

LESSON PLAN #1: Introduction to Abigail Adams

[1] **Curriculum framework(s):** 26.6 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and identify and evaluate the techniques used to create them. 9.7 Relate a literary work to the seminal ideas of its time. 27.7 Develop and apply criteria for assessing the effectiveness of the presentation, style, and content of films and other forms of electronic communication.

[2] **Goal of the lesson:** To introduce students to Abigail Adams through discussion and web inquiry.

[3] **Expected student outcomes:** Students will be able to describe Mrs. Adams and identify key events in her life.

[4] **Assessment of expected student outcomes:** Students will complete the Web Quest handout, and teacher will check for understanding.

[5] **Instructional procedures:** 45 minutes

Introduction (10 minutes): Students will respond in their journals to the following phrases: “Abigail Adams;” “American Revolution;” “Women’s Roles;” “18th century.” Then the teacher will lead students in sharing their responses to these linked words. Teacher clarifies.

Instruction/learning activities (30 minutes): Students complete the Web Quest after the teacher introduces them to the various websites relating to Abigail Adams. Teacher circulates in the room.

Closure (5 minutes): Students complete an exit ticket answering: What was the most astonishing aspect of Abigail Adams’s life? They may also hand in their Web Quest questions if complete.

Learning reinforcement /homework: Students will complete the Web Quest handout if they have not yet done so. They must read and annotate two letters for the first lesson, listed under “Material and resources” below.

Accommodations/modifications to meet diverse student needs: Students will have access to larger font if needed. Students who possess the need will be paired with a partner to aid him or her. Teacher’s circulation allows for further modifications if necessary to either challenge or aid students.

[6] **Material and resources (attached):**

- 1) Background material on Abigail Adams
- 2) Web Quest handouts
- 3) A computer lab and computer for each student
- 4) Letter from John Adams to Abigail Smith, 4 October 1762
- 5) Letter from Abigail Smith to John Adams, 11 August 1763

Background on Abigail Adams and her Correspondents

In addition to the information below, please consult the following websites:

“John and Abigail Adams.” *American Experience*.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/adams/index.html>

The Adams Papers. Massachusetts Historical Society.

http://www.masshist.org/adams_editorial/

Abigail and John Adams

Married in 1764, Abigail Smith (1744-1818) of Weymouth, Massachusetts became Abigail Adams, and of her many epistles, most were addressed to her husband John Adams (1735-1826). John Adams, the second president of the United States, was a Harvard-trained lawyer, yet after their marriage he and Abigail ran the family farm in Braintree (now Quincy), a farm he inherited from his father. Abigail and John Adams wrote over 1,100 letters during their courtship and marriage, between the years of 1762-1801, when they experienced lengthy separations from each other. John was frequently away on legal and government business: as a lawyer, as part of the Continental Congress, and as an ambassador.

Their letters demonstrate the finest epistolary writing in the world. The majority of the letters in the Adams Family Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society are the recipient's copy. Abigail, in particular, disliked keeping a record book, a practice followed by many of her contemporaries wherein the writer copied his or her letter in a book before sending it to the correspondent.

In their correspondence, Abigail and John often wrote with nicknames. Most frequently, they addressed each other as “Much Loved Friend” or “My Dearest Friend.” In the beginning of their courtship, John writes to her as “Miss Adorable”; they also use the names “Diana” and “Lysander.” However, in the 1770s, Abigail begins signing many of her letters as “Portia,” another classical allusion “after the long-suffering, virtuous wife of the Roman statesman Brutus” (McCullough 26).

Throughout all of her letters, Abigail impresses the reader with her style. Ironically, she received no formal education. Her knowledge came from reading many classics, including Shakespeare, Addison, Pope, Franklin and the Bible. Learning was important to her. Likewise, she sought to run the family farm as efficiently and effectively as possible. She churned her own butter, and did many household tasks required of an 18th century woman. In addition, due to her husband's frequent travels, Abigail also steered the family's financial business as well.

Although John Adams was Abigail's most significant correspondent, she wrote to many individuals. The list below is only a small sampling of her epistolary friends.

Isaac Smith, Jr. (1749-1829) wrote to Abigail at age thirteen asking to correspond with her. As a doting cousin, she obliged him; however, Isaac was a Loyalist and left for England during the American Revolution.

Mary Smith Cranch (1741-1811) was Abigail's sister and friend; they seemed to have a very strong relationship and relied upon each other for guidance and assistance in times of trial.

Elizabeth Smith Shaw (1750-1815) and Abigail had a sisterly relationship; however, from the letters, we can infer that her relationship was not as strong as that with Mary Smith Cranch.

Abigail Adams Smith (1765-1813), also known as Nabby, had a good relationship with her mother and was full of companionship and friendship, particularly since Nabby was Abigail's only daughter to see adulthood. She married William Stephens Smith and gave birth to four children. Unfortunately, Nabby passed away from cancer with her parents at her bedside.

John Quincy Adams (1767-1848) was Abigail's oldest and most successful son. As a young boy he spent a great deal of time traveling, mostly with his father, so his letters to his mother are numerous. He continued his travels throughout adulthood but did attend Harvard College. He followed in his father's footsteps as president of the United States from 1825-29, but is perhaps most famous for his legal defense of the slaves on the *Amistad* in front of the Supreme Court. He is also known for incredible brilliance but great lack of social diplomacy, a shortcoming tempered by his wife, Louisa Catherine Johnson.

Charles Adams (1770-1800), Abigail's second son, accompanied his father and older brother to Europe; although he studied at Harvard like his father and brother, his excess combined with his alcoholism led to his early death. He married Sarah Smith and had two daughters.

Thomas Boylston Adams (1772-1832) was the youngest of the Adams children and also attended Harvard; few letters exist from the 18th century between Abigail and Thomas Boylston. He married Ann 'Nancy' Harrod.

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) corresponded regularly with both Abigail and John Adams until the early 19th century when Jefferson and Adams became embroiled in a rancorous political relationship. However, the correspondence resumed in 1812, and Jefferson wrote an eloquent tribute to John upon learning of Abigail's death. Both he and John died on July 4th, 1826, fifty years after the Declaration of Independence was signed.

Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814) wrote numerous letters to Abigail. She also wrote poetry and dramas, and her writing style tended to be ornate. In terms of politics, she was not as strong as Abigail on the role of women's rights. She ignored Abigail's sentiment to "remember the ladies" (Roberts 50). Their friendship deteriorated in 1805 when Mercy

attacked John's political role in a book she published; however, at the end of their lives, Abigail repaired this relationship and resumed correspondence.

General Note on 18th Century Letters:

The letters included in this unit are either online or transcribed at the end of this packet. Each lesson plan contains links to the letters, which are posted on the Massachusetts Historical Society's website, where a transcribed copy and digital image are available. In the digital image, students and teachers will notice the unusual depiction of the letter "s" as "f," known as the "swash S." This was a common practice used during the colonial period. Therefore, for historic interest, I encourage teachers and students to utilize both the transcription **and** the digital image of the original. However, some letters are not available online and have been transcribed. In these transcriptions, I have retained the original spelling and grammar of the authors. In fact, in both the online transcriptions and the transcriptions contained in this packet, readers will note the errors in orthography and mechanics. This indicates the lack of a single authoritative dictionary or style manual in the 18th century. Likewise, due to handwriting, decay of time and the editorial changes made by Adams descendants, some of the words are illegible or inaccurate in their current state.

On a final note, while observing the dates of the letters and their responses, we must keep in mind that the letters took a long time to reach their destination, and in fact, sometimes never reached the destination at all. This would be particularly troublesome if the sender mailed a packet of letters to the recipient, as was commonly done. Therefore, when Abigail or John write that they have not received a letter for several weeks or months, it does not necessarily mean that the correspondent was neglecting his or her epistolary relationship, but rather, the letters had difficulty arriving.

Historical Notes on Literacy in New England:

According to Cremin, a noted historian of American education, education and literacy expanded in the years building up to the American Revolution "because of a growing participation in public affairs" (545). Education and literacy would enable colonial citizens to read pamphlets and other propaganda to join against England. Adult males in America were around 70-100 percent literate compared to 48 percent in the English countryside and 74 percent in English urban areas (546). Indeed, the Massachusetts Historical Society was founded in 1791, an indication of the importance of learning, for its founders actively sought to preserve history for the benefit of future generations.

Some women were able to read and write, some only to read, and some were only able to make their mark. Abigail Adams was exceedingly literate. Since she was of the upper echelon of society, most of her female peers would have been literate and well read (Roberts 12). A select few would even have attended school (12). In fact, for its time period, New England was remarkably literate. In a case study of the Upper Valley of the Connecticut River during the colonial and revolutionary eras, literacy rates varied between 60 percent and 90 percent for women (Gilmore 121). These rates "were even more striking in the comparative context of North Atlantic civilization. In fact, as with males, women in the Upper Valley were second to Sweden within the North Atlantic in the achievement of literacy through 1830" (121).

As the Revolution began to spread, so did the support for female education. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a patriot and signer of the Declaration of Independence, was a proponent of female education, for he realized, along with John Adams, that the education of men begins at home with their mothers (Roberts 251). Therefore, women must possess knowledge to share that knowledge with their sons. By 1790, women like Judith Sargent Murray from Massachusetts illustrated that the mythological gap in intelligence between men and women was merely a result of the differences in education between men and women, and was not a biological state (252). Though Abigail exuded brilliance as a writer and a thinker, she was by no means the only woman or person championing learning, particularly in the highly literate society of 18th century New England.

Portrait from the
Massachusetts Historical
Society



Web Quest: Abigail Adams

American Literature

Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks: 26.2 Students will identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and identify and evaluate the techniques used to create them. 9.7 Students will relate a literary work to

Curriculum Design: Content-based and inquiry design

To gather information on Mrs. Adams we will visit the following web sites:

- <http://www.masshist.org/adams/>
- <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/letter/>
- <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/adams/peopleevents/index.html>

Outcome: Students will gain knowledge of Abigail Adams, her life, her family and her era. Students will answer the following questions:

- 1) Where and when was Abigail Smith Adams born? Where and when did she die?
- 2) Describe Abigail's education.
- 3) When and where was John Adams born? When did he and Abigail marry?
- 4) How many letters did Abigail and John write to each other? Why so many? What were some of the topics of the letters? How did they address their letters to each other?

Letter from John Adams to Abigail Smith, 4 October 1762

Miss Adorable

By the same Token that the Bearer hereof satt up with you last night I hereby order you to give him, as many Kisses, and as many Hours of your Company after 9 O'Clock as he shall please to Demand and charge them to my Account: This Order, or Requisition call it which you will is in Consideration of a similar order Upon Aurelia for the like favour, and I presume I have good Right to draw upon you for the Kisses as I have given two or three Millions at least, when one has been received, and of Consequence the Account between us is immensely in favour of yours,

*John Adams
Octr. 4th. 1762*

A scanned image of the original letter is available at the following site:
<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17621004ja>

Letter from John Adams to Abigail Smith, 4 October 1762 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.

Letter from Abigail Smith to John Adams, 11 August 1763

Weymouth August th 11 1763

My Friend

If I was sure your absence to day was occasioned, by what it generally is, either to wait upon Company, or promote some good work, I freely confess my Mind would be much more at ease than at present it is. Yet this uneasiness does not arise from any apprehension of Slight or neglect, but a fear lest you are indisposed, for that you said should be your only hindrance.

Humanity obliges us to be affected with the distresses and Miserys of our fellow creatures. Friendship is a band yet stronger, which causes us to [\[feel\]](#) with greater tenderness the afflictions of our Friends.

And there is a tye more binding than Humanity, and stronger than Friendship, which makes us anxious for the happiness and welfare of those to whom it binds us. It makes their [\[Misfortunes\]](#), Sorrows and afflictions, our own. Unite these, and there is a threefold cord -- by this cord I am not ashamed to own myself bound, nor do I [\[believe\]](#) that you are wholly free from it. [\[Judge you then\]](#) for your Diana has she not this day [\[had sufficient\]](#) cause for pain and anxiety of mind?

She bids me [\[tell\]](#) you that Seneca, for the sake of his Paulina was careful and tender of his health. The health and happiness of Seneca she says was not dearer to his Paulina, than that of Lysander to his Diana.

The Fabrick often wants repairing and if we neglect it the Deity will not long inhabit it, yet after all our care and solisitude to preserve it, it is a tottering Building, and often reminds us that it will finally fall.

Adieu may this find you in better health than I fear it will, and happy as your Diana wishes you.

*Accept this hasty Scrawl warm from the Heart of Your Sincere
Diana*

A scanned image of the original letter is available at the following site:
<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17630811aa> .

Letter from Abigail Smith to John Adams, 11 August 1763 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.