A Little Girl with a Big Future
Abigail Smith was born in Weymouth, Massachusetts, in 1744. Her father was a Harvard-educated minister. Her mother was from a prestigious colonial family. The two built a happy and secure home for their children. They entertained often, inviting some of the colony’s most intelligent and fascinating citizens to their home. Abigail was one of the couple’s four children. Although she was often sick, Abigail still had a happy childhood. As a girl in colonial society, her dreams for her future no doubt included marrying and having her own family someday. While that dream would indeed come true, little Abigail had a much bigger future ahead of her.

A Life of Her Own
When Abigail was about 17 years old, a man named John Adams began to court her. He sent her letters in which he addressed her as “Miss Adorable.” Abigail responded with her own letters addressed to “My Dearest Friend.” The romantic letter exchange that the couple began in those days would continue for the rest of their lives, especially whenever they had to be apart.

John Adams, like Abigail’s father, had gone to Harvard University. Unlike her father though, he was a lawyer. Abigail’s parents were not altogether happy when the couple decided to marry. Adams was from a modest farming family. In addition, at that time lawyers did not usually make a lot of money. In the end, the Smiths were impressed by Adams’s education, honesty, and willingness to work hard. When they married, Abigail was 19 years old and Adams was 28. The two moved into a house in the small town of Braintree, not far from Abigail’s family home.

A Strong Partnership
From the beginning, John and Abigail were devoted to one another. The many letters that they left behind show a love based on mutual respect and a strong friendship. Abigail believed it was her duty to support her husband in all his endeavors, even when she had to make sacrifices to do so. For his part, John valued his wife’s opinion, delighting in her intelligence and wit.
Struggles and Triumphs
In 1768, Abigail and John moved their family to Boston. Abigail loved city life. She kept busy raising her children, socializing with Boston’s most prominent families, supporting her husband as he grew his legal practice, and keeping up with events in Boston and throughout the colonies. The conflict between England and its North American colonies was growing, and John was in the thick of the excitement. Soon Abigail had to handle things at home alone while her husband left to serve on the Continental Congress. She did not know it at the time, but this separation was to be the first of many separations that did not become easier through the years. Though Abigail recognized that her husband’s work was important, many of her letters also expressed her loneliness.

Abigail proved herself equal in every task. She capably educated her children, ran the farm and household, and helped manage John’s business. In September 1774, John Adams, George Washington, and other colonial leaders were meeting in Philadelphia to discuss how to respond to recent trouble with the British. The Boston Tea Party had already occurred. Abigail had kept her husband informed about the activities of the British in Boston while he was away:

[The] Governor is making all kinds of warlike preparations such as mounting cannon upon Beacon Hill, digging entrenchments upon the Neck, placing cannon there, encamping a regiment there, throwing up Brest Works &c. &c. The people are much alarmed.

As tensions grew and the possibility of war became a certainty, Abigail proved herself not only a passionate Patriot, but also an advocate for women’s rights. In a letter to her husband on March 31, 1776, Abigail took an important step in a long struggle for women’s equality when she wrote,

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 favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not
Abigail Adams

Biography

put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

The war years were filled with difficulties and dangers. As battles raged throughout the colonies, Abigail expressed her fears and anxieties to her husband. In a letter written in May 1777:

I should feel more unhappy and anxious than ever if I realized our being again invaded by the wickedest and cruelest of Enemies. I should not dare to tarry here in my present situation, nor yet know where to flee for safety; the recital of the inhumane and Brutal Treatment of those poor creatures who have fallen into their Hands, Freezes me with Horror. My apprehensions are greatly increased; should they come this way again I know [not] what course I should take.

In 1778, John Adams was asked, along with Benjamin Franklin, to negotiate an alliance with the French. He sailed with his son, John Quincy, to Europe, leaving Abigail and the other children behind. Now the couple was separated not just by 300 miles of land but by thousands of miles of ocean. The only way the two had to communicate was by letter, which was a slow process, especially across the ocean. Yet despite these hardships, Abigail loved her country and never tried to keep her husband at her side. John left for France in February 1778. In May, Abigail wrote the following:

I have waited with great patience, restraining as much as possible every anxious Idea for 3 Months. But now every Vessel which arrives sits my expectation upon the wing. . . . Difficult as the Day is, cruel as this War has been, separated as I am on account of it from the dearest connection in life, I would not exchange my country for the Wealth of the Indies, or be any other than an American.

Second Lady, First Lady
When at last the war was won, John was appointed minister to England and Abigail was at last able to join him in Europe. She had not seen her husband or son for six years. They spent four years abroad, and Abigail delighted in her new surroundings and opportunities.

Back in the United States, the new Constitution was being written while the Adamses were away. After it was ratified, George Washington was elected to be the first president of the United States in 1789. Abigail’s husband John was chosen as vice president. Abigail accompanied him to New York, happy that the two were together and back in the United States. In 1796, John was elected president and Abigail became first lady.
As first lady, Abigail was busier than ever. She rose at 5 a.m. each day and tended to the tasks associated with managing the household. Eleven o’clock was visiting time, and she often saw 60 or more guests each day. Life was a whirlwind of activity. In November 1800, the nation’s capital moved from Philadelphia to Washington, DC. John took up residence in the unfinished White House, and Abigail joined him a few weeks later.

As always, Abigail made the best of things. She carried out her duties as first lady with grace and continued to support her husband. He consulted with her about everything, which caused some to criticize her involvement in political issues. In fact, some people called her “Mrs. President” because they thought she influenced her husband’s policies and decisions too much.

**Finally, Some Time Alone**
John Adams served one term as president. After he lost the election of 1801 to Thomas Jefferson, Abigail and John returned to Massachusetts. They spent the next 17 years quietly, continuing to correspond with those whom they had met through their long, eventful lives.

In addition to her unswerving devotion to her husband and country, Abigail Adams was ahead of her time on many issues. Besides her support for laws to protect women, she also favored a woman’s right to an education. Equally unusual for the time in which she lived, Abigail opposed slavery. In the days before the battles of Lexington and Concord, when talk of independence and freedom filled the country, Abigail wrote to her husband: “I wish most sincerely that there was not a slave in the province. It always appeared a most iniquitous Scheme to me to fight ourselves for what we are robbing the [African Americans] of, who have as good a right to freedom as we have.”

Abigail died of typhoid fever in 1818. She had lived to see her son, John Quincy, become secretary of state. He later was elected the sixth president of the United States.
After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. Abigail wrote to her husband in 1774, saying “[The] Governor is making all kinds of warlike preparations such as mounting cannon upon Beacon Hill, digging entrenchments upon the Neck, placing cannon there, encamping a regiment there, throwing up Brest Works &c. &c.” In these comments, she was expressing
   A. facts
   B. opinions
   C. viewpoints
   D. emotions

2. Which of the following best expresses Abigail’s beliefs about education?
   A. Female education is unnecessary because women have more important duties as wives and mothers.
   B. If women are to educate their children, they must themselves have access to an education.
   C. I refuse to lend my support to the cause of American independence until the issue of education for women is addressed.
   D. Too much time is spent by both men and women in reading and studying rather than more useful activities.

3. During the presidency of John Adams, why did some people refer to Abigail Adams as “Mrs. President”?
   A. They respected her for the sacrifices she had made for the country.
   B. They were ridiculing her for her views on women’s rights.
   C. They hoped to show the world that the new government was democratic.
   D. They thought she had too much influence over her husband, the president.

4. Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, “If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.” How did the ideals expressed in this letter reflect those of the American Revolution that her husband was helping to lead? Support your answer by drawing on details you read in this passage.