

Biographical Briefing on Abigail Adams

Directions: The following information will help your group prepare for the press conference in which one of you has been assigned to play Abigail Adams and the rest of you have other roles to play. To prepare for the press conference, each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Abigail Smith was born on November 11, 1744, in Quincy, Massachusetts, the daughter of a minister. She did not attend school, but was taught by her grandparents, who had a large library in their home. Soon, young Abigail was reading and studying on her own, without the help of her grandparents. She would often be found reading until the late hours of the evening. One day John Adams, a lawyer from Boston, visited her father. He teased her about her reading. Abigail replied that women were just as curious to gain knowledge as men.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- **What did Abigail Smith's father do for a living?**
- **Since she did not go to school, how was she able to study?**
- **How do you think Abigail felt when John Adams teased her about studying? Why?**

Despite their first encounter, Abigail totally approved of John's involvement in the struggle against British rule over the American colonies. They married in 1764. In 1768, John moved the family to Boston because he had been elected a member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives. Later, John traveled to Philadelphia when he was appointed to the Continental Congress. Although Abigail and the rest of the family stayed in Boston, she influenced John's thoughts and actions through her numerous letters about life in Boston and about British military movements. She criticized him in 1774 for not being able to direct the Congress to declare independence, and she spoke out against clergymen who urged American colonists to submit to the King. Although she feared the violence the rebellion would create, she was willing to make that sacrifice in order to obtain freedom from the Crown.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- **How did Abigail feel about John Adams' involvement with the rebellion? Why?**
- **Why did Abigail criticize her husband and the Continental Congress?**
- **Why were her letters valuable to her husband and Congress?**

Throughout 1774 Abigail sent her husband numerous letters that mirrored much of colonial opinion. She told her husband of the injustice under which every Bostonian was forced to live. Citizens were arrested for wiping their noses with white handkerchiefs because it was believed to be a sign of rebellion; the British ordered all people to stay off rooftops or face execution for observing British troop movements; and Bostonians were forced to house and feed British soldiers. "The present state of the inhabitants of Boston is that of the most abject

of slaves, under the most cruel and despotic of tyrants..." In writing this, Abigail expressed her belief that England was treating Bostonians as badly as slaves.

Abigail Adams was never a woman who quietly assumed the traditional passive role expected of a wife. Like her husband, Abigail Adams was a powerful voice for independence. In November of 1775, she risked a charge of treason for speaking out against a petition calling for improved relations with the King. Instead, Abigail insisted that independence was the only option. "Let us [the United States and Britain] separate," she wrote John. "They [the British] are unworthy to be our brethren [friends]."

*Stop here
and discuss*



- **About what did Abigail write to John?**
- **Why would it be important for John to know about these events?**
- **What were the key reasons Abigail supported independence?**

When Abigail Adams referred to independence she was speaking of independence for all, including African Americans and women. She pressed John to outlaw slavery so that the country could start with a clean slate. "How can Americans claim to be fighting for what we are daily robbing...from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have?" she wrote to her husband.

Through her letters, Abigail also sought to promote women's rights. She wrote to John, "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 powers into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies, we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or Representation."

Amused by her passion, but not swayed by her beliefs, John wrote in return, "Depend upon it. We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems." Abigail's pleas and the rights of women were ignored. While Abigail's hope for complete independence was not fulfilled in her lifetime, she helped to lay the foundation for those who would later struggle against racism and sexism.

*Stop here
and discuss*



- **Why did Abigail think King George should no longer rule?**
- **Who does Abigail urge John to remember in shaping the new government?**
- **Why does she think it necessary for women to be included in government?**