

Gender & Marriage in Revolutionary America

The “Union” of John & Abigail Adams

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When studying the formation of the United States of America or any political union, historians would be justified in questioning what allowed states of so many different ideas, institutions and cultures to unite. Given that the development of the modern state can be seen largely as the union of several “imagined communities,” it comes as no surprise that nations are susceptible to civil conflict or even war. In order to better understand what elements aid in unifying peoples of different interests, scholars can turn to one of the simplest and yet most complex of unions. The union between a man and woman in the bonds of matrimony is an institution that has survived for centuries, yet too often has it paralleled the inequalities evident in colonialism. The situation of women in Revolutionary America, for instance, often mirrored the issues that the “Founding Fathers” faced in justifying the rebellion against colonial rule and the creation of a new political system. However, women bore more of the cost of the Revolution and, even with the successful emergence of the American state, women still suffered under many of the grievances and problems that had instigated the Revolution. By examining the lives and writings of John and Abigail Adams, this paper will describe the powerlessness associated with economic dependence and lack of representation experienced by American colonists and, more acutely, by women. By using a single marriage as a model, this paper better discusses the difficult compromises between union and sovereignty.

In the highly charged year of 1776, “taxation without representation” became one of the mottos of the Revolution. While economic inequalities between the mother country and her colonies existed, some scholars have pointed to the class division within American society as a main catalyst. Gary Nash, for instance, argues that “hostility toward men of great wealth intensified and the cultural hegemony of the elite, never firmly established, tottered

precariously.”¹ In other words, those without property and wealth were beginning to see the wealth of the elite as a product of class exploitation. Similar to this injustice, gender exploitation prevented women from controlling property in colonial America. In theory property was owned and administered by men, though in practice some of these rules were changing before the time of the American Revolution. Though Abigail Adams was not legally able to own property, she found herself undertaking various business practices throughout her marriage. While her husband was away on public duties, Abigail “speculated in currency, purchased land, and sold luxury items that John sent from Europe.”² Though all of this was conducted under her husband’s name, the administering of property by Abigail shows the flexibility that existed in this patriarchal society. The union between men and women required some degree of balancing powers or even amending rules to operate effectively.

Abigail’s ability to operate in ways contrary to contemporary ideas about women’s sovereignty in many ways was inherited through her family lineage. Abigail descended from a family of wealth and one that historically recognized the legal status of women as capable of owning and administering property, at least following widowhood. While searching through her family lineage, we find a host of prominent New Englanders on both sides of her family. Through her mother, Elizabeth Quincy, Abigail inherited a well-respected lineage that included “landowners, public officials, and merchants since the early years of Massachusetts.”³ Her father, William Smith, also came from a line of prosperous merchants, with trading ties to the southern colonies and even into the West Indies. Abigail had a special kinship with her maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Norton, in whose house she had lived as a child, but she inherited her

¹ Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution*, Abridged Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986 [1979]), 166.

² Edith B. Gelles, *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 4.

³ Charles W. Akers, *Abigail Adams: An American Woman* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 2.

name from her paternal grandmother. Abigail Fowle was the daughter of Isaac Fowle and Beriah Bright. Isaac Fowle, the descendant of a notable British family, served in King Philip's War and was later promoted to lieutenant. Most remarkably, "his will, dated December 4, 1717, probated November 9, 1718, bequeathed to his widow Beriah the full and sole improvement of all his estate, real and personal, so long as she should remain his widow."⁴ Although Beriah was appointed as a joint executor with her son Henry, it is telling that she, as a woman, was granted full control over her husband's property. Isaac's choice to leave everything to his wife corroborates Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's discovery of 75 to 80% of widows named executors even when they had grown sons.⁵ Following Henry's death, Beriah left her estate to the six children of her daughter and son-in-law, Abigail and William Smith. The record is almost silent regarding Abigail Fowle, though she must have made a significant amount of impact on her son for him to name his second daughter after her. Despite the ability of Abigail Fowle and her granddaughter to administer over property, in both cases this right was granted only in the absence of their husbands. As such, within the marital union gender roles remained distinct, just as classes remained divided following the Revolutionary War and formation of the United States.

Another interpretation of the Revolutionary War is presented by scholars in the imperial school of thought who argue that self-interested Americans seeking westward expansion coupled with British miscalculations led to division.⁶ With regard to gender, self-interest coupled with judgments, whether rational or irrational, was also utilized in the choices of union. When she first met John Adams, Abigail was only a young teenager and did not make a considerable

⁴ William Richard Cutter & William Frederick Adams, editors, *Genealogical and Personal Memoirs Relating to the Families of the State of Massachusetts*, vol. iv (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1910), 2638.

⁵ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991 [1980]), 249.

⁶ See I.R. Christie, *Crisis of Empire: Great Britain and the American Colonies, 1754-1783* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1966), 111.

impression on John. His first written reference to her called her a wit who was “wanting in the ‘Tenderness’ and ‘fondness’ of another girl, Hannah Quincy.”⁷ Later on, it was her wit that John admired and loved, but at the moment he was courting another. In judging upon his self-interest, John was considering marriage to Hannah, yet he did not see it as economically feasible. He had already graduated from Harvard in 1755, taught school, was received into the bar in 1758, and was in the process of establishing his practice in Braintree, Massachusetts. Perhaps he was miscalculating what was sufficient for a successful marriage, but this shows how, to New Englanders like Adams, the patriarchal duty to support a wife and family weighed heavily on a man’s mind. This does not mean that selflessness was the primary occupation in the minds of young singles during this time. As Charles W. Akers explains, it was “absolute Poverty” that dissuaded Adams from entering “early marriage, [which] he knew, could ruin an aspiring lawyer.”⁸ Regardless of the reasons considered, marriage was as serious as any other political union, and was considered carefully as the benefits, responsibilities, and challenges were judged. Just as territorial expansion enveloped the minds of Revolutionary Americans, familial expansion also engaged men and women in their courting process. By 1776, Americans had weighed these issues and chose to create a union beneficial to their own interests.

Understanding man’s self-interest was important not only to British leaders and American statesmen but also to individuals when selecting marriage partners. Following his break with Hannah Quincy, John became a much harsher critic of himself and mankind in general. His experiences in personal relationships spoke to his developing thoughts regarding political relationships. While he debated with himself in his diary concerning the ability of men to govern, he found that even “the most refined Patriotism to which human Nature can be

⁷ L.H. Butterfield, et al., editors, *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 17.

⁸ Akers, *Abigail Adams*, 14.

wrought, has in it an alloy of Ambition, of Pride and avarice that debases the Composition, and produces mischievous Effects.”⁹ Given the wicked nature of men to seek only their self-interest, what form of government could possibly create a better union? Historically, women were not given the opportunity to choose or have a say in their marital partners, though this had changed by the time of the Revolution. Abigail’s parents were not fully satisfied with her choice to marry a lawyer, it being a degree below their status, yet the decision was hers. The marital union, therefore, was the perfect model for a political union. Let those who are involved choose what is best for them. Nevertheless, when the states chose to unite and when democracy was looked to for governance, there were still those who were excluded from the decisions. Once a union was created, a woman’s voice was disqualified. Within her marriage, Abigail was meant to sacrifice a degree of her sovereignty to her representative and husband. This “virtual representation” allowed men to stand for their wives, and such it was in the electoral process.

In order for men to choose good leaders, some degree of education was required. The Revolutionary War was sparked significantly by the increase of ideas, pamphlets and newspaper writing. As John recorded in his diary on August 1, 1761,

I must judge for myself, but how can I judge, how can any Man judge, unless his Mind has been opened and enlarged by Reading. A Man who can read, will find in his Bible, in the common sermon Books that common People have by them and even in the Almanack and News Papers, Rules and observations, that will enlarge his Range of Thought, and enable him the better to judge who has and who has

⁹ John Adams, *John Adams Diary October 18, 1761*, from the Massachusetts Historical Society, *Adams Family Papers*, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=D7> (accessed March 6, 2009).

not that Integrity of Heart, and that Compass of Knowledge and Understanding,
which form the Statesman.¹⁰

As education and literacy increased, “colonial protests argued for the rights of Englishmen on a constitutional basis.”¹¹ As such, “taxation without representation” took on not only economic meaning but also the call for legal and intellectual rights. Once again, however, women were excluded from these ideas. Nevertheless, John found a woman with a range of thought that exceeded her own education. Abigail was not granted all of the luxuries we attribute to modern day elite. She was not given any formal education as females were typically denied schooling. Just as the British sought to maintain the function of colonists as British subjects, the patriarchal authority likewise dictated that the primary function of women remained that of wife and mother.

In revolutionary America, it was considered that the best instruction a young girl could possibly receive took place inside the home and was restricted to matters involving home and family. This was no different than the British idea that American legislatures maintained authority of their domestic responsibilities while Parliament governed over all other matters. Nevertheless, her home schooling allowed Abigail and her sisters to gain an interest in reading scriptures, literature and newspapers. They also enjoyed writing letters and even discussing politics. Upon reflecting on their youth, Abigail’s sister Mary asked how it was possible “that so totally secluded as we were in childhood from the world, we came to be so interested in the politics of it at so early a period of life.”¹² Their interests were fueled not only by the things they read, but also by listening in on the conversations of their parents and friends. Revolutionary

¹⁰ John Adams, *John Adams Diary August 1, 1761*, from the Massachusetts Historical Society, *Adams Family Papers*, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=D7> (accessed March 6, 2009).

¹¹ Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995 [1953]), 118.

¹² Mary Smith Cranch, quoted in Nagel, *The Adams Women: Abigail and Louisa Adams, Their Sisters and Daughters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 11.

sentiments were also fueled through print and the spoken word as Americans began rejecting their seclusion from the political debate. Abigail's rejection of intellectual seclusion allowed her mind to develop strong ideas that most assuredly aided her husband and marriage in later years. Their marital union was strengthened by their common interests in classical and popular literature as well the debates of their time. It would be folly to assume that any union exists without contributions from all parties involved, regardless of how equality in the relationship is viewed.

Although Abigail would later disparage some of the inequalities forced upon women, she also considered the patriarchal realm as "divinely ordained and natural."¹³ To her husband, she was outspoken about many of her feelings, yet, both openly and to her husband, she remained a submissive wife as society expected of her. In this regard, Abigail, just as any one of the states in the Union, understood that a degree of her sovereignty needed to be sacrificed to have a stronger union, or family, of her own. In modern times, it is recognized that sacrifices are needed on both sides of the union. In the eighteenth century, however, the sovereignty of women was given less attention. The sovereignty of the individual, specifically in marriage, was never easy to maintain. In his ongoing debate with Henry James and Horace Greeley, Stephen Pearl Andrews argued in 1858 "that the same evils which exist under the Institutions of Despotism and Slavery exist likewise under the Institution of Marriage and the Family."¹⁴ According to Andrews, it was the inability of married women to own property that primarily manifested their repression under marriage. Knowing that marriage required some sacrifice from either the man or the woman (although more commonly this sacrifice was demanded of the woman), Andrews questioned the validity of the institution as a whole. He even went as far as

¹³ Gelles, *Portia*, xvi.

¹⁴ Stephen Pearl Andrews, et al., *Love, Marriage, and Divorce and the Sovereignty of the Individual and Divorce* (New York: Source Book Press, 1972 [1853 and 1860]), 35.

suggesting the eventual break-up of marriage as a practice in order to ensure complete sovereignty. In the modern debate regarding marriage and whether or not the control of this institution should be left to the individual states or federal government is also no less a discussion of sovereignty than it is one regarding morality or civil rights.

To understand whether morality, rights, or sovereignty provoked Abigail's feminist efforts, particularly in her letter to her husband at the beginning of the Revolution, many historians rely on speculation. "By the way," Abigail wrote in March 1776,

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. 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.¹⁵

Abigail's reminder regarding the tyranny of men applied to John's consistent lack of faith in mankind, but did not his pessimism also address women? Her mention of representation could be perceived as a request for voting rights, though one may wonder whether Abigail would have been satisfied with "virtual representation." Mary Beth Norton and Carl N. Degler argue that by addressing power in the hands of husbands, Abigail was concerned with property rights under marriage.¹⁶ On the other hand, her concern over "vicious" men or their "cruelty" may also have

¹⁵ Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776*, letter quoted in Butterfield, et al., 121.

¹⁶ See Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996 [1980]), 50-51; see also Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 190.

been more concerned with male sexual oppression, as suggested by Nancy F. Cott.¹⁷ Regardless of her particular meaning, it is important to recognize Abigail's concern over some form of tyranny against the female sex. As state diplomats were sent to constitutional conventions to ensure no overwhelming tyranny be placed upon their constituents, Abigail simply offered her diplomatic plea on behalf of women.

Abigail remained a strong defender of the union between men and women, accepting their "separate but equal" status. This meant that men were to exercise their power as friends, rather than taking on the "harsh title of Master." The final line in this popular "Remember the Ladies" letter provides insight into Abigail's view of the roles of men concerning women. "Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness."¹⁸ Protection and happiness were important ideas of governance to Americans for the next decade, especially as the Constitution and Bill of Rights were written. Nevertheless, John's reply was less than serious, laughing off her request as merely theoretical in nature. "In Practice you know We are the subjects," he wrote. "We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticcoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight."¹⁹ This war of words never resulted in any actual rebellion on the part of women, which begs the question as to whether Abigail's request was also limited to theory.

The discussion over women's rights did not end with John's light-hearted reply, as Abigail responded on the issue once more in May of that year. Again she addressed the issue not

¹⁷ Nancy F. Cott, "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850," *Signs* 4, no. 2 (Winter, 1978), 229.

¹⁸ Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776*, letter quoted in Butterfield, et al., 121.

¹⁹ John Adams, *John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776*, letter quoted in Butterfield, et al., 123.

so much with regard to women as she emphasized marital relations. “You insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives.” She did not go as far as arguing that all power should be relinquished, but that the power of married women needed to be recognized. “Notwithstanding all your wise Laws and Maxims,” she continued, “we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our Masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet.”²⁰ In theory, women had the power to overthrow the patriarchy, but in practice Abigail believed that some form of “natural” authority still existed. In addition, she addresses legal authority as opposed to political, thus calling into question her feelings concerning suffrage. Perhaps within marriage Abigail believed in a separation of powers, similar to the way in which American statesmen sought to balance three branches of government.

Aside from perceived natural differences, there were still legal and societal impediments that prevented women from their full measure of happiness. Abigail recognized challenges to wives, but also to all women. Her denial of a formal education weighed heavily on her mind throughout her life. This same burden fell on John’s mind as well, though not with regard to women. John was worried about the lack of education amongst the future men that would lead the newly united States and complained about it to his wife. Abigail responded, “If you complain of neglect of Education in sons, What shall I say with regard to daughters, who every day experience the want of it.” Appealing to John’s liberal mind, she argued, “if we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen and Philosophers, we should have learned women.”²¹ Having not received a formal education because of her sex, this was a sensitive issue for Abigail. By writing to her husband, she hoped to convince him through a shared interest that raising women, at least in education, could benefit society as he desired.

²⁰ Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to John Adams, May 7, 1776*, letter quoted in Butterfield, et al., 127.

²¹ Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to John Adams, August 14, 1776*, letter quoted in Butterfield, et al., 153.

The union between John and Abigail, though imperfect, contained mutual love and concern for each other's well-being. Following the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Abigail showed joy in the foundations that were being laid for a wondrous political union, but her thoughts remained upon her husband. On July 21, 1776, she lamented having not heard regarding John's health. "My anxiety for your welfare will never leave me but with my parting Breath, tis of more importance to me than all this World contains besides." Abigail understood the importance that her sacrifice was, not only for her children but for the entire future of the country. Nevertheless, she implored John "never to omit what is so essential to my happiness."²² In subsequent letters, John remembered to include his health. He also showed much love in his letters, though not as passionately at times as his earliest letters during courtship. The separation that John and Abigail endured, however, was difficult and their letters are filled with anxiety and concern for each other's well-being.

Anxiety was a common feeling for husbands and wives during the Revolutionary War, though the war was not always the cause. On July 9, 1777, while Abigail was pregnant with their sixth child, she wrote a small letter of grief. "I have been very unwell for this week past, with some complaints that have been new to men, tho I hope not dangerous." Such thoughts are not irrational even amongst today's women in an age of modern medicine. Without the luxury of calling a 24-hour clinic, Abigail confided in her husband. "I was last night taken with a shaking fit," she explained, "and am very apprehensive that a life was lost."²³ Being separate from his family and his duty as a father, John responded the very next day. "My Mind is Anxious, and my Heart in Pain for my dearest Friend... Three Times have I felt the most distressing Sympathy

²² Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to John Adams, July 21, 1776*, letter quoted in Butterfield, et al., 148.

²³ Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to John Adams, July 9, 1777*, letter quoted in Butterfield, et al., 178.

with my Partner, without being able to afford her any Kind of Solace, or Assistance.”²⁴ John was concerned not only for his wife but his infant child. Three days later Abigail’s doctor wrote a letter informing him of the still born child. Abigail’s worries were justified and her hope for a daughter was fulfilled and devastated at the same moment. She wrote of her submission to the will of God, but could not prevent the emotional pain she endured. John’s absence made it even more difficult, for both parties. “My dearest Friend,” John wrote, “Never in my whole Life, was my Heart affected with such Emotions and Sensations, as were this Day occasioned by your Letters... Devoutly do I return Thanks to God, whose kind Providence has preserved to me a Life that is dearer to me than all other Blessings in this World.”²⁵ This experience witnesses to the struggles that all married couples faced in Revolutionary America. Pregnancy brought extreme worries for the health of wife and child alike, and the loss of one or both was a less than unusual occurrence.

There is no concrete evidence regarding the mortality rate of mothers and their newborns, but from the worries recorded in Abigail’s letters we can surmise that pregnancy brought legitimate anxiety to Revolutionary Americans. In his study of seventeenth century Plymouth, John Demos found evidence to suggest “that in one out of thirty deliveries the mother would lose her life, or, stated another way, that every fifth woman in the Old Colony died from causes associated with childbirth.” If these numbers were consistent into eighteenth century Massachusetts, the odds were not favorable for Abigail, this being her sixth pregnancy. “The mortality rate for newborn infants is more difficult to determine,” Demos continues, “but one in ten would seem a reasonable guess.”²⁶ For Abigail, this guess falls short of reality. It could be

²⁴ John Adams, *John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 10, 1777*, letter quoted in Butterfield, et al., 178.

²⁵ John Adams, *John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 28, 1777*, letter quoted in Butterfield, et al., 184.

²⁶ John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 131-132.

argued that medicine was more advanced than it had been a century earlier, but even in the nineteenth century questions are left unanswered. As Nancy Schrom Dye suggests, “we need to assess the extent to which new medical practices themselves were harmful.”²⁷ Even modern science has failed to produce a harmony of opinion regarding childbirth and obstetrics with notions of protecting women and infants.²⁸ In Abigail’s case, we find a tragedy that burdened her just as greatly as, if not more than, those who sent their sons into battle were pained by the prospect of losing grown children. Nevertheless, the colonies were united and willing to make sacrifices, just as husband and wife mimicked each other in placing their burdens upon their God and each other. When John’s father passed away, he wrote of how the loss “tenderly affected me, but I hope with full Confidence to meet him in a better World.” His faith in God remained strong, but the death of those around him also drew him closer to his dear wife. Not two lines later and John addressed Abigail, “I feel for you, as I know how justly dear to you, your father was.”²⁹ Stress and tension, while having the ability to tear apart some marriages, was used to share closer emotions and strengthened the union between John and Abigail.

Marital unions are commonly professed before God, and the Adams’ union was no different. Religion played an important role in their marriage and family life, and it is unlikely that it was insignificant in other affairs, including politics. While exploring the many letters between John and Abigail that have survived, one would find very few without some reference to God or Heaven. In his letter on July 3, 1776, explaining the passage of a resolution to declare independence, John attributed it as “the Will of Heaven, that the two Countries should be sundered forever.” Concluding that letter, John placed his full faith before God. “But I must

²⁷ Nancy Schrom Dye, “History of Childbirth in America,” *Signs* 6, no. 1 (Autumn, 1980), 105.

²⁸ For a detailed account of pregnancy and childbirth perspectives from eighteenth century America to the present, including the evolution of medical practices, see Karen L. Michaelson, editor, *Childbirth in America: Anthropological Perspectives* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1988), pages 91, 142, & 157 in particular.

²⁹ John Adams, *John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 25, 1784*, letter quoted in Butterfield, et al., 373.

submit all my Hopes and Fears,” he said, “to an overruling Providence, in which, unfashionable as the Faith may be, I firmly believe.”³⁰ Overjoyed with the news, Abigail wrote of her desire for the future of their country. “May the foundation of our new constitution, be justice, Truth and Righteousness.” Having oft times made use of literary and scriptural language in her letters, Abigail chose in this letter the spiritual word. “Like the wise Mans house may it be founded upon those Rocks and then neither storms or tempests will overthrow it.”³¹ Theirs was a union between husband, wife and God, and there was no reason not to believe that God would not be part of the new union between the states.

The next two lines in Abigail’s reply may shed a degree of light on the future discussion of church and state relations in America’s governance. “I cannot but feel sorry,” she wrote, “that some of the most Manly Sentiments in the Declaration are Expunged from the printed copy. Perhaps wise reasons induced it.”³² At first glance, her use of manly brings questions regarding her views of manhood. The fact, however, that it is capitalized and follows her discussion of the scriptural parable regarding the wise man denotes a religious connotation. Why did the delegates in the First Continental Congress seek a union with less religious assertions, or “Manly Sentiments,” than some would have expected? As Abigail answered her own query, perhaps wise reasons did dictate these decisions. Nevertheless, to Abigail the idea of separating church and state did not mean detaching religion from public servants. Years later when Europe was undergoing its own set of revolutions, Abigail wrote to her sister of her distress regarding obstacles to religion. “It is a part of Religion as well as morality, to do justly and to love mercy and a man can not be an honest & Zealous promoter of the Principles of a True Government, without possessing that Good will towards man which leads to the Love of God, and respect for

³⁰ John Adams, *John Adams to Abigail Adams, July 3, 1776*, letter quoted in Butterfield, et al., 139-140.

³¹ Abigail Adams, *Abigail Adams to John Adams, July 14, 1776*, letter quoted in Butterfield, et al., 145.

³² *Ibid.*, 145.

the Deity.”³³ These were thoughts shared by her husband as well, whose advice in 1776 to the individual states was to balance legislative, executive, and judicial power in a “government of laws, and not of men.”³⁴ What is a government of laws as opposed to a government of men? Being well-acquainted with philosophy, Adams knew, “the government of laws, said Aristotle, is the government of God.”³⁵ Taken in comparison to Abigail’s requests regarding women, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Abigail also sought for a government of laws, and not of men.

At the time of the American Revolution, women were largely seen as inferior to men and, as the nation of liberty and equality developed, were not allowed their complete and equal rights. Nevertheless, many men and women created unions during this time that lasted their entire lives. The marriage between John Adams and Abigail Smith was a strong and special union fostered by mutual love, faith in God, and intellectual discourse. Given the disparities in gender relationships, their union was uniquely equal in many respects. Just as the Revolutionary War and subsequent Constitutional Convention of 1787 created a union unparalleled in history, the marriage between John and Abigail was likewise beyond compare to other contemporary marriages. It was a union that was far from perfect, but so was the American Union. Just as the United States Constitution allowed for the amendment process to address unsolved inequalities, the issues of gender would likewise be revisited during the next two centuries. In addition, balancing between union and sovereignty remains a difficult and challenging task both in personal and political lives. If the marital union has the power to survive over centuries of disparity, then surely a political union must be capable of the same.

³³ Abigail Adams, quoted in Stewart Mitchell, editor, *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), 179.

³⁴ John Adams & Charles Francis Adams, editor, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1865), 230.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 404-405.

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Adams, John. *John Adams Diary 21 March – 18 October 1761*. Diary. From the Massachusetts Historical Society, *Adams Family Papers*. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=D7> (accessed March 6, 2009).

The diary of John Adams is an excellent window into the *personal* thoughts and feelings of one of America's most influential statesmen. The Massachusetts Historical Society has made a number of these documents available on their website with the ability of the researcher to search for terms and words, thus making it easier to find whatever you desire (if it exists).

Adams, John & Charles Francis Adams, editors. *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1865.

The works of John Adams within this text includes numerous documents concerning his thoughts regarding government. Especially when understanding the later Constitutional Convention, this source can be invaluable in realizing how early a balance of powers was even considered.

Akers, Charles W. *Abigail Adams: An American Woman*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980.

Adding to the many biographies already available about Abigail Adams, Aker's study is one useful account into the life of this remarkable woman. Akers addresses the various debates regarding some of Abigail's words within her letters, and also provides his own unique insights which provide the researcher with a broad understanding of the interpretations available.

Andrews, Stephen Pearl, Henry James, Horace Greeley & Robert Dale Owen, editors & contributors. *Love, Marriage, and Divorce and the Sovereignty of the Individual and Divorce*. New York: Source Book Press, 1972 [1853 and 1860].

In this work, we have a debate in the middle of the nineteenth century, prior to the Civil War, regarding the validity of the institution of marriage. While the time of this document is a century later than the subjects in this essay, the debates reflect the universal discussion of sovereignty and union within marital relations. Also, being as early as it is, the authors are able to debate over marriage without falling into the modern debates regarding marriage that would be inapplicable to the seventeenth century.

Butterfield, L.H., Marc Friedlaender & Mary-Jo Kline, editors. *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

This book includes numerous of the personal letters between John and Abigail, thus giving the historian a view into the personal relationship of an influential Revolutionary couple. Though many of the letters in this book have been previously available, this particular edition includes additional letters not available in a single source as well as introductory and explanatory lines to give the reader a better understanding of the period.

Christie, I.R. *Crisis of Empire: Great Britain and the American Colonies, 1754-1783*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1966.

Though only referenced as a source regarding the Imperial School interpretations of the American Revolution, this work is an excellent secondary source that shows the divergent viewpoints regarding revolutionary thinking. Taken in the context of union and disunion, the British perspective is just as important as the American, as are both perspectives of men and women.

Cott, Nancy F. "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1850." *Signs* 4, no. 2 (Winter, 1978): 219-236.

One particular explanation of Abigail Adams' "Remember the Ladies" discourse is found in this article by Nancy F. Cott. No discussion of Adams' feminism is complete without addressing the various interpretations of her words. This article discusses sexuality and sexual ideology in a way that links American ideas of manhood to the Victorian model.

Cutter, William Richard & William Frederick Adams, editors. *Genealogical and Personal Memoirs Relating to the Families of the State of Massachusetts*, vol. iv. New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1910.

This is an extremely useful source in tracing genealogical roots of families from early Massachusetts. In this essay it has been used to trace Abigail Adams' lineage as well as to incorporate certain facts regarding her family, particularly female ancestors.

Degler, Carl N. *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

In this interpretation of Abigail Adams' "Remember the Ladies," Degler discusses property rights, which is a common concern throughout American colonial history up to this point. In addition, this is a valuable tool in understanding the way in which women and family both were united and how their union has continued to this day.

Demos, John. *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony*. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Though this monograph deals with an earlier period to the Revolutionary Era, it is significant in numerous ways. First, it addresses Massachusetts, which is the same region, thus making it more plausible for traditions to have passed on to Revolutionary Massachusetts. In addition, this book deals with the family, womanhood, and specifically used in this essay is its information regarding mortality rates, which is invaluable.

Dye, Nancy Schrom. "History of Childbirth in America." *Signs* 6, no. 1 (Autumn, 1980): 97-108.

To write any history regarding women and gender, one must address the issue of childbirth. This article by Dye is an exceptional piece, especially in its detailed examination of the evolution of medicinal practices.

Gelles, Edith B. *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Edith B. Gelles has produced us with another exceptional work on the life of Abigail Adams. Not only does this book deal with Abigail's thoughts and the various interpretations thereof, it also deals with the many day-to-day jobs that were a part of Abigail's life.

Michaelson, Karen L., editor. *Childbirth in America: Anthropological Perspectives*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1988.

In addition to Dye's article on childbirth, this is another exceptional book to utilize. Karen Michaelson has compiled numerous essays dealing with childbirth in American history, and this work has been referenced here simply to give the researcher additional sources to consider.

Mitchell, Stewart, editor. *New Letters of Abigail Adams, 1788-1801*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947.

Typically, when looking into the life of Abigail Adams, it is easy to limit ourselves to her letters to her husband. In this work, Stewart Mitchell has compiled additional letters previously unavailable, and all from a later period in Abigail's life (which is also typically overlooked). Many of these letters are to her sister, which provides an alternate writing style to the romantic interaction between Abigail and her husband.

Morgan, Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan. *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995 [1953].

This is an excellent source on the Revolutionary period and the events leading up to the War. One particular interpretation this work deals with regards ideas and ideology, and when talking about education and the limits placed on women, many further questions can come about when viewing the Revolutionary debates.

Nagel, Paul C. *The Adams Women: Abigail and Louisa Adams, Their Sisters and Daughters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

When dealing with gender and womanhood, this is an excellent work that focuses not only on Abigail, but on all of her direct female relatives. Of particular interest is the relationship between Abigail and her sister Mary, which this book includes numerous references. By analyzing their relationship, we gain a better understanding of Abigail not only as an adult, but as an adult who was once a child (or an adult looking back at her childhood).

Nash, Gary B. *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution*, Abridged Edition. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986 [1979].

As another interpretation regarding the causes of the American Revolution, this work by Gary Nash is exceptional in analyzing the economic disparity in America. Given the fact that women themselves were disadvantaged economically, this is an applicable work when comparing women to colonists in their struggles against oppression.

Norton, Mary Beth. *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1996 [1980].

In addition to Degler's work, this book by Mary Beth Norton discusses the "property" and "legal" rights interpretation of Abigail's "Remember the Ladies." In addition, as a secondary source regarding female life during the Revolutionary period, this work is invaluable in aiding the historian's perception of gender roles in eighteenth century America.

Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991 [1980].

This work by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich deals with an entire century prior to the Revolutionary period. It discusses gender roles and womanhood, particularly in northern New England, which is certainly applicable to the topic. Another item that is of importance in this book is Ulrich's quantitative account regarding women's inheritance and property rights after widowhood.