sup> During the years that they were present in New York and Philadelphia for the event, they returned to Quincy by August. After Congressional business was completed, the President, the Congress, and the Cabinet officials usually left the capital city to escape the summer heat and illness. In 1793, the Washingtons returned to their Mount Vernon estate to wait out the summer illness.<sup>83</sup> In an incident where John returned to the Quincy farm, Abigail mentioned to John the illness that was plaguing New York at the time, “You did well to flee before the very sickly period. Mr. Maddison lies very ill at Philadelphia, and it is reported that the Speaker of the House died last week. I hope however the report may not be true, as I have not seen any mention of it in the papers.”<sup>84</sup> People of colonial cities knew that rural areas were safer from illnesses and less heat repressive than the larger cities; therefore, they headed to other areas for protection from illness.

Prior to and following the change of the seat of government from New York to Philadelphia, Abigail was ill. She wrote her sister, “My Health for six weeks has not been good. I still Labor under an Intermitting [fever] which I apprehend will increase with the warm weather. . . am frequently inclined to decline company.”<sup>85</sup> Six weeks later, Abigail wrote her sister that she was still ill. She did not recover until she returned to Quincy that summer.

In 1798, on a summer retreat to Quincy during the Adams’s Presidency, a precedence set by the Washington Administration, Abigail became very sick. John

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<sup>82</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, July 12, 1789, July 4, 1790, and July 3, 1798, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801.

<sup>83</sup> McCullough, 446.

<sup>84</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, October 27, 1789, [electronic edition]. Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, February 5, 1792, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 77.

feared that she would not recover from this illness and remained with her in Quincy. Instead of returning to the capital in the early Fall, John took a five-month leave of absence from Philadelphia. He conducted business, via a courier, until Abigail was well enough for him to return to the capital city. This unprecedented leave called into question John's capabilities and mental stability. However, the plague of illness that struck Philadelphia in the summer of 1798 was vicious and killed many including Bache, the publisher of the newspaper, *The Aurora*.<sup>86</sup> Abigail remained on what she considered her deathbed in Quincy for a lengthy period. In October of 1798, John Adams wrote John Quincy concerning Abigail's illness, "Your mother has been sick of complication of disorders, a chronic Diarrhea, an intermittent fever & almost a diabetes sometimes for 3 months."<sup>87</sup> John declared to his wife in February of 1799,

I am very anxious to hear from you having no Letter since the 10th. Your sickness last summer, fall and Winter has been to me the severest Tryal I ever endured. Not that I am at this moment without other Tryals enough for one Man. I may Adopt the Words of a celebrated Statesman, whom however I should not wish to resemble in many Things. And now, good judge, Says he, 'let me ask you, whether you believe that my Situation in the World is perfectly as I could wish it; whether You imagine that I meet with no shock from my Superiours, no Perverseness from my equals, no impertinence from my Inferiours? If you fancy me in such a state of bliss you are wide from the mark.'<sup>88</sup>

In late March, John returned to Quincy to be at his wife's side and quite possibly to escape the politics of the situation with France. While John was tending to his wife, political plots began to ferment throughout the Federalist Party by way of Alexander Hamilton.<sup>89</sup> Hamilton wanted Adams out of office and began casting doubt among

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<sup>86</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, The Adams Papers, MA Historical Society, reel 392, November 11, 1798, Library of Congress.

<sup>87</sup> Letter from John Adams to John Quincy Adams, The Adams Papers, MA Historical Society, reel 119, #15b, Library of Congress.

<sup>88</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, February 22, 1799, [electronic edition]. Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.

<sup>89</sup> McCullough, 525-526.

the other Federalists concerning John's capabilities and sanity. Over the course of his administration, John's popularity was waning and he found his authority questioned by members of his administration. He had begun to lose control of the Presidency and was beginning to act like a man under siege in his own administration. John finally returned to the Philadelphia in October 1799, and Abigail followed a month later to resume her duties as hostess for her husband.<sup>90</sup>

Throughout the Adams' letters, there was no mention of Abigail ever being diagnosed with a particular illness or receiving a formal visit from a doctor other than Dr. Rush. The letters expressed that Abigail clearly suffered from symptoms of some sort of illness and she had to be cared for by members of her family. Abigail's friend and sister, Mary Cranch, assisted in the care of Abigail during her long illness. In returning to Washington in 1800, Abigail regrets having to leave her sister, who had taken care of her. "It is very distressing to me to leave my sister, whom I owe so much for her attention and kindness to me at all times, but more particularly in my long Sickness. When I might be of service to her, all the aid I can afford her whilst I stay, is by watchers, and my help are very ready to serve me, for her"<sup>91</sup> Fortunately, Mary recovered from her illness of 1799 and remained Abigail's trusted confidant.

After leaving the White House, Abigail returned to the family's home in Quincy where they finally were able to enjoy their retirement. For nearly the next two decades, she struggled intermittently with her health, but she was happy to take

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<sup>90</sup> Letter from Abigail Admas to Mary Cranch, July 7, 1798 and October 17, 1799, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 207-208.

<sup>91</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, October 18, 1800, [electronic edition]. Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.

pleasure in some time with her husband, children, and grandchildren. At the age of 74, Mrs. Adams passed away on October 28, 1818.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Withey, 313.

## Chapter 4: A Political Equal

### Politics

As evident in her correspondence with her sister, Abigail Adams clearly had her opinions about people, situations, and places. John and Abigail generally agreed on most aspects of politics. While her political views typically mirrored that of John's, Abigail was more conservative. Massachusetts's politician, Fisher Ames<sup>93</sup> knew that Abigail was more than the simple wife of John Adams. In a correspondence to Rufus King,<sup>94</sup> the Minister to Great Britain, Ames wrote, "the good Lady his wife has been often talkative in similar strain, and she is as complete a politician as any Lady in the old French Court."<sup>95</sup> As John's confidant and biggest supporter, Abigail had to have had a direct influence on John's politics. While direct proof of Abigail's influence is lacking, their relationship warrants conjecture that Abigail did provide her husband political advice when he was in need.

In one instance where John and Abigail disagreed on a political situation was the case of George Washington's birthday celebration in 1797. John Adams was not in favor of attending the celebration in Philadelphia, while Abigail attended the

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<sup>93</sup> "Fisher Ames," *Online Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov>. "A Representative from Massachusetts ; . . member of the Massachusetts convention called for the ratification of the Federal Constitution in 1788; elected to the First through Third Congresses and as a Federalist to the Fourth Congress (March 4, 1789-March 3, 1797).

<sup>94</sup> "King, Rufus," *Online Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov>. Delegate from Massachusetts and a Senator from New York. . . served in the Revolutionary War . . . Member of the Continental Congress from Massachusetts 1784-1787; delegate to the Federal constitutional convention at Philadelphia in 1787 . . . elected to the United States Senate, 1789-1796, resigned to become United States Minister to Great Britain; Minister to Great Britain 1796-1803; unsuccessful Federalist candidate for Vice-President of the United States in 1804; again elected as a Federalist to the United States Senate; . . again United States Minister to Great Britain 1825-1826; died in Jamaica, Long Island, N.Y., April 29, 1827.

<sup>95</sup> Joseph Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams*, (Norton & Co.: New York), 21. *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King*, edited by Charles R. King, Vol III, (New York: Da Capo Press), 1971, 304,

celebration in Boston as the first lady. John wrote his wife about the celebration for Washington's Birthday. "I contented myself with paying my Respects to The President with the Senate but I thought it would not become me to be present at the Ball of a Saturday night, especially at a time when I could not get it out of my Thoughts that my venerable Parent might be closing her Eyes forever."<sup>96</sup> Meanwhile up in Quincy, Abigail wrote John about the invitation she received to attend the events in Boston to celebrate the birthday. She made it known that she intended to go to the celebration.

I presume you will have a splendid Birth day. There are preparations making in Boston to celebrate it. I received a very polite Note inclosing a Card for me and an other for Louissa for the Washington Ball. The Note from the Managers requested me to honour them with my attendance, which they should esteem a particular favour. As it is the last publick honour they can shew the President, thus circumstanced I have determined to attend.<sup>97</sup>

John does not mention Washington's Birthday again after he receives the letter from Abigail. He possibly understood that the First Lady was socially dictated to attend such a celebration or he may have been embarrassed that Abigail attended and he chose not to attend the festivities. Abigail's difference of opinion over the attendance of Washington's Birthday celebration was one of the few known cases that Abigail disagreed with John's action and decision.

Mrs. Adams was, without a doubt, politically astute. Being John's wife and being naturally curious, she had a firm understanding of current events and the major politicians of their time. In addition, she regularly corresponded with her son, John Quincy, on the situations in Philadelphia, and he in turn replied back with information

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<sup>96</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 2 March 1797, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>97</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 19, February 1797, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

about the political climate in Europe. His letters to his mother were more than just pleasantries. On July 25, 1798, “You have seen by the extracts from their newspapers which I have lately sent you . . . We may be sure however that in fact a long and terrible war is opening upon us.”<sup>98</sup> Abigail was clearly viewed as a political equal by her son and others.

Based on Abigail’s observations, she foresaw the separation in Congress between the North and South. During the spring of 1792, Abigail noted that the Southern, Anti-federalist, Members of Congress were on the attack against the Secretary of War, Knox and the Secretary of State, Hamilton. “The Secretary of State & even the President has not escaped. I firmly believe if I live Ten Years longer, I shall see a devision of the Southern and Northern States, unless more candor & less intrigue, of which I have no hopes, should prevail.”<sup>99</sup> Abigail’s assessment of political and cultural environment served John better than most advisors.

### **John’s Confidant**

As in all concrete marriages, a husband and wife must rely upon each other as a source of solace. In a family surrounded by the sordid nature of politics, Abigail was the one true advisor of John. She was more than a wife, mother, and companion; she was his most trusted consultant. Abigail reported to John on the political climate, politicians, and current events. The practice that began during the Revolutionary War continued throughout their marriage. In a reprint of her eulogy given at Abigail’s funeral the pastor noted,

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<sup>98</sup> John Quincy. Adams to Abigail Adams, The Adams Papers, MA Historical Society, reel 390, No. 41, July 25, 1798, Library of Congress.

<sup>99</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, April 20, 1792, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 83.

Conversant with the circumstances, that led to dismemberment of this from the parent country, and partaking in the feelings of the leading characters in the mighty struggle, she had early formed an attachment to the liberties of her country, which was strengthened by her connection, and sympathy, and co-operation with the bereaved companion of her life in the exalted stations he has filled.<sup>100</sup>

Throughout all of John's appointments and elections, Abigail was there to support him.

In 1789, there was an incident where a disgruntled, unsuccessful politician wrote a slanderous article about Vice-President Adams. The article appeared in the Boston newspapers and was distressing to both Abigail and John. The newspaper piece suggested that John Adams intentionally ignored the author of the article on numerous accounts. The critique then accused the Vice-President of succumbing to pride, vanity, and malicious intent while in office. From the reply written by Abigail, she indicates that Mary Cranch must have questioned her sister about the validity of the incident. Abigail replied that the claim was unfounded. The Vice-President only recalled seeing the author of the article once and never had the opportunity to speak with him.<sup>101</sup>

Abigail had considerable influence on her husband. She had a hand in the granting of positions to her son-in-law, William Smith, her nephew, William Cranch, and her brother-in-law, Richard Cranch. As a favor to her sister, Mary, she asked the Vice-President to intervene to find work for William Cranch. In a letter to her sister, Abigail discusses finding work for a family member through John Adams. "Mr. Adams delivered the Letter and talked with the Gen.'ll about him at the same time. The Genll mentioned him as a good workman & an honest Man. I will inquire of him

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<sup>100</sup> Christian Discipline (1813-1818), 365.

<sup>101</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, September 1, 1789, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 24-25.

when I see him if anything can be done for him.”<sup>102</sup> The Adams’s son-in-law, Smith was the source of great disappointment for the family. John had a hand in obtaining numerous appointments for Smith. Mr. Adams continued to seek positions for him out of concern for his daughter and his grandchildren. Abigail would write often to John about his daughter’s plight and then John would intercede.<sup>103</sup> In 1798, President Adams had reached his limit with Smith. He nominated Smith for two separate positions in the Army. After the first was defeated in the Senate, Adams swallowed his pride and resubmitted his son-in-law for another position, which was granted. Adams made it known to Smith, that he was humiliated by these events and that this was the last time he would find him a position. The Adams’s blatant use of nepotism was a criticism by some of the President’s detractors. When Jefferson took office, he immediately did away with the preferential treatment of the Adams administration, citing that it hurt his Presidency.<sup>104</sup> Abigail was only looking out for her family’s well being and may not have been aware of the political problems her requests to John would cause or it was possible that she did not care what others may have thought. As in the appointment of her nephew, William Cranch, in 1801, Abigail appears not to care what the critics of the Adams Administration have to say about their nepotism. In the letter to William’s mother, Abigail declared that, “he [John] has the pleasure of appointing your son to the office of the commissioner for the city .

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<sup>102</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, March 15, 1790, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 41.

<sup>103</sup> Levin, 357-359.

<sup>104</sup> Adrienne Koch, Jefferson and Madison: the Great Collaboration, (New York: Alfred Knopf), 1950, 223.

. .and tho this will be sit down by the Antis, as a promotion on the account of Relationship, we care not now what they say.”<sup>105</sup>

With Abigail’s illnesses and the financial restraints of the Executive Branch, she was not at John’s side throughout his career. To keep the Adams family out of debt, they decided that Abigail should remain in Quincy during John’s second term as Vice-President while John stayed in a boarding house in the newly relocated capital of Philadelphia. During their separation they once again relied upon each other for information. She attended to the three farms and he attended to politics. It was during this time that John and Abigail once again resumed communicated through letters. These letters contained more than family information and sentiments, they provided current event information to each other about politics and personalities: Abigail from Boston and John from Philadelphia.<sup>106</sup> In addition to news, John once again began writing his confidential thoughts through his letters. Politics were the main topic of many of John’s letters. Knowing that his wife understood the politics of the country as well as any of his advisors, he confided in Abigail. He sought her solace and counsel in many of the matters of his office. However, he found it more difficult to write freely to his wife during his Presidency than during his Vice-Presidency.

I dont like the president as a correspondent half as well as the Vice-President. Now dont be allarmd. I mean only your honour, you used to write me much more freely then; now if you chance to say any thing, I am left in a wide feild of conjecture, as for Instance, Judge Cushing had a visit in deleware from Mr. John Dickerson. I know you will reply that it is not proper for you to write freely, and

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<sup>105</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, January 15, 1801, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 263.

<sup>106</sup> Withey, 224.

that you have so many perplexities you can scarcely write at all, but that you know cannot prevent my curiosity.<sup>107</sup>

While both John and Abigail were Federalists, Abigail's views tended to be more extreme than her husband's. She was also less forgiving and more suspicious of the political motives of others than John. Despite their differences, she was the much-needed confidant for her husband's private political views.

Beyond Abigail's requesting of family political appointments, her political prowess and influence on John was well known. John turned to his wife with his thoughts about his relationship with the legislative branch and the actions he should take. "Since my nomination of Murray I have been advised by some to name my son John . . . Rivalries have been irritated to madness and Federalists have merited the Sedition law and Cobbet the Alien Bill – But I will not take revenge. I don't remember that I was ever vindictive."<sup>108</sup> John could not express these thoughts or feelings to anyone other than his wife. She understood him and could provide him with the advice and reinforcement he needed on this occasion.

With the appointment of Mr. Murrey minister Plenipo to France, a measure which had astonishd all the Federilist; and was a Subject of great Speculation in Boston. Soon after Thomas . . . got a Good Story in Boston. Some of the Feds who did not like being taken so by Surprize, said they wisht the old woman had been there; they did not believe it would have taken place. This was pretty sausy, but the old woman can tell them they are mistaken, for she considers the measure as a master Stroke of policy; knowing as she did that the pulse had been feeling through that minister for a long time. Besides the appointment shows that the disposition of the Government is still pacific, and puts to the test the Sincerity of the directory . . . It is a measure which strikes in the Head Jacobinism. It came as unexpected to them, as to the Federilists."<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 18, January 1799, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>108</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 22, November 1799, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>109</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 27, February 1799, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

In this amusing tale, their son Thomas recounted a story to his mother. He said a group of men on a ship in Boston were speaking of possible peace with France when they said, “wisht the old woman had been there; they did not believe it that would not have taken place.” Abigail was seen as a pro-war advocate, an extreme Federalist, and quite possibly a better politician.<sup>110</sup> As such, she may not have selected Murray, but went with the party candidate instead. Even if Abigail was in favor of war with France, she supported her husband’s decision to keep open the possibility of peace with France and the appointment of Gerry. Abigail assured John that his decision to appoint Murray was a sound political decision, as well as political strategy.

While at home in Quincy, Abigail continued to serve as political hostess and received visits from citizens, dignitaries, and public officials at the Adams homestead. While social in nature, these visits were an important part of the political society that was developing.

On Wednesday I received a visit from president Willard, and Mr. Garry.[Gerry]. They were so polite as come on purpose; they both requested me to make their respects to you.<sup>111</sup> Yesterday in high Stile with his Carriage and four, His Honor the Lieut. Govenour made me a visit. This is the first notice I have received of his Gaurdianship. He desired I would inform the president that he had been here, as he had promised him that he would take care of me. I told him I should certainly comply with his request.<sup>112</sup> We are all well. Mrs. Washington and Family dined with me last Saturday together with General and Mrs. Knox and Mrs. Green.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Withey, 261.

<sup>111</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 25 January 1799, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>112</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 13, January 1799, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>113</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 10 November 1789, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

Abigail continued to serve the political needs of her husband even while remaining at home. She graciously met with all who visited her and planned dinner in honor of many of her guests.

## **Chapter 5: Allies, Adversaries and the President**

Unlike his predecessor George Washington, who was revered by all factions of politics until the very end of his administration, John developed both political allies and adversaries in the roughly 35 years of service; he devoted to the formation of the new nation. Martha Washington served at her husband's side and was able to remain largely out of politics, but Abigail had to be fully aware of the developing politics of the men around her and her husband. As such, she was able to assist her husband during the difficult phases of his Vice-Presidency and Presidency. John often found himself alone in his public policy decisions and he struggled to understand his former friends from the Revolution.

### **Elbridge Gerry and France**

In 1798, Mrs. Adams's politics were exceptionally anti-France. Abigail was upset over the fate of the young, French Queen, Marie Antoinette, and was distrustful of all French politicians. She feared war was unavoidable and that France and her sympathizers were to blame for the ominous state of affairs.<sup>114</sup> The First Lady sided with the extreme Federalist of the party. They believed that the Republicans that sided with France should be punished for their lack of action against the country. "America must be punished, punished for having amongst her legislatures Men who sanction these crimes, who justify France in all her measures, and who would rejoice to see fire, sword, and Massacre carried into the Island of Great Britain until she

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<sup>114</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, March 27, 1798, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 148.

became as miserable, as France is wretched.”<sup>115</sup> From her perspective, the young Nation was standing on the brink of war with its former ally and Congress should take some responsibility for having such men in positions of leadership.

In the case of Elbridge Gerry,<sup>116</sup> Abigail had a mixed relationship with the statesman. She both trusted and doubted him along with his capabilities. While John was Minister in England, Gerry kept Abigail abreast of important activities in the Congress. She would take that information and pass it on to John.<sup>117</sup> Years later, Abigail came to view Gerry’s politics as contrary to her own as he became more Anti-Federalist. On July 12, 1789, Abigail wrote to her sister that no Member of Congress has more contrary sentiment to hers than Elbridge Gerry. She stated that Anti-federalist Gerry, “does not comprehend the Great National System,” and suggested that this misunderstanding will leave him lost.<sup>118</sup> This statement of Abigail was made during the Vice-Presidency. Nearly a decade later, she commented again about Gerry’s actions as a Minister in France. She suggested that he was making a mistake by awaiting orders from the Congress concerning France and the XYZ affair.<sup>119</sup> She felt that the unsavory tactics of the French politicians had insulted United States. John Adams selected Gerry to serve as a member of an envoy to

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<sup>115</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, January 20, 1798, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 124.

<sup>116</sup> “Elbridge Gerry,” *Online Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov>. “A Delegate and a Representative from Massachusetts and a Vice-President of the United States; , colonial house of representatives . . . Member of the Continental Congress 1776-1780 and 1783-1785; a signer of the Declaration of Independence; delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787; elected to the First and Second Congresses (March 4, 1789-March 3, 1793); France on a diplomatic mission in 1797; Governor of Massachusetts 1810-1811; elected Vice-President of the United States on the ticket with James Madison in 1812 and served from March 4, 1813 to 1814.

<sup>117</sup> The Book of Abigail and John, 372.

<sup>118</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, July 12, 1789, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 15.

<sup>119</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, June 19, 1798, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 193.

France to discuss peace. As an Anti-Federalist, the choice of Gerry, a known French supporter, was a controversial one.<sup>120</sup> Rumors circulated about Gerry's loyalty concerning France and many feared he became a traitor. However, Adams trusted Gerry's character and abilities as a member of the elite Revolutionary generation. He firmly believed in the integrity of those who fought the war from independence. Against the advisement of his Cabinet and most likely Abigail, President Adams chose his old friend to represent America's interests.<sup>121</sup> Despite the misgivings of the XYZ affair, the gamble worked in Adams favor. Gerry helped preserve the peace between the United States and France.<sup>122</sup> In spite of the criticism he received, Adams preferred to avoid war with France, then send a representative that may not have conserved peace.

However, John's decisions were based on the common bond that he and Gerry shared as members of the select group from 1760.

### *Alexander Hamilton*

John and Abigail shared a deep distrust of Alexander Hamilton. Throughout the later half of their careers, John Adams and Alexander Hamilton exhibited a deep-rooted dislike of each other. Though the origin of their rift was not exactly known, the political ambitions of Hamilton were a major factor. Adams hypothesized that the animosity was based on unintentional slight of a relative of Hamilton back in days of the Continental Congress.<sup>123</sup> Regardless of the hostility and conniving behavior, John

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<sup>120</sup> McCullough, 486.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 503.

<sup>123</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *Faces of the Revolution*, (Random House: New York), 1990, 16.

and Abigail still supported many of Hamilton's Treasury Department programs. They approved of the policy versus the character of the man creating them.<sup>124</sup>

Unbeknownst to Adams, Hamilton was involved in collaborations to discredit him and keep him from higher office. Adams had served eight years with Hamilton, as he was a member of Washington's cabinet during his Vice Presidency.<sup>125</sup> Adams' rival Hamilton had been in very close circles for the better part of 12 years. As President, John was forced to commission Hamilton in 1800, as the Inspector General and Senior Major General under General Washington in the new provisional army created to defend the United States from France. If Adams did not commission Hamilton, Washington would refuse the position of General.<sup>126</sup> Rather than lose Washington and all chances of creating an army, Adams begrudgingly relented to General Washington's wishes and permitted Washington to select Hamilton for the coveted commission. The incident proved that even detached from an Executive cabinet position or any elected higher office, Hamilton exerted powerful influence over the Office of the President. The incident illustrated that at the end of administration in 1800, Adams had lost control of his party and the politics of the country.

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<sup>124</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, February 20, 1790, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 38.

<sup>125</sup> Encyclopedia of the United States Cabinet, vol. 3, (ABC-CLIO: Santa Barbara), 997-998.

<sup>125</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, May 26, 1800, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 252n. Mark Grossman., Encyclopedia of the United States Cabinet, vol. 3, (ABC-CLIO: Santa Barbara), 997-998. Washington's Cabinet from the second Administration consisted of Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, Henry Knox, Samuel Osgood, Timothy Pickering, Edmund Randolph, Oliver Wolcott Jr., Henry Knox, James McHenry, William Bradford Jr., Charles Lee, Joseph Habersham. Adams's cabinet consisted of Timothy Pickering, John Marshall, Oliver Wolcott, Jr., Samuel Dexter, James McHenry, Roger Griswold, Charles Lee, Joseph Habersham, and Benjamin Stoddart.

<sup>126</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, May 26, 1800, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 252n.

In October of 1800, Hamilton circulated a letter, which was later published as a pamphlet entitled, “The Public Conduct and Character of John Adams.” In it Hamilton, sought to discredit Adams as a capable leader, “No denying to Mr. Adams patriotism and integrity, and even talents of a certain kind, I should be deficient in candor, were I to conceal the conviction, that he does not possess the talents adapted to the Administration of Government, and that there are great and intrinsic defects in his character, which unfit him for the office of the Chief Magistrate.”<sup>127</sup> The allegations against Adams were spread throughout the county. The letters indicate that Mary Cranch questioned her sister about the pamphlet. Abigail declined to answer Hamilton’s allegations to her sister. She remarked that her husband will one day answer these scandalous allegations against her character and ability, but reminds her sister that, “many of which are as goose lies.”<sup>128</sup> In a November 1800 letter, Abigail referred to a request for information from her sister about Hamilton as, “the little General” and then declined to comment on the letter citing, “you have more health to laugh at folly, and pity the weakness, vanity, ambitious views of . . . fables.”<sup>129</sup> Abigail’s mocking of Hamilton reflected her low opinion of the man.

As an observer, Abigail correctly perceived that Hamilton intended to divide the Federalists Party against the President and promote war with France for his own ambition. However, John Adams’s procurement of peace destroyed the platform that Hamilton developed.<sup>130</sup> En route to Quincy in 1800, Abigail, Nabby, and the

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<sup>127</sup> Ellis, 19.

<sup>128</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, November 21, 1800, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 258.

<sup>129</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, November 10, 1800, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 255.

<sup>130</sup> Withey, 271.

grandchildren encountered General Hamilton and his troops in Trenton.<sup>131</sup> Without invitation from the Adams party or consultation with the Commander-in-Chief, Hamilton went on a military tour of Adams's New England stronghold and tried to draw support for his troops and a war with France, as well as promote himself amongst New England Federalist.<sup>132</sup> Abigail remarked that during the chance encounter she observed the troops and then went on to discuss the work of Colonel Smith, who commanded a regiment in Hamilton's army. Hamilton's trip did little to further his cause in the Northern half of the States.

Hamilton's deceitful behavior regarding Adams succeeded in dividing the Federalist and ruining Adams's chances for re-election in 1800. Unfortunately for Hamilton, his character defamation technique succeeded in splitting the party enough that his own chances of becoming President were destroyed along with Adams chances for re-election. The Republican candidate, Thomas Jefferson was elected Adams's successor as the third President.

In her role as John's companion, Abigail needed to understand and observe the both friends and foes in their political world. After the election of the 1796, Abigail recounted to John, "that I have often said to you H\_n is a man ambitious as Julius Caesar, a subtle intriguer. His abilities would make him dangerous if he was to espouse a wrong side, his thirst for Fame is insatiable. I have ever kept my Eye upon

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<sup>131</sup> With the death of General George Washington, Hamilton was denied leadership of the provisional army. Hamilton remained Inspector General. Adams disbanded the army when the threat of war with France subsided.

<sup>132</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, May 26, 1800, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 252 and 252n.

him.”<sup>133</sup> Abigail’s acute sense of politics, human character, and current events served as one of John’s most important tools in his career.

### Jefferson

While serving as a diplomat in Paris from 1780 to 1789, John, Abigail, and the children became close friends with Thomas Jefferson and his young daughter, Polly. Jefferson, a friend from the Revolutionary War generation, provided John with a companion to debate policy and a friend to enjoy the culture of the new country. He also became a friend for Abigail to discuss the fine arts with and to attend dramatic performances. In addition, young Polly filled a void for Abigail created by her daughter’s recent marriage. The two families grew very fond of each other during their stay in Europe. However, by the time John was elected Vice-President, their relationship had begun to sour. The downward spiral of their friendship continued into Adams’s Presidency and climaxed with the election of 1800. Their relationship completely severed due to the political factions and the tensions that dominated their lives and would not resume until the twilight of their years.

In the newly formed government, John trusted no one but Abigail to discuss his feelings about Jefferson. She understood her husband as well as their former friend. Over the course of his Vice-Presidency and Presidency, John relied more and more on Abigail to discuss his mixed situation with Jefferson. Their former friend slowly became their political enemy. In their letters, they discussed Jefferson on a personal, political, and professional basis. He wrote his wife, “I am really astonished at the blind Spirit of Party has Lived on the whole soul of this Jefferson. There is not

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<sup>133</sup> Withey, 241.

a Jacobin in France more devoted to Faction.”<sup>134</sup> Despite their political difference, John assuredly wrote his wife in 1793, that he and Jefferson are still friends, an indication that Abigail was concerned about their declining relationship. “Mr. Jefferson was polite enough to accompany me: so you will see We are still upon Terms.”<sup>135</sup>

In 1793, a situation arose with French minister Genet and Secretary of State Jefferson. John Adams wrote Abigail about the unfolding drama in the Cabinet.

Mr. Jefferson called on me last night and informed me, that to day We should have the whole Budget of Foreign Affairs British as well as French. He Seems as little Satisfied with the Conduct of the French Minister as any one.”<sup>136</sup> “The two Houses have been tolerably unanimous in giving to the Presidents System a kind of rapid Approbation: but what will be the Result of the Negotiations with France and England I know not. Mr. Jefferson has regained his Reputation by the Part he has taken, and his Compositions are much applauded by his able Friends and assented to by others.”<sup>137</sup> The President and Mr. Jefferson have handled Genet, as freely as Columbus. How Jefferson can feel I know not. There are Passages in Genets Letters which imply that Jefferson himself contributed very much to lead him into the snare.<sup>138</sup>

Abigail understood the growing controversy with the French Minister, but acknowledged that her husband had a better understanding of what was unfolding on the foreign relations front with France.

You are at the fountain and yet so far before us, that we do not keep pace with you. Only two Letters have yet been publishd of the important correspondence. One of Mr. Jeffersons to Mr. Morris and Genetts answer; a fine speciman of his Learning and of his English, of his civility and Breeding. A Number of Pieces have appeard in the Chronical order the Signature of Americanus [Alexander Hamilton was known to write under the pen of Americanus], as false and Hollow

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<sup>134</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 28 December 1792, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>135</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 3 February 1793, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>136</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 5 December 1793, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>137</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 12 December 1793, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>138</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 20 December 1793, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

as is the Heart of the writer, but he has an opponent to deal with who throws him upon his Back in every Passage, and when he knows not what to say, he whines and cants like the Hypocrite he is calls the performances of columbus purile and Literary Plagiarism from Juniors affected wit &c, and that even the high station of his Sire will not screen him from contempt. So true is the words of the Poet, "envy will Merrit as its shade persue."<sup>139</sup>

The situation with the French minister, Genet, created quite a stir in the politics of the fledgling nation. From Abigail's perspective, the problems with Genet were being instigated further through the letters appearing in the prominent newspapers.

As the difficulties with the French Foreign minister were being resolved, John wrote Abigail about Jefferson's impending resignation well before the information was made public. Both were surprised at the event, but John confessed to her that he was not distressed by the situation. Over the course of two months, the Adams corresponded about their former friend. He wrote, "I am told Mr. Jefferson is to resign tomorrow. I have so long been in the habit of thinking well of his Abilities and general good dispositions, that I cannot but feel some regret at this Event: but his want of Candour, his obstinate Prejudices both of Aversion and Attachment his real Partiality in Spite of all his pretensions and his low notions . . . I will not weep."<sup>140</sup> Abigail quickly responded to her husband, "I find by the papers that Mr. Jefferson has resigned, and that the Virginia Corps fill the vacant places . . . What ever may be Mr. Jeffersons motives for resigning, I presume he will not be neglected. Most men grow either Avaricious or ambitious as they advance in Life."<sup>141</sup> Abigail stated that the political leaders of Virginia would quickly find a position for one of their favorite

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<sup>139</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 5 January 1794, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>140</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 26 December 1793, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>141</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 12 January 1794, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

sons for she presumed that this was the way politics worked.<sup>142</sup> After Jefferson's resignation, John penned his wife his true opinion of the resignation of the Secretary of State,

Jefferson went off Yesterday, and a good riddance of bad ware. . . I am almost tempted to wish he may be chosen Vice-President at the next Election for there ~~he could neither good nor harm.~~<sup>143</sup> Mr. Jeffersons ~~design~~ resignation tho long talkd of was not fully credited untill it took place. The reason given for it by the French Partizans is that the Nature of his office obliged him to lend his Name to Measures which Militated against his well known principals; and give a sanction to sentiments which his heart disapproved. If this is true he did wisely to withdraw. They say that he will now appear as the Supporter of Genet and they consider him all their own. But I have always reluctantly believed ill of him and do not credit these reports. Yet I know Mr. Jefferson to be deficient in the only sure and certain security, which binds Man to Man and renders him responsible to his Maker.<sup>144</sup>

Abigail was entrusted with John's knowledge of their former friend, his suspicions of the real motive for Jefferson's retirement, and his jibes at Jefferson's future career.

As the years progressed, the relationship between the Adams family and Jefferson became increasingly complex. During the 1793 election, John prepared himself for the likelihood that he would not win re-election as Vice-President and that Jefferson would be elected. He revealed his feelings to Abigail about the impending election. "I received yesterday the Votes from Kentucky. They are Said to be all for Mr. Jefferson. Let Us, my Dear prepare our minds and as well as We can our Circumstances to get out of this miserable Scramble."<sup>145</sup> Despite John's fears and

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<sup>142</sup> Abigail did not have a problem with nepotism. See the section on Abigail's influence over John regarding the appointments of their family members.

<sup>143</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 6 January 1794, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>144</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 18 January 1794, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>145</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 9 January 1793, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

anxieties about his immanent defeat, they were not realized. He won the electoral contest with a landslide victory over Jefferson of 77 to 4.<sup>146</sup>

The next election proved to be more difficult for Mr. Adams. John's worries about losing his Executive position continued and intensified over the Presidential election of 1796. He poured his thoughts out on parchment to the only individual he could trust whole heartily with his feelings. Abigail was always the one person he could truly divulge his underlying vulnerability. He wrote,

You know the Consequence of this, to me and to yourself. Either We must enter upon Ardours more trying than any ever yet experienced; or retire to Quincy Farmers for Life. (I am at least determined not to serve under Jefferson, as W. is not to serve at all. I will not be frightened out of the public service nor will I be disgraced in it. You will say that he will be over persuaded. You know what Jeremy said of Elijah. 'His poor soul would have no chance for salvation for he had sworn most bitterly.'<sup>147</sup>

Abigail agreed with her husband's feelings about his public position and was more adamant about the possibility of becoming Vice-President under Jefferson. "As to holding the office of v p. there I will give my opinion. Resign, retire. I wont be second under no Man but Washington."<sup>148</sup> She advised her husband to not serve as Jefferson's Vice-President. Abigail viewed it as insulting to John's position.

John described to Abigail the politicking that was taking place between the Federalist Party and the various regions of the country.

The Southern Gentry are playing at present a very art ful Game, which I may devallope to youin Confidence hereafter, under the Seal of Secrecy. Both in Conversation and in Letters they are representing the Vice-President as a Man of Moderation. Although rather inclined to limited Monarchy and somewhat attached to the English, he is much less so than Jay or Hamilton. For their Parts for the sake of Conciliation they should be very Willing he should be continued

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<sup>146</sup> Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1994, 360.

<sup>147</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 5 January 1796, [electronic edition]. Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.

<sup>148</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 21 January 1796, [electronic edition]. Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.

as Vice-President, provided Jefferson the Northern Gentlemen would consent that Jefferson should be President. I most humbly thank you for your kind Condescension, Messieurs Transcheasapeaks.<sup>149</sup>

Abigail fully understood John's interpretation of the political situation within their political party and provided her own opinion of the situation.

The Southern Gentlemen think and believe that the Northern Gentleman are fools, but the Northern know that they are so, if they can believe that Such bare faced dupery will Succeed, as that which you say is now practising. Aut Caesar aut Nullus, is my Motto tho I am not used to quote lattin or spell it. I have no desire for the first, whilst he whose Right it is ought to be Sovereign, but if the people are blind, they deserve a Jefferson, or some one not half as deserving. Yet I am sure it will be a most unpleasent Seat, full of Thorns, Briers, thistles, murmuring, fault finding, calumny, obliqui, disgrace for I ought I know, and what not. But the Hand of Providence ought to be attended to and what is designd, Cherefully.<sup>150</sup>

In Abigail's reply to John, she asserted that the Southern politicians were fools to think that that the Northerners will fall for their image of John Adams as passive and content to remain as the Vice-President, for New Englanders knew the Vice-President to be an ambitious and honest leader. She concluded her remarks to her husband by reassuring them that if voters select Jefferson as their President, then it will be a miserable Presidency and they received what they deserved for voting against Adams.

The anxiety of the impending election consumed the winter months of 1796, for the Adams. John resolved himself to losing the election before learning the final tally. "I can pronounce Thomas Jefferson to be chosen P. of U. S. with firmness and a good grace that I dont fear. But here alone abed, by my fireside nobody to Speak to, poring upon my Disgrace and future Prospects -- this is Ugly. The 16 of Feb. will soon come and then I take my Leave, for ever. Then for Frugality and Independence.

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<sup>149</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 23 January 1796, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>150</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 14 February 1796, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

Poverty and Patriotism. Love and a Carrot bed.”<sup>151</sup> Abigail, long accustomed to her husband’s melancholy, does not reply to John’s comments, but instead focused on the possibility of Hamilton or Jefferson winning the election.

You may judge from the statement here made, that the high Authority was aware of the snare, and exerted himself to ward of the blow. H.[Hamilton] is as much suspected here as he is with you, and for the Reasons given by the Jacobins. They say H. knows you will not be governd. I am ready to think that enmity to Jefferson was the prevailing Motive. Jefferson I hope will succeed. I believe the Government would be more ~~illegible~~ conciliated, and the bitterness of party allayd. The former Friendship which subsisted between you would tend to harmonize, and moderation, coolness and temperament would reconcile the present, faring interests to concord. This is my hope, and I do not despair of seeing it effected. You know my Friendship for that Gentleman has lived through his faults and his errors, to which I have not been blind.<sup>152</sup>

Abigail concluded her statement by suggesting that John and Jefferson will become friends again after the election. Adams narrowly won the election over Jefferson with a vote of 71 to 68 to become the Nation’s 2nd President.<sup>153</sup>

Once the results of the election were finalized, John wrote to his wife with the good news. He was elated as he discussed Jefferson serving as Vice-President to Adams.

To be Sure, My Election he said, he had vast pleasure in assuring me since it had been made certain had given vast Satisfaction in this City and State. Even those who had voted for another had a great affection for me. Mr. Smilie himself had told him this very day that he had an affection for me. He met Mr. Madison in the Street and ask'd him if he thought Mr. Jefferson would accept the Vice Presidency. . . Jefferson and I should go on affectionately together and all would be well. I should Settle all disputes with ~~them~~ the French well enough. These are confidential Communications.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 7 December 1796, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>152</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31, December 1796, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

<sup>153</sup> CQ Guide to Elections, 361.

<sup>154</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 1 January 1797, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive](#).

Inclined to be naïve when accessing his political opponents, John was overjoyed to hear of a letter written by Thomas Jefferson about his acceptance of the Vice Presidency. “Mr. Jeffersons Letter to Mr. Madison was Yesterday in the mouth of every one. It is considered as Evidence of his Determination to accept -- of his Friendship for me -- And of his Modesty and Moderation.”<sup>155</sup> Abigail wrote John about the letter and her feeling about the election of Jefferson.

The extract from Mr. Madisons Letter [the letter from Jefferson referred to in John’s January 3, 1797 letter] I believe to be the Genuine sentiments of Mr. Jeffersons Heart. Tho wrong in politicks, tho formerly an advocate for Tom Pains Rights of Man, and tho frequently mistaken in Men and Measures, I do not think him an insincere or a coruptable Man. My Friendship for him has ever been unshaken. I have not a doubt but all the discords ~~will~~ may be tuned to harmony, by the Hand of a skillfull Artist. I see by the paper of to day that the extract is publishd in the Centinel, not through Eve, I assure you, for I have not disclosd it. It has gaind as most storys do, that Mr. J. declares he would not have taken the vice presidency under any other Man.<sup>156</sup>

Despite the stress and strain of the election, Abigail reassured John that they should leave behind their past problems with Jefferson and focus on the future and the new administration. They viewed this as a new beginning to their relationship with their friend from the Revolutionary generation.

### **President Adams**

When Adams was elected President in 1796, he was only the second person to assume the position. Mr. Adams, a man concerned with appropriate behavior, had no precedent to follow on how to properly succeed the Office of the President. As such, he struggled to find a balance between honoring Washington and creating his own administration.

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<sup>155</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 3, January 1797, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

<sup>156</sup> Letter from John Adams to John Adams, 14 January 1797, [electronic edition]. [Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.](#)

From the very beginning of his Presidency, Adams was confronted with difficulties. Thomas Jefferson, Adams former friend, was elected Vice-President. However, Jefferson was not of the political party of the President. He was simply the candidate with the second largest amount of votes. As a result, they were ideological rivals.

In a display of respect to the departing Washington and a desire for a smooth transition, Adams retained Washington's Cabinet. "When I came into office, it was my determination to make as few removals as possible . . . not one from personal motives, not one from party considerations. This resolution I have invariably observed."<sup>157</sup> Adams soon realized that he might have made a mistake in his decision; he was not surrounded by a cabinet of well-wishers. George Washington was revered throughout his Presidency and few thought to question the gentleman, but Adams was another story. Despite Washington's warning against political factions, they had fully developed and were stirring up problems.<sup>158</sup> By the time Adams, a Federalist, became President, he was encircled by a swarm of Republicans and other ambitious Federalists. The administration John built around himself required the assistance of his strongest supporter, Abigail. With his wife remaining in Quincy, he beckoned her to return to Philadelphia to assist him with the Presidency. In 1797, he wrote her,

I must go to you or you must come to me. I cannot live without you. I must entreat you to lose not a moment's time in preparing to come on, that you may take off from me every care of life but that of my public duty, assist me with your councils, and console me with your conversation. The times are critical and

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<sup>157</sup> Brown, 27.

<sup>158</sup> McCullough 479.

dangerous, and I must have you here to assist me. I must now repeat this with zeal and earnestness. I can do nothing without you.<sup>159</sup>

The President quickly realized that he needed his most trusted advisor and confidant to support him. Keeping Washington's cabinet and having Jefferson as Vice-President was not what he expected.

Abigail's position as counsel to her husband extended beyond correspondence, when she was with John she provided him with the same advice and support that she provided through her letters. Many of the communications between Mrs. Adams and her sister are direct reflections of the politics and musings of John Adams. During the build up to the Quasi War with France in 1797, Abigail wrote her sister a letter containing the rhetoric that could have been ripped from John's diary.

Is it possible that any person can suppose this Country wish for war by which nothing is to be obtained, much to be expended and hazarded, in preference to Peace? But in self-defense we may be involved in war; and for that we ought to be prepared, and that is what the President means. What benefit can war be to him? He has no ambition for military Glory. He cannot add by war, to his peace, comfort of happiness. It must accumulate upon him an additional load of care, toil, trouble, malice, honor and independence if his Country to any Nation, and if in support of that, we are involved in war, we must & we ought to meet it, with firmness, with Resolution & with union of Sentiment.<sup>160</sup>

The rant of words read more like a speech to detractors of President Adams than a friendly letter to her sister. In a letter to a friend in 1807, John wrote, "My object was defense of my country, and that alone, which I knew could only be affected by the navy."<sup>161</sup> The two excerpts displayed the singularity of their thoughts and writings as well as Abigail's intimate knowledge of the President's thoughts and feelings. She

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<sup>159</sup> Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 13 March 1797, [electronic edition]. Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive.

<sup>160</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, March 27, 1798, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 148.

<sup>161</sup> Brown, 76.

used that knowledge to spread the word about John's foreign policy motives and how he only had the country's best interest at heart.

Nearing the end of Adams' Presidency, he experienced greater difficulties with his Secretaries and the Federalist Party. President Adams seemed trapped in his own Administration. His only source of support was his wife. In the tense days during the Quasi War, Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, publicly questioned the President's actions, an almost unheard of action in later administrations. Abigail wrote Mary Cranch and went into great detail about the situation in the cabinet. However, she chose to withhold the names of the parties involved. "There is a man in the cabinet, whose manners are forbidding, whose temper is sour and whose resentments are impacile, who nevertheless [sic] would like to dictate every Measure . . . But I am mistaken if this dictator does not get himself ensnared in his own toil. He would not now remain in office."<sup>162</sup> Pickering was removed from his cabinet position on May 12, 1800. With members of his cabinet against him, John needed Abigail more than ever during this phase of his career. Unlike many others, she understood the people, including John, and events of their time. Mrs. Adams was truly John's greatest supporter and most trusted companion.

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<sup>162</sup> Letter from Abigail Adams to Mary Cranch, December 11, 1799, The New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801, 221.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

In many ways, Abigail Adams was a traditional 18<sup>th</sup> Century woman; she was supportive, loving, and bound to her husband and children. But in other ways, Abigail was a non-traditional woman, she was strong willed, a good farm manager, and politically astute. As a woman of the new Republic, she found herself having to lead a lifestyle that she never intended. She never dreamed that she would have to serve as head of the family farm, to serve as a political hostess, or to serve as her husband's political consultant and confidant. For when she married John Adams in 1764, she never imagined that the young lawyer would rise to such national political heights.

The relationship of John and Abigail Adams was one of mutual respect and admiration. Abigail Smith Adams was more than a wife and mother; she was a confidant, an advisor, and a shrewd politician. As a First Lady, she helped to set the diplomatic, social, and ceremonial precedence for the future White House. A woman born to a Massachusetts minister, she overcame her simplicities and lack of education to work toward the success of her husband and their children. Abigail was John's most ardent supporter and viewed his work as her work. She wrote, "If his country calls him to continue longer in Her service, I doubt not that he will be obedient to her voice, in which case I certainly should consider it my duty to accompany him."<sup>163</sup> She was prepared to continue the arduous journey into politics and forego her long sought retirement to the family's home. On the memorial stone to John and Abigail in Quincy, was written the epitaph,

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<sup>163</sup> Akers, 191.

During an Union of more than a half century they survived, in harmony, in sentiment, principle, and affection, the tempest of civil commotion; Meeting undaunted and surmounting the terrors and trials of that revolution which secured the freedom of their country; Improved the condition of their times; And brightened the prospects of futurity to the race of man upon Earth.<sup>164</sup>

Abigail Adams was truly her husband's partner in life. Her capabilities permitted him to dutifully serve the new Nation and forego the direct responsibilities of the family farm and rearing of their four children. She was his closest friend, greatest supporter, and the reason for much of his success in life.

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<sup>164</sup> Richardson, 283.

<b>Locations of John and Abigail Adams: 1789-1801<sup>165</sup></b>		
Year	Abigail Adams	John Adams
January 24, 1789	New York, NY	New York, NY
February 1789- March 1789		
April 1789-May 1789	Braintree, MA	New York, NY
June 1789	Braintree, MA/ New York, N.Y.	New York, NY
July 1789- September 1789	New York, NY	New York, NY
October 1789	New York, NY	Fairfield, MA
November 1789	New York, NY	Braintree, MA/Philadelphia, PA
December 1789		
January 1790-November 1790	New York, NY	New York, NY
January 1791-March 1791	<i>New York, NY</i>	<i>New York, NY</i>
April 1791	Philadelphia, PA	
May 1791	Mrs. Abigail Smith's Home, New York	
June 1791-October 1791	<i>Braintree, MA</i>	<i>Braintree, MA</i>
November 1791-April 1792	Philadelphia, PA	Philadelphia, PA
May 1792-October 1792	<i>Braintree, MA</i>	<i>Braintree, MA</i>
November 1792	Braintree, MA	Hartford, CT/ New York, NY
December 1792-February 1793	Braintree, MA	Philadelphia, PA
March 1793	Braintree, MA	Philadelphia, PA/Quincy, MA
April 1793-October 1793	Quincy, MA	Quincy, MA
November 1793	Quincy, MA	Quincy, MA/ Hartford, CT/Philadelphia, PA
December 1793	Quincy, MA	Philadelphia, PA
January 1794-May 1794	Braintree, MA	Philadelphia, PA
June 1794-October 1794	Braintree, MA	Braintree, MA
November 1794- February 1795	Braintree, MA	Philadelphia, PA
March 1795-May 1795	Braintree, MA	Braintree, MA
June 1795	Boston, MA/ New York, NY	Philadelphia, PA
July 1795-November 1795	<i>Braintree, MA</i>	<i>Braintree, MA</i>

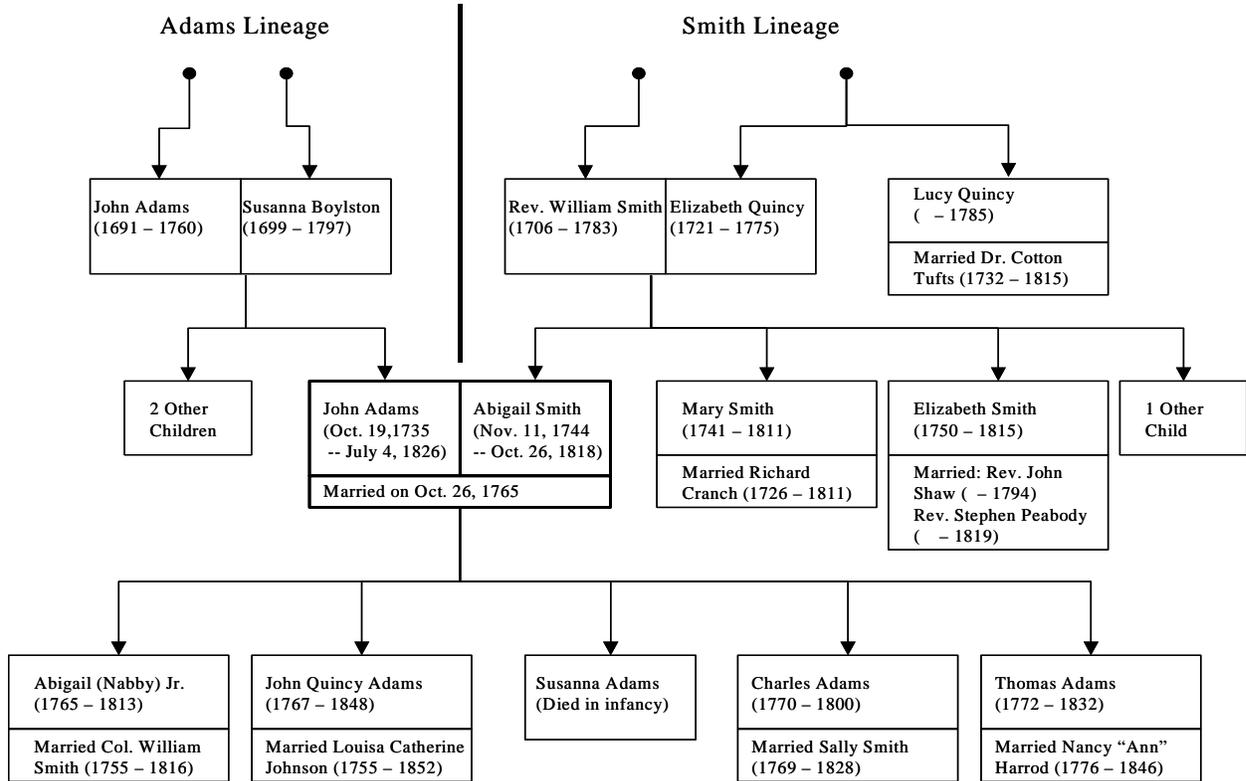
<sup>165</sup> Information is based on the New Letters of Abigail Adams edited by Stewart Mitchell letters and the Letters of John and Abigail Adams from the MA Historical Society.

December 1795-May 1796	Braintree, MA	Philadelphia, PA
June 1796-October 1796	<i>Braintree, MA</i>	<i>Braintree, MA</i>
November 1796	Braintree, MA	Braintree, MA/ Stafford, CT
December 1796-April 1797	Braintree, MA	Philadelphia, PA
May 1797-July 1798	Philadelphia, PA	Philadelphia, PA
August 1798- October 1798	<i>Braintree, MA</i>	<i>Braintree, MA</i>
November 1798-March 1799	Braintree, MA	Philadelphia, PA
April 1799-September 1799	<i>Braintree, MA</i>	<i>Braintree, MA</i>
October 1799	Quincy, MA/ East Chester, PA	Trenton, NJ
November 1799-December 1799	Philadelphia, PA	Philadelphia, PA
January 1800-May 1800	Philadelphia, PA	
June 1800	Quincy, MA/ Washington, DC	Washington, DC
July 1800-September 1800	<i>Braintree, MA</i>	<i>Braintree, MA</i>
October 1800	Quincy, MA	
November 1800	Philadelphia, PA/ Washington, DC	
December 1800-January 1801	Washington, DC	Washington, DC
February 1801	Washington, DC/ Philadelphia, PA/ Baltimore, MD	Washington, DC

Key

- Locations in italics and in yellow are based on the assumption that John and Abigail were at the same location because of the absence of letters between the couple.
- Sections in blue are time periods where John and Abigail are together.

# Adams Family Tree<sup>166</sup>



## Adams Family Tree

<sup>166</sup> Levin, front cover pages and Mitchell, appendix 3 and 4.

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