Abigail Adams

Citation metadata
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Date: Summer 2015
From: Historical Journal of Massachusetts (Vol. 43, Issue 2)
Publisher: Westfield State University
Document Type: Book review
Length: 2,003 words

Main content

Article Preview:


Abigail Adams is best known for her famous letter exhorting her husband, John Adams, to "Remember the Ladies" in devising America's new political system while he was at the Continental Congress in 1775. Abigail was as committed to the cause of independence as her husband and had proven herself an astute observer of political developments. Her famous phrase comes from the following entreaty: "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." Dozens of middle and high school textbooks quote this passage, as do a large number of college-level U.S. history textbooks.

This famous letter transformed Adams into a feminist icon. Although in this passage she may have been referring to domestic violence, in other letters she expressed the view that women should be equally educated with men as well as be allowed to engage in business and control their own finances. Some of these aspects of Abigail Adams's biography are well-known. Less well known are her ideas on religion, politics, African-Americans, money making, war profiteering, European life, and family. As scholar Jeanne Boydston aptly noted over twenty years ago:

Abigail Adams is surely one of the most studied women in American history. A prolific and eloquent correspondent, she left behind a cache of letters spanning the better part of fifty years. She is the subject of five major, scholarly biographies in the last 35 years alone, nine volumes of correspondence (hers alone or in part), creating a veritable "Abigail industry." (1)

Since these words were penned in 1994, another half dozen new biographies of Abigail Adams and collections of the Adams' correspondence have appeared in print to both critical and popular applause. These newest works include Woody Holton's Abigail Adams (2010), winner of the prestigious Bancroft Prize; Joseph J. Ellis' First Family: Abigail and John (2010); and literary scholar Edith B. Gelles' third book on the subject titled Abigail and John: Portrait of a Marriage (2009), among many other new works. In addition, several major miniseries and documentaries have been produced over the years that wonderfully chronicle their relationship.

Thus, one might well wonder, do we really need another biography of Abigail Adams? This reviewer would answer with a resounding "yes!" Woody Holton's Abigail Adams is a wonderful, engaging work that offers many new insights and perspectives. As one reviewer writes, Holton "allows Abigail's voice to radiate off the page; the biography grips the reader from the beginning tale of Abigail writing her own will. [It is] a wonderful book for revolutionary history buffs, women's studies majors, and biography lovers." (2)

There were many ways that Abigail defied convention in her private life. For example, Holton has discovered that she wrote a will leaving...
Abigail Adams was one of only two women to have been both wife and mother to two U.S. presidents (the other being Barbara Bush). Abigail Adams (1744-1818) was the wife of President John Adams, the mother of President John Quincy Adams, and the second First Lady of the United States. As the Second Continental Congress drafted and debated the Declaration of Independence, Abigail began to urge John in her letters that the creation of a new form of government was an opportunity to make the legal status of women equal to that of men. The text of those letters became some of the earliest known writings advocating women’s rights. Abigail Adams, American first lady (1797–1801), the wife of John Adams, second president of the United States, and mother of John Quincy Adams, sixth president of the United States. Until modern times, few first ladies shared Abigail Adams’s interest in politics or the treatment of government leaders by the press. Although her approach to the office of first lady was in many ways advanced, her fame rests on her thousands of letters, which form an eloquent and evocative description of her life and times.