

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

# American First Ladies

Their Lives and Their Legacy

*Edited by*  
**Lewis L. Gould**



*American First Ladies*



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LEWIS L. GOULD



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Lewis L. Gould  
*Austin, Texas*





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# *The First Lady as Symbol and Institution*

Since the early 1980s historians, journalists, and popular writers have devoted serious attention to the role of the wife of the president of the United States in national politics and cultural life. Earlier there had been individual works that considered the place of the First Lady in American history, including Marianne Means, *The Woman in the White House* (1963), and Sol Barzman, *The First Ladies* (1970). These and other books on the First Ladies, however, drew only rarely on personal papers and original documents. For the most part they were selective and anecdotal as well.

During the past decade and a half numerous studies of the First Lady have attempted to identify the impact of these women on American history. Authors such as Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies* (1986), Myra Gutin, *The President's Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century* (1989), and Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies* (2 vols., 1990–1991) have scrutinized the institution based on extensive research into primary sources. Simultaneously, college courses on the First Lady have been offered, symposia have brought together former First Ladies to discuss their legacy, and scholarly panels have been held to measure the significance of presidential wives. By the early 1990s the outlines of a distinct research area devoted to First Ladies had emerged where history, political science, and women's studies intersected.

Despite these constructive achievements the new field lacked a reliable, up-to-date reference work that included the essential facts about each First Lady in a brief biographical essay. The purpose of *American First Ladies* is to provide the general reading public, especially students coming initially to First Ladies, with informative entries about each of these women, entries that also indicate the location of primary sources, reliable biographies where available, and topics for further research.

Each entry on a First Lady is a self-contained unit with a chronological account of her life and an effort to assess her place in the development of the institution of the First Lady. The bibliographical essays outline where personal papers and other relevant manuscript sources can be found. They also provide a selection of the First Lady's own writings, contemporary articles or memoirs by family and friends, biographical studies of both her and her husband, and relevant newspaper stories, scholarly articles, and general surveys. In the case of deceased First Ladies, an obituary is also listed.

The editor's first task was to decide who should be included in the encyclopedia. For this volume the working definition of a First Lady is the woman or women (in the case of John Tyler and Woodrow Wilson) who were married to the president of the United States during his term of office. Previous marriages were thus ruled out, and so Alice Lee Roosevelt, Theodore Roosevelt's deceased first wife, and Jane Wyman, Ronald Reagan's divorced first wife, do not have essays devoted to them. Similarly, wives who died before their husband reached the White House have not been the subject of essays. This group includes Martha Jefferson, Rachel Jackson, Hanna Van Buren, and Ellen Herndon Arthur.

Other candidates for attention who receive coverage in books about First Ladies were the women who served as White House hostesses, what Betty Caroli has called "Young Substitutes for First Ladies" or "stand-in chatelaines." Two of his nieces served Andrew Jackson in this capacity between 1829 and 1837. Angelica Van Buren, the daughter-in-law of President Martin Van Buren, played a similar role between 1837 and 1841. Since James Buchanan was a bachelor president, his niece Harriet Lane functioned as his hostess from 1857 to 1861. Chester Alan Arthur called on his sister Mary Arthur McElroy to be his hostess between 1881 and 1885. While these women were valuable aides to the president in his social capacity, they never occupied the same status in the minds of the American people as the wife of a president. Their contributions to the institution of the First Lady were fleeting and ephemeral, and they did not merit inclusion in a volume devoted to presidential wives.

During the mid-nineteenth century a number of First Ladies relied on their daughters or daughters-in-law to aid them in the White House. These relationships, however, could be dealt with in the context of the essays about the First Ladies themselves, as the entries on Anna Harrison, Letitia Tyler, Margaret Taylor, Abigail Fillmore, and Eliza Johnson make clear.

*American First Ladies* seeks to provide readers with a sense of the institutional continuity and traditions of the position of the First Lady as it has evolved over more than 200 years. Accordingly, even a president's wife such as Anna

Harrison, who was First Lady for only six weeks in 1841 and who never came to Washington, is still part of the continuum that runs from Martha Washington to Hillary Rodham Clinton in a way that Emily Donelson, hostess for Andrew Jackson, or Harriet Lane never were.

Some of the apparent gaps in the coverage of First Ladies that arise from this editorial decision are covered by the existing essays in this encyclopedia. Holly Cowan Shulman's treatment of Dolley Madison indicates how she served as a surrogate hostess for Thomas Jefferson for eight years. For the other First Lady stand-ins of the nineteenth century, researchers are referred to books by Carl Anthony and Betty Caroli, where these women are treated in detail.

Of the thirty-eight women whose lives are described in this encyclopedia, some made such a slight mark on the history of their time that only a brief essay was needed to exhaust what was known about them. Anna Harrison, Letitia Tyler, Margaret Taylor, and Jane Pierce fall into that group. With the burgeoning interest in First Lady studies, however, more information on the less renowned nineteenth-century presidential wives is likely to come to light.

For the remaining thirty-four women the editor asked the contributors to provide essays ranging between 5,000 and 10,000 words, depending on the historical importance of the First Lady herself. The length of each essay was determined by the perceived significance of the various First Ladies and their impact on the institution. Because of the greater availability of source materials and more intense coverage of their activities, the late-twentieth-century First Ladies have longer essays devoted to them.

The contributors tried to point out instances where particular First Ladies were the first members of the institution to engage in an innovative activity—to speak in public, hire a social secretary, talk on the radio, campaign for partisan candidates, testify before a congressional committee, or act as a full White House aide. They have also devoted attention to questions of education, public image, the nature of the presidential marriage, and child rearing in and out of the White House. Within the limits of the available sources and the space allotted to them, the authors have also endeavored to give a sense of the personality and individual appeal of each of these fascinating women.

Americans are ambivalent about presidential wives. The public expects the First Lady to fulfill a multitude of roles flawlessly, and there is criticism at any departure from perceived standards. At the same time the criteria for success as a First Lady constantly change as the public's view of women evolves and develops. These essays reveal the degree to which First Ladies have, from Martha Washington onward, been the subject of popular attention and controversy about their

performance in the national spotlight. With the perspective that these biographical studies provide, it should now be easier to make intelligent assessments of how much future First Ladies resemble their historic predecessors.

The histories of First Ladies have common elements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but there are also evident differences: The role of the president's wife has responded to changes in the nation's highest office itself and the social demands on women. During the period from 1789 to 1861 First Ladies were mostly private personages, with Dolley Madison as the notable exception and Julia Tyler a brief portent of fame to come. With the advent of Mary Todd Lincoln and her notoriety during the Civil War, the possibility of intense newspaper attention to First Ladies became a reality. None of Mary Todd Lincoln's late-nineteenth-century successors equalled her celebrity, although the coverage devoted to Lucy Webb Hayes and Frances Folsom Cleveland indicated a mounting degree of popular interest in the White House and its families.

During the early twentieth century First Ladies slowly acquired a true institutional apparatus to help with meeting the mounting demands on their time. Isabelle "Belle" Hagner represented the first social secretary to a First Lady in the modern sense when Edith Kermit Roosevelt employed her in 1902. During Mrs. Roosevelt's tenure, the role of the president's wife began to become that of social arbiter of good taste and leader of feminine fashion. Illness prevented Helen Herron Taft and Ellen Bolling Wilson from building on Edith Roosevelt's legacy before World War I.

Edith Wilson became a negative role model in her performance after President Woodrow Wilson became seriously ill in 1919. The consensus was that she had overstepped the implied limits of her position when she screened correspondence and visitors to her sick husband. Her example served as a powerful cautionary lesson against First Lady activism. Nonetheless, the impulse toward a greater visibility for presidential wives proved able to overcome the setback that Edith Wilson had dealt the institution.

As Republican First Ladies and the wives of less-than-successful presidents, Florence Kling Harding, Grace Goodhue Coolidge, and Lou Henry Hoover seem pale beside the imposing presence of Eleanor Roosevelt. Yet, as the entries on these women make clear, they each contributed to the institutional development of the role of First Lady and exploited to varying degrees their increasing status as media attractions. Florence Harding had a more feminist emphasis to her public work and paid particular attention to the media aspects of the White House. Similarly, Grace Coolidge provided a modicum of glamour and sophistication to her husband's administration and used her position to support artists and perform-

ers from all phases of the arts. Lou Henry Hoover was the first presidential wife to speak to radio audiences, and her identification with the Girl Scouts shaped her response to the economic depression that her husband faced as president. By the end of the 1920s the public had become accustomed to seeing First Ladies as more visible figures than had been the case twenty years before.

The major innovations in what a First Lady could do, of course, came with the twelve-year tenure of Eleanor Roosevelt. Her press conferences, daily newspaper column, and extensive travels made her a national personality in a way that no previous First Lady had achieved. While some of the changes she made in the institution, such as regular press conferences, did not endure, her example as an activist role model gave her successors a precedent to invoke when they wished to pursue a cause or a campaign. A full-scale examination of Eleanor Roosevelt's contributions as First Lady, based on her extensive personal papers, is one of the pressing needs of scholarship on presidential wives.

In the two decades after Mrs. Roosevelt left the White House in 1945, her successors—Bess Truman, Mamie Eisenhower, and Jacqueline Kennedy—did not embark on substantive activism or follow favorite causes. Mrs. Truman and Mrs. Eisenhower represented a return to the more traditional model of the First Lady as the helpmate, out of the public eye. Jacqueline Kennedy infused the institution with glamour and celebrity and thus aroused popular interest in what the First Lady did, even if her own accomplishments were limited to a renovation of the interior of the White House. With the growing influence of television, the First Lady became a focus for media attention.

During the three decades since Jacqueline Kennedy was in the White House a growing emphasis on activism has marked the role of the First Lady. Lady Bird Johnson identified herself with the environment and beautification. Her use of staff, her involvement with conservation legislation, and her advocacy of environmental causes laid down a style as First Lady that her Democratic successors would emulate. Following Mrs. Johnson, Patricia Nixon was less visible in her public role, but, as recent scholarship about her indicates, she was as involved in serious causes as her husband's conservative administration would allow her to be.

Betty Ford was the most feminist First Lady since Eleanor Roosevelt, in her campaigning for the Equal Rights Amendment and her general stance for a liberated and open lifestyle. The brevity of her husband's term and her own problems with chemical dependencies limited the impact of her tenure, but she pushed the boundaries of the institution in significant ways. Similarly, Rosalynn Carter was an energetic and purposeful First Lady who tried to forge a public partnership with her husband that reflected the nature of their marriage. That her strat-

egy aroused a public backlash attested to the enduring strength of traditional ideas regarding what the wife of the president should do. Mrs. Carter's record will probably gain in historical interest as researchers investigate the materials about her activities at the Carter Library.

Nancy Reagan's controversial eight years revealed how much the popular expectation of First Lady activism had become embedded within the political culture. Faced with a public reaction against her opulent lifestyle during her first two years, she and her advisers turned to a "Just Say No" campaign against illicit drugs to validate her credentials as a First Lady with a real cause. During the second Reagan term, her influence on the presidency evoked memories of Edith Wilson and comparable criticism of her performance from male critics in the press. Despite the low rankings she has received in the polls of historians, Nancy Reagan will prove to be one of the most interesting and written-about First Ladies of the modern era.

Few First Ladies can match the sustained popularity of Barbara Bush. During her four years in the position she maintained a level of public approval and applause that often saw her outpacing her husband in the polls. She benefited from following the turbulent performance of Nancy Reagan, but she also managed the media and her own image with a great deal of deftness. Her endorsement of literacy never attracted any serious criticism, and she survived the experience of being First Lady with few serious controversies. The publication of her memoirs and the opening of the Bush Library may cause some slight downward revision in her historical standing because she was more acerbic in private than her genial public posture indicated. Nonetheless, Mrs. Bush will probably be regarded as a successful First Lady because she fulfilled the several roles of the position so smoothly.

As the institution of the First Lady approaches the twenty-first century, the experience of Hillary Rodham Clinton underscores the clashing expectations that Americans still bring to the wife of the president. For independent women who have career patterns similar to that Hillary Rodham Clinton followed, the current First Lady is an inspiring model. Other women, and many men, on the right of the political spectrum regard Hillary Clinton as a figure of such evil intentions as to render her almost devilish in character. Why she should evoke such contradictory impressions will be for her future biographers to decide.

As First Lady, Hillary Clinton broadened the range of what the wife of a president can do in her role as a policy leader in the health care debate. While subsequent First Ladies may draw back from the extensive involvement in substantive issues that Mrs. Clinton has practiced, there will be other presidential

wives in the future who will build on the precedents she has developed. In the case of First Ladies, once an innovation has occurred, it is not long before others in the White House use the example as a rationale for their course as the wife of the president. As professional women become First Ladies in the future, Hillary Clinton will probably be seen not as a dramatic departure from older norms but the first example of how the wife of the president mirrors social trends a decade or so after they have first been noticed.

For more than two centuries the spouse of the president has been a woman. In the twenty-first century the likelihood of there being a woman chief executive will grow. How will an institution premised on the presence of a wife adapt to a "First Gentleman" or "First Mate," to mention some of the improbable titles applied to prospective presidential husbands? An encyclopedia about First Ladies cannot peer into that misty future and project how the institution will adjust to a male occupant, but there will undoubtedly have to be major changes to accommodate a male consort in the White House. Once the succession of First Ladies has been interrupted, an enduring American institution will have been changed in serious ways.

For the present, however, the historical importance of First Ladies seems ensured. These women offer a significant perspective on how their fellow citizens regard marriage, child rearing, women in society, and gender relations within the United States. The thirty-eight women included in *American First Ladies* have been interesting, controversial, sad, and inspiring. Americans have sensed that the wife of the president of the United States says something meaningful about the way the nation has chosen to organize its private and public affairs. The contributors to this biographical encyclopedia share this assumption, and their individual entries are designed to introduce readers to a fascinating group of women whose historical role deserves to be argued about and studied in an intelligent and thoughtful way.

#### *Bibliographical Essay*

There are a number of general surveys of First Ladies. Some of the older ones include Laura C. Holloway, *Ladies of the White House* (Philadelphia, 1870, 1881), Kathleen Prindiville, *First Ladies* (New York, 1942), Mary Ormsbee Whitton, *First First Ladies, 1789–1865* (New York, 1948), Marianne Means, *The Woman in the White House* (New York, 1963), and Sol Barzman, *The First Ladies* (New York, 1970). General histories of the White House in which the First Ladies are featured are Bess Furman, *White House Profile* (Indianapolis, 1951), Amy La Follette Jensen, *The White House* (New York, 1962), William Seale, *The President's House* (2 vols., Washington,



D.C., 1986), and Elise K. Kirk, *Music at the White House: A History of the American Spirit* (Urbana, Ill., 1986). The most recent treatment is Betty Boyd Caroli, *Inside the White House* (New York, 1992).

For recent scholarship on the First Ladies, see Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies* (New York, 1987), Nancy Kegan Smith and Mary C. Ryan, eds., *Modern First Ladies: Their Documentary Legacy* (Washington, D.C., 1989), Myra Gutin, *The President's Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, Conn., 1989), and Carl Sferrazza Anthony, *First Ladies: The Saga of the Presidents' Wives and Their Power, 1789–1990* (2 vols., New York, 1990, 1991). Other popular treatments are James S. Rosebush, *First Lady, Public Wife* (Lanham, Md., 1987), Paul F. Boller Jr., *Presidential Wives* (New York, 1988), Diana Dixon Healy, *America's First Ladies: Private Lives of the Presidential Wives* (New York, 1988), Peter Hay, *All the President's Ladies* (New York, 1988), and Alice E. Anderson, *Behind Every Successful President* (New York, 1992). Ann Grimes, *Running Mates* (New York, 1990) examines the campaign of 1988 from the perspective of the women who might become First Lady. An unpublished doctoral dissertation about First Ladies is Barbara Oney Garvey, "A Rhetorical-Humanistic Analysis of the Relationship between First Ladies and the Way Women Find a Place in Society," (Ph.D. dissertation: Ohio State University, 1978). The fall 1990 issue of *Presidential Studies Quarterly* was devoted in part to a number of essays about twentieth-century First Ladies.

# AMERICAN FIRST LADIES



*Martha (Dandridge Custis) Washington*

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# *Martha (Dandridge Custis) Washington*

*(1731–1802)*

*First Lady: 1789–1797*

Martha Washington was the “worthy partner,” as her obituary phrased it, of the nation’s first president. So entwined were their lives that she can hardly be thought of other than in conjunction with George Washington. As First Lady—although the term was not used in her lifetime—she devoted herself to domestic and social life, setting a pattern for many of the women who came after her.

Born Martha Dandridge on June 2, 1731, in New Kent County, Virginia, she was the first of eight children of John Dandridge, a modest planter and county clerk, and Frances Jones Dandridge. The Dandridges were members of the gentry class but by no means in the first rank of tidewater aristocrats. Being the oldest sister of a large family—her youngest sister was born when she was twenty-five—helped shape the matronly aspect of her character so marked in adulthood. For a woman of her time and place, Martha received an education that her parents and itinerant tutors considered quite adequate, but the vagaries of diction and grammar in her letters show its limits. A lady’s education emphasized “accomplishments”—music, the arts, dress, fine sewing, dancing, demeanor, household management—to the detriment of reading, writing, mathematics, and certainly of any higher subjects that might make her seem undesirably bookish to suitors. Marriage was a Virginia woman’s destiny, and charm, in the absence of fortune, was essential for attracting a husband.

Certainly, Martha was quietly charming. At the age of seventeen she caught the fancy of Daniel Parke Custis, a man twenty years her senior. He had been thwarted in earlier attempts at matrimony by his eccentric and domineering father, John Custis, who indignantly refused permission to this marriage as well. The Custises and the Parkes, Daniel’s mother’s family, were among the wealthiest and most prominent families in Virginia, and John Custis looked higher than little Miss Dandridge, barely out of the schoolroom and meagerly dowered, for

his only son and presumed heir. Finally in 1749, through the intervention of a friend, the elder Custis acquiesced to the marriage, reportedly remarking that he was “as much enamored with her character” as Daniel was “with her person.” He promptly made a will in favor of his son and died in a timely fashion.

The wedding took place in 1750 at the bride’s home, and the two set up housekeeping at Custis’s plantation, ironically called White House, on the Pamunkey River some thirty-three miles from Williamsburg, the colonial capital. Children arrived promptly: Daniel Parke (b. 1751), Frances Parke (b. 1753), John Parke (b. 1754), and Martha Parke (b. 1756). In 1754 young Daniel died, the first of a trail of deaths that marred their happy life. Two years later Martha’s father died suddenly while traveling. In the spring of 1757 their daughter Frances died, followed three months later by Daniel Custis himself, who fell ill and died suddenly, intestate, leaving Martha Custis an extremely wealthy widow of twenty-six with two small children to rear, almost no experience of financial matters, and a tangled morass of plantation affairs and Custis family problems, including a generation-old lawsuit that threatened to beggar the estate.

Surviving documents from the period of her widowhood give a sense of the overwhelming situation facing her. Letters from agents, attorneys, and merchants refer to complex business matters; any decision about the estate might have long-lasting and possibly disastrous results. Lacking an understanding of basic finance, Martha needed someone trustworthy to look after her affairs.

And then came the tall, dignified, ambitious soldier, a few months her junior, from a respectably circumstanced family much like her own. They had probably met previously during Williamsburg’s social season. It must have seemed providential for both of them when the colonel of the Virginia militia began courting the wealthy young widow. In March and June 1758, in the intervals allowed by his military duties, George Washington visited at White House, and they settled their future; he put in train renovations and a considerable enlargement of Mount Vernon, the simple manor house he rented from his brother’s widow.

Washington had courted other women in his youth and had nursed a hopeless infatuation for an older, married neighbor, the glamorous Sally Fairfax. Marriage, however, was a serious matter, requiring, in his opinion, good sense, good dispositions, and sufficient financial means. In the long run, friendship was more important than a fleeting passion. Besides the attraction of her wealth, Martha was good-natured and pretty, a tiny woman under five feet tall with brown hair and slanting hazel eyes. Most important, the engaged couple shared similarities of disposition and outlook that forged a forty-year marriage of extreme happiness. They agreed on the importance of dignity, good reputation, decency in

human relations, and a settled family life. Neither was addicted to the vices endemic among wealthy planter families—high-stakes gambling, drunkenness, debt accumulation, and infidelity.

They were married at White House on January 6, 1759, a year and a half after Daniel Custis's death. After a visit to Williamsburg, Washington took his new wife and stepchildren to Mount Vernon, far from their family and friends in the south. Two years later, on the death of his sister-in-law, Washington became the owner of the plantation that is so closely associated with his memory.

There, for the next fifteen years, the Washingtons enjoyed lives of happiness and simple contentment, partners in, according to a letter quoted by James T. Flexner, all the "domestic enjoyments" so relished by Washington after the austerity of his youth and the rigors of military life. He became an experimental farmer of some renown, adding to his acreage and making the plantation profitable, and becoming a leader in the political and social life of the colony. Although he was troubled by the moral implications of slavery, the basis for the plantation economy, the Mount Vernon slaves were not freed until his death. The Washingtons accepted slavery as an economic necessity but dealt humanely with their unfree labor force, providing decent living conditions, keeping families together, and refusing to sell slaves against their will.

Martha Washington's concerns were primarily domestic: creating a harmonious and well-run household, managing large-scale spinning and sewing enterprises, and catering to her husband's comfort. The Mount Vernon family was very social, daily welcoming friends and acquaintances for dinner or extended visits. The influx of visitors to Mount Vernon prompted Washington in the 1770s to enlarge the house further, to its present size. To Mrs. Washington, the house seemed filled with "mirth and gaiety." Happy though they were in their marriage, the Washingtons were sorely disappointed by their failure to have children. George was a loving stepfather and a careful financial steward to the Custis children, but there was no doubt that they were Martha's children and that she would have the final say concerning them. Although Martha had been quick to criticize her own mother for spoiling a little sister, she could not see that she was similarly at fault.

Reluctant to let the children out of her sight, Martha Washington was a loving, neurotically overanxious, and much too doting mother. She spoiled her son John ("Jacky") shamefully, despite her new husband's attempts to impose some sort of discipline. Jacky grew up self-indulgent and indolent, careless of both education and occupation. Her youngest child, Martha "Patsy" Custis, was a worry in a different way: from childhood the girl was delicate, subject to epileptic fits of increasing severity. One afternoon in June 1773, Patsy rose from the dinner

table, suffered a seizure, and died in less than two minutes. "This Sudden, and unexpected blow," wrote Washington in his diary for June 19, 1773, "has almost reduced my poor Wife to the lowest ebb of Misery."

That fall, Jacky, for all his faults a loving son, returned home to be with his grieving mother. Washington succumbed to the combined entreaties of his wife and stepson and allowed Jacky to abandon his studies at King's College and to marry Eleanor Calvert, a member of a prominent Maryland family. They were wed in February 1774.

The Washingtons' private affairs, of course, were rapidly eclipsed by history as the colonies moved toward an open confrontation with the mother country. When George rode off as a delegate to the first Continental Congress in 1774, Martha Washington struggled to accept the revolutionary changes overtaking the Virginia colony. Despite her lack of interest in politics she became a staunch defender of the patriots' cause and was scandalized by allegations that she was a Tory who opposed her husband's views.

As Washington rapidly emerged as the indispensable man of the American Revolution, he and his wife saw their placid, pastoral life disappear. For the first time since their marriage, they were separated for long periods. Washington felt compelled to accept command of the Continental Army. He wrote to his wife on June 18, 1775, informing her of his decision; his tone, which is almost apologetic, assures her that his true happiness lay with her and the family. Ever concerned for his wife's welfare, George made his will and bought Martha two suits of what he was told was the "prettiest Muslin." Upon leaving for Boston he wrote: "I retain an unalterable affection for you, which neither time or distance can change."

Losing hope for an early return to Mount Vernon, in the fall of 1775 Washington invited his wife to join him at the army's winter encampment outside Boston. For the first time in her life this retiring middle-aged woman traveled north of Alexandria, Virginia, jolting over dreadful roads to join her husband.

For the first time, too, she experienced her husband's growing celebrity. The Washingtons were respected in Virginia but had never been singled out. On this journey there were numerous public demonstrations along the way. In Philadelphia she was accorded extraordinary civilities and escorted on her way out of the city, as she dryly observed, "in as great pomp as if I had been a very great somebody."

Arriving at the camp in December 1775 Martha Washington found the preparations for war "very terable indeed" but promptly set about creating a home-like atmosphere, an oasis of peace where she attended to her needlework, wel-

comed the officers and their wives to her quarters, and provided emotional comfort for her hard-pressed husband. This first visit set the pattern for the Revolutionary War years. Each spring when the army took to the field she returned to Mount Vernon and the family. Each fall she rejoined her husband wherever the army was encamped for the winter. The pleasant, grandmotherly figure became an icon of the American army, the general's lady who brought something of home and hearth to the beleaguered troops.

As the war drew to a close, Martha suffered a crushing personal tragedy. Jacky Custis, who had not served in the revolutionary army, in 1781 joined his stepfather at Yorktown to enjoy the British defeat; there he contracted one of the endemic camp fevers and soon died. His wife, Eleanor, and mother, who rushed to his bedside, were devastated. Martha Washington had written on other occasions that parents of very large families were better able to bear the frequent deaths of children. It must have seemed especially painful to her that, with only two children surviving infancy, both should die before her.

Grief-stricken, Martha dreaded retirement at a Mount Vernon without children to care for. But Jacky's widow had four small children, and the Washingtons offered to adopt the two youngest, Eleanor Parke Custis (b. 1779) and George Washington Parke Custis (b. 1781). Although there was no formal adoption, Nelly and Wash, as they were known, lived with the Washingtons as their children for the rest of their lives. Their mother soon married a family acquaintance and had many more children. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such adoptions by family members were quite common. The relationship remained close and there was constant visiting back and forth between the families.

In 1783, with the Revolutionary War at a close, the Washingtons returned eagerly to Mount Vernon, attempting to pick up the strands of their previous life. Washington occupied himself with completing the embellishment of the house and restoring the land, which was sorely neglected during the war. Mrs. Washington tended to her small grandchildren, who were an endless source of interest to her. Because Washington believed girls should be as well educated as boys, the children shared a tutor, who doubled as secretary to the general. The most important of their tutors was Tobias Lear, who became a fixture of Washington family life, devoted to them and eventually marrying (in succession) two of Mrs. Washington's nieces.

Regarding Nelly, her grandmother was more of a disciplinarian than she had been with the previous generation. Her hours of music practice and studies were strictly observed, and any faults of demeanor were promptly corrected. Unfortunately, Mrs. Washington continued her permissive course toward boys—



"my pritty little Dear Boy . . . it makes me miserable if ever he complains." Like his father, Wash was indolent, an indifferent student whose grandmother blamed his teachers for any lack of scholastic progress. Perhaps, though, the seeming impossibility of measuring up to Washington contributed to both Jacky's and Wash's dilatory ways.

The children's health was a constant preoccupation for their grandmother. They were not allowed to overeat or to indulge in heavy food, since Martha held the firm opinion that "worms is the cause of all complaints in children." Her remedy for childhood worms—an elixir of wormseed, rhubarb, garlic, and "best wine or whiskey"—is preserved in Nelly's 1830s housekeeping book.

Not surprisingly, the endless minor complications of childhood, combined with the very real dangers of epidemic illness—smallpox, yellow fever, typhoid, and whooping cough—kept Martha apprehensive. Besides her own four children, by this time she had lost five of her seven brothers and sisters, and numerous nieces and nephews. Death was very much a part of eighteenth-century life. A devout Episcopalian, Martha found solace in her religion; still, as she wrote to a bereaved friend, "nature will, notwithstanding, indulge, for a while, its sorrows."

The younger women in the family, including her daughter-in-law Eleanor and favored nieces from both the Dandridge and Washington families along with the wives of Washington's aides, were essential to Martha's happiness. She enjoyed a companionable social life, with a circle of young women friends to help her entertain the many visitors who found their way to Mount Vernon's hospitable door. Increasingly, these visitors were politicians as the Articles of Confederation were superseded by a federal constitution. Most Americans agreed that there was only one possible president for the new government—George Washington. Again, duty called, and when Washington was informed of his election in April 1789 he set off within two days for New York City, the temporary capital.

Mrs. Washington, who had dreamed of permanent retirement with her husband, hoping "to grow old in solitude and tranquility together," was not best pleased by this honor. She wrote, "I think it was much too late for him to go in to publick life again" but acquiesced, as always, in his devotion to the nation. She remained a resolute patriot with all her prejudices in favor of America. As she wrote to a friend returning from a European sojourn, "I think our country affords every thing that can give pleasure or satisfaction to a rational mind."

In New York, Washington found that everything of the day-to-day business of the government was yet to be invented, and he felt his way slowly in setting precedents for the future. His governmental burden was complicated by a disconcerting social problem. There were many who believed that the nation's citi-

zens had an inalienable right to meet their president at will and that he was obliged to entertain them. Always hospitable, Washington found, however, that this republican propensity for intruding on the president on the smallest excuse—or indeed none at all—made it almost impossible for him to carry out the work he had been elected to do.

After consultation with trusted friends and advisors, Washington fixed a formal schedule of public entertaining and refused to receive guests at other times. To limit intrusive visitors, he inaugurated a weekly levee on Tuesday afternoons, which any respectable-looking man was welcome to attend without appointment. He delegated domestic arrangements to the indispensable Tobias Lear and sent the family coach back to Mount Vernon. Martha Washington and her two young grandchildren, accompanied by her niece, as well as one of Washington's nephews, set off, arriving in New York on May 28, 1789.

Martha Washington's report on the journey reflects her usual mix of concerns, public and domestic: an agreeable trip despite Nelly's coach sickness, a reception by dignitaries in Philadelphia, shoes and stays ordered for her favorite niece. The little party was met at Elizabethtown by the president in a fine barge, culminating the "great parade that was made for us all the way we come."

Martha Washington's first care was to enroll the children in a good school. She very soon, however, discovered the tedium of constant public attention. Contrary to her usual habit at home, her hair had to be set and dressed every day and she attended much more to her clothes, putting on white muslin habits for the summer—"a good deal in the fashion."

The boundaries of social life to be observed by the president's lady were just being defined, and often the definition arrived at by her husband was not to her liking. Washington had decided that his wife would preside at a weekly drawing room for both men and women on Friday evenings. On the second day after her arrival in New York she was the hostess at the first of these parties, which continued throughout Washington's presidency. Seated, Martha Washington received her guests, who were greeted by the president and then were free to circulate among the other visitors. In addition, the Washingtons gave dinner parties on Thursdays evenings for government officials and their families, as well as for foreign dignitaries, invited in rotation.

Limiting their social life to official entertainments, Washington had announced that he and his wife would not accept invitations to private gatherings. Mrs. Washington was considerably disgruntled to find herself so fettered by political considerations. She repined and stayed at home—"I am more like a state prisoner than anything else, there is certain bounds set for me which I must not

depart from—and as I can not doe as I like I am obstinate and stay at home a great deal.” None of the guests attending the presidential entertainments, however, knew of her dissatisfaction. Although Washington was sometimes criticized for stiffness and ceremoniousness, his wife was always given high marks for her charm and graciousness. Even her husband’s political enemies succumbed to the effortless kindness with which she made all her guests feel at ease.

Living arrangements for the presidential family were makeshift, inasmuch as both Washington, D.C., and the White House were years in the future. The Washingtons rented a three-story house on Cherry Street, large but still cramped with the many staff and servants to be housed; it also served as the working office of the president and his staff. Mrs. Washington mothered not only her grandchildren but also the several young gentlemen who were the president’s secretaries and aides. In addition to their official duties, these amiable bachelors escorted her and the children on their excursions and acted as deputy hosts on all social occasions.

Besides the family and staff, Martha Washington enjoyed friendships with the wives of other government officials. Fortunately, Lucy Knox, the wife of the secretary of war, was an old friend from Revolutionary War days. An unexpected new friend, given the differences in their personal styles, was the outspoken New Englander Abigail Adams. Mrs. Adams, generally more inclined to critical observation, wrote soon after meeting her, in a letter to Mary Cranch of July 12, 1789, that “Mrs. Washington is one of those unassuming characters which create Love & Esteem. A most becoming pleasantness sits upon her countenance & an unaffected deportment which renders her the object of veneration and Respect.”

There were grave doubts at home and abroad about the long-term success of what many considered to be nothing more than an experimental American government. Only Washington, it was believed, enjoyed the solid popular respect needed to lead the new nation through these years. But Washington, as his worried wife pointed out, was an elderly, if vigorous, man. During the first two years of his presidency illness threatened both his life and the shaky government. Washington was so gravely ill in 1789 and again in 1790 that he nearly died. The nation trembled, and all the more Martha Washington. Although he recovered completely both times, she was convinced that long hours, worry, and lack of regular exercise were undermining her husband’s health.

At the end of 1790, after a holiday at Mount Vernon, the family moved to the interim capital, Philadelphia, the nation’s leading city. They rented the large Morris mansion on High Street, and the president busied himself with household alterations and improvements, one of his abiding interests. The Custis children were settled in school, and the Washingtons again took up their schedule of offi-

cial entertainments. But in Philadelphia there were many old friends and some engaging new ones. Gradually, under his wife's influence, the president's strictures against accepting private invitations were informally relaxed, and the seven years they spent in Philadelphia were filled with activity as they attended parties, the theater, church, concerts, and everything else of interest from balloon ascensions to a circular panorama of Westminster and London.

Some of the family's Philadelphia friends were extremely wealthy, well-educated, and sophisticated, to the distaste of voluble republican critics. Martha Washington, however, with her simple dignity, self-confidence, and graceful manners never found herself at a loss socially. Only about her writing ability did she suffer from any sense of diffidence. When she wanted to shine, certain letters—to the wives of foreign officials or the formidably accomplished Elizabeth Powel or her official responses to tendered gifts—were drafted for her by Washington or by Tobias Lear. She then copied these drafts and signed them as her own. But the formal correspondence with its attention to grammar and consciously literary turns of phrase lacks the charm of her own letters to her intimates—sensible, homely, and frequently lightened with self-deprecating humor.

As far as Martha Washington was concerned, her sixty-year-old husband had done all that could be expected for his country by 1792, toward the end of his first term as president. Their neglected acres at Mount Vernon needed attention, and the rising tide of partisan political attacks distressed both Washingtons. It was time for him to retire and let a younger generation of political leaders take command. Unfortunately, they were not yet prepared to do so, and both factions begged Washington to accept a second term for the good of the country. It was almost unbearably disappointing to Martha Washington when her aging husband again bowed to duty. After the simple inauguration, which she and the children attended, the problems of the second term rapidly multiplied, becoming far worse than she could ever have anticipated.

The deadly yellow fever epidemic that struck Philadelphia in 1793, forcing the Washington family to take refuge in Germantown, was an ominous beginning to a troubled time. These years saw the Whiskey Rebellion, a major international crisis with Great Britain, Indian attacks on the frontier, and the tumultuous intrusion of French Revolutionary influence into American politics. Most discouraging of all to Washington was the ferocity of partisan infighting as Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson emerged as leaders of contending political factions. Republican newspaper attacks on the president grew more virulent, wounding him terribly. The family formed a lasting dislike of Jefferson for his deliberate orchestration of Washington's mortification.

Martha Washington feared that her husband would not survive the many strains of a second term. When he wrenched his back while riding during a 1794 trip to Mount Vernon she was beside herself with anxiety. Only his return to Philadelphia prevented her from posting down on the stagecoach.

The disappointments of these years caused the president and his wife to long for their well-earned retirement at Mount Vernon. Washington had spent eight weary years building a government that could survive a change of executive, avoiding the cycles of revolution and dictatorship that would plague future republics. Remaining only to attend the inauguration of John Adams, they bade farewell to their friends in Philadelphia and loaded the family, staff, servants, Nelly's dog and parrot, as well as mountains of baggage, into two groaning coaches. The overflow—furniture and yet more baggage—was sent by ship. Despite a very heavy cold and cough, Martha Washington would hear of no delay in setting off for Virginia.

They arrived back home in March 1797 to find Mount Vernon in considerable disarray, with many of the buildings decaying. Mrs. Washington wrote to an old friend that “we once more (and I am very sure never to quit it again) got seated under our own Roof, more like new beginners than old established residents.”

Their retirement followed the pattern of previous returns to Mount Vernon. “Farmer Washington” began to bring his land back into shape after years of neglect and to oversee long-overdue building repairs. His wife devoted herself to the young people. Even though Washington Custis had remained behind for the time being at Princeton College, another young man needed her maternal attentions—George Washington Lafayette, adolescent son of the Marquis de Lafayette, sent in 1795 with his tutor to live with the Washingtons while his father languished as a political prisoner; young Lafayette remained part of the household until that fall.

Eighteen-year-old Nelly, however, claimed her grandmother's special care. By Virginia reckoning it was time to find a husband for the sprightly young brunette. She was frequently sent for extended visits with friends in Alexandria or with her older sisters, married with babies, both of whom lived in the fashionable Washington suburb of Georgetown. For a year and a half after returning to Virginia she regularly attended tea parties, the theater, horse races, and balls on these visits. Although her grandmother warned her that “one always expects more pleasure than they realize after the matter is over,” balls remained her favorite amusement. When she was at home young friends from the neighborhood and acquaintances from the city were frequent callers. She

attracted numerous admirers but did not immediately receive a formal offer of marriage.

The Washingtons had always entertained generously and had a large acquaintance, but now the former president's celebrity was a magnet, drawing an endless string of visitors to their door—relatives, friends, acquaintances, those who could scrape up an introduction, and some for whom sheer gall was excuse enough. Eating dinner alone together was such a rarity that Washington mentioned the occasion in a note to Lear that summer; George and Martha Washington had last dined alone in 1785.

Ultimately the press of visitors became too great for the Washingtons' settled habits. They liked to retire early to bed, and he often wished to spend the evening in his study, arranging his papers or answering his large correspondence. He invited one of his many nephews, Lawrence Lewis, to join the family as an unpaid secretary and deputy host. Lewis was a childless widower of thirty, the son of Washington's sister Betty. He moved to Mount Vernon in 1797, relieving the Washingtons of many cares and becoming engaged to Nelly at Christmas the following year. The couple were married on February 22, 1799 (Washington's birthday) and, to everyone's satisfaction, they continued to make their home at Mount Vernon. Nelly felt too lonely away from her beloved Grandmama, and Martha Washington, as always, depended on the companionship of the young women of the family.

Washington Custis continued to present an annoying problem for George Washington, but probably not for his loving grandmother, as he neglected to apply himself at any of the colleges where he was enrolled. At his own request he was allowed to come home for good in August 1798. Martha Washington was quite satisfied to have all her young people living at Mount Vernon.

After a week-long labor Nelly gave birth to her first child, a healthy daughter, in late November 1799. Mrs. Washington's delight in her latest great-grandchild was short-lived, however. Two weeks later, despite bitter cold and snow, George Washington rode out to supervise plantation activities and became chilled; his cold soon proved to be a severe respiratory infection, and he died on December 14 with his wife and his old friend Tobias Lear at his side.

Martha Washington was devastated. She had devoted herself to her husband and she had little interest in life after his death. She closed their bedroom and moved to a small garret room. Dressed in a black gown and frilled white cap, she continued to receive the stream of callers at Mount Vernon as graciously as ever, but she had become somewhat distant and preoccupied. For her remaining two and a half years, she lived with loving companions—her grandchildren; Lear,

who had remained with the family; Nelly's Frances Parke and a new baby, Martha Betty; and the many other family members who regularly made long visits. She received numerous requests for mementos of Washington and busied herself sending remembrances, including locks of his hair, to admirers. After some months of fatigue and failing health, she died in her bed, May 22, 1802, and was buried beside her husband in the family tomb at Mount Vernon.

A letter freezes a moment in time, preserving the feelings of that moment from change. Martha Washington destroyed the hundreds of letters she wrote to her husband, which might have satisfied the curiosity of later generations. Only one letter, written in 1767, escaped her fire, but that one—loving, homely, comfortable—says all there is to say. “My Dearest . . . I am sorry you will not be at home soon. . . . Your most Affectionate, Martha Washington.” Her simple words reflect forty years of mutual devotion.

A few months after their marriage in 1759, George Washington wrote to an acquaintance, in a letter published in his collected papers, that he expected to find happiness with his “agreeable Consort for Life.” Martha Washington was certainly an agreeable consort and his partner in all domestic enjoyments. Together, they enjoyed a lifetime of quiet happiness.

### *Bibliographical Essay*

Documentary sources for the life of the very private Martha Washington are sparse. No scrap of paper written by her before her first widowhood exists, and documents from that period deal largely with business matters having to do with her first husband's estate. According to family tradition, after George Washington's death, she burned all the hundreds of letters that the couple had exchanged through the years. Certainly, very few of their letters remain—four of his letters to her and only one of hers to him, accidental survivors of her determination to preserve their privacy.

Many of her letters to relatives and friends, however, were saved. Most of her papers are held by the Virginia Historical Society and Mount Vernon. Scattered letters are also to be found in other archives or in private hands. Joseph E. Fields has compiled all known papers of Martha Washington, incoming and outgoing, and published them as *“Worthy Partner”: The Papers of Martha Washington* (Westport, Conn., 1994). All quotations are from this source, unless otherwise indicated. This essential resource includes an excellent short biography by Ellen McCallister Clark, formerly librarian of Mount Vernon. Fields reproduces certain well-known letters published in nineteenth-century sources while indicating that they were probably pious fakes.

*The Diaries of George Washington*, ed. Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville, Va., 1976–1979), and the comprehensive collections of Washington’s papers, ed. John Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C., 1931–1944) and William W. Abbott, et al. (Charlottesville, 1983–), are primary sources that contain valuable information about the daily life of the Washingtons, as do the exhaustive multi-volume biographies of Washington by Douglas Southall Freeman *George Washington* (New York, 1948–1957) and James Thomas Flexner *George Washington* (Boston, 1965–1972). Other important sources for the private and social life of the Washington family are *Recollections and Private Memoirs of Washington* by Mrs. Washington’s grandson George W.P. Custis (Washington, D.C., 1859), *The Family Life of George Washington* by Charles Moore (Boston, 1926), *The Republican Court* by Rufus W. Griswold (New York, 1855), and the annual reports of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union. Abigail Adams’s comment about Martha Washington is from a letter to Mary Smith Cranch, July 12, 1789, in Stewart Mitchell, ed., *New Letters of Abigail Adams* (Boston, 1947).

Martha Washington—often in combination with her formidable mother-in-law, Mary Ball Washington—was the subject of worshipful nineteenth-century biographies, frequently embellished with doubtful anecdotes. These include Margaret Conkling’s *Memoirs of the Mother and Wife of Washington* (Auburn, N.Y., 1850), Benson J. Lossing’s *Mary and Martha* (New York, 1886), and Anne Hollingsworth Wharton’s *Martha Washington* (New York, 1897). In this century *Washington’s Lady* by Elswyth Thane (Mattituck, N.Y., 1977) is a fictionalized but carefully researched work. There is no scholarly biography of Martha Washington. Her obituary can be found in the *Alexandria Advertiser and Commercial Intelligencer*, May 25, 1802.

—PATRICIA BRADY





*Abigail (Smith) Adams*

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# *Abigail (Smith) Adams*

(1744–1818)

*First Lady: 1797–1801*

Born in the seaport town of Weymouth, Massachusetts, near Boston, on November 11, 1744, Abigail Smith was reared by her father, the Reverend William Smith, pastor of the pristine church at the crest of the winding road, and her mother, the dutiful Elizabeth Quincy Smith. She was the second of four children.

On Abigail's mother's side the Quincys were rooted in American soil five generations deep, four in succession claiming diplomas from Harvard. Abigail's grandfather, John, was a colonel in the militia, speaker of the House of Representatives, and negotiator of Indian treaties. Taught discipline with justice and dignity by her grandmother Elizabeth Norton, also a minister's daughter, her grandfather's sense of public service and of active concern for the commonwealth helped to crystallize Abigail's fundamental values and ideas. Melded with her commitment that "nothing bound the human mind but religion" and her mother's model of strenuous goodness and tireless devotion to God and family, Abigail's credo governed her future family until her last breath.

So did her reverential quest for the education of women, who, entrusted with the care and early instruction of their children, played no less a role than men in the "Great Theatre" of life. One month before her seventeenth birthday, Abigail, a tall and slender girl with keen, penetrating black eyes, wrote wistfully of her aspirations and frustrations, hoping she would not be thought a stupid girl, apologizing to her cousin for being a "very incorrect writer." Feeling intellectually deprived by the usual fare offered women of her era—the study of simple arithmetic, reading, music and dancing, Irish and ten-stitch embroidery—she yearned to study with the same "greatest Masters" who taught the male members of her family. Lacking this opportunity she would compensate by a somewhat osmotic process and with the help, as she put it, of a kind hand here and there. She identified her brother-in-law Richard Cranch as the kind hand who

introduced her to the poetry of John Milton, Alexander Pope, James Thomson, and William Shakespeare, and to the novels of Samuel Richardson. She also managed to learn enough French to master Molière and other French writers.

Abigail's first meeting with John Adams was definitely not a case of love at first sight—Abigail was fifteen at their first introduction, and he was twenty-four and in love with another young woman. Though he conceded Abigail and her sisters to be "Wits," he wrote off the Smith girls in his diary as "Not fond, not frank, not candid." He was even less comfortable with Abigail's father. He suspected that Parson Smith, who could afford a Negro servant named Tom, a chaise, and a fine personal library, concealed his wealth from his parishioners so that they might send him presents.

Their reintroduction was more promising. A graduate of Harvard in 1755, John Adams, a pigeon-breasted, lumpy bundle of a man, had taught for a year in Worcester, Massachusetts, staying on to study law. By the time of his return in 1760 to Braintree, he spoke of the acute issues and looming choices he faced as an American. His destiny as a patriot was influenced by James Otis Jr. an impassioned thirty-six-year-old student of constitutional rights, and by his second cousin, Samuel Adams, whose so-called Committees of Correspondence publicized the cause of the colonies from town to town. A year later, fervently in love with Abigail, he often signed himself "Lysander" as he wrote of dreaming of Miss Adorable and of Dear Miss Jemina, of his Aurora and Diana (she was "Mrs. Nabby" before and Portia only after marriage), of her morning presence, and of her kisses. Abigail, in turn, devoted, proud, and shy, soon proclaimed openly and with tender sincerity the investment of her whole heart, her hopes, and her wishes in the bosom of this "dearest friend" and "beloved partner."

Though Abigail insisted that she and John were both cast in the same mold, John was emphatic about their ancestral differences—distinctions that would blur in the post-revolution era. If the Quincys were gentry, the Adamses were aspiring yeomen, English emigres to Massachusetts Bay in 1639. John's mother, Susanna Boylston Adams, was a niece of Zabdiel Boylston, who introduced the practice of inoculation for smallpox to the British Empire. His father, John Adams, a cordwainer, was, in family tradition, a constable, tithingman, ensign in the militia, selectman, and church deacon.

John was the family's first and only graduate of Harvard. Once admitted to college he began the incessant self-search for his place in the "starry worlds" outside, for a "new, grand, wild yet regular thought" that might make him famous; his steadfast devotion to this, his first real cause, intimated all that he was to be as a husband, father, and statesman. A man of passion, intellect, and vanity, he

had unlimited need for approval and recognition. The incipient politician, zealous student of the Scriptures, of English and Latin authors had, however, to face up to what he considered a personal weakness—his enjoyment of the society of females. So great was his emotion that he recorded in his diary what amounts to an exhaustive primer on his ideal female. His description of her role in society was prescient of his future wife, Abigail Smith Adams. To one day produce “an Hero or a Legislator, a great Statesman or Divine or some other great Character that may do Honour to the World”—this, in John’s opinion, was “the Highest Pinnacle of Glory to which a Woman can in Modesty aspire.”

Plans for the marriage of John and Abigail were interrupted by a terrifying epidemic of smallpox, so rampant that on March 3, 1764, Boston voted to allow the extreme measure of private arrangements for inoculation. Adams boarded at the home of his uncle, James Cunningham, to await inoculation. During this time he was able to address a special request of Abigail’s. As a critic, Abigail said she feared John Adams more than any other person on earth and she wished for his truthful estimation of her thoughts and deeds. His response provided an unexpectedly delightful, flirtatious, and spontaneous portrait of Abigail during their courtship. It animates another, painted two years later by Benjamin Blyth, in which Abigail appears thoughtful, composed, pristinely groomed. Her dress is classic—pearls, embroidered white lace collar, hair brushed back into a tidy bow.

Responding to Abigail, John Adams teased that her habit of reading, writing, and thinking made her head hang like a bulrush. She did not play cards or sing or dance. She walked as though she were parrot-toed, and crossed her legs to the ruination of her posture. But she blushed and smiled easily, her eyes sparkled, and all the rest, he assured her, appeared to be “bright and luminous.”

Just weeks before their marriage on Thursday, October 25, 1764, Adams, with “Prophetick Imagination” discerned, with supreme tenderness, the pivotal role Abigail would fill in his long and accomplished life. On September 30 he wrote:

*[Y]ou have always softened and warmed my Heart, shall restore my benevolence as well as my Health and tranquility of mind. You shall polish and refine my sentiments of Life and Manners, banish all the unsocial and ill natured Particles in my Composition, and form me to that happy temper, that can reconcile a quick Discernment with a perfect Candour.*

Years before meeting Abigail, Adams had understood his problem, which his marriage would solve to a dramatic degree: “Ballast is what I want. I totter, with every Breeze, My motions are unsteady,” he wrote in his diary, dated October—

December, 1758. Abigail Adams was indeed her husband's "ballast" on his heroic journey en route to founding a new nation. But her role was far greater though less recognized. During the course of many wrenching separations, the last of which went on for nearly ten years, her supportive, eventful, and poignant letters to her husband, as well as to her children, family, and friends, disclose talents of an instinctive writer whose vivid, frank and on-the-spot documentation of the personalities and events of the Colonial era in America and Europe is her ultimate legacy.

Once married, the couple settled on the property Adams had inherited from his father, in the farmhouse built near his birthplace on the road from Plymouth to Boston. The house had ten acres of adjoining land and thirty acres of neighboring orchard, pasture, and woodland. Adams remodeled a front room into a law office by replacing a window with a door. With her husband's tutoring, Abigail Adams's early concern and responsibility for the property was to be lasting, though her interest in it probably differed from her husband's. She seemed always to focus on the peach, pear, and plum trees, on maple sugar and asparagus as well as the daffodils of what she called the "renovating season."

Both Abigail and John Adams were preoccupied with what they called the "contest" between America and England. During the early years of Mrs. Adams's evolution from housewife to patriot, Adams was his wife's main witness and principal delegate and scribe in matters relating to the revolution. He was a charter member of the Sons of Liberty, founded in 1765 to oppose the Stamp Act, and the Committees of Correspondence. He was entirely sympathetic to her "ten thousand questions," and though he joked about it, he most studiously tried to quench her "Eveship's" thirst for "retailed Politics."

As resourceful as she was inquisitive, when Abigail Adams herself turned home-front reporter during John Adams's increasing absences, she would fill the gaps in news by keeping in contact with her husband's colleagues as well as relatives, friends, her children, and their tutors at home and abroad. But even while Adams was nearby and Mrs. Adams on only a brief visit to her family in Weymouth, she could not stifle her curiosity. "If you have any news in Town which the papers do not communicate," she told her husband on December 30, 1773, "pray be so good as to Write it."

On June 6, 1770, when Adams was elected a representative to the General Court from Boston, the now prospering lawyer had once again realized that to serve in public office would entail sacrifice of personal ambition and fortune. That evening he confided his doubts to his wife, who, in a flood of tears, told him that she was aware of all the danger to him, to her, and to their children.

But he had done as he ought; she was “very willing to share in all that was to come and to place her trust in Providence.”

Eight years after marriage, and after her third move from Braintree to Boston, Abigail Adams, at twenty-eight, settled in at Queen Street with four children. She was the mother of her namesake, Abigail, called Nabby, age seven (b. July 14, 1765), John Quincy, five (b. July 11, 1767), Charles, two (b. May 29, 1770), and a two-month-old infant, Thomas Boylston (b. September 15, 1772); one more child, Susanna, died at fourteen months; another child would be still-born.

At one of the most intensely domestic and transient periods of her life Abigail Adams reached beyond her nursery, kitchen, and field to explore the outside world, if only from her desk chair, through her writing and reading. Her wistful words of approval of her Cousin Isaac’s intended voyage to England are those of a yearning and burdened young woman: “Now is the best Season of Life for you to travel; Ere you have formed connection which would bind you to your own little Spot.” Afterward, when Isaac did report on his travels, Abigail Adams pointed out the limitations imposed on women:

*Women you know Sir are considered as Domestick Beings, and altho they inherit an Eaquel Share of curiosity with the other Sex, yet but few are hardy eno’ to venture abroad, and explore the amaizing variety of distant Lands. The Natural tenderness and Delicacy of our Constitutions, added to the many Dangers we are subject to from your Sex, renders it almost impossible for a Single Lady to travel without injury to her character. And those who have a protector in an Husband, have generally speaking obstacles sufficient to prevent their Roving.*

Abigail Adams’s interest in the writings of exceptional women or in sympathetic works by men on the subject of women also emphasizes her acute sensitivity to the special condition of being born female. In this regard she was curious about the English historian Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay, who had completed the fifth of the eight-volume series on the *History of England, from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick Line*. She was also fascinated by the work of the flamboyant Reverend James Fordyce, D. D., whose *Sermons to Young Women* was written out of an “unfeigned regard for the Female Sex.”

Another author who caught Mrs. Adams’s attention with his *Letters on the English Nation* was supposedly a Jesuit named Batista Angeloni, actually the English political writer John Shebbeare. He wrote about the inhuman tyranny of barring women from the privileges of education.

It was during this time of intense interest in the female condition that Mercy Otis Warren, America's first female historian and playwright, sister of James Otis, initiated a correspondence with Mrs. Adams, who welcomed the arrangement: "Thus imbolden'd I venture to stretch my pinions," she thanked Mercy on July 17, 1773. Mercy was sixteen years her senior and though their literary styles differed measurably they shared brilliant intellects and almost identical concerns about female circumstances. Together, sometimes as Marcia and Portia, the two, Mercy and Abigail, were able to "visit" about writers, politics, children, and fashion—they regularly bartered yards of ribbons, laces, and fabrics—as well as the roles thrust upon their husbands. To these two women, Mercy's husband, James Warren, gave full credit for "a Share and no small one either—in the conduct of our American affairs."

The body of letters these two produced during their lifelong, though flawed, friendship established Mrs. Adams as the equal of the older and acknowledgedly more learned woman. Abigail Adams would always defer to Mercy, even in old age dismissing any pretensions to being an educated woman. Believing as she did that there were so few women who really could be called learned, she did not wonder that they were considered "black swans." To be one required such talents and such devotion of time and study as to exclude the performance of most domestic cares and duties that fell exclusively, in her opinion, to the lot of most females. Her personal lot, she apparently felt, would always exclude her from this prestigious membership. Anticipating the pivotal question of the women's movement by more than two centuries, Abigail Adams would write:

*How miserable must that woman be who, at the same time she has both genius and taste for literary inquiry, can not cheerfully leave the pursuit to attend to the daily cares of the prudent housewife. Though not less to be pitied, is she who is wholly immersed therein and has no higher ideas than those which confine her to the narrow circles of domestic attention.*

On June 17, 1774, John Adams, along with Thomas Cushing, Sam Adams, and Robert Treat Paine, was elected by the General Court in Salem to be a delegate to America's first Continental Congress. Adams's election to Congress signaled the beginning of a new era for his wife. Adams was absent from Braintree, touring the Eastern Circuit in Maine for the tenth and last time, before leaving for Philadelphia. In the course of fifteen letters written in less than a month, between June 23 and July 9, 1774, he formulated the principal roles Abigail Adams would assume for the next ten years of her life.

In order for him to serve his country—"Swim or sink, live or die, survive or perish with my country, is my unalterable determination"—Adams created a partnership with his wife. His letter from York, Maine, written on July 1, might be regarded as a directive couched as an invitation, begging Abigail to dedicate herself to a joint endeavor. It proved to be a masterful summation of her life's work:

*I must entreat you, my dear Partner in all the Joys and Sorrows, Prosperity and Adversity of my Life, to take a Part with me in the Struggle. I pray God for your Health—intreat you to rouse your whole attention to the Family, the stock, the Farm, the Dairy. Let every Article of Expense which can possible be spared be retrench'd. Keep the Hands attentive to their Business, and [let] the most prudent Measures of everykind be adopted and pursued with Alacrity and Spirit.*

On Wednesday morning, August 10, 1774, John Adams departed for Philadelphia, leaving his wife and their four children behind. Abigail Adams would be thirty on her next birthday. Aware that uncertainty and expectation "left the mind great scope," she could not have known that her farewell wave signaled the start of a turbulent decade in which the family would grow increasingly fragmented and their lives as separate as Braintree was from St. Petersburg, Russia, let alone Philadelphia.

Abigail Adams already knew loneliness but had yet to learn that the impending political and intellectual revolution would drastically and intimately affect her family's fortunes. Still, horrified as she was to think about the possibility of bloodshed, she was wholehearted in her decision to join her husband as partner in behalf of their country. She would shoulder her responsibilities; she was quite ready for her husband to assume his.

During the next ten years, Adams, who had dictated his wife's roles as educator and farmer, would view with selfless admiration what probably was the third major aspect of the couple's partnership, her role as a writer and reporter. From the very beginning her extraordinary gifts would evoke his grandest compliment. "I really think that your Letters are much better worth preserving than mine," he would tell her, treating her literary output as an unexpected windfall, an inexhaustible dowry that enriched his life. Her shrewd gifts of perception, observation, and curiosity molded the modest housewife into an admired historian. Since women were not masons, or bound to keep secrets, she thought them entitled to a greater latitude of speech than men. As Abigail Adams herself remarked:



"my pen is always freer than my tongue." Her greatest fan, Adams told his wife, "A delicious letter from you is worth a dozen of mine."

By January 1775 Mrs. Adams sounded resigned to a more strenuous position regarding Great Britain. She expressed her sentiments in a letter to the historian Catharine Macaulay: "tender plants must bend, but when a Government is grown to strength like some old oak rough with its armed bark it yealds not to the tug, but only nods and turns to sullen state." To Mercy Warren, the day after she read George III's speech at the opening of Parliament on November 20, published in the *Massachusetts Spy* of February 2, 1775, she concluded: "The die is cast." George's speech had left one option to "Friends of Liberty": "to die [the] last British freemen, than bear to live the first of British Slaves."

As firsthand witness to the deprivation inflicted on her relatives and friends by British troops, and after the death of her beloved physician friend, Joseph Warren, at Bunker Hill, Abigail Adams concluded to make her farewell to England. "Let us separate, they are unworthy to be our Brethren. Let us renounce them. . . . Let us beseech the Almighty to blast their Counsels and bring to Nought all their devices." Her problem, once having decided to reach for Independence, was how to achieve this desperately desired goal thoughtfully and peacefully. In her opinion, "ten thousand Difficulties" were bound to arise; the reins of government had been slackened for so long that she feared the people would not quietly submit to the restraints necessary for the peace and security of the community. Although consoling herself that "great difficulties may be surmounted, by patience and perseverance," she worried that "if we separate from Brittain, what code of Laws will be established. How shall we be governed so as to retain our liberties? Can any government be free which is not administered by general stated Laws? Who shall frame these Laws? Who will give them force and energy?"

In her pursuit of independence, Abigail Adams devised a concept as bold as it was broad. She brought to her husband's attention several unexpected constituents. She had already alerted Adams to the universality of her liberalism. She had written to him in September 1774 of a cumbersome situation in which Negroes agreed to fight for the Governor if he would arm them and then liberate them if his side won. "You know my mind upon this Subject," she had said. "I wish most sincerely there was not a slave in the province. It always appeared a most iniquitous Scheme to me—fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have."

On March 31, 1776, Abigail Adams originated her campaign for women's rights. Seeking her husband's "indulgence" and risking his finding her "saucy," Mrs. Adams wrote what she would refer to as her "List of Female Grievances":

*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. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular 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. . . .*

Seemingly to gain courage Abigail Adams continued:

*That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your sex. 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.*

She persisted, rephrasing her initial pronouncement in her letter of May 7:

*I cannot say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to Men, Emancipating all Nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives. But you must remember that Arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken—and notwithstanding all your wise Laws and Maxims 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. . . .*

On the whole Abigail Adams was surprisingly influential, judging from her impact on her husband. On May 26, in a letter to Brigadier General Joseph Palmer, John discussed his ideals of government, including who had the right to vote and under what circumstances. He was certain in theory that the only moral foundation of government was the consent of the people, and his question was to what extent this principle could be carried out. “Shall we say, that every Individual of

the Community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent . . . to every act of Legislation?" And if this were impossible, as he judged Palmer would say, then what about the right of men to govern women without their consent? and the "Right of the Old to bind the young without theirs?" It was as though Adams had his wife's threatening letter before him as he concluded: "Depend on it, Sir, it is dangerous to open so fruitful a source of Controversy and altercation, as would be opened by attempting to alter the Qualifications of votes. There will be no end to it—New claims will arise—Women will demand a Vote. . . ."

Again, Mrs. Adams would champion a heartfelt feminist theme—the need for privacy, space, territory—echoed by centuries of women and articulated most movingly during her period of recuperation from her vaccination in Boston at the end of August 1776. Anticipating Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own* by a century and a half, she told her husband:

*I have possession of my Aunts chamber in which you know is a very convenient pretty closet with a window which looks into the flower Garden. In this closet are a number of Book Shelves, which are but poorly furnished, however I have a pretty little desk or cabinet here where I write all my Letters and keep my papers unmolested by any one. I do not covet my Neighbours Goods, but I should like to be the owner of such conveniences. I always had a fancy for a closet with a window which I could more peculiarly call my own.*

As the reality of separation from her husband grew more ominous, Abigail Adams, on Wednesday, August 10, 1777, realized that three years had passed since Adams stepped into the coach and in some respects out of her life. Married thirteen years, it seemed as though they hadn't had the happiness of living together for half that time. Adams's homecoming on November 27 would be a prelude to still another wrenching parting. The distance of 300 miles, to which they had painfully become accustomed, was to multiply to 3,000 miles by a vote taken by Congress on November 28, the date Adams was elected as joint commissioner to France. Accompanied by his ten-year-old son, John Quincy Adams, he boarded the ship *Boston* on February 13. The two would return home August 3, 1779, only to leave again three months later because of John's nomination to travel to France as minister plenipotentiary to negotiate with British representatives. Abigail Adams recognized the invitation to serve as an honor. After she said goodbye on that forlorn Saturday, November 13,

desolate in her “widowhood,” she took full measure of the void left by her husband, who boarded the *Sensible* this time not only with Johnny but also with their son Charles, as well as two secretaries.

In parting with John Quincy, age twelve, and nine-year-old Charles, Abigail had already dedicated her children’s lives to the service of their country. She had justified the sacrifice of their company at a time, she said, when a mother’s care was less important than their having the opportunity to learn to discharge their duties to their Great Preserver, to society in general, to their country, their parents, and themselves, under their father’s eye. Abigail Adams had more or less codified the formidable code to which all her descendants would be bound, by which some would flourish and others wither, in her letter to young Johnny:

*Improve your understanding for acquiring useful knowledge and virtue, such as will render you an ornament to society, an Honour to your country and a blessing to your parents. Great Learning and superior abilities, should you ever possess them, will be of little value and small Estimation, unless Virtue, Honour, truth and integrity are added to them. Adhere to those religious Sentiments and principals which are early instilled into your mind and remember that you are accountable to your Maker for all your words and actions. Let me injoin it upon you to attend constantly and steadfastly to the precepts and instructions of your Father as you value the happiness of your Mother and your own welfare.*

More, there was to be no compromise:

*I had much rather you should have found your Grave in the ocean you have crossd or any untimely death crop you in your Infant years, rather than see you an immoral profligate or a Graceless child.*

Mrs. Adams would not be reunited with her husband until July 21, 1784, a period of inestimable hardship for both. Abigail’s profound loneliness and her husband’s searing sense of political insecurity were exacerbated by months of silence between their letters. Once abroad, angered by intrigue and outright hostility and frustrated in his relationship with Comte Charles Gravier de Vergennes, the French foreign minister, Adams set out independently for Amsterdam with his two sons in hopes of promoting America’s cause with the Dutch. He described the year 1780 as the “most anxious, humiliating, and mortifying” one of his life. Two years later, on April 19, 1782, seven years after the battles of Concord and

Lexington and six months after the surrender of Lt. General George Cornwallis at Yorktown, his fortune had immeasurably improved. "Admitted and acknowledged in Quality of envoy of the United States . . . to their High Mightinesses," Adams looked on his success in Holland "as the happiest Event, and the greatest Action of my Life past or future."

But the years between had exacted a severe toll on the couple. Adams, involved in negotiations that "hung upon a Thread, a Hair, a silken Fibre" suffered flagrant bouts of self-doubt and actual illness. At a loss for his wife's reassurance and support, he worried about expenses and more about his sons' education, having transplanted them abruptly from French to Dutch schools and having to move them yet again on their dismissal from the Latin School in Amsterdam to Leyden. By August 27, 1781, John Quincy had joined Francis Dana, appointed the first American minister to Russia, in St. Petersburg; Charles, ill and homesick, had already begun his journey home on August 12. Meanwhile, Abigail Adams hungered for news of her husband or her children and was insulted by her family's silence. That December, depressed by the tomblike silence between them—she had not received a letter in over a year from either her husband or her sons—her ultimate wish was for her husband's return.

On June 17, 1782, Mrs. Adams learned of her husband's recognition by the Dutch. She was exultant. "I will take praise to myself," she responded. She claimed it her due, for having sacrificed so much of her peace and happiness to promote the welfare of her country, which was probably "unmindful of the hand that blessed them." The patriot had risen to the occasion, the mounting months of wretched isolation forgiven. As ardently as she longed for her husband's return she assured him that she could not feel the least inclination to a peace but on "the most liberal foundation."

Not surprisingly, Abigail Adams gave a great deal of thought to the subject of "Patriotism in the female Sex," concluding it to be "the most disinterested of all virtues," considering women's exclusion from honors and from offices, and property as well, if one recognized that even in the freest countries property was subject to the control and disposal of a woman's partner, to whom the laws gave sovereign authority. Deprived of a voice in legislation and obliged to submit to laws imposed on them, women, she believed, might be justified in showing indifference to the public welfare. And yet the opposite was true. All history and every age, Abigail Adams pointed out to her husband, exhibit instances of patriotic virtue in the female sex which "considered our situation equals the most Heroick of yours." Living out their lives during momentous separations with "patience, perseverance and fortitude" in their little country cottages, congressional

wives were not to be ignored. Instead, for example, Abigail Adams chose to recognize Elizabeth Adams, Sam Adams's wife, as a sister delegate, defending her use of the title by asking John: "Why should we not assume your titles when we give you up our names."

While in Paris, on September 7, 1783, John Adams was happily surprised by his appointment, along with John Jay and Benjamin Franklin, to enter into a treaty of commerce between the United States of America and Great Britain. He was able at last to invite his wife to Europe, and his letters to her at this time are full of optimism and purpose. Only Abigail Adams had hinted at the appointment, owing to her brilliant ability as a reporter of news, and an admiring husband acknowledged gratefully that she gave him "more public intelligence than any body." Would she bring their daughter and leave the boys with her brother-in-law schoolmaster and the responsibilities of her household to her father or uncles or brother-in-law? Urging his wife to embark for London, Amsterdam, or any port in France, he confided to a newly married colleague: "I hope to be married once more myself, in a few months, to a very amiable lady whom I have inhumanly left a widow in America for nine years, with the exception of a few weeks only."

On June 20, 1784, Abigail Adams and twenty-year-old Nabby, along with their two servants, boarded the *Active* at Rowe's Wharf in Boston. Full of conflicting emotions over crossing the formidable ocean, she worried about leaving her home and country, her children and her friends, and wondered if she would ever see them again. She also was concerned that she might present an awkward figure in court. All in all, only the hope of ending what she counted as a ten-year separation from her husband—Adams had set out for Philadelphia in August 1774—seemed to justify this tumultuous change in her life.

Mrs. Adams and her party landed in England on Tuesday, July 20, 1784, and reached London the next evening. Because John was delayed at the Hague, Abigail was first reunited, on Friday, July 30, with her son John Quincy, whom she had seen only once in a brief, three-month interval during the past six years and five months. He was now seventeen years old and, according to his mother, "Nothing but the eyes, at first sight, appeared what he once was." Reunited with her husband eight days later, Abigail wrote that "poets and painters wisely draw a veil over those Scenes which surpass the pen of the one and the pencil of the other; we were indeed a very, very happy family once more met together. . . ."

The family arrived in Paris on August 13, 1784, and four days later they were settled in the suburb of Auteuil about four miles from the Opera House. Inhabiting a strange new world of commitments, language, and friendship for which she was quite unprepared, Abigail Adams attempted to cope with her myriad

and mysterious challenges in ways both masterful and humorous. Fanatically observant, immeasurably proud, Mrs. Adams had an amazingly pragmatic and chauvinistic sense of diplomacy that seemed to crystalize instantly when she took possession of a splendid, forty-bed stone dwelling in Autueil on the edge of the Bois de Boulogne.

The whole question of trying to staff her French household highlighted the problem of different mores and, more seriously, the Americans' inadequate pay. To her own countrymen, her seven servants would be considered extravagant, she knew, unless they understood the whole issue of diplomacy. To send a person to Paris in a public character, to be a public jest, was an insult, she argued. Further, for a nation to degrade its own ministers by obliging them to live in "narrow circumstances" was penny-wise and pound-foolish; Mrs. Adams was certain that one entertainment at home fostered more successful negotiations than twenty official meetings. How then was she to accomplish with seven servants what the Spanish ambassador did with one hundred, including fifty in livery, or the English ambassador with fifty, including twenty in livery? And how could her household be expected to compete with the wealth exhibited by one foreign ambassador's table settings, which cost more than the American ambassador earned in an entire year? As her solution to financial hardship, Abigail Adams sought to imbue her French household with New England order and thrift; her attempt to stretch her staff's services was marginally rewarded when the *maitre d'hôtel* agreed to double as footman, on condition that he be given a gentleman's suit of clothing in place of livery.

Yet Paris had its own allure. Studying the many beauties as well as some of the "deformities" of the Old World, Abigail Adams began to talk about finding her taste "reconciling itself." She was enchanted by the dress and beauty of the performers, girls clothed in the thinnest silk and gauze, with short petticoats, but the sight of them "springing two feet from the floor, posing themselves in the air, with their feet flying, and as perfectly showing their garters and drawers," was altogether new to her. Yet in truth, repeated viewings, she would admit, had worn away her disgust and she could now enjoy them. However, "If you ask me what is the Business of Life here," Abigail Adams said, "I answer pleasure."

Mrs. Adams's reactions to the customs of the Old World were as varied as the Paris skies. She was scornful and revolted, but alternatively understanding, appreciative, and even amused, by the people, sights, and customs she was exposed to as a diplomat's wife. She admired the discreet Marquis de Lafayette as intensely as she was shocked by Benjamin Franklin's flamboyant friend Madame Anne Helvetius, also known as Notre Dame d'Auteuil. The tall, kind widower

Thomas Jefferson was practically a member of her family, like a fond uncle to John Quincy. The very first month the families were in Paris together the Adamses had witnessed with trepidation Jefferson's twelve-year-old daughter, Martha, who liked to be called Patsy, in her induction at the convent. As a family they shared with Jefferson far more than the official ceremonies and dinners—theater and carnivals as well. Within the confines of the Adams family, Thomas Jefferson was pronounced “one of the choice ones of the earth.”

The nine months that Abigail, John, John Quincy, and Nabby lived together as a family came to an end with John's appointment to the Court of St. James on February 25, 1785, opening a new phase in America's quest for recognition. On March 7, Congress gave leave to Benjamin Franklin to return to America as soon as it was convenient. On March 29, Thomas Jefferson was unanimously elected Franklin's successor at the court of Versailles; he and Adams would retain their joint commission to negotiate commercial treaties with European and African nations.

Adams's appointment not only signaled a new era for American diplomacy but also a most immediate wrench within the family. Both mother and father agreed that John Quincy must return to America to go to school in *new* England rather than *old* England, to Harvard College. For all Abigail Adams's dedication to her son's future ambitions, or those instilled in him by his parents, she grieved over his departure and admitted readily that Europe without him would have fewer charms. Paving the way for his return, she pleaded with her sister Mary to take care of him in the same way she herself would under similar circumstances.

John, Abigail, and Nabby arrived in London on Thursday, May 26, 1785. Abigail Adams was to be alternately happy, stimulated, and infuriated during this four-year venture. She was pleased to have her daughter recover from a melancholy love affair to marry her husband's dashing new secretary, Colonel William Smith; gratified by her travels and studies; and so unforgiving in her anger over damaging press reports that she would later support, with dire consequences during her husband's presidency, the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts.

In the brief period before the new ambassador's presentation at the court of his British Majesty, the forty-seven-year-old King George III, on Wednesday, June 1, 1785, Abigail Adams had rented and settled the family into a substantial grey stone mansion on the corner of Duke and Brook streets in the northwest corner of Grosvenor Square. Adams was satisfied with his meeting with the British monarch, but the London *Public Advertiser* thought otherwise. On June 6, the idea of an American ambassador (“Good heavens what a sound!”) was declared “humiliating.”



From the start, Thomas Jefferson had told Mrs. Adams that he did not envy her husband's assignment to Great Britain, that it would have "illegally" suited Jefferson himself. He found the London papers teeming not only with news of assassinations, suicides, and thefts, but, what was worse, with the blackest slanders. Friends, relatives, and government officials at home who read the British newspapers, or reprints of the controversial columns, assumed the worst. Abigail Adams tried to smooth away misunderstandings, assuring relatives that the "news sharks" were uninformed, that the Tory venom was due to envious intolerance of an American minister's being treated the equal of other nations' envoys—with attention, politeness, and civility. But she could not remain cerebral about a gaping wound. She was furious and could not pretend otherwise. "False as hell" was what the press was. "No," she corrected herself, "False as the English." On guard now and hurt, she talked about people who would "catch at everything," who gave themselves to "misrepresentation." Once kindled, her resentment of the press was permanently inflamed.

Still, Mrs. Adams was a proud woman, almost belligerently protective of her husband, ambitious for him, his driven helpmate who would do her utmost to enhance his position and her country's stature. Scheduled to be presented, with her husband and Nabby, at the Queen's circle on June 25, she was quite willing to live up to her responsibilities as the ambassador's wife. Her hoops and her daughter's would be as wide as any, her feathers as commanding, her ribbons as frivolous. But she would not compromise her own taste. Above all, she vowed to be discreet and neat; in other words, Abigail Adams meant to cope with royal exigencies on her own terms. Admitting to a "disagreeable feeling" about her presentation to the German-born Queen Charlotte, Mrs. Adams thought that the queen's complexion was florid, accentuated by her purple and silver robes, and that she was neither well-shaped nor handsome. Abigail Adams allowed that the princesses royal, Charlotte and Augusta, were pretty, though hardly beautiful, and that their fair complexions betrayed only a "tincture" of the king's countenance. In spite of her reservations, she did admit to thinking that the queen and her daughters held forth with "much affability, and the ease and freedom of old acquaintance."

In July 1786, Abigail Adams traveled into the British countryside with her husband, daughter, and son-in-law; in August she joined her husband on a business trip to Holland concerning America's commercial treaty with Prussia. On her next tour in January 1787, Mrs. Adams spent a fortnight in "amusement and dissipation" at Bath in southwest England, where she commented on its noble and magnificent beauty but recognized that her early education had given her "not an habitual taste for what is termed fashionable life."

One of the great pleasures of this period of Abigail Adams's life was her correspondence with Thomas Jefferson. Their exchange of thirty-five letters, of which Mrs. Adams wrote twenty, spanned thirty-two months and provides remarkable insight into their obviously affectionate friendship, which, sadly, would sour over politics. They gossiped about Madame Helvetius and about Cardinal de Rohan, consoled themselves on the vagaries of "hireling scribblers," and consulted one another as to whether to charge house rent to the government. They passed cultural notes, Mrs. Adams referring to Jefferson's favorite passion—the German-born composer George Frideric Handel—and fashion notes, Jefferson wondering, now that the French queen had vowed to wear nothing but French gauze, what might happen to the English looms. An American might bring in the Irish linen shirts Mrs. Adams ordered for him, Jefferson suggested, when he crossed the Channel; someone could tuck her small orders of lace and ribbons in his pocket, Mrs. Adams countered.

Although their correspondence maintained a dependable rhythm, at least in its early period, a three-month hiatus occurred during the autumn of 1786. Jefferson might have waited even longer to resume it, considering that he had suffered a dislocated wrist when he fell while strolling along the Seine with his beloved Maria Cosway. But urgent news depended on Abigail Adams's cooperation. On learning that his little daughter would be sailing for England in May, Jefferson wrote to Mrs. Adams to ask if she would keep her under her wing until he could send for her. He went on to say that his daughter Mary (called Polly), was eight years old and would be in the care of her nurse, a black woman.

On June 26, 1787, almost five months after Jefferson had written to Mrs. Adams, a party of three presented themselves at the Adamses' doorstep: Captain Ramsey delivering a clinging, miserably tearful Polly, accompanied by a young mulatto named Sally Hemings.

Minutes after Polly's arrival Abigail Adams wrote to advise Jefferson to collect his child in person, as her adjustment was painful. Also, the "old Nurse" that Jefferson had counted on to care for her, Betty Hemings, had been replaced by her daughter Sally, who appeared to be fifteen or sixteen years old, though she was in reality only fourteen.

On further acquaintance, the sister of James Hemings, Jefferson's young servant in Paris, did not inspire greater confidence, but rather deepening concern. Abigail Adams thought of her as wanting "more care than the child," of being "wholly incapable" of looking properly after Polly, "without some superior to direct her."

Unfortunately, Mrs. Adams was ill much of the early-blooming spring of 1787 before Polly's arrival. That her health very much circumscribed her attendance at dinners, theater, or the Court of St. James was a trivial matter compared with the deprivation she suffered by her inability to attend seven of twelve lectures to which she had subscribed with unsurpassed enthusiasm. Once again Abigail Adams made an eloquent case for the education she actually lusted after, sorrowful in her recognition of her lost opportunity. The five lectures she managed to attend—on electricity, magnetism, hydrostatics, optics, and pneumatics—she considered “connected with and . . . subservient to the accommodation of common life.” She was thrilled by the “assemblage of Ideas entirely new,” and commented that “it was like going into a Beautifull Country, which I never saw before, a Country which our American Females are not permitted to visit or inspect.” She wrote wistfully about the lectures she had missed, and how they would have afforded her “much matter for future recollection and amusement.”

Exposure and frustration made Abigail Adams analytical of her own status. She decided she would not choose to quarrel with the assertion that the study of “household Good, as Milton terms it,” was no doubt the peculiar province of the female character. Yet surely, as rational beings, women had to have an alternative, a way that their minds might “with propriety receive the highest possible cultivation.” The advantages of learning for women were quite specific:

*Knowledge would teach our sex candour, and those who aim at the attainment of it, in order to render themselves more amiable and usefull in the world, would derive a double advantage from it, for in proportion as the mind is informed, the countenance would be improved and the face enobled as the Heart is elevated, for wisdom, says Soloman, maketh the face to shine.*

Counting on Solomon to reinforce still another argument, Abigail Adams pointed out that even the “Luxurious Eastern Sage” did not think that a woman who spoke with wisdom was inconsistent with one who tended to her household, or less inclined, for having gone beyond the limits of her room and kitchen, “to superintend the domestick economy of her family.”

Remarkably, Mrs. Adams's impassioned arguments in behalf of educating women did not exclude an awareness of the price. And there was a price, for she believed sincerely that it was most dangerous for a female to be distinguished for any qualification beyond the rest of her sex. Whatever her demeanor, she was sure to encourage the jealousy of the men and the envy of the women. Abigail's solu-

tion was succinct: the remedy lay in increasing the number of accomplished women, a monopoly, she concluded, being always "envidious."

The fall of 1787 brought word of completed negotiations for the Adamses' purchase of the home of Leonard Vassall-Borland, a grandson of a West Indian sugar planter, including eighty-three acres of field, pasture, salt marsh, and woodland, for the sum of 600 pounds. News of the availability of fifty-six adjoining acres at twenty-five dollars apiece elicited John Adams's decidedly positive response: "My view is to lay fast hold of the Town of Braintree and embrace it with both my arms and all my might, there to live—there to die—there to lay my bones—and there to plant one of my sons, in the Profession of the Law and the practice of Agriculture, like his father." The house, which Adams would describe modestly as "but the farm of a patriot" with "some of the most beautiful prospects in the world" remained in the family's possession until 1946, when it was deeded as the Adams National Historic Site.

On October 5, 1787, Congress voted that the Honorable John Adams be permitted, at his request, to return to America. The Adamses' arrival home on June 17, 1788, was celebrated by cannon fire, church bells, and cheers. The couple could now boast of two sons at Harvard and a third, John Quincy, clerking for the eminent lawyer Theophilus Parsons, in Newburyport. Only their daughter, the wife of Colonel Smith, living in Jamaica, Long Island, posed a problem, that of her husband's wavering financial status. The former ambassador was concerned about his own future as well.

Adams, as ever, was torn between public and private life, and his habit of self-analysis was almost as intense and merciless as in his youth. In a suspended state he brooded all that autumn on the matter. Meanwhile, the first presidential election took place. Congress had designated January 7, 1789, as the day for appointing presidential electors, and February 4 as the day for casting ballots. On April 6, 1789, the Senate, with nine of its twenty-two members present, witnessed the counting of sixty-nine ballots unanimously electing George Washington as president and thirty-four electing John Adams as vice-president.

Abigail Adams's pleasure was irrepressible. In spite of acute awareness of her "delicate situation" by virtue of her husband's high office, her excuse for commenting on political affairs was straightforward: "Perhaps, there is no person who feels more interested in them." She congratulated her country on recent judicial appointments "in which an assemblage of the greatest talents and abilities are united which any country can boast of; gentlemen in whom the public have great confidence, and who will prove durable pillars in support of our government."

Abigail Adams began the vice-presidential years with unprecedented op-

timism. New York City was the capital of the new nation, and she set out to join her husband in his new post on June 17, 1789, a year and two days after the couple's return from England. Richmond Hill, the house where she was to live, tall, columned, with eleven-foot ceilings, with gardens and majestic views of the Hudson and the farms of New Jersey beyond, was precisely in keeping with the houses she had lived in and visited abroad. With a few minor details to handle Mrs. Adams was almost instantly ready to assume a responsible social life, as rigorous and organized as any she had known and criticized abroad. As there were no public walks or amusements, the system of rotating receptions or levees assumed emphatic significance.

Once Martha Washington settled on Fridays at eight o'clock, the pattern was set. Abigail Adams then chose to receive on Mondays, her rooms lighted and put in order for those who cared to come to make their bow and curtsy, to take coffee and tea, to chat for half an hour or longer. The same ceremony was performed on Tuesdays at Mrs. John Temple's house—"Lady" Temple, as Abigail Adams insisted on calling the former Elizabeth Bowdoin; Wednesday was Mrs. Knox's turn, and Thursday, Mrs. Jay. Despite health problems and coping with housing a family of eighteen, Abigail Adams was in brilliant spirits, worried about being "too happy in the situation of it to have it lasting." In fact, she asked a favor of her "near and intimate Friends" that they let her know if they perceived any alteration in her conduct.

In truth, Abigail Adam's situation in life had measurably changed her manner and expectations. Her fears were as readily realized as they were understandable. Only to study her references to herself as her "Ladyship," her friend as "Lady" Temple, and especially to George and Martha Washington illuminates her own new, sharply defined sense of social position and expectations of homage. She wrote of the Washingtons with sensitivity and affection, but also with a more formal dimension, that of deference. Inadvertently, Mrs. Adams treated the Washingtons as uncrowned royalty, as court subjects, eligible successors to the monarchical figures of her recent past. She was truly delighted that their celebration of the new year of 1790 was as crowded as one at St. James and attended with company as brilliantly dressed, diamonds and great hoops excepted.

Unfortunately, although Abigail and John Adams remained passionately enthralled by every nuance in the growth of their developing country and the "great national objects" coming before Congress, the press focused on the outer trappings of the Adamses' lives. When the "Boston puffs" criticized the dissipations of New York, meaning the official entertainments, the newspaper editors absolved the president but held the Adamses as catalysts for the infamous indulgences. Mrs.

Adams certainly thought the *Massachusetts Centinel* had gone too far in displaying favoritism when it printed Edward Church's scathing poem cautioning John Adams without mentioning his name: "Ye Would'd be Titled! whom, in even hour—The rash, unthinking people cloth'd with pow'r."

In private, Abigail Adams despaired. The vice president ten times to one went to the Senate in a one-horse chaise; only the president had his powdered lackies waiting at the door. One was hypocritically attacked, she concluded; the other was styled savior and God. Mrs. Adams believed that she and her husband were defamed owing to misinterpretation of her husband's recently published series of articles that mistakenly identified him with monarchical government. With weary resignation she concluded: "Thus it is to be seated high. I pray Heaven to give me a conscience void of offence, and then the curse causeless shall not come."

The publication of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* in Philadelphia in May 1791 not only challenged John Adams's belief that the English Constitution was the only workable form of government but also severely damaged his friendship with Thomas Jefferson. John Adams was shocked to read Jefferson's endorsement of Paine's document, affirming Paine's accusations of Adams's "political heresies." Abigail Adams's silent condemnation of Jefferson's attempts to explain his position and to reconstitute the family friendship would be revoked only momentarily with the untimely death of Polly.

On July 16, 1790, Philadelphia was named the capital of the United States until 1800, at which time a federal city was to be founded on the Potomac River. Arriving in Philadelphia the second week of November 1790, Mrs. Adams soon discovered to her unreserved delight that the women of Philadelphia were well educated, well bred, and well dressed, and that she was received in their brilliant drawing rooms with every mark of politeness and civility. As politically aware as ever, Abigail Adams noted with special interest the bill signed February 25 chartering the Bank of the United States. Opposed by many Southern members of Congress on the grounds that it was financially hazardous as well as unconstitutional—Congress hadn't the power to incorporate a bank—Abigail did worry about this divided stand and speculated that if she lived ten years longer she would see a division of the Southern and Northern states, unless more candor and less intrigue should prevail.

In 1792 Abigail Adams stayed home in Massachusetts owing to her failing health. Recognition of a more permanent arrangement came two years later, when Adams finally packed off all the furniture left behind in Philadelphia. During that period Adams was a commuter, going to work in Philadelphia from two to six

months, for however long Congress sat or as long as he felt obligated to stay. Meanwhile, Abigail managed the farm, cared for her ill mother-in-law, supervised a secret building program involving an addition to their home, and resumed her correspondence with her husband after a hiatus of nearly ten years while he waited for news on his ultimate destiny.

The specter of France—revulsion at its “king-Killing,” fear of its “fire, impetuosity and vehemence,” conviction that “anarchy, chaos, murder, atheism, blasphemy” were not liberty—haunted their thoughts and crowded their pages to one another. At a time of “wild projections and notions” in their own republic, discussions between Adamses ranged from the purpose of taxes to the practicality of a banking system to the scourge of a two-party political system—a concept encouraged by those hated “hell-hounds” of rival newspapers who promoted Federalist views. Abigail Adams was outraged at the treatment of Washington by the press. Taking his character all together, Mrs. Adams said, “We shall not look upon his like again.”

If the press could mistreat Washington, who was not used to such “threshing,” and whose skin was “thinner” than her husband’s, Abigail Adams could only wonder what was to be expected of his successor. As election day grew closer John wrote his wife on February 10: “I am weary of the game, yet I don’t know how I could live out of it.” On election day, December 5, 1796, Adams, the Federalist candidate, won seventy-one votes in the presidential election. He had edged out Jefferson, the Democratic-Republican candidate, by three votes, and Thomas Pinckney and Aaron Burr by a more comfortable margin. The hazards implicit in John’s minuscule lead did not escape Abigail. “President by three votes,” some would call him shortly. When she concluded that only Washington could unite “such an assemblage of fortunate circumstances to combine all hearts in her favor,” she was more prescient than even she herself might have imagined. Frankly threatened by her husband’s elevated station, Mrs. Adams envisioned the presidency “as a slippery precipice, surrounded on all sides by rocks, shoals and quicksands.”

Abigail Adams remained in Massachusetts for approximately twenty-two of the forty-eight months of her husband’s presidency for a variety of reasons, mostly health and family concerns. As First Lady she must be remembered for her inspiring concept and support of the office of the presidency and of a growing nation, for her character and intelligence rather than for any innovations as a White House hostess. In fact, her ceremonial duties reminded her of her state of “splendid misery.” She dreaded the Fourth of July celebrations and, much as she admired George and Martha Washington in other respects, she blamed them for introducing a custom she found far too costly and tedious.

While Abigail Adams harbored no illusions whatsoever about the “elevated seat” her husband was to occupy—she judged it a mark at which envy, pride, and malevolence will shoot their envenomed arrows—she again reiterated her deep regard for her country’s well-being. While her “desire and wish to shine in public Life . . . was wholly extinguished,” life’s purpose was to preserve peace, to support order, and to sustain their government. “The sacrifice of an individual life,” on the contrary, was important only to its near connections, and “ought not to be taken into consideration.” On February 8, 1797, Mrs. Adams wrote: “My thoughts and my meditations are with you . . . and my petitions to Heaven are that ‘the things which made for peace may not be hidden from your eyes.’” Her feelings were not those of pride or ostentation, but were solemnized by a sense of the obligations, the important trusts, and numerous duties connected with it. “That you may be enabled to discharge them with honor to yourself, with justice and impartiality to your country, and with satisfaction to this great people, shall be the daily prayer of your A.A.”

Once again back in Philadelphia, Abigail Adams settled down to exercise what Adams called her “admirable faculty” of employing her mind, her studious addiction to “scribbling” letters to one member or another of her family, which would become the provocative and nearly weekly bulletins of his presidential years. Mrs. Adams’s reports on friends and foes are brilliant testimonies of her political curiosity and wisdom as well as her monolithic loyalty to her husband. They cover the French and English, all nationalities of ships at sea, Indians at war, predators on Louisiana and other controversial territories, members of the cabinet and Congress, and, two months after inauguration, the press, who had pained her before, but never with such nightmarish brutality.

President Adams’s quest for a peaceful solution to his country’s “misunderstanding” with France, his commitment to the policy of neutrality he had helped Washington support, was pronounced untenable. Right at the start of his administration, angry members of the French Directory lashing back at Jay’s Treaty, at what they believed to be America’s overly conciliatory settlement with Great Britain, not only refused to recognize America’s minister to France, Washington’s appointee, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, but also annulled the treaty of amity and commerce written into the Franco-American Alliance of 1778. Adams’s insistence that salvation lay in negotiations rather than warfare incited the Francophile press to turn on him for the unpardonable sin of proclaiming America “just and impartial to foreign Nations.”

Abigail Adam’s early and enduring fears were dramatically affirmed. A press that vilified Washington could certainly be expected to turn on his successor. The



past March, the *Aurora* had applauded the end of Washington's service to his country, claiming that America's first president had "carried his designs against the public liberty so far as to have put in jeopardy its very existence." With that in mind, Mrs. Adams concluded that of course a man who attained eminence of any kind and by whatever means, even the most honorable, would be exposed to envy and jealousy. Steeling herself against Benjamin Franklin Bache and his colleagues, she was still supremely miserable over the "low Billingsgate" surrounding her husband's every move and that of the rest of the family. Turning on Adams, Bache insisted that the president held out the idea of negotiations with the French only to deceive the American people, that his protestations were so much presidential war whoop in which his peace initiatives masked preparation for war.

Bache's assaults were compounded by others, including Peter Porcupine, the pen name of the English-born William Cobbett, and by Boston's *Independence Chronicle & Universal Advertiser*, whose editor had achieved "more of the true spirit of Satin" than all of the Jacobin papers," Abigail Adams said, by misrepresenting the president's salary and that of her son, John Quincy. Apart from an inflammatory press, Mrs. Adams was further enraged by the behavior of Tennessee's Senator William Blount, who attempted to enlist the Creeks and Cherokees to help the British gain the Spanish territories of West Florida. "When shall we cease to have Judases?" Abigail asked. "We are in peril by Land, and we are in perils by sea, and in perils from false Brethren," Abigail concluded after the exposure of Blount's treachery.

Frustrated by reports from France, exasperated by the Federalist press and their "wicked and base, violent & calumniating abuse," Abigail sought justice at her writing table. Denied the larger audience she might like, to argue her husband's and her nation's cause, Mrs. Adams was determined to set the record straight at least for the devoted few. As though on scheduled assignment, she reported to her family almost every morning, during the spring of 1798, the suspenseful antics of what would be known as the XYZ Affair, and its role in America's "quasi-war" with France. A remarkably thorough journalist, she supplemented her observations with copies of official papers. Also an inventive and persistent publicist, she suggested to her correspondents that certain documents be forwarded to friendly newspapers as opposed to the Federalist press. Passage of what she called the "Alien Bill" was the fulfillment of her revenge. She embraced the Alien and Sedition Acts, actually four separate acts passed in different stages. Section two of the fourth act addressed Abigail's most searing complaints, providing punishment "if any person shall write, print, utter or publish, or shall cause or procure to be written, printed, uttered or published . . . scandalous and malicious writ-

ing or writings against the government of the United States, or either house of the Congress of the United States, or the president of the United States.”

In response to her husband’s invitation to join him in the new president’s house in Washington, Abigail Adams arrived on Sunday, November 16, 1800. She did not fail to be somewhat awed by the “grand and superb scale” of the “great castle,” her temporary home, only to be dismayed that there was not a sign of a fenced yard without, and not a single completed apartment within; the main staircase, furthermore, would not be up that winter. Twelve fireplaces needed lighting to alleviate the chilling dampness; there was no place to hang the laundry for the time being except in “the great unfinished audience Room.”

In answer to nervous queries about how she found travel through shocking wilderness without some gentleman with her, other than the coachman, Abigail Adams laughed, scolded, and bragged that she was too independent to want a gentleman always at her side. Though she allowed that it would have been very agreeable to have one along, she explained that she was “accustomed to get through many a trying scene and combat many difficulties alone.” Adams would begin his 500-mile trip home on March 4, as soon as he had concluded unfinished business. March 3 found him signing commissions of his new appointees; under the Judiciary Act passed on February 13 he named John Marshall as chief justice of the Supreme Court, and others whom Jefferson deemed his “most ardent political enemies.” By so doing, Adams committed the one and only act that he regarded as a source of personal displeasure.

For all their yearning for Braintree—now known also as Quincy—for their trees, flowers, fences, and rocks, both John and Abigail Adams were apprehensive about facing “total relinquishment” of public life. But as a generous epitaph to their presidential years, Abigail Adams wished that her husband be succeeded by a wise administration, even as she recognized that “in the best situation, with the wisest head and firmest Heart, it will be surrounded with perplexities, dangers and troubles, that are little conceived of by those into whose Hands it is like to fall.”

Abigail Adams was then fifty-seven years old. Very soon the so-called “tranquil shades of Quincy” teemed with children, grandchildren, and servants—a force of twenty-one by actual count. The parlor belonged to John Adams in the forenoon, when he read and wrote. He began his autobiography in October 1802, supposing that some of his posterity might probably wish to see in his own handwriting “a proof of the falsehood of that Mass of odious Abuse of my character.” Reviewing, explaining, affirming, and defending his role in building his nation, he exchanged dozens of letters with colleagues, friends, and family until his death.

As her own room was filled with grandchildren and daughters-in-law, Abigail Adams, who loved to be by herself when she wrote, snatched bits of time while her dog Juno lay at her feet and snored. Though her eyes bothered her, and she did not write as prolifically as usual during this period, her scope had not diminished, nor was her pen less pointed. Aaron Burr's duplicity she pronounced a disturbing phenomenon. Hamilton was a frail, weak man deluded by his passions; Napoleon Bonaparte, like Macbeth, seemed to think that all means were lawful to accomplish one's ambition. She read widely and she would follow John Quincy Adams's career microscopically, rumor by rumor, to her last breath, reliving in many ways the vicissitudes of her husband's career as her son ascended from the United States Senate on February 3, 1803, to professor of rhetoric at Harvard in 1805, to minister to Russia in 1809, minister to Great Britain in 1815, and, fourteen months before her death, when recalled to Washington, to serve as secretary of state under President Monroe. Contrary to the acid memoir written at age sixty-five by John Quincy's wife, a memoir so cruelly unflattering to her mother-in-law, the more youthful, fortyish, mentally sturdier Louisa Catherine Adams shared with Abigail Adams an abundant, sympathetic, far-flung correspondence that remains a trenchant commentary on the privileges and difficulties of embassy life.

In the course of her last correspondence, Abigail Adams enjoyed candid "talks" with many people on many subjects, including religion. She acknowledged herself a Unitarian, and authors such as Byron, Lawrence Sterne, Walter Scott, Milton, Pope, and Francis Thompson were "sterling bullion and have never been rivaled by any of their successors."

Four years after his wife's death of typhus fever on Wednesday, October 28, 1818, John Adams, on reading the *Life and Letters* of Rachel Wriothesley, Lady Russell, did not fail to remember most vividly the special lady he pronounced his "best, dearest, worthiest, wisest friend." In a letter to his granddaughter Caroline he mentioned that as much as he admired the Englishwoman, he admired his own Lady far more: "This Lady was more beautiful than Lady Russell, had a brighter genius, more information, a more refined taste, and at least her equal in the virtues of the heart." Remembering the patriot and peace-loving revolutionary, mother and writer, he extolled the wife who had never discouraged him by word or deed from "running all hazards for the salvation of his country's liberties."

On the subject of independence, with John Adams in the throes of helping to draft a new code of laws, Abigail Adams had cautioned her husband to "Remember the Ladies." Otherwise, she warned on March 16, 1776, if particular

care and attention were not paid them, “we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice.” Two centuries later, with her threat fulfilled, Abigail Adams is indeed a First Lady to remember not only as the Colonial foremother of the twentieth-century feminist movement but also as America’s first suffragette, who championed both the rights of women and the abolishment of slavery.

Abigail Adams should also be remembered on several other counts. As a zealous patriot, as wife and partner of John Adams, she nurtured, with grave personal sacrifice, the American revolution. In the thick of battle she wrote to a friend on December 5, 1773, “What a pitty it is that we can die but once to save our Country.” As a writer and historian Abigail Adams was as modest as she was compelling. Despite fears that her letters in general were “trash,” her husband praised her on August 10, 1776, as a source of “clearer and fuller Intelligence, than I can get from a whole Committee of Gentleman.” When approached about publishing her correspondence, she was terrified, she said, too vain to risk her reputation before the public.

Though she suffered profound family tragedy—her daughter Nabby’s difficult marriage ended in death from breast cancer; her son Charles died of alcoholism as had her brother—Abigail Adams was a founder of America’s most enduring dynasty. Her son John Quincy Adams was professor of rhetoric at Harvard; minister to Prussia, Holland, Russia, and England; secretary of state; sixth president of the United States; senator and representative early and late in life. Her grandson Charles Francis Adams served as ambassador to Britain, legislator, historian, fellow at Harvard; her great-grandson was the venerable writer Henry Adams.

Ultimately, remembering Abigail Adams’s years as First Lady is secondary by far to remembering a first-rate talent, a writer with an excellent mind and extraordinary ambitions for women who served her country not just during the presidential years but during all of her years.

### *Bibliographical Essay*

The first edition of Abigail Adams’s letters was published by her grandson Charles Francis Adams in 1840. Since then they have appeared under varying auspices, in juxtaposition to her husband’s, interspersed with her daughter’s, her sister’s, Thomas Jefferson’s, and those of other celebrated colonials. They are found predominantly in the Adams Papers, Microfilms, 1629–1889, at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Also to be found at the society are the De Windt Collection of letters from Abigail Adams to her daughter Nabby, Abigail Adams Smith,

and William Stephens Smith; the Norton Diaries, with background material on Abigail Adams's maternal forebears; the Smith-Carter Collection with numerous letters from Abigail Adams to her maternal uncle, Isaac Smith, and his son Isaac Smith Jr. The Smith-Townsend Collection at the society includes letters from Abigail Adams to her cousin, William Smith of Boston, and to her niece Betsy Cranch.

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The definitive biography based on all unpublished and published papers available to date is Phyllis Lee Levin, *Abigail Adams* (New York, 1987). All quotations in the above essay are to be found in that volume.

—PHYLLIS LEE LEVIN

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# *Dolley (Payne Todd) Madison*

*(1768–1849)*

*First Lady: 1809–1817*

Dolley Payne was born on May 20, 1768. Her mother, Mary Coles, was descended from Isaac Winston, an early Quaker settler in Virginia who was the grandfather of the American patriot Patrick Henry, and William Coles, an immigrant from Wexford County, Ireland. Her father, John Payne, came from an Anglican family of middling success. Dolley's parents were married outside the Quaker faith in 1761, but three years later her father applied and was admitted to the Quaker Monthly Meeting in Hanover County, Virginia.

In 1765 the Paynes moved to Rowan County, North Carolina. Dolley Payne was thus born in North Carolina, near where Guilford College stands today. Dolley was one of eight children, four boys (Walter, William Temple, Isaac, and John), and four girls (Dolley, Lucy, Anna, and Mary). The family, however, did not thrive, and, a year after Dolley's birth, they returned to Virginia. Three years later they settled into a house on the estate of her mother's family, the Coles Hill Plantation. As a young girl Dolley grew up in comfort in rural eastern Virginia, deeply attached to her mother's family.

With the revolution over in 1783, John Payne emancipated his slaves. Soon afterward he took his family to Philadelphia, where he attempted to establish himself as a merchant in the laundry starch business. The move, however, would soon bring tragedy. In 1785 the Payne's eldest son, Walter, perished. Philadelphia was a city in transition, where spiraling costs and contracting trade imposed crushing expenses on small businessmen. In 1789 Payne's venture failed and he retreated into his home. He died a broken man on October 24, 1792.

Dolley's mother survived initially by opening a boarding house for the leaders of the new nation. In 1793, however, Mrs. Payne retired. She moved with her two youngest children, Mary and John Coles, to western Virginia to live with

her daughter Lucy, who in 1792 had married George Steptoe Washington, a nephew of George Washington's.

In January 1790 Dolley Payne married her first husband, a young Quaker lawyer named John Todd. Todd provided her with much-needed financial security. The couple prospered and produced two boys in rapid succession, John Payne Todd (b. 1790) and William Temple Todd (b. 1792).

In the fall of 1793 yellow fever struck Philadelphia. It was a devastating epidemic. Five thousand people died within a few weeks. Dolley Todd took her two children to a resort on the outskirts of the city. Her husband remained in the city, at first attending to his business and then helping his ailing parents, who soon perished. Then he fell ill, and, on October 24, 1793—the very day of the first anniversary of her father's death—John passed away in Philadelphia. Their infant son William Temple also succumbed to the plague. She lost her husband, her in-laws, and her infant son all within the space of one week.

After she had recovered from the initial shock, Dolley Todd returned to Philadelphia and settled into a new life. She was a widow at the age of twenty-five, concerned with the future of her surviving son and surrounded by friends anxious to help her. Young and attractive, she soon became popular.

In May 1794 James Madison asked his friend Aaron Burr to introduce him to Dolley Todd. Anticipating their meeting, Dolley wrote to her friend Eliza Collins Lee that "Aaron Burr says that the great little Madison has asked to be brought to see me this evening." Madison was seventeen years her senior and, at the age of forty-three, a long-standing bachelor. A member of a Virginia planter family, he had played a large role in the framing of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and then was elected to the House of Representatives from central Virginia. From there he became a leader of the emerging Republican Party. He "was a little man with small features rather wizened when I saw him, but occasionally lit up with a good-natured smile," wrote British diplomat Augustus John Foster, who first knew James Madison as secretary of state, in his "Notes," later published as *Jeffersonian America*.

During the summer of 1794 Madison courted Dolley Todd. It was a good match: he was charming and witty among his friends (if often shy and remote in public); brilliant and successful; a man without his own children who was anxious to care for hers. And he had fallen passionately in love with her. As her cousin Catherine Coles wrote her on June 1, Mr. Madison "thinks so much of you in the day that he has Lost his Tongue, at Night he Dreams of you & Starts in his Sleep a Calling on you to relieve his Flame for he Burns to such an excess that he will be shortly consumed. . . ."



*Dolley (Payne Todd) Madison*



Four months after their first meeting, Dolley Todd and James Madison were married. The wedding took place on September 15, 1794, at her sister Lucy's estate, Harewood, in Virginia. "In the course of this day," Dolley again wrote to her friend Eliza, "I give my Hand to the Man who of all other's I most admire." The Quakers disowned her on December 12, 1794. She was now the wife of a prosperous, slave-owning, Virginia planter who was definitely not a Quaker. And she moved onto the national stage as the wife of a leader of the emerging Republican Party.

The Madisons lived in Philadelphia for the next three years. Their home was a large, fashionable, red-brick house in the middle of the city. Dolley Madison brought with her not only her four-year-old son, John Payne Todd, but also her younger sister, Anna, who had lived with her from the time that she married John Todd and had become like a daughter. Philadelphia was a lively city, full of balls and parties. The Madison house was filled with a whirling social life, gossip, and the latest in French fashion. Mrs. Madison loved the new European styles, with short sleeves and revealing neck-lines, the sort of dress an older, primmer, Abigail Adams thought of as outrageous and indecent.

Amidst the excitement of her new social life, Mrs. Madison lost two of her remaining brothers. In 1795 William and Isaac died. Only one brother, John, remained. She left behind no letter recording her emotions.

Nor did she or James Madison ever write down what it meant to them to remain childless. There is no hint of disappointment or sadness. This circumstance, however, did leave her in the unusual position of having only one child to raise.

When John Adams became president in 1797 the Madisons retired to Montpelier, the family estate of 5,000 acres in Orange County, Virginia. There they expected to remain as planters, living quietly in the country. In 1800 Dolley's youngest sister, Mary, wed a member of the Virginia House of Delegates, John G. Jackson, who would in 1803 be elected to Congress from what is now West Virginia.

In May 1801, at the request of the newly elected president, Thomas Jefferson, the Madisons once again shifted—this time to the new capital of Washington, D.C. The day after his presidential inauguration, Jefferson nominated James Madison as secretary of state. Madison accepted immediately, but the family delayed moving for several months, as James Madison was ill and his father died.

Upon their arrival in the federal city in May, the Madisons stayed first with Jefferson in the White House, later moving to a row house between the White House and Georgetown, and finally settling in at 1333 F Street, Northwest, two blocks east of the president's house. It was a comfortable brick home with plenty

of bedrooms, entertaining space, living quarters for servants and slaves, storage space for wine and fuel, and a carriage house in the rear.

During the eight years that he served as secretary of state, Madison engaged in a series of complex negotiations with France, Britain, and Spain. The country's major foreign-relations issues—the revolution in St. Domingue (now Haiti), the depredations of the Barbary pirates, the dangers of a possible French empire west of the Mississippi River, the American claims to Spanish Florida, and, after 1805, the intensifying conflict between France and Britain as the world's two superpowers—were discussed at home and occasionally referred to in Mrs. Madison's letters, but they did not form the cornerstones of her life. The important events lay in her private sphere and with her public obligations.

The circumstances of her family were often emotionally difficult, although for the first years in Washington life proceeded without any major problems or shifts in her daily routine. Then, on March 30, 1804, her sister Anna married Richard Cutts, a congressman from Maine who had first been elected in 1801. Anna's marriage was a seismic event for Dolley, as intense as any grief she had yet experienced—and she was quite clear about the pain in her letters.

Soon thereafter Mrs. Madison began a long bout with an ulcerated knee, which by 1805 needed serious medical attention. That summer she went to Philadelphia to be treated by the eminent Dr. Philip Syng Physick. For much of the time her husband remained by her side—writing, but also relaxing and visiting—until September, when business called him back to Washington.

It was the only time in their marriage that the Madisons spent more than a day or two apart, and their often-quoted letters from these weeks have a tenderness that speaks of a mutual affection. Dolley Madison began the correspondence on October 23, 1805, writing, "A few hours only have passed since you left me my beloved, and I find nothing can relieve the oppression of my mind but speaking to you in this *only* way." Mr. Madison responded five days later by asking his wife to "let me know that I shall soon have you with me, which is most anxiously desired by your ever affectionate James Madison."

It was her first visit to Philadelphia since she had left the city in 1797. She spent a great deal of time renewing old friendships. Returning to Philadelphia as a leading woman of Washington, however, also clarified how much her life had changed, and the importance of her public role.

The Madisons traveled very little. Jefferson, the Monroes, and the Adamses, for example, had spent years in Europe, as had a score of the leading figures of the early Republic and their wives. James Madison loathed traveling. The Madisons shuttled between their plantation in Orange County and their home in Washing-

ton, with an occasional visit to a friend or relative in Virginia. This insularity intensified Mrs. Madison's concentration on her immediate roles: doyenne of Washington and mistress of Montpelier. It also helped her create a special blend of high fashion and popular American culture. She interpreted European dress, manners, and food through a purely American filter.

By 1805 her only surviving brother, John C. Payne, had become an alcoholic and a reckless gambler. In 1806 the Madisons sent him to Tripoli as secretary to the American consul there. For Dolley Madison, who always wanted as much of her family as close as possible—while they increasingly moved to more and more remote regions—this was another loss. Later that year, two of her nieces died. In 1807 her mother passed away and, a year later, her sister Mary succumbed to tuberculosis, after years of illness. Her immediate family was thus reduced to her two surviving sisters, Anna and Lucy, her wastrel brother John, her son, and her husband.

She remained very close to her sisters, Anna Cutts and Lucy Washington, and Mary's widower, John G. Jackson. The entire Cutts family often spent the months Congress was in session in Washington, and, after 1809, the year Madison was elected president, they actually lived in the White House. The two women were thus often together. When Anna Cutts was back in Maine, Dolley Madison missed her. While apart they wrote each other often, filling their correspondence with news about children, family, and their various illnesses.

Nevertheless, the situation had its strains. As the spring of 1812 drew to a close, President Madison began to count votes in Congress for a declaration of war. Richard Cutts wrote he could not attend the congressional session; he had been thrown from a carriage in the Boston Wharf in the fall of 1811, and he was in too much pain to make the long trip. Whether this was the truth is uncertain; however, Cutts had other problems. A New Englander, Cutts was faced with the fact that his constituency opposed open conflict with England. In addition, he had speculated quite heavily in a shaky ship-building deal and he feared that war would ruin him. He showed up shortly after the vote for war had been taken. Despite the strains, however, when Richard Cutts was defeated that fall, President Madison appointed him superintendent of military supplies. Cutts and his family, now part of the civil service, moved into their own home, a large and comfortable house on Lafayette Square, across from the White House.

Richard Cutts, however, suffered severe financial losses from his speculations over the course of the War of 1812. In an attempt to pay his debts he borrowed heavily from both Madison and John G. Jackson. Cutts finally went bankrupt and was sent to debtors' prison. His assets were sold to pay his debts, although