

**An Uncommon Exchange: The Political Conversation Between
Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren**

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Introduction

Between the years 1773-1807, the American colonies not only managed to win independence from Great Britain, but also formed a nation that still stands strongly today. During these same years, two extraordinary American women, Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren, conducted a correspondence in which they discussed both the American Revolution and the political system that resulted. Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams not only worked to instill civic virtue into their children and husbands, but also went beyond this acceptable female political role. Their unusual strong interest in politics and involvement in political affairs was extraordinary in comparison to other women of the period. Mercy and Abigail's relationships to men who were political leaders, their closeness to Boston, and their greater educational opportunities all contributed to their increased interest and engagement in politics. Mercy and Abigail clearly demonstrated their interest in politics through their correspondence in which they not only connected the political events surrounding them to their domestic lives, but also critiqued these events. They frankly and bluntly gave their opinions and debated issues. They found this correspondence so important that they managed to sustain it even after their political beliefs began to differ dramatically in the years right after the war. These differences strained their friendship, but did not rupture it until Mercy publicly criticized and humiliated Abigail's husband, John Adams. After a prolonged silence, Mercy and Abigail managed to resume their friendship and correspondence, but without the political discussion that so greatly distinguished it before.

Although Mercy and Abigail expanded beyond their domestic sphere to express their political interest, most American women limited their political influence to activities

related to their household – a concept coined “republican motherhood” in 1976 by historian Linda Kerber.¹ For women, previously lacking any influence on politics, the ideology of republican motherhood allowed them indirect influence through their sons and husbands. Kerber described the republican mother as “dedicated to the service of civic virtue; she educated her sons for it; she condemned and corrected her husband’s lapses from it.”² In order for the republican mother to carry out these duties, Kerber stated that the mother needed to understand and stay alert to current public affairs, “be an informed and virtuous citizen,” and view the “political world with a rational eye.”³ For those who generally opposed a political role for women, this ideology offered a less threatening political role that appeared to reconcile “politics and domesticity,” and denied women a direct influence on policy-making decision.⁴ Instead, women indirectly influenced the republic by raising future virtuous sons dedicated to the republic.

Kerber also connected the early republic’s fear of the future citizenry’s lack of morals and virtues to the development of a political role for women connected to their domestic activities. She stated that as a group, women appeared to represent moral stability so women gained the responsibility of shaping “the characters of their sons and husbands in the direction of benevolence, self-restraint, and responsible independence.”⁵ According to this ideology, by instilling civic virtue into these sons and husbands, women played the greatest part in ensuring the future existence of the republic. By raising the future citizenry, women could not ask for a more important or influential

¹ Linda K. Kerber, “The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment-An American Perspective.” *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 Special Issue: An American Enlightenment (Summer 1976): 187-205.

² *Ibid.*, 202.

³ Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect & Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 235.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12. and Kerber, “The Republican Mother,” 204-5.

political role. Kerber linked the embrace of republican motherhood by women and men with the increasing advocacy of greater educational opportunities for women after the American Revolution. Owing to their roles as transmitters of civic virtue to their families, women's education became justified and legitimized. A woman needed an education in order to develop properly her family's virtue and civic duty.⁶

A second important historian who has written about women in the era of the revolution, Mary Beth Norton also discussed republican motherhood in her work. Although Norton acknowledged this ideology's novelty, she believed that "it presented no dramatic break with tradition."⁷ Although women now gained some form of a political role, this role still kept women completely connected to their homes and failed to allow them direct political participation. Norton further developed Kerber's concept of republican motherhood by applying it in connection to the values of individualism and collectivism. As she explains, before the Revolution, collectivism, or the sacrifice of the individual for the good of the whole, was an important and widely accepted value. In the new republic, individualism became a prized attribute, but collectivism remained essential. According to Norton, men felt they no longer could express collectivism because of the new emphasis on individualism. However, since women always carried a tight link to a "collectivity (the family)," as a component of republican motherhood, women began to express collectivism. By sacrificing "herself to the family," the

⁵ Linda K. Kerber, *Toward an Intellectual History of Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 40.

⁶ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 200.

⁷ Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (June 1984): 618.

republican mother freed “her husband and sons to express their individualism to the fullest” which therefore benefited the republic.⁸

Norton traced the origins of the ideology of republican motherhood to the economic boycotts used against the British right before and during the American Revolution. She stated that when American political leaders decided to use economic boycotts “women’s domestic sphere took on political significance.”⁹ By 1783, a whole generation of women existed who viewed themselves as politicians.¹⁰ Male political leaders, she argued, could no longer afford to ignore the significance of the household because if they did, these women might attempt political rights outside of their domestic sphere. Thus, in contrast to Kerber, Norton perceived the republican motherhood ideology as forming during the American Revolution instead of afterwards, and viewed the economic boycotts as actual political acts that led to the recognition of women’s potential indirect influence.

A third historian, Rosemarie Zagari, has also contributed to this conversation about the American Revolution and origins of a political role for women. She wrote that, since good government rested on the need for good laws, and “good laws depended on good manners, then those who shaped the people’s manners also shaped the law and government.”¹¹ According to Zagari, due to their responsibility for society’s manners, women influenced government and politics. Therefore, although a woman’s political role

⁸ Ibid., 617.

⁹ Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 155.

¹⁰ Ibid., 171.

¹¹ Rosemarie Zagari, “Morals, Manners, and the Republican Mother,” *American Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (June 1992): 205.

lacked the directness of a man's, it nonetheless remained influential because mothers molded the morals and manners of the future generations.

Zagarri agreed with Kerber that women were regarded as making a crucial contribution to the republic by raising virtuous children, but stated that despite this development of an ideal political role for women, the Revolution did not produce physical, "concrete changes in the political status of women."¹² She argued, that, ideally this ideology offered women a large, new political role, but in reality women gained little influence in the political realm. According to Zagarri, although these women probably believed that their role as republican mothers led their children to become good republican citizens, this influence was largely an illusion. Yet, according to Zagarri, most women did not desire a fundamental change in gender roles.¹³ Elite white women, she wrote, felt comfortable with their position. Republican motherhood offered them the recognition they desired for their hard work throughout the Revolution, but did not fundamentally alter the way these women lived their lives.

Although both Mercy and Abigail worked to fulfill the role of republican motherhood, they both extended their political interest and activity beyond its domestic restriction. Their correspondence became one form of their unusual political activity as both women continually wrote about politics, while rarely connecting it to their domestic, household sphere. This correspondence began after a visit made by Abigail to Mercy in July 1773 in which the two women met for the first time, even though Mercy, through her husband, was acquainted with Abigail's husband John Adams. Mercy invited a communication between the two women and Abigail excitedly accepted. Why Mercy

¹² Rosemarie Zagarri, "The Rights of Man and Woman in Post-Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (April 1998): 206.

made the suggestion remains unclear, but the decision was probably influenced by both a genuine interest in Abigail and an ulterior motive. Mercy greatly admired Abigail's husband, John, and possibly saw a correspondence with Abigail as a way to gain greater access to him. Before Abigail and Mercy met, John never expressed any interest in Mercy. Only after Abigail and she started an exchange did he start to pay attention to Mercy and her accomplishments. Mercy cultivated a relationship with John because she respected his intellect and his political power. He provided another outlet for her to share her political opinions and he also was an important source of information for her. She highly valued her relationship with John and he treated her as an intellectual equal and confidant.¹⁴

Mercy's and Abigail's correspondence spanned forty-one years, but the quantity of letters exchanged varied throughout the years.¹⁵ When their correspondence started it began at a slow pace with two letters between them in 1773 and five in 1774. However, they appear to make up for that lack in 1775 and 1776 with a total of twenty-four letters in 1775 and 1776. Between 1777 and 1781, the number of letters ranged from two to

¹³ Ibid., 217.

¹⁴ Rosemarie Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1995), 86-90.

¹⁵ Correspondence come from: L. H. Butterfield, Wendell D. Garrett, & Marjorie E. Sprague, eds., *Adams Family Correspondence*, [hereafter referred to as *AFC*] *Volume 1: December 1761-May 1776* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1963).; L. H. Butterfield, Wendell D. Garrett, & Marjorie E. Sprague, eds., *AFC, Volume 2: June 1776-March 1778* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1963).; L. H. Butterfield and Marc Friedlaender, eds., *AFC, Volume 3: April 1778-September 1780* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1973).; L. H. Butterfield and Marc Friedlaender, eds., *AFC, Volume 4: October 1780-September 1782* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1973).; Richard Alan Ryerson, Joanna M. Revelas, Celeste Walker, Gregg L. Lint, & Humphrey J. Costello, eds., *AFC, Volume 5: October 1782-November 1784* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1993).; Richard Alan Ryerson, Joanna M. Revelas, Celeste Walker, Gregg L. Lint, & Humphrey J. Costello, eds., *AFC, Volume 6: December 1784-December 1785* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1993).; Massachusetts Historical Society, *Warren-Adams Letters: Being Chiefly a Correspondence Among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren: Volume II: 1778-1814* [hereafter referred to as *WAL*] (New York: AMS Press, 1972).; The Massachusetts Historical Society, *The Adams' Papers* Microfilm.; Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Correspondence Between John Adams and Mercy Otis Warren* [Hereafter referred to as *Correspondence*] (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1878).

seven a year. There were no letters between March of 1781 and February 1783. Historians explain this hiatus by noting that, after the Warren's moved to Milton, Massachusetts, a short stop away from the Adams' residence in Braintree, the two women, instead of writing, visited each other. From the summer of 1784 until June 1788, when Abigail stayed in Europe, they exchanged two very long letters a year, partly due to the extended period of time it took mail to cross the Atlantic Ocean. From May 1789 until October 1796, there exists an unexplained gap in the correspondence. Most likely the letters from this time period were lost since neither woman acknowledged a break in the correspondence, and historians do not refer to this period as a time when the women stopped exchanging letters. In 1797 and 1798 they wrote a surge of letters to each other, many a response to John's election to the presidency, and from 1799 until their break in 1807 they shared about two letters a year. In 1807, a complete break in communication occurred in response to the publication of Mercy's *History*. Although they resumed correspondence between December 20, 1812 and Mercy's death in October 1814, their relationship lost its political flavor and dwelled instead on reflections of approaching death.

Mercy and Abigail's political participation and discussion made them unusual because they often disconnected this political activity from their domestic sphere. Although in their correspondence they occasionally related political events to their households and displayed characteristics of republican mothers, they exchanged information and opinions on political battles, figures, and policy for their own pleasure, not that of their families. Sometimes they agreed with each other, but many times they did not.

The first chapter of this thesis describes how Mercy and Abigail were republican mothers, and the factors that not only contributed to their unusual political interest, but also differentiated them from their female contemporaries. The second chapter discusses Mercy and Abigail's correspondence from its conception in 1773 until the end of the American Revolution in 1783, and how elements of it demonstrate their unusual political interest. In the third chapter, discussion of the letters continues, but the focus is on the continuance of the correspondence despite Mercy and Abigail's diverging political beliefs, and how and why their political conversation finally ended. Both Mercy and Abigail shared a political interest that differentiated them because it extended beyond their domestic lives, and they demonstrated this interest in a correspondence. This exchange offers a rare peak into the minds of two women who both embodied, but also went beyond, republican motherhood without suffering condemnation for their actions.

Chapter 1

The Creation of a Political Interest

With the advent of the American Revolution, the women of the colonies took on a political role for the first time. They became a potent force behind the boycotts of British products and learned how to compensate for these lost goods. They also encouraged men to fight and learned how to adapt to the absence of their fathers, husbands, and sons. The form of political action taken by American woman, although important to the war effort, remained within their traditional domestic realm. Even after the American Revolution ended, their newly developed political role stayed tied to their homes and families. Although Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren behaved as “republican mothers,” they were quite unusual in taking a more public role in politics. Abigail and Mercy enjoyed relationships to prominent men, a proximity to Boston, and more educational opportunities that contributed to their greater interest and participation in politics outside their domestic realm.

* * *

Women heavily contributed to the success of the American Revolution, and they typically connected their activity to their domestic sphere. Male leaders recognized the need for women’s participation in the war effort and coveted their assistance from the beginning. One man, Christopher Gadsden, made an appeal to men to persuade their wives to aid the cause because without them “‘tis impossible to succeed.”¹⁶ Historian Linda Kerber argued that through their participation in the boycotts, women “initiated the politicization of the household economy” in which they stopped buying boycotted

¹⁶ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 37.

products, especially British cloth and tea.¹⁷ Women also refrained from purchasing goods from merchants who did not refuse to sell British products. Women's contribution to the American cause went beyond simply declining to purchase British merchandise: women needed to compensate for these lost goods through their home production.¹⁸ Women used herbs grown in their gardens to make their "American" tea and sewed homespun clothes for their families. Many of them, especially elite women, learned for the first time how to spin in order to make their own cloth.¹⁹

Throughout the American Revolution, however, women's political participation usually kept them within women's traditional sphere. At the beginning of the war, women often exhorted their husbands and fiancées to patriotism, and openly criticized men who refused to fight.²⁰ Women regularly sewed uniforms for soldiers, prepared cartridges and bandages, and collected urine for gunpowder processing. These women knew they heavily supported the war with their everyday efforts and viewed themselves as patriots due to their activities. Kerber noted that it made sense for these women to display their political consciousness "on their own turf, at home, in the woman's domain."²¹ They felt most comfortable in their traditional domain, and society expected them to display their patriotism within this sphere.

Similar to their female contemporaries, Mercy and Abigail also politically participated within the domestic sphere and embodied republican motherhood. Both Mercy and Abigail realized the benefits of this role and advocated it. According to

¹⁷ Ibid., 41.

¹⁸ Joan R. Gundersen, *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America, 1740-1790* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 150-1.

¹⁹ Alfred F. Young, "The Women of Boston: 'Persons of Consequence' in the Making of the American Revolution, 1765-76," in *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution*, eds. Harriet B. Applewhite and Darline G. Levy (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), 197.

²⁰ Ibid., 192.

historian Lester Cohen, Mercy “specifically identified the role of mother with the preservation of republican principles” such as “virtue and virtuosity.”²² She exemplified this role in 1779 when she wrote a letter to her son Winslow warning him against the immoral and pernicious principles found in a set of published letters by a Lord Chesterfield. Mercy advised her son not to fall prey to Lord Chesterfield’s influence which she viewed as synonymous with European corruption.²³ She wished to uphold Winslow’s virtue and allegiance to American values. Abigail heard about Mercy’s letter and requested a copy of it. Abigail so admired the letter that she published it, to the surprise of Mercy.²⁴

In two letters to Mercy, Abigail expressed her potential influence over her husband. In both of these letters, she explained how she encouraged her husband John to go serve on the Continental Congresses. In 1776, she “could by no means consent to his resigning” even though she wished him home.²⁵ A year later she conveyed that in her heart she wanted to “dissuade him from going” and knew she “could have prevailed,” but realized that the country’s “public affairs” were “gloomy” and that “if ever his assistance was wanted” it was now. Instead of trying to keep John home, Abigail convinced him of the necessity of his presence.²⁶ She indirectly participated in the government by remaining unselfish and encouraging her husband’s political participation. She upheld his civic virtue and fulfilled her role as a republican mother.

²¹ Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 105.

²² Lester H. Cohen, “Mercy Otis Warren: The Politics of Language and the Aesthetics of Self,” *American Quarterly* 35, no. 5 (Winter 1983): 495.

²³ Jeffrey H. Richards, *Mercy Otis Warren* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 32.

²⁴ Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 28 February 1780, *AFC*, Vol 3, 289. and Edith B. Gelles, “Bonds of Friendship: The Correspondence of Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren,” in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society: Vol CVIII 1996*, (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1998), 62.

²⁵ AA to MW, January 1776, *AFC*, Vol 1, 423.

²⁶ AA to MW, January 1777, *AFC* Vol 2, 150.

Although Mercy and Abigail embraced republican motherhood they also extended their political activity beyond its domestic restrictions, an unusual act for women of the time. They wrote to important political figures with their own opinions; Mercy published plays, pamphlets, and books drenched with her political views; and both shared a political exchange that expressed their vivacious political interest.

From first appearances Abigail appeared to remain strictly within her domestic sphere since she wrote only letters, mostly to family and friends. However, over her life span she wrote hundreds of letters and these friends and family included important political figures such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. In many of these letters, she no longer played the role of republican mother and instead asked questions and stated opinions about public policy and the actions of the British and Americans. Abigail once observed to her granddaughter that political commentary was as natural to her as breathing.²⁷ According to historian Edith Gelles, Abigail's clear interest in and astute observations on current politics made her one of her husband's "primary and most trusted sources of information on military and political developments in the Massachusetts Bay area" during his stay in Europe.²⁸ She later played this role for her son, John Quincy Adams, when he became isolated from most sources of news from home while in Prussia.²⁹ Often when her husband failed to respond to letters sent to him, Abigail answered these letters and used them as an opportunity to offer her own opinions. Historian Rosemary Keller observed that this became one of the ways in which Abigail

²⁷ Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*. 190.

²⁸ Edith B. Gelles, *First Thoughts: Life and Letters of Abigail Adams* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

related her political views to “persons in strategic positions who could influence public opinion or governmental policy.”³⁰

When Abigail’s husband, John, became president of the United States in 1797, Abigail stepped outside her domestic sphere by becoming a presidential advisor. In his presidency, John tried to remain independent of his cabinet and tended to ignore their advice. In letters to her family and friends, Abigail demonstrated her unusual degree of knowledge and definite opinions on public issues not yet widely introduced to the public. Her recognition as a public figure caused those who sought political appointments to write directly to her as well as to her husband.³¹ Furthermore, in response to newspaper criticisms of her son, John Quincy, receiving a new political post by his presidential father, Abigail planted stories in newspapers that defended her husband’s decision – a public relations move that in later administrations became institutionalized.³² According to historians Edith Gelles and Pauline Schloesser, because of Abigail’s ability to “use her influence as a wife of an important politician to impact policy,” she was “able to supercede gender restrictions and have a political voice in ways that other disfranchised persons could not.”³³ Although outwardly it appeared that Abigail’s patriotism was exhibited only within the domestic realm, as the trusted wife of one president and mother of another, far more than most of her sex, she participated in the usually male-only world of politics.

³⁰ Rosemary Keller, *Patriotism and the Female Sex: Abigail Adams and the American Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1994), 79.

³¹ Gelles, *First Thoughts*, 139, 143 and 151.

³² *Ibid.*, 146-7.

³³ *Ibid.*, 16. & Pauline Schloesser, *The Fair Sex: White Women and Racial Patriarchy in the Early American Republic* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 152.

Mercy's extensive political activity was even more extraordinary for the times. Not only did she correspond with prominent and important figures, she also became the first American woman to publish political plays.³⁴ Mercy's plays received praise as political satires that commented on public life and sought to influence public opinion.³⁵ These plays – *The Adulateur*, "The Defeat," *The Group*, *The Blockheads*, *The Motley Assembly*, *The Ladies of Castile*, and *The Sack of Rome* – all expressed the tensions within the country and praised the Patriots while attacking the Tories and British troops.³⁶ Her anonymous and well-argued political pamphlets gained her additional recognition. One pamphlet, written in 1788, criticized the newly created Constitution and fueled the debate between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists.³⁷ In addition she published two books: *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous* (a collection of her poems, plays, and other miscellaneous works published in 1790), and her famous, three-volume *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution Interspersed with Biographical, Political, and Moral Observations* (published in 1805).³⁸

The support of the prominent men in Mercy's life played a role in her success in publishing politically charged plays, poems, pamphlets, and books. As stated by historian Joan Gunderson, "males supported Warren's [publishing] efforts because they recognized

³⁴ Published between 1773-1779.

³⁵ Kristin Waters, ed., "Federalism and Anti-Federalism: James Madison and Mercy Otis Warren," in *Women and Men Political Theorists: Enlightened Conversations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 172.

³⁶ Mercy Otis Warren, *The Plays and Poems of Mercy Otis Warren*, ed. Benjamin Franklin V (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1980), vii-viii. This book contains the work found in Warren's book *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous* published in 1790.

³⁷ Mercy Otis Warren, *Observations on the New Constitution, and on the Federal and State Conventions. By a Columbian Patriot*, published in Boston in 1788 & Reprinted in Waters, "Federalism and Anti-Federalism," 192-204.

³⁸ Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution Interspersed with Biographical, Political, and Moral Observations, Vol I & 2*, [Hereafter referred to as *History*] ed. Lester H. Cohen (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988).

that she had an extraordinary gift.”³⁹ Her plays and pamphlets successfully raised the political awareness of the general population and awakened its patriotism. Prominent men, who regarded her judgment as excellent, solicited her opinion on political matters.⁴⁰ Historian Jeffrey Richards credits Mercy as being “one of the few women of her time who addressed public men as her equal.”⁴¹ Clearly Mercy’s writing was not an extension of her domestic duties, but an unusual political act of public activity on the part of a woman. Mercy and Abigail’s politically motivated writings involved them in a realm usually visited only by men with the effect that even in their time, they gained recognition as public figures.⁴²

Mercy and Abigail’s relationships to politically prominent men contributed to their interest in politics outside of their domestic realm. Born into a merchant class family in 1728, Mercy grew up surrounded by political debate. Her father, James Otis, held multiple political positions including Speaker of the House in the Massachusetts General Court. The bitter rivalry between her father and the later Governor Thomas Hutchinson influenced Mercy’s later portrayals of Hutchinson in her plays as a hateful, almost satanic creature. This rivalry created a split in 1760 that drew different people to each side – Otis side represented provincial and individual liberties whereas the Hutchinson side favored royal and parliamentary control over provincial affairs.⁴³

Mercy’s older and favorite brother, James Otis Jr., also involved himself deeply in the discussion of grievances against Britain. He visibly criticized the unlimited search

³⁹ Gunderson. *To Be Useful*, 152.

⁴⁰ Lincoln Diamant, ed., *Revolutionary Women in the War for American Independence: An One-Volume Revised Edition of Elizabeth Ellet’s 1848 Landmark Series* (London: Praeger, 1998), 44.

⁴¹ Richards. *Mercy Otis Warren*, 27 & 38.

⁴² Gelles. *First Thoughts*, 33.

⁴³ Richards. *Mercy Otis Warren*, 8-9.

powers of customs officers and the Stamp Act. Tory papers constantly mocked him and even created a satirical song about him. However, the Tory's behavior towards James Otis Jr. only led to public support for him. Influenced by the intelligence of his sister Mercy, he also stood strongly for women's equality with men, which he expressed in his 1764 pamphlet, *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*.⁴⁴ Due to her close relationship with her brother, when he received a highly publicized, severe beating from a political opponent in 1769, she felt devastated. This beating also motivated her to publicly write against the British crown since her brother's attackers were Tories.⁴⁵

Mercy's and Abigail's marriage to politically prominent men offered them opportunities to engage in politics. They both married men who would play prominent roles in the formation of the new country. Mercy married James Warren in 1754 and had five sons. One of the inner circle of men referred to today as the founding fathers, James Warren's ancestors came from the *Mayflower*. He was a moderately successful merchant, a public official for most of their marriage, and a man who enjoyed the respect and trust of those who knew him. That public reputation allowed him to play key political roles before and during the American Revolution. He held multiple positions – most of them before and during the war – including speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives.⁴⁶ After the war ended, he turned a deaf ear to the outcry of his peers and withdrew from politics in order to spend more time with his wife.

Born in 1744, at the age of twenty, Abigail married John Adams in 1764, one of the most prominent men in American history, and gave birth to two girls and three boys. Before their marriage, John participated little in politics, but during the first ten years of

⁴⁴ Zagari, *A Woman's Dilemma*, 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

their marriage his involvement increased. John spent much of this time in Philadelphia and later went to Europe for a number of years. He eventually served two consecutive terms as vice-president from 1789-1797 and then an additional four years as the second president of the United States from 1797-1801. After an unsuccessful run for re-election, John retired from political office. Abigail and Mercy's marriages to these politically prominent men offered them opportunities to engage in politics outside of their domestic sphere and contributed to their strong interest in politics.

Abigail's and Mercy's close proximity to Boston served as another factor that stimulated their political interests and contributed to their involvement in public affairs. They were both born near Boston and lived most of their lives near the city. By itself, a proximity to Boston could not explain how Mercy and Abigail came to display an unusual degree of interest in politics, but in addition to the other reasons cited it offers insight. Cities often heard news first and with its population in close quarters, could spread that information quickly. These American cities served as a hub of political activity, especially Boston. Modern historians categorized Boston as "indisputably one of the most important centers of the political resistance to Britain."⁴⁷ Robert Palmer, a leading historian of the American Revolution, stated that the main protests against British policy began in Boston. The British, he wrote, focused their punishments, such as the Boston Port Act, on the city because they recognized Boston as the center of political resistance.⁴⁸ The conflict over the Stamp Act, Declaratory Act, and the Townshend Act gained center stage in Boston and from there spread out over the rest of the colonies.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁷ Young, "The Women of Boston," 182-3.

⁴⁸ Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800: The Challenge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959), 170-5.

These activities surrounded Abigail and Mercy, and no doubt contributed to their political interest. In contrast, out on the frontier areas women were not routinely confronted with the charged political activity found in the cities such as Boston. With their distance, women had less of an opportunity to interact in political discussion and therefore were unable to acquire a strong political interest.

Mercy's and Abigail's educations also attributed to their unusual display of political consciousness. The educations they received allowed them to understand the revolutionary rhetoric and to contribute to its ongoing discussion. Both were unusually well educated compared to most women in eighteenth-century New England. Even between the two women there existed an educational difference, however. Early in her life, Mercy's father recognized his daughter's desire to learn and interest in academics. He disregarded the social norm for female education and allowed her to attend tutoring sessions with her older brothers who were preparing for Harvard College. Thus, she received the same educational opportunities as her brothers except formal training in Latin and Greek. Her advanced education reflected itself in her writings which overflowed with elaborate language typical of the well-educated of her time. This style included classical references and meanings hidden to the uneducated.⁴⁹

Although Abigail's education was superior compared to her female contemporaries, she did not benefit from the kind of advanced education offered to Mercy. Abigail studied at home, a common practice for women. Yet, her grandmother and mother ensured that she took advantage of her father's library and that she read classical writers such as Shakespeare, Milton, and Pope as well as travel literature, sermons, and moralistic essays of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Abigail,

however, failed to learn formal writing skills, and throughout her life her letters overflowed with grammatical errors. She always felt a sense of embarrassment over her perceived lack of education in comparison to that of her friend Mercy.⁵⁰

For most white women living in the Revolutionary era, their education normally circulated around how to take care of the household properly and how to read. The responsibility for a girl's education fell on her mother and other female figures in her life. Many women never learned how to write, since it was a skill taught only after reading, and not many people felt it necessary to spend that much time on a woman's education. Social class played a role in how much education a girl received. The poorer the family the less likely time could be spent teaching her how to read because her family needed her labor. On the other hand, in socially established families, daughters learned skills such as embroidery and dancing.⁵¹ However, the social prominence of a family did not guarantee the education of the females in the family. When a founding father, Elbridge Gerry courted a young woman, a daughter of a state legislator, she failed to read his letters due to her illiteracy.⁵² As stated by Gundersen, in colonial and revolutionary America, no matter the social class of the family "a girl's literacy depended on her father's attitudes and his own literacy."⁵³

* * *

For most American women, their political interest and activity solely stayed within their domestic sphere. Although Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren embraced republican motherhood, they also extended beyond its restrictions by participating in

⁴⁹ Cheryl Z. Oreovicz, "Mercy Otis Warren: 1728-1814," *Legacy* 13, no. 1 (1996): 56.

⁵⁰ Keller, *Patriotism and the Female Sex*, 14.

⁵¹ Gundersen. *To Be Useful*, 79-81.

⁵² Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 191.

politics outside of their households. They both wrote letters to prominent men; Abigail served as a presidential advisor and news source for her husband and son; Mercy wrote books, pamphlets, and plays; and both were recognized in their time as political, public figures. Their relationships to prominent men, a proximity to Boston, and more educational opportunities all contributed to this increased political interest for both Abigail and Mercy. An interest that becomes apparent in the correspondence they shared.

⁵³ Gundersen, *To Be Useful*, 80.

Chapter 2

The Political Interest Revealed: The War Years

At the onset of the American Revolution, two extraordinary women, Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren, began a friendship and correspondence that lasted for decades. From the beginning of their exchange in 1773 until the conclusion of the American Revolution in 1783, Mercy's and Abigail's conversation revealed a shared political interest which extended beyond the restrictions imposed by republican motherhood. In this exchange, at times they expressed their personal experiences in relation to the war, but normally they disconnected their discussion of politics from their households, their domestic sphere. Instead, their conversation overflowed with their shared opinions and knowledge of political figures, battles, and events.

After two letters in which Abigail and Mercy touched upon various subjects in the hopes of finding a common interest, Abigail decided to discuss politics, thereby discovering a shared interest between the two women that would last throughout their correspondence. In this December letter, Abigail observed Mercy's "sincere" love for her "country" and launched into a fervent speech about the current situation between Britain and the colonies, especially in regards to tea.⁵⁴ Since 1770, tea remained the only item subject to duties by the British government after the repeal of the Townshend Act.⁵⁵ Abigail referred to the tea currently in port at Boston Harbor from the East India Company as "baneful" due to its representation of British oppression over the colonies. She hoped that the opposition to the tea arriving into Boston would remain strong and

⁵⁴ AA to MW, 5 December 1773, *AFC, Vol 1*. 88.

effective, but believed that the form of resistance taken might induce the two countries closer into war. Although she preferred to avoid war, Abigail made the observation that the “old oak,” Britain, had become too strong to yield to the “tug” of the “tender plants,” the colonies, and the only way for the “plants” to grow was through a separation.⁵⁶

Abigail’s hope for strong opposition to the tea was realized on December 16, 1773 when male citizens of Boston, dressed as Indians, boarded the three controversial tea ships and emptied their cargo into the harbor.⁵⁷

Mercy followed Abigail’s lead and offered her own views on the current political situation between the colonies and Britain. Mercy sounded surprised by Abigail’s excited opinion over the current state of affairs. Although Mercy did not dismiss Abigail’s view, she disagreed that a separation was necessary between the colonies and Britain. Mercy hoped for Britain and America a reunification “reestablished on so firm a basis” that neither of the “narrow hearted on either side of the Atlantic” could “threaten its total dissolution.”⁵⁸ Although she did not list any names, she saw both British and American individuals as the reason behind the problems between Britain and the colonies. Mercy attempted to persuade Abigail that the “united efforts of the extensive colonies” would repel these individual oppressors so that the restoration of “peace and freedom” could occur without bloodshed.⁵⁹ Although Mercy and Abigail differed in their calculations on the depth of the rift that existed between Britain and the colonies, they both believed that the colonists’ rights deserved recognition. Mercy remained more cautious in comparison

⁵⁵ Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*. 170.

⁵⁶ AA to MW, 5 December 1773. *AFC, Vol 1*, 88.

⁵⁷ Colonel Richard Ernest Dupuy and Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy, *An Outline History of the American Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975), 4.

⁵⁸ MW to AA, 19 January 1774. *AFC, Vol 1*, 91.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

to Abigail who viewed war as the only alternative in solving the conflict between Britain and America.

A month later, Abigail continued the political discussion started in her earlier letter. Politics would remain an important part of their correspondence. Reacting to Mercy's commentary, Abigail acknowledged that she had overreacted in her fears that the tea ships in Boston Harbor would lead immediately to war. She wrote of her relief that the tea "drowned in an ocean of water" instead of among the blood of her countrymen. In this letter, Abigail also decided to offer her opinion on the conflict between Britain and the colonies. She agreed with Mercy that ambitious men caused British oppression, and compared King George III's "unbounded ambition" to that of Satan. Abigail resented these ambiguous "artful and designing men" who wished to break up the unity of the colonists by creating two factions: loyalists and patriots. Both Abigail and Mercy despised factions, and viewed the British two-party system as problematic.

According to Abigail:

Party spirit ruins good neighborhood[s], eradicates all the seeds of good nature and humanity – it sours the temper and has a fatal tendency upon the morals and understanding and is contrary to that precept of Christianity thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self.⁶⁰

Abigail viewed the unity and agreement between the different colonies in North America as its greatest strength and feared the consequences if factions occurred.

In closing her letter, Abigail prompted Mercy for one of her "poetical productions" filled with political observations which she often wrote. Mercy complied that same month.⁶¹ She wrote a poem about the Boston Tea Party represented in the form

⁶⁰ AA to MW, February 1774, *AFC*, Vol 1. 97-8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

of a mythical battle between two wives of Neptune, Amphitrite and Salacia. Amphitrite represented the loyalists who wanted to keep the tea on the land with Salacia, symbolizing the patriots, believing that the tea belonged to the aquatic deities. The Titans, embodying the British, working with Amphitrite, wanted “to travel or’e [around] Columbia’s Coast” in order to rob and plunder. However, the Tuscararoes, representing the colonists, agreed with Salacia and dumped the tea into the ocean. Mercy described Salacia as victorious and approved of the actions of the colonists. Even though Mercy wrote this poem in a letter to Abigail, Mercy also meant for John to also read this poem. In the letter, Mercy recognized Abigail’s abilities and judgment, but explicitly asked for John’s review of the poem. Since John received formal classical training and originally recommended that Mercy write a mythical poem about the Boston Tea Party, she trusted him over Abigail in pointing out any of its faults.⁶²

Before Abigail and Mercy exchanged another letter, Britain enacted the first “Coercive” or “Intolerable Act” in March 1774 in response to the Boston Tea Party. The Boston Port Act closed Boston Harbor until the East India Company received monetary compensation from the town for the tea thrown into the harbor.⁶³ Parliament and King George III focused their punishments on Boston and Massachusetts since they viewed Boston as causing the most trouble for the British crown.⁶⁴ On May 20, 1774 another “Coercive Act,” the Massachusetts Government Act, was signed into law. This act severely reduced the powers of the various constituted bodies within Massachusetts. The governor’s council, an upper legislative house, acted as an advisory board to the governor, and had previously been selected by members of the lower house. With the

⁶² MW to AA, 27 February 1774, *AFC, Vol 1*, 99-103.

⁶³ Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution*, 174.

new act, the governor gained the power to appoint the council, and this council lost its previous ability to ratify and veto the governor's appointment of sheriffs. Towns lost the right to pick their jurymen and the ability to hold town meetings except for the allotted annual town meeting.⁶⁵

Mercy referred to the Massachusetts Government Act in her next letter to Abigail on August 9, 1774. She wrote how on her arrival home the day before, she viewed the act, and described it as "designed to perpetuate the thralldom of America: and particularly Massachusetts."⁶⁶ Although she still hoped for a peaceful resolution to the conflict between the colonists and Britain, she recognized that the actions of the British government pushed these two "nations" towards war. Like Abigail, Mercy began to view war as imminent, and stated in her letter that "nothing but the blood of the virtuous citizen can repurchase the rights of nature;"⁶⁷ These natural rights included the right to self government, freedom of conscience, and the rights of people collectively to form a government of their own choosing.⁶⁸ At first, Mercy along with other colonists hoped for these "freedoms" while still remaining British citizens, but as Britain started to pass these "Coercive Acts" Mercy started to view war and separation as the only possibility. With the implementing of these acts, Mercy conveyed to Abigail the importance of the decisions that lay ahead for the men, including John Adams, who were scheduled to convene in Philadelphia on September 5, 1774 as the First Continental Congress. These men had "an important part to act" in which "the future freedom and happiness" of the

⁶⁴ Young, "The Women of Boston," 182. & Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution*, 174.

⁶⁵ Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution*, 175.

⁶⁶ MW to AA, 9 August 1774, *AFC, Vol 1*, 138.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁶⁸ Schloesser, *The Fair Sex*, 88.

extended colonies rested.⁶⁹ Mercy astutely observed that these men had to decide how to respond to Parliament and the British crown.

For the first time in her correspondence with Abigail, instead of objectively discussing the political circumstances in America, in this letter Mercy connected the approaching war to her personal situation. By external appearances Mercy “comported with the solicitude” for the “calamities” of her “country.” She understood and agreed with the reasons behind a possible war with Britain, but as a “woman” and a “mother,” her heart filled with “anxious concern” over a future decision of war. She had “no less than five sons” who may “perhaps fall a sacrifice” to liberty.⁷⁰ She pointed out to Abigail how the war could negatively affect their lives. The war no longer remained a distant debate, but an increasing possibility.

By the time Abigail responded the next January, her husband had already returned home from the First Continental Congress. This Congress adopted a “Declaration of Rights” on October 14, 1774, with the purpose of unifying all the different colonies under a common, if ambiguous, principle.⁷¹ In her letter to Mercy, Abigail frankly described an incident involving a night watchman and several British soldiers in Boston. Abigail illustrated how the night watchman offered to take a drunken British soldier home, only to have nine of his drunken fellow officers come upon the scene and beat the watch. She hypothesized that the incident was not “premeditated,” but angrily lashed out at the behavior of “dissolute, unprincipled officers” and “an ignorant, abandoned soldiery” who believed that they needed to “quell a lawless set of rebels.”⁷² “Who can think of it

⁶⁹ MW to AA, 9 August 1774, *AFC, Vol I*, 138.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷¹ Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution*, 181.

⁷² AA to MW, 25 January 1775, *AFC, Vol I*, 180.

without the utmost indignation,” she raged.⁷³ Her political discussion did not end with this incident. Abigail further demonstrated her interest in current political activity by conveying the result of an election for a delegate for the Massachusetts Congress and by transmitting what she referred to as a “rumor” about Tories collecting “a regiment of soldiers” from Boston.⁷⁴

Abigail’s letter, overflowing with information about the current political events of Boston, delighted Mercy. Three days later Mercy responded, stating that, although she still hoped “a little longer for a more favorable termination of the distresses of America,” she suspected war was unavoidable.⁷⁵ In her letter, Mercy also agreed with an earlier assessment made by Abigail that because of their marriage to leaders of the Patriot cause, they might become targets of “peculiar afflictions.”⁷⁶ Mercy conveyed the importance of their role as wives of politically prominent men. Even if Mercy and Abigail “suffer pain and poverty,” these hardships were preferable to their husband’s abandoning “their noble principles of integrity and honor.”⁷⁷ Mercy viewed herself and Abigail in a heroic light. They struggled “with the calamities of life” instead of “cowardly” shrinking from the role assigned to them. As one of the few times in which they connect their political discussion to their lives as wives and mothers, this part of the letter demonstrates how they saw themselves as republican mothers encouraging the civic virtue of their husbands.

A month later, Abigail wrote to Mercy enraged over a speech made by King George III to Parliament. Abigail angrily observed that, without being offered the opportunity of defense, colonists would experience the most hostile measures by Britain.

⁷³ Ibid., 179-80.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 180.

⁷⁵ MW to AA, 28 January 1775, *AFC, Vol I*. 181.

⁷⁶ This letter by AA is lost.

Abigail expressed to Mercy that the “sword is now our only, yet dreadful alternative,” and she predicted that Britain’s behavior would cause it to repeat “the fate of Rome.”⁷⁸ She declared fervently that all “friends of liberty” would rather choose “to die [the] last British freedom, than bear to live the first of British slaves.”⁷⁹ The strong, aggressive language Abigail utilized throughout this letter demonstrated her involvement over the political situation, which remained disconnected from her domestic sphere. She believed strongly in the patriotic cause, and her letter expressed her personal opinion of what freedom represented to the colonists.

After briefly discussing the Battle of Lexington and Concord in a letter to Mercy, Abigail surprisingly never discussed the Battle of Bunker Hill even though she witnessed this battle from the highest hill near her home.⁸⁰ However, in her next letter, Abigail solicited Mercy’s opinion on the Olive Branch petition which Congress sent to the king in July 1775.⁸¹ This petition, written by the Second Continental Congress, affirmed Americans’ attachment to King George III and their wish for reconciliation. The petition urged King George III to end all military actions and to discuss terms for a resolution.⁸² When Richard Penn arrived with the petition in London in August 1775, the king refused to see the carrier or receive the petition. In her September 21st letter, Mercy regarded this decision by King George to reflect his “obstinate perseverance in error.” but she believed that his action “best” for the colonists. Although from the outset a settlement between the colonies and Britain appeared the best course of action, in reality there were deep issues

⁷⁷ MW to AA, 28 January 1775, *AFC, Vol I*, 181-2.

⁷⁸ AA to MW, 3? February 1775, *AFC, Vol I*, 183.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁸⁰ AA to MW, 2 May 1775, *AFC, Vol I*, 190. & Charles W. Akers, *Abigail Adams: An American Woman* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1980), 36.

⁸¹ A lost letter.

⁸² Dupuy & Dupuy, *An Outline History*, 13.

that needed attendance before any kind of settlement. She stated, “Negotiation under certain circumstance is but building on a fabric so shattered by the recent storm, that it is in danger of falling under the hands of the workmen on the first rude blast which shall attack it.”⁸³ The issues between Britain and the colonies ran too deep to find an easy solution. Even though throughout her earlier correspondence with Abigail Mercy continued to hope for reconciliation instead of war, Mercy reluctantly admitted that only war could solve their issues.

Six letters passed between Mercy and Abigail in which they discussed the fate of a state prisoner; the consequences to the country if a certain spy escaped; John Hancock’s horrendous behavior by not stepping down as president of the Continental Congress; and Abigail’s sacrifice by allowing her husband to leave her again. In April 1776, however, Abigail wrote to Mercy with a radical suggestion. Abigail explained that upon hearing of John’s appointment to a committee to draft the Declaration of Independence, she wrote for him to “remember the ladies,” and further declared in her letter to John:

Be more generous and favorable to them [ladies] 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.⁸⁴

After receiving a disappointing reply from her husband, Abigail wrote to Mercy out of frustration. Abigail transcribed her original letter and how John called her “saucy.” She listed for Mercy the reasons for writing to John, including the desire to “speak a word in

⁸³ MW to AA, 21 September 1775, *AFC, Vol 1*, 281-2.

⁸⁴ AA to John Adams, 31 March 1776, *AFC, Vol 1*. 370.

behalf of our sex.”⁸⁵ Abigail felt that British law gave men too much power over their wives, and these women often suffered for men’s tyranny. She wanted some laws that favored women and protected them from men who take advantage of their domination. Abigail semi-jokingly stated that she and Mercy should join together in “a petition to Congress” to consider the case of women.⁸⁶

Mercy, however, never responded to Abigail’s letter and Abigail appeared to drop the subject. In her next letter dated May 8, 1776, Abigail failed to refer to her letter to John or the request she made to Mercy.⁸⁷ Mercy’s silence on the subject of Abigail’s letter remains somewhat surprising, since as a woman she sought public influence. Even if she disagreed with Abigail’s demands, Mercy normally would express her differing opinion in a letter. Most likely, Mercy ignored Abigail’s letter in the hopes of remaining neutral. She wished to avoid siding with Abigail and angering John. Mercy highly valued and relied on her friendship with John in order to obtain the inside scoop of the current political activities. If she sympathized with Abigail, Mercy might damage her relationship with him.⁸⁸

The Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776, but this important occasion went unmarked by both Abigail and Mercy. Their next letter, was not until early September 1776 when Mercy hoped for Abigail’s and her children’s quick recovery from smallpox.⁸⁹ The reason why they failed to notice this important occasion remains a mystery. Abigail was quarantined in Boston from July to August and maybe she could

⁸⁵ AA to MW, 27 April 1776, *AFC, Vol 1*, 397.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 397.

⁸⁷ AA to MW, 8 May 1776, *AFC, Vol 1*, 403-4.

⁸⁸ Zagari, *A Woman’s Dilemma*, 94.

⁸⁹ MW to AA, 4 September 1776, *AFC, Vol 2*, 118.

not send or receive letters.⁹⁰ Also, Mercy might have wished to avoid this topic in case Abigail renewed her request to Mercy. Whatever their reasons, the Declaration of Independence occurred without any acknowledgment in the correspondence of the two women.

In the nine letters that passed between September 4, 1776 and January 2, 1778, Abigail and Mercy discussed a wide array of topics including their bad health; their opinion on the development of war; the need for Mercy to record the events surrounding the American Revolution; and Abigail's reluctance in allowing her husband to leave her to serve the public. In January 1778, Mercy wrote in order to convince Abigail of the necessity of John's departure to France. With France joining the American cause, after the patriots won the Battle of Saratoga in October 1777, Congress chose to send John to France as a diplomat. With Abigail visibly upset over this decision, Mercy praised Abigail's "public spirit and fortitude" and her virtuous patriotism.⁹¹ She associated the trials of war to Abigail's situation and recognized Abigail's personal sacrifice. Mercy, in one of her rare occasions, discussed politics in the language of republican motherhood. She urged Abigail to follow the role appropriate of the wife of an important, influential, and wise man; Abigail needed to fulfill her ultimate patriotic duty and sacrifice by allowing her husband to serve his country.⁹²

A couple of letters later, in which they discussed political events occurring overseas and the death of Mercy's father, Abigail informed Mercy of her view of a certain gentleman who "has roused the attention of the public."⁹³ She lacked offering a

⁹⁰ Akers, *Abigail Adams*, 48-9.

⁹¹ MW to AA, 2 January 1778, *AFC*, Vol 2, 376.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 376.

⁹³ AA to MW, 22 January 1779, *AFC*, Vol 3, 154.

name, assuming that Mercy already knew the man and the situation. Abigail found the actions of Silas Deane humiliating. As a diplomat to France, he promised French aristocrats high army positions and great awards for going to America to fight. Only when the aristocrats arrived, they discovered Deane's promises false. Abigail believed that Deane's action lessened America "in the eyes of foreign powers," but observed that this behavior occurred whenever "self-interest is more powerful than public virtue."⁹⁴ She ended her discussion on this topic by reflecting on the consequences "when men leave honesty."⁹⁵ Mercy responded by affirming her belief in his guilt of every charge brought against him. She offered her opinion that occasionally the most "unworthy characters" engaged offices and once they created their damage, try "to escape punishment" and instead place blame on "the most worthy."⁹⁶ She told Abigail to not worry since she expected his punishment to come with time.

Nearly a year later, with only three letters between them discussing John's possible appointments, Abigail wrote Mercy a distressed letter about the "internal foes" of America who rendered patriot's tasks as "difficult and dangerous."⁹⁷ Abigail anguished over the lies told in regards to her husband and other patriotic leaders. She informed Mercy that a party of "worthless[,] ambitious[,] and intriguing Americans" were spreading rumors that John entered an "illicit correspondence with the British Ministry."⁹⁸ She wondered if her husband's "innocence" and "wisdom" could screen him

⁹⁴ Ibid., 154.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 154.

⁹⁶ MW to AA, 15 March 1779, *AFC*, Vol 2, 190-1.

⁹⁷ AA to MW, 28 February 1780, *AFC*, Vol 3, 288.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 288.

from his foes.⁹⁹ She expressed bitterness over the situation of the politician, always in the public eye with people always ready for an attack.

After exchanging four letters in which both women complain about their health, wonder about peace, and comment in Congressmen, in a March 1781 letter, Abigail expressed optimism about the outcome of the war. She congratulated the repeated successes of General Daniel Morgan and referred to him as “the rising hero in the South.” She also viewed the detecting of the plans of the “treacherous Arnold” as a sign of the strong spirit of America.¹⁰⁰ Abigail predicted that the “virtuous” citizens will drive away the “mercenary invaders” with peace returning to “these distressed states.”¹⁰¹

With Mercy and her husband moving to a house in Milton, near Abigail, this letter was the last to pass between them until February 1783. When the correspondence resumed, Mercy indicated that she never meant for the suspension of their exchange. She then spent the rest of the short letter listing her strong affections for Abigail.¹⁰² Abigail quickly responded to Mercy, and her letter served as the last correspondence between the two before the signing of the Treaty of Paris in September 1783.

As the war slowly came to an end, Abigail felt strongly about the loss of Americans’ virtues. She observed America “assimilating” itself “to foreign nations” by copying more of “their foibles and vices than their virtues.”¹⁰³ She failed to state the reasoning behind her accusation or examples of how “virtue” had already been lost, but she expressed anxiety for the future generations. She questioned whether it was better to

⁹⁹ Ibid., 288.

¹⁰⁰ AA to MW, 5 March 1781, *AFC*, Vol 4, 87.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 87.

¹⁰² MW to AA, Ante 11 February 1783, *AFC*, Vol 5, 92

¹⁰³ AA to MW, 12 February 1783, *AFC*, Vol 5, 95.

confront children with or to hide from them the political realities of life.¹⁰⁴ In her reflections, she broadly discussed the effect of loss of virtue on children. Even though a mother, she failed to connect her question to her own children or situation.

Through this conversation Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren extended beyond the political role expected of women. Although they occasionally described the American Revolution in relation to their personal lives as republican mothers, they typically disconnected their discussion from their domestic spheres. They shared their own views and opinions on political figures, events, and battles, unusual subject matter for most women of their time. This correspondence allowed them to express their shared political interest. So important was this exchange to them that when their political beliefs diverged after the American Revolution, they worked to maintain its continuance.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 95.

Chapter 3

Continuance and End of a Political Conversation

After the American Revolution, the highly political conversation between Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams continued despite the differences of opinion that began to emerge between them. After Abigail spent four years in Europe, Mercy suspected that she preferred a despotic over a democratic government. When the Constitution was revealed by its creators, Mercy and Abigail took different sides in the debate that ensued. Their conversation was so important to them that they managed to reconcile and share their different political beliefs. However, after Mercy's humiliating portrayal of John Adams in her *History*, Abigail abruptly discontinued their relationship. Mercy's *History* proved too strong a burden to bear on their friendship, and they forever lost their political conversation.

After the ratification by Congress of the Treaty of Paris on January 14, 1784 – signifying the official end of the American Revolution – Abigail felt safe enough to travel to Europe with her daughter Nabby in order to join her husband and two older sons. Abigail sailed in the summer of 1784 and after landing in England, journeyed to France to stay. In early September, Abigail wrote a part of her first letter to Mercy from Europe. In this section, Abigail detailed her plan to discontinue discussing “politics” since “the world is at peace” and she felt “wholly done” with the subject.¹⁰⁵ With this statement, she acknowledged the political exchange between her and Mercy. It appears Abigail wished to warn Mercy that this letter would be different from past letters because of its lack of

¹⁰⁵ AA to MW, 5 September 1784. *AFC*, Vol 5, 448.

political observations. However, by the time Abigail wrote the second part of the letter in December, she was clearly absorbed in the politics of Europe and discussed them in a letter to Mercy. These included the current problems between the Dutch and Austrian Emperor, and how this related to France, specifically the Queen, Marie Antoinette.¹⁰⁶ Even though Abigail feigned a temporary disinterest in politics, she quickly reasserted her fascination with the subject in her conversation with Mercy.

Mercy's response to Abigail's letter demonstrates that Mercy did not yet suspect Abigail of monarchist tendencies, a charge Mercy would later on make. Mercy approvingly stated that Abigail was "not yet a[n] European Lady," and still preferred the company of her friends over "the splendor of Court."¹⁰⁷ Mercy sympathized over Abigail's move to England since Mercy viewed England to be a bitter country. She wished for John's success in acquiring a treaty of commerce between America and Britain since she felt this treaty would place "the two countries on a more amicable footing."¹⁰⁸ Due to Abigail's distance from home, Mercy decided to acquaint her friend with the current state of affairs in America. Mercy communicated a pessimistic view of these affairs, stating, "We have governments of our own forming, magistrates of our own electing, but without confidence in their abilities, or energy and decision on their part to acquire or secure it."¹⁰⁹ Mercy's statement told Abigail some of the many complaints made of the current American political system under the Articles of Confederation. America finally won its freedom but was failing because the Articles of Confederation did not work. Although in the future Mercy disagreed with the new system of

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 149-50.

¹⁰⁷ MW to AA, 30 April 1785, *AFC, Vol 6*, 113.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 114.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 114.

government designed to fix the problems she listed above, she still felt a better political system was necessary in order to keep the country together and strong.

Without waiting for the above letter to arrive, Abigail wrote again to Mercy in May 1785, and despite her previous claim of disinterest, she spent half of the long letter on politics. She discussed the character of the Marquis de Lafayette and used his position as the head of the French chapter of the Knights of Cincinnati to criticize the order.¹¹⁰ After the American Revolution, the Knights or Society of Cincinnati formed as a hereditary organization, which contained permanent funds, periodic assemblies, and distinctive emblems and badges. Only those who fought as American or French officers in the American Revolution could join.¹¹¹ Abigail recognized the sacrifice that these officers paid to their country, “but no man or body of men can merit the sacrifice of the liberties of a people” by creating a hereditary and possibly aristocratic order.¹¹² She found this consequence “mortifying.”¹¹³

At the time of Abigail’s letter, she and Mercy still shared many of the same political sentiments, including abhorring anything that appeared despotic. When Mercy wrote Abigail in September 1785, however, Mercy hinted at her concern that Abigail might prefer court life over the current democratic system in America. Mercy never outwardly accused Abigail of monarchist tendencies in this letter, but she repeatedly reminded Abigail of her “love” for “her country.”¹¹⁴ Mercy praised America and highlighted its features as if she wanted to remind Abigail not to lose herself in the gaieties of court life.

¹¹⁰ AA to MW, 10 May 1785, *AFC*, Vol 6, 138-40.

¹¹¹ Palmer, *Age of Democratic*, 270.

¹¹² AA to MW, 10 May 1785, *AFC*, Vol 6, 139.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 139.

Reflecting on Mercy's commentary several months later, Abigail offered reassurance of her resistance to the addiction of the "gaieties of Europe" and her lack of captivation "with the manners or politics of Europe."¹¹⁵ She stated her disinterest in replicating the politics of Europe in America. In this same letter, Abigail explicitly demonstrated her political astuteness to Mercy. Abigail consoled Mercy on the circulating criticisms of James Warren's early retirement from political office. Abigail pointed out that these condemnations were unfounded, but she also added that she previously "foresaw" this reaction when he turned down an appointment of Speaker in the Massachusetts House in 1781. She asked Mercy to recall how Abigail "earnestly pressed" him "to accept his last appointment."¹¹⁶ She wanted Mercy to recognize that if James had taken Abigail's advice, these criticisms could have been avoided.

After the creation of the Constitution, the growing political differences between Abigail and Mercy became apparent when they took different sides in the debate that emerged. The Constitution was created, in part, as a reaction to Shay's Rebellion. This rebellion formed in August 1786, due to the poor economy rapidly increasing the number of foreclosures on farmer's land. On February 4, 1787, General Benjamin Lincoln and his troops attacked Shay's rebels and captured one hundred fifty men and scattered the rest. Abigail's May 1787 letter, recognized and praised the fact that one of Mercy's sons, Harry, went with General Lincoln to attack the rebels. Abigail stated that Harry's actions demonstrated his patriotism and his good citizenship. She continued to comment on the current situation in the United States. She believed that although a free country, it was "embarrassed in its finances, distressed in its commerce, and unbalanced in its

¹¹⁴ MW to AA, 13 September 1785, *The Adams' Papers*, Reel 365.

¹¹⁵ AA to MW, 24 May 1786, *WAL*, 274.

governments.”¹¹⁷ Abigail agreed with Mercy’s earlier statement that the Articles of Confederation needed revision. Under the current government, the country was likely to collapse.

In response to the calls for a stronger central government, a Constitutional Convention met on May 25, 1787 with the intention to revise the Articles of Confederation. This Convention deliberated all summer, keeping their proceedings secret, and on September 17, 1787 they approved and signed a new document, the Constitution, that created a new body of government. On September 19th, the public received its first opportunity to review the Constitution and a storm of controversy arose that split the country into two factions soon known as “Federalists” and “Anti-Federalists.” Mercy wrote Abigail on September 22nd to inform her of this new document. Although soon to take the Anti-Federalist side, Mercy wrote that she so far felt unsure of her opinion of the Constitution. She told Abigail that “many are presently bent in opposition” to the document.¹¹⁸ Mercy suspected the corrupt motives of the Constitutional Convention because it kept its proceedings secret, but she still chose to reserve her judgment until the convention “divulged” its intentions.¹¹⁹

In reaction to the criticisms of the Constitution, a group of men who supported the document, including James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, wrote essays defending it in October 1787. These essays became known as *The Federalist Papers*. The Federalists coveted a strong central government to provide stability and commercial protection. They

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 274.

¹¹⁷ AA to MW, 14 May 1787, *WAL*, 289.

¹¹⁸ MW to AA, 22 September 1787, *The Adams’ Papers*, Reel 370.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., Reel 370.

hoped to prevent the masses controlling the government through mob rule.¹²⁰ Although still in Europe, both John and Abigail Adams sided with the Federalists.

Mercy identified with the Anti-Federalists and criticized the Constitution. In February 1788, she wrote a famous pamphlet “Observations on the New Constitution, and on the Federal and State Conventions.”¹²¹ This pamphlet criticized the Constitution and offered the Anti-Federalist argument that mainly worried over a too strong central government that lessened the control of the states and eroded the populations’ control over the democratic process. Mercy and the Anti-Federalists specifically worried over the lack of a Bill of Rights.¹²² Her pamphlet soon became more influential than the Anti-Federalist pamphlet that her husband wrote.

With Abigail and Mercy taking different sides of the debate over the Constitution, their relationship became strained. However, while they joined opposing political parties, they managed to reconcile their differences and continue their political correspondence. In later years, reflecting back, they appeared proud of this accomplishment.

In February 1789, Mercy wrote to Abigail, calling attention to a visit made by Abigail to New York City. At this time, New York City served as the country’s capital and the city buzzed with rumors over the candidates for president and vice-president. Abigail visited New York City and told everyone that the purpose was to visit her daughter, but in reality she went to determine how strong her husband’s chances were for the vice-presidency.¹²³ Mercy indicated that she knew the real reason for Abigail’s visit

¹²⁰ Waters, “Federalism and Anti-Federalism,” 173.

¹²¹ Mercy Otis Warren, *Observations on the New Constitution, and on the Federal and State Conventions. By a Columbian Patriot*, published in Boston in 1788 & Reprinted in Waters, “Federalism and Anti-Federalism,” 192-204.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 192-204.

¹²³ Akers. *Abigail Adams*, 112.

and slyly remarked that the city “may be her [Abigail’s] future residence.”¹²⁴ Abigail, however, never replied to Mercy’s commentary, and John won the office of vice-president on April 6, 1789. He served two terms in that position until his election to president in 1797.

When Mercy wrote Abigail in February 1797 with congratulations to John’s election as president, the letter revealed the strong divide between these two women over their political beliefs. In her letter, Mercy remained unafraid to point out their political differences and remarked that due to her position as an “*old friend*” [her emphasis], she will offer her honest opinion on his election instead of filling the letter with “many pretty things.”¹²⁵ Mercy sarcastically congratulated John’s “elevation to the presidential chair,” but found these congratulations “secondary” to her “condolence” for the future state of the country because of his election.¹²⁶ She complained that the electoral system was an “ill lottery,” and called John’s election candidacy the “best card in the pack.”¹²⁷ He was not necessarily the best person for the job. Mercy implied the Adams’ monarchist intentions by accusing Abigail of trying to seek a “crown.” She further warned that Abigail should know from her experience in Europe that a crown would not “enhance” her “happiness.”¹²⁸

Abigail politely but vehemently defended both herself and her husband in her immediate response to Mercy’s letter. She acknowledged Mercy’s congratulations, and, despite Mercy’s biting commentary, called John’s election a “voluntary and unsolicited

¹²⁴ MW to AA, *The Adams’ Papers*, Reel 372.

¹²⁵ MW to AA, *The Adams’ Papers*, Reel 383.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, Reel 383.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, Reel 383.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, Reel 383.

gift, of a free and enlightened people.”¹²⁹ The people, Abigail retorted, placed “a precious and valuable deposit” in her husband because they recognized that his job required “every exertion of the head and every virtue of the heart.”¹³⁰ She realized that no matter how “pure the intentions or upright the conduct” many still would be offended.¹³¹ Abigail refuted the accusation that she sought a worldly crown by stating that she only wanted the crown found in the next world. These women held strong political beliefs that led to heated disagreements, but they still managed to continue their correspondence despite their differences.

Although Mercy’s political views remained the same, in her next letter she apologized for her harsh criticisms of both John and Abigail. Abigail’s response to Mercy’s earlier letter made her rethink her earlier attack. Mercy recognized John’s position as both “enviable” and “arduous.”¹³² Even though she disagreed with the political system, Mercy said she believed John the best person for the job. With the possibility of war with France, he possessed “the clearest understanding and the most [in]corruptible virtue” to guide the United States safely from harms way.¹³³ Mercy warned Abigail of those who hoped and laid in wait over failure on John’s part. Both parties hold “expectations” of him, and both contain rivals.¹³⁴ Mercy offered her support of John to Abigail, but also painted a realistic portrayal of the political world and its participants.

¹²⁹ AA to MW, 4 March 1797, *WAL*, 332.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 332.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 332.

¹³² MW to AA, 6 April 1797, *The Adams’ Papers*, Reel 384.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, Reel 384.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, Reel 384.

A year later, Mercy reflected on her and Abigail's past relationship with politics. For a long time, they walked figuratively, "hand in hand" over "the wide field of politics;" discussing both its positive and negative parts.¹³⁵ Remembering back, politics "has not been the path to peace" and there exist "miseries" in their country left to ponder.¹³⁶ Mercy listed as an example the "disgraceful conduct" of some of the members in Congress who put America to shame.¹³⁷

For Abigail and Mercy the subject of politics had not brought peace to their personal lives or relationship. Surprisingly, however, their relationship and their political conversation managed to continue despite the countrywide dispute over the different political ideologies to which they adhered. In this passage, Mercy recognized the past political relationship between the two women, and demonstrated her hope for it to continue by offering her pessimistic views on the current political situation.¹³⁸ Abigail took Mercy's lead and started her June letter with a nostalgic remembrance of the past political scene experienced together. They witnessed "war, havoc, and desolation" and watched the "country rise superior to oppression and despotism."¹³⁹ Abigail wrote her letter in the same style as Mercy. Abigail proudly proclaimed their past relationship and the subjects discussed between them, and displayed her intention for that conversation to continue by spending the rest of the letter sharing her knowledge of the situation with France and the part the president must now play.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ MW to AA, 9 April 1798, *The Adams' Papers*, Reel 388.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, Reel 384.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, Reel 384.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, Reel 384.

¹³⁹ AA to MW, 17 June 1798, *WAL*, 339.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 339.

The Final Split

Throughout Mercy's relationship with Abigail, both Abigail and John encouraged her authorship of a history of the American Revolution. Whenever she felt discouraged and stopped writing, Abigail often persuaded Mercy to start again. Abigail's letter of August 1777 demonstrated the support she gave Mercy. In this letter, Abigail reminded her that if she failed to record the "memorable events" of the Revolution than they might disappear into "oblivion."¹⁴¹ Even worse, the enemy might record history and "misrepresent facts." Abigail not only played the role of motivator, but she also distributed to Mercy most of her sources. Both John and Abigail served as Mercy's eyes and ears. They reported to Mercy most of the political events that occurred during and after the American Revolution and the characters of the political figures that she herself did not encounter. Without the Adams' constant forwarding of important letters, documents, and any other kind of literature thought helpful to Mercy, she never would have accrued the information necessary to write a proper history. Throughout her relationship with Abigail, Mercy realized the importance of their correspondence in obtaining information for her. In almost every letter, she constantly urged and reminded Abigail to forward the latest letters received from John and any other important political figures.

In 1805, thirty years after its first conception, Mercy published her three-volume *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution: Interspersed with Biographical, Political, and Moral Observations*.¹⁴² Although Mercy's and

¹⁴¹ AA to MW, 14 August 1777, *AFC*, Vol 2. 313.

¹⁴² Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution Interspersed with Biographical, Political, and Moral Observations*, Vol I & 2. ed. Lester H. Cohen (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988).

Abigail's correspondence continued despite their political differences, Mercy's *History* caused an end to this political conversation.

The letters of 1807 between Abigail and Mercy indicate that neither of the Adams' had yet read the three-volume set. These letters painted Mercy's and Abigail's relationship as strong. It also highlighted that the two women perceived that they carried and shared different political views without causing harm to their friendship. In Mercy's letter, she proclaimed that their "variation of sentiment" in regards to politics ought to never "dim...the hearts of fine friendship."¹⁴³ Abigail's last letter revealed that she meant for their correspondence to continue. She praised their long standing friendship and hoped that it could only grow stronger in death. She also ended the letter by asking a question for Mercy to answer, thinking that their conversation would continue.

After John read Mercy's *History* in 1807, however, he was infuriated. Mercy not only rarely mentioned his name, she leveled old political charges against him during the few times she acknowledged his presence. He felt cheated that Mercy failed to give him the credit he deserved for all his years in public service, and she belittled his successes. In addition, he believed her accusations false especially in the passage where she described him during his stay in England. She wrote, "He became so enamored with the British constitution, and the government, manners, and laws of the nation, that a partiality for monarchy appeared, which was inconsistency with his former professions of republicanism."¹⁴⁴ John responded to the book with a letter in which he recited his grievances against the *History*. This letter started a summer-long, heated, barrage of

¹⁴³ MW to AA, ? 1807, *The Adams' Papers*, Reel 405.

¹⁴⁴ Warren, *History*, 675.

letters between John and Mercy in which he questioned her intentions in writing the book. She devised a quick and reasonable defense to every allegation charged. At the end of the exchange, his letters left the impression of an angry man with an irrational temper.

Abigail felt betrayed and embarrassed by Mercy's harsh portrayal of John.

Abigail spent years encouraging and helping Mercy to write her *History*, only for it to discredit her husband. Abigail reacted by completely ending her correspondence with Mercy. Even though in the past their friendship survived the harsh critiques made of one another, Abigail felt Mercy's blow too strongly. This time, Mercy's criticisms went beyond the shared letters of two women. Instead, she recorded them into a published history for all to read. Abigail chose to not even respond with a letter to Mercy outlining her grievances. Abigail decided to remain silent, probably with the intention of preventing an avenue by which Mercy could explain herself. This silence forever ended the political conversation shared by these two remarkable women.

Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams shared a correspondence that allowed them to extend beyond the political role expected of women – republican motherhood. This dialogue continued even after their political beliefs began to grow apart. As time continued and they reflected back, they felt proud of their ability to maintain a conversation that shared very different and often heated viewpoints. This situation changed, however, after Mercy published her *History*. By ignoring John's many accomplishments and reintroducing old attacks on his political opinions, she lost the exchange previously shared with Abigail. The political conversation between the two

women finally ended. When their friendship later on resumed, it never again contained the discussion of politics that had previously made it so interesting and unusual.

Conclusion

Abigail Adams and Mercy Otis Warren enjoyed a long correspondence that displayed their interest in politics. In this conversation, they shared information and opinions, and critiqued the political events surrounding them. Although they embraced the ideology of republican motherhood, they typically extended beyond its restrictions and disconnected most of their political activity from their households. Their relationships to political leaders, proximity to Boston, and education were all factors that differentiated them from most of their female contemporaries and contributed to their unusual degree of political interest and activity.

During the American Revolution, although they occasionally debated, Mercy and Abigail shared the same basic political beliefs. They discussed the war and their opinions on political figures, battles, and events. Though not as frequently, they also connected the war to their everyday lives and fulfilled their role as republican mothers. Abigail occasionally conveyed her dismay over her husband leaving to serve his country, but both she and Mercy expressed the need for Abigail to encourage John Adams civic virtue. During the American Revolution, Mercy started writing her *History*, and not only did Abigail continually encourage its formation, but also provided Mercy with documents and letters from Abigail's husband.

With the creation of the Constitution in 1787, Abigail and Mercy took opposite sides in the debate that ensued over this document. In the disagreement over the Constitution, the country became divided into two political parties – Federalists and Anti-Federalists – a consequence the leaders of the American Revolution always hoped to avoid. Mercy believed that the Anti-Federalists upheld the true spirit and purpose of the

Revolution and suspected that Abigail's change of heart occurred because of her experiences during her four years in Europe among the despotic governments. Despite these political differences, their friendship continued and in later years they expressed pride in sustaining their political conversation despite their different beliefs.

The mutual interest and engagement in politics that previously joined them together eventually tore Abigail and Mercy apart. In her *History*, Mercy used its pages as a forum to present old charges against John Adams, Abigail's husband. Mercy downplayed the significance of John's political accomplishments and made personal attacks on his character. Abigail felt betrayed by Mercy's book especially since Abigail and John both emotionally and physically supported Mercy during its creation. Abigail reacted by abruptly ending her relationship with Mercy. Mercy's behavior proved too embarrassing and hurtful to Abigail for their relationship to continue. Although in the past Mercy made harsh criticisms of John, she went too far by permanently recording them in history.

Between the middle of 1807 and the end of 1812, no correspondence or visitation occurred between Abigail and Mercy. Eventually, the actions of a mutual friend, Massachusetts governor Elbridge Gerry, convinced these two women to set aside their political differences and renew their friendship. In December 1812, Abigail made the first gesture and wrote Mercy a letter. Abigail offered, as a token of peace, a pin containing locks of hair from her and John. She refused to apologize for any past actions, but the letter and the offer of the locks of hair were a conciliatory gesture. Abigail hoped to return to the type of correspondence enjoyed by her and Mercy for thirty-four years. She wanted to share her political observations, and she believed she had her old friend to

share them with again. She spent most of this first letter expounding on the current political actions in both the United States and abroad. She complained about the refusal of naval protection and how it was necessary for the defense of the nation. She feared another Napoleon setting his sights on the splendor of America and replicating the disaster he created in Moscow.¹⁴⁵

Mercy accepted Abigail's apology and offered her own by sending a ring with a lock of her own hair. However, she offered no reaction to Abigail's political commentary.¹⁴⁶ For the most part she avoided all discussion of politics in the multiple letters that ensued between them until her death in October 1814. This meant that their political conversation was permanently over; never again would they return to the exchange they shared before John read Mercy's *History*.

Abigail tried again in her next letter to spark their old discussions when she angrily wrote that the Senate refused to declare war against the British, even though they were trampling on American citizens' individual rights.¹⁴⁷ Mercy rejected the bait, and with good reason. In 1813, she already was eighty-five years old and reflected heavily on death and the world beyond. Her husband, James, passed on ahead of her in 1808. God and heaven became the primary topics in her letters.

Mercy, however, had another motive to avoid the discussion of politics in her letters. By the time Abigail and Mercy resumed their friendship, most of Mercy's past correspondents had died. She felt excited over the renewed opportunity to write to Abigail, and it seemed that she wanted to avoid jeopardizing their renewed relationship. Mercy recognized that their previous break occurred due to their political differences and

¹⁴⁵ AA to MW, 30 December 1812. *Correspondence*, 501.

¹⁴⁶ MW to AA, 15 April 1813. *The Adams' Papers*, Reel 415.

wanted to avoid any potential conflict. She felt lonely with her husband and so many of her friends' dead, so she treasured Abigail's letters even more.

Although Mercy refused to renew a political dialogue with Abigail, Mercy never lost her interest in politics. At this time, John Adams was already retired from political life, but his son, John Quincy, was rising in political prominence. During the years in which Abigail and Mercy renewed their relationship, he held the position of American Minister of the Russian Crown. Mercy continually requested and received his letters from Abigail. This time – whether sincere or not – Mercy praised the virtue of John Quincy and expressed utter enjoyment when she perused his letters, but carefully avoided commenting on the information he provided in them.

By the time Mercy died in 1814, her and Abigail renewed their friendship and correspondence, but this exchange lost the political component that had previously made it unusual. They shared an interest and engagement in politics that differentiated them from most of their female contemporaries because Abigail and Mercy went beyond republican motherhood. Although in some ways they embraced this ideology, they tended to disconnect their political discussion and activity from their households. They upheld a correspondence that served as a way for them to express their political opinions and share news. Mercy, however, ended their unusual conversation when she used the pages of her *History* to list old charges against her old friend's husband. Abigail and Mercy's unusual, shared political interest connected them for so many years, but in the end brought the end to their extraordinary exchange.

¹⁴⁷ AA to MW, 20 June 1813, *WAL*, pgs 382-3.

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