

## LETTERS BETWEEN ABIGAIL AND JOHN ADAMS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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### Questions:

- 1) Describe the letters between Abigail and John Adams.
- 2) What do these letters suggest about women's roles in the new republic?

*The Revolution permanently changed American society. Profoundly affected by republican ideals, people of all races, classes, and sexes challenged forms of hierarchy. Thousands of women supported the Continental Army as "camp followers," nurses, and in rare instances, as soldiers. But most Americans still believed that women's primary roles were wife and mother. While New Jersey allowed women to vote until 1807, no other state granted women suffrage. Women were barred from formal politics.*

*Nonetheless, many Americans modified their views. They increasingly accepted the notion of marrying for love instead of familial obligation. Divorce became more readily available to women with abusive husbands. Believing that women were responsible for teaching children moral and political virtues, schools and academies began offering women improved educations to prepare them for their role as "republican mothers."*

*Abigail and John Adams witnessed such changes. A major figure in the Continental Congress who later became the nation's second president (1797-1801), John Adams was a brilliant and volatile man. In 1764, he married the lively and intelligent Abigail Smith. They considered their marriage an ideal intellectual and intimate partnership. Often separated by Adams's political duties, the duo shared impassioned letters.*

*In this exchange, Abigail and John Adams share opinions on women's rights.*



Abigail Adams to John Adams  
Braintree March 31, 1776

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 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.

John Adams to Abigail Adams  
April 14, 1776

As to Declarations of Independency, be patient. Read our Privateering Laws, and our Commercial Laws. What signifies a Word.

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government everywhere. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient-that school and Colleges were grown turbulent-that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented.- This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it out.

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Although they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would completely subject Us to the Despotism of the Petticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight. I am sure every good Politician would plot, as long as he would against Despotism, Empire, Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy... - A fine Story indeed. I begin to think the Ministry as deep as they are wicked. After stirring up Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholics, Scots Renegades, at last they have stimulated them to demand new Privileges and threaten to rebel.

Abigail Adams to John Adams  
Braintree, May 7, 1776

I can not say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and goodwill 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

“Charm by accepting, by submitting away  
Yet have our Humor most when we obey.”

Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776 and May 7, 1776; John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776, in L.H. Butterfield et al, eds., *The Book of Abigail and John* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 120-122, 127.