

Abigail Adams on the Status of Women

Abigail Adams has often been hidden in the shadows of her husband, John, and her son, John Quincy—both of whom became Presidents of the United States. Yet father and son were quick to point out the large role Abigail played in their successful careers in government.

Abigail was a remarkable woman in her own right. Due to her husband's extensive absences as he pursued his career, Abigail shouldered responsibilities uncommon for women of her time. She ran the Adams household and farm, supervised the education of the children, managed the family's finances, and even increased their holdings.

John and Abigail had a very strong marriage, and one unusual for their time. An educated woman, Abigail wrote long letters to John, keeping him informed of political developments at home as he traveled. John considered Abigail his intellectual equal, and she served as his confidante and sounding board as the principles of the revolution

and the new nation evolved and took hold.

Abigail wrote many letters expressing her opinions on the issues of the day. Concerned with the status of women, she wrote John the following on March 31, 1776, as Congress was debating independence.

... I long to hear that you have declared an independency—and by the way in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would remember the ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they

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could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or representation.

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.

—ABIGAIL ADAMS, 1776

In another letter to John, dated May 7, 1776, Abigail reinforced her position:

I cannot say that I think you are 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.

—ABIGAIL ADAMS, 1776

Examining the Reading

Reviewing Facts

1. Identify what Abigail Adams requested of her husband in the "new code of laws."
2. Cite the discrepancy Abigail Adams found in the work of the Second Continental Congress.

Critical Thinking Skills

3. Making Inferences What did Abigail Adams believe about the nature of power?