



John and Abigail Adams Classroom Guide

Introduction: John and Abigail Adams had one of the most remarkable political marriages in the history of American public life. As a key leader before and after the American Revolution, John Adams was in the political spotlight; a spirited and thoughtful woman, Abigail Adams was an influential confidant who shaped his life immeasurably. This **Biography** offers an insightful window into their relationship by examining the large volume of letters exchanged between them throughout the years. During the American Revolution, it was Abigail's letters to John that reported the on-the-ground movements of British troops to the Continental Congresses in Philadelphia. Throughout his political career their exchange of ideas played a profoundly important role in their own lives and in the development of the American republic.

John and Abigail Adams: Love and Liberty delivers the story of love, trust and sustained faith the Adams' shared. With fascinating background from historians such as David McCullough, excerpts from John and Abigail's letters, and eloquent narration, this one-hour documentary shows how the partnership between these two individuals colored John Adam's Presidency and shaped the foundation of American democracy. Though Abigail was constrained by the limitations placed upon women during her era, her perspective had an enormous influence on her husband's life and political career. This program gives students an excellent opportunity to explore the ways their relationship affected the course of American politics, and to discuss the ideas and events that helped forge a new nation.

OBJECTIVES AND CURRICULUM LINKS

John and Abigail Adams: Love and Liberty would be useful for middle school and high school classes on United States History, Arts and Letters, Politics, and Civics. Educators may want to use clips from this program to add to their course units on the early Republic, biography in history, or letter-writing as a literary form.

Vocabulary:

Using the dictionary at www.merriamwebster.com, an Internet resource such as www.history.com, or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

- Ambitious
- Ambivalent
- Burden
- Diplomatic
- Exculpate
- Ingratiating
- Qualm
- Righteous
- Stillbirth
- Wily

Critical Viewing Questions:

1. What was Adams' family life like as a boy? What lessons did he learn from his father?
2. Where did John go to college? What profession interested John coming out of college? What did John's father want him to do after graduating?
3. When did John begin to court Abigail? What role do you think his affection for her played in his early career?
4. Why did John do a favor for the colonies by defending the soldiers involved in the Boston Massacre? Do you find his defending them slightly ironic? Why?
5. How did Abigail continually inform John about the looming war? Why were her updates to him so significant?
6. Why do you think they made such a good team both personally and politically? How do you think Abigail influenced her husband's political style and decision-making?
7. What was Adams' most pressing issue as the 2nd President? What did he decide to do regarding this issue? What were the repercussions politically for his decision?
8. What were the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798? What did Adams think of their ratification?
9. What did Adams do after he retired from public life? Was he well-respected immediately following his Presidency? Is he considered a well-respected President today?
10. Why do you think John and Abigail's partnership is considered one of the greatest marriages and one of the greatest political partnerships in American history?

Extended Activities

1. Continued Research

The letters John and Abigail Adams exchanged are very important historical documents. Online or at the library, research their letters and choose one that you find particularly interesting. Then, write a 1-2 page essay describing the letter, its context, and what it reveals about life during this era.

2. "Remember the Ladies"

One of Abigail Adams' most well-known statements is "Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors." Although she was well-read and had many of her own ideas, Abigail was constrained by the limitations placed upon women during her era. Online or at the library, research the lives of women during the American Revolution and after. Then, write an editorial or letter from the perspective of Abigail Adams arguing for the political rights or roles she thought women should be granted.

3. Dear Abigail/Dear John

This documentary highlights many of the letters John and Abigail Adams exchanged. Based on what you learned from watching this documentary, compose your own letter from John to Abigail or Abigail to John. Share these letters with your larger class or group.

Additional Resources

Websites

Whitehouse biography of John Adams:

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/ja2.html>

Whitehouse biography of Abigail Adams:

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/firstladies/aa2.html>

National First Ladies Library on Abigail Adams:

<http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=2>

Massachusetts History Society's electronic copies of letters between John and Abigail Adams:

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/letter/>

Books

Adams, Abigail, John Adams, Joseph Ellis, Margaret Hogan and C. James Taylor. *My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams*. Belknap Press, 2007.

Bernstein, R.B. *Wisdom of John and Abigail Adams*. MetroBooks, 2002.

Levin, Phyllis Lee. *Abigail Adams: A Biography*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2001.

McCullough, David. *John Adams*. Simon & Schuster, 2001.

St. George, Judith. *John and Abigail Adams: An American Love Story*. Holiday House, 2001.