

First Family
Abigail and John

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CONTENTS

Cover
Other Books by This Author
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Preface

CHAPTER ONE

1759–74

“And there is a tie more binding than Humanity, and stronger than Friendship.”

CHAPTER TWO

1774–78

“My pen is always freer than my tongue, for I have written many things to you that I suppose I never would have talked.”

CHAPTER THREE

1778–84

“When he is wounded, I bleed.”

CHAPTER FOUR

1784–89

“Every man of this nation [France] is an actor, and every woman an actress.”

CHAPTER FIVE

1789–96

“[The vice presidency is] the most insignificant office that ever the
Invention of Man contrived or his Imagination conceived.”

CHAPTER SIX

1796–1801

“I can do nothing without you.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

1801–18

“I wish I could lie down beside her and die too.”

EPILOGUE

1818–26

“Have mercy on me Posterity, if you should see any of my letters.”

Acknowledgments

Notes

A Note About the Author

CHAPTER ONE

1759–74

“And there is a tie more binding than Humanity, and stronger than Friendship.”

KNOWING AS WE DO that John and Abigail Adams were destined to become the most famous and consequential couple in the revolutionary era, indeed some would say the premier husband-and-wife team in all American history, it is somewhat disconcerting to realize that when they first met in the summer of 1759, neither one was particularly impressed by the other. The encounter occurred in the parlor of the pastor’s house in Weymouth, Massachusetts, which happened to be the home of Abigail and her two sisters. Their father was the Reverend William Smith, whom John described in his diary as “a crafty designing man,” a veteran public speaker attuned to reading the eyes of his audience. “I caught him, several times,” wrote John, “looking earnestly at my face.” Like most successful pastors, he was accustomed to being the center of attention, which apparently annoyed John, who described Reverend Smith prancing across the room while gesturing ostentatiously, “clapping his naked [?] sides and breasts with his hands before the girls.”¹

Abigail, in fact, was still a girl, not quite fifteen years old to John’s twenty-four. She was diminutive, barely five feet tall, with dark brown hair, brown eyes, and a slender shape more attractive in our own time than then, when women were preferred to be plump. John was quite plump, or as men would have it, stout, already showing the signs that would one day allow his enemies to describe him as “His Rotundity.” At five feet five or six, he was slightly shorter than the average American male of the day, and his already receding hairline promised premature baldness. Neither one of them, at first glance, had the

obvious glow of greatness.

John's verdict, recorded in his diary, was that he had wasted an evening. He was courting Hannah Quincy at the time—some say that she was actually courting him—and his first reaction was that neither Abigail nor her sisters could measure up to Hannah. They seemed to lack the conversational skills and just sat there, “not fond, nor frank, not candid.” Since Abigail eventually proved to be all these things, we can only conclude that this first meeting was an awkward occasion on which the abiding qualities of her mind and heart were obscured beneath the frozen etiquette of a pastor's parlor. And besides, she was only a teenager, nine years his junior, not even a legitimate candidate for his roving interest in a prospective wife.²

To say that “something happened” to change their respective opinions of each other over the next three years is obviously inadequate, but the absence of documentary evidence makes it the best we can do. John had legal business in Weymouth that involved the status of the pastoral house occupied by the Smith family, which meant that he was literally forced to interact with Abigail. And he accompanied his then best friend, Richard Cranch, who was courting (and eventually married) Mary Smith, Abigail's older sister. This, too, prompted interactions. And his flirtatious relationship with Hannah Quincy ended in a mutually declared romantic truce, which made John, once again, eligible.

Time was also a factor. The difference between a fifteen-year-old girl and a twenty-four-year-old man seemed a chasm; the difference between eighteen and twenty-seven was much more negotiable. Though it seems too easy to say, chance and circumstance provided them with the opportunity to talk with each other, to move past the awkwardness of a stuffy Weymouth parlor, thereby initiating a conversation that lasted for almost sixty years.

But talk by itself was not sufficient to explain their mutual attraction. The letters that began to flow back and forth between them late in 1761 contain some explicit expressions of powerful physical and sexual urges, so that the picture that emerges depicts two young lovers conversing about Shakespeare's sonnets or Molière's plays in between

long and multiple kisses, passionate embraces, and mutual caresses. Their grandson Charles Francis Adams, who published the first comprehensive edition of their correspondence nearly a century later, was either too embarrassed or too much a prisoner of Victorian mores to include any of their courtship correspondence. Here is a sample of what he chose to censor. John to Abigail, addressed to “Miss Adorable”: “By the same token that the bearer hereof [JA] satt up with you last night, I hereby order you to give him, as many kisses, and as many Hours of your company after nine o’clock as he pleases to demand, and charge them to my account.”³

Or John to Abigail, explaining that a sudden storm had prevented a trip to see her at Weymouth: “Yet perhaps blessed storm ... for keeping one at my distance. For every experimental philosopher knows, that the steel and the magnet, or the glass and the feather will not fly together with more celerity ... than somebody ... when brought within striking distance—and Itches, Aches, Agues, and Repentance might be the consequences of contact in present circumstances.”⁴

Then Abigail to John, proclaiming that their mutual attraction was visceral as well as intellectual: “And there is a tye more binding than Humanity, and stronger than Friendship ... unite these, and there is a threefold chord—and by this chord I am not ashamed to say that I am bound, nor do I [believe] that you are wholly free from it.”⁵

The inevitable “did they or didn’t they” question is impossible to answer conclusively, though their first child, named Abigail, was born eight and half months after their marriage, just barely within the bounds of propriety. But the fact that they were strongly tempted is beyond question, and a crucial indication that their affinity was not solely cerebral. For both of them, love entailed a level of intimacy that no conversation could completely capture and required a physical attraction. And they both felt it. If Abigail referred to it as “the third chord,” we might shift the metaphor and describe it as an emotional affinity that made unconditional trust between them a natural act.

One of the distinctive features of their extraordinary correspondence over a lifetime—more than twelve hundred letters—was also present from the start, namely, the tendency to banter playfully about serious

subjects, thereby creating a certain ambiguity as to whether the issue at stake was cause for concern or laughter. For example, in a note to Abigail's sister Mary, John jokingly claimed that Abigail was rumored to have a crush on the recently coronated British monarch, George III, and that "altho my allegiance has been hitherto inviolate, I shall endeavor all in my Power, to foment Rebellion." (Little did he know that his joke would become a prescient prophecy.) Or there is Abigail's mock criticism of John that then concludes with a double-edged compliment:

You was pleas'd to say that the receipt of a letter from your Diana always gave you pleasure. Whether this was designed as a compliment (a commodity I acknowledge that you seldom deal in) or as a real truth, you best know. Yet if I was to judge a certain persons Heart by what the like occasion passes through a cabinet of my own, I should be apt to suggest it as a truth. And why may I not? When I have often been tempted to believe that they were both cast in the same mold, only with this difference, that yours was made with a harder mettle, and therefore is less liable to an impression. Whether they both have an equail quantity of steel, I have not yet been able to discover, but do not imagine that either of them are deficient.⁶

Abigail was apparently more than half serious when, a few months before their wedding, she asked John to deliver on his promise "and tell me all my faults, both of omission and commission, and all the evil you either know or think of me." John responded with a mock "catalogue of your Faults, Imperfections, Deficits, or whatever you please to call them." She was, he observed, negligent at playing cards, could not sing a note, often hung her head like a bulrush, sat with her legs crossed, was pigeon-toed, and to cap it off, she read too much. Abigail responded that many of these defects were probably incurable, especially the reading, so he would have to learn to live with them. The leg-crossing charge struck her as awkward, since "a gentleman has no business to concern himself with the leggs of a lady."⁷

The letters exchanged during their courtship (1761–64) provide the first and fullest window into the chemistry of their relationship, but it would probably be wrong to presume that the correspondence accurately reflected the way they talked to each other when together.

Letter writing in the eighteenth century was a more deliberative and self-consciously artful exercise than those of us in the present, with our cell phones, e-mail, and text messaging, can fully fathom. The letters, of course, are all we have to recover the texture of their overlapping personalities. While they constitute a long string of emotional and intellectual pearls unmatched in the literature of the era, they were also self-conscious performances, quasi-theatrical presentations that were more stylized and orchestrated than real conversations. There are some things, in short, that we can never know for sure about their deepest thoughts and feelings, even though they are among the most fully revealed couples in American history.

Two essential ingredients in their lifetime literary dialogue were clear from the start: first, Abigail, despite the lack of any formal education, could match John with a pen, which was saying quite a lot, since he proved to be one of the master letter writers in an age not lacking in serious contenders; second, there was a presumed sense of psychological equality between them that Abigail expected and John found intoxicating. She was marrying a man who loved the fact that she was, as he put it, “saucy,” and he was marrying a woman who was simultaneously capable of unconditional love and personal independence. They recognized from the beginning that they were a rare match. There were so many topics they could talk about easily and just as many things they did not have to talk about at all.

The wedding occurred on October 25, 1764, in the same parlor of her father’s house in Weymouth where they had initially found each other so uninteresting. In her last letter to John before the wedding, Abigail asked him to take all her belongings, which she was forwarding in a cart to their new home in Braintree. “And then Sir, if you please,” she concluded, “you may take me.”⁸

DOWRIES

What did each of them bring to the marriage? Well, most basically, John brought sixty acres of land and a small house that he had inherited from his father, who died in 1761. Abigail brought a cartload

of furniture and a household servant, who was partially paid for by her father. By the standards of New England at that time, these assets, though hardly massive, were not meager. They were starting off with more material resources than most newlyweds.

What about their respective bloodlines? On this score Abigail brought more status than John. Her mother was a Quincy, a name that rested atop the Braintree elite; the family eventually had the town named after them. Their mansion at Mount Wollaston was the closest thing to a baronial estate outside of Boston. Her father was a Harvard-educated minister, while John's was a farmer and shoemaker without a college education.

But this discrepancy was a bit deceptive, because Deacon Adams, as he was called, was a respected local leader who, at one time or another, had held every office in the Braintree town government. Moreover, as John made a point of emphasizing in his autobiography, the Adams family could trace its lineage back to 1638, making it one of the most long-standing families in Massachusetts, a venerable if not particularly prominent line.⁹

That said, when John graduated from Harvard in 1755, he was ranked fourteenth out of twenty-five students, a ranking based solely on family status rather than academic achievement. (Academically, by the way, he was one of the top three students in his class, and the status-based system of ranking became a casualty of the American Revolution.) There is indirect evidence to believe that Abigail's mother opposed the marriage, convinced that her daughter was marrying down and could do better. Such social calibrations were swept away by Abigail's uncompromising insistence that she had found her man and was determined to have him.¹⁰

In terms of providing for a family, John's prospects were excellent. He had that Harvard degree, had studied with some of the leading lawyers in the colony, had passed the equivalent of the bar exam in 1761, and had begun to develop a reputation as one of the up-and-coming attorneys in the Boston area. Indeed, he had chosen to delay marriage until he was twenty-nine, three or four years later than the norm for males in New England at that time, in order to ensure that his

income could provide for a wife and family.¹¹

Abigail brought equivalently sturdy strengths. From early childhood she had been exposed to the mundane but essential duties of managing a household. Though the Smith family had four servants, two of them slaves, all the daughters were required to perform the cooking, cleaning, spinning, and gardening duties that were expected of a New England wife. She could manage servants, to be sure, but she could also perform the various tasks they were assigned alongside them, to include maintaining a permanent fire in the fireplace for cooking, scouring heavy kettles and pots, feeding and killing chickens, and performing elemental carpentry repairs of cabinets and cupboards. In a pinch, she could also split logs for the fire.¹²

Then there were the less tangible assets that both brought to the union—the ambitions, insecurities, obsessions, excesses—all the mental and emotional ingredients that had begun to congeal in their respective personalities. John had nine more years of experience to distill, and the fact that he began keeping a diary soon after graduating from college means that the record of his interior life as a young man is much fuller than anything we have for Abigail. Many New Englanders of the time kept diaries, but most of them are about the weather. When John recorded which way the wind was blowing, however, he was usually being metaphorical, referring to the gusts surging through his own soul.¹³

In one sense John's early diary entries are reminiscent of an introspective tradition as old as New England Puritanism. He was forever making lists of daily tasks to perform, books to read, ways to discipline his day. But he invariably failed to meet his own standards. One day, for example, he vowed to rise before sunrise but then slept until seven o'clock and, as he put it, "Rambled about all Day, gaping and gazing." He kept imposing moral tests on himself that he consistently failed. Instead of reading his law books one day, he spent all his time "in absolute idleness, or what's worse, gallanting the Girls." Like the classic Puritan diary, his was a record of imperfection.¹⁴

Unlike the aspiring Puritan saint, however, who was preoccupied with the question "Am I saved?" John's obsession was more secular:

“What is my destiny?” In some respects this secularization of the Puritan ethic resembled the list of disciplined habits Benjamin Franklin made famous in his “The Way to Wealth,” which took for granted that worldly success, not eternal salvation, was the proper goal of life. But John’s introspective philosophy, if he had ever given it a title, would have been called “The Way to Virtue.” Mere worldly success in terms of wealth was never enough for him; indeed, it was actually dangerous, since wealth inevitably corrupted men and nations by undermining the disciplined habits that produced the wealth in the first place. Making wealth your primary goal, as he saw it, was symptomatic of a second-rate mind destined to die rich but unfulfilled.

John’s ambitions soared to a greater height, a place where fame rather than fortune was the ultimate reward. When he read Cicero’s orations against Catiline out loud in front of a mirror, he confided to himself that “it opens my pores, quickens the circulation,” as he imagined himself an American Cicero delivering an equivalently dramatic speech. Or when he read Shakespeare, he asked himself how he could replicate the bard’s genius at creating characters he had never experienced directly: “Why have I not genius, to start some new thought, something that will inspire the World, [and] raise me at once to fame?” For a country lawyer, he was aiming very high, looking to lash himself to a cause larger than himself.¹⁵

One of the most consequential decisions he ever made, second only to his decision to marry Abigail, was to become a lawyer rather than a minister. Though he tortured himself with guilt-driven questions for a full year after his graduation from college, knowing that his father hoped he would choose the pulpit, the outcome was never in doubt. Once the intellectual elite of New England, the ministry had drifted to the sidelines by the middle of the eighteenth century, caught up in increasingly pedantic theological quarrels and burdened by what John called “the whole cartloads of trumpery, that we find Religion incumbered with in these Days.” He had no desire to languish in obscurity, splitting theological distinctions at night and preaching harmless homilies to parishioners on Sunday. (Abigail’s father, it turns out, was a sterling example of what he did not wish to become.) He

was determined to become a major player in this world, not an erudite guide to the next one. Whether she knew it or not, Abigail was marrying one of the most ambitious men in New England.¹⁶

He spent three years (1755–58) teaching school and reading law in Worcester. During this formative phase he let all his friends know that his teaching job was a mere way station that allowed him to support himself while he prepared for grander things, that “keeping this school any length of time would make a base weed and ignoble shrub of me.” He recorded a daydream in his diary in which he imagined his classroom as a little commonwealth, casting himself in the role of dictator, a sort of Cromwell of the kindergarten:

I have several renowned Generals but three feet high, and several deep-projecting politicians in petticoats ... Some rattle and Thunder out A, B, C, with as much Fire and impetuosity, as Alexander fought ... At one table sits Mr. Insipid flopping and fluttering, spinning his whirligig, or playing with his fingers as gaily and wittily as any frenchified coxcomb. At another sits the polemical Divine, plodding and wrangling in his mind about Adam’s fall in which we sinned all as his primer declares. In short my little school, like the great World, is made up of Kings, Politicians, Divines, Fops, Buffoons, Fidlers, Sycophants, Fools, Coxcombs, chimney sweeps, and every other character drawn in History or seen in the world.¹⁷

Finally, he began what was to become a lifelong conversation with his internal demons. “Vanity I am sensible, is my cardinal folly,” he lectured himself, “and I am in constant Danger, when in company, of being led an ignus fatuus by it without the strictest caution and watchfulness over my self.” He was too candid, too conspicuous in his ambition, too talkative. He would come home after an evening of conversation with the local elite at Worcester and pour out his lamentations, especially his irresistible urge “to shew my own importance or superiority, by remarking the Foibles, Vices, or Inferiority of others,” which invariably alienated the very people he sought to impress.¹⁸

More ominously, he often felt overwhelmed by his own passions—be they vanities, ambitions, or envies—acknowledging that in those moments he was wholly out of control, like an erupting volcano. On

one occasion he described his emotions as “Lawless Bulls that roar and bluster, defy all Control, and sometimes murder their proper owner.” On another occasion they became thunderstorms: “I can as easily still the fierce Tempests or stop the rapid thunderbolts,” he chided himself, “as command the motions and operations of my own mind.”¹⁹

Eventually John’s dialogue with his own boisterous passions informed his understanding of all politics, gradually projecting onto the world his incessant emotional turmoil and thereby envisioning all societies as cauldrons of swirling, inherently irrational drives that it was the chief business of government to control. For the time being, however, his internal eruptions, raging bulls, or violent thunderstorms, whatever one wished to call them, defied his best efforts at control. And he knew it. (His own sense of being unbalanced was one reason he made balance the beau ideal of his political philosophy.) As he saw himself, he was a gifted young man with appropriately lofty ambitions, all of which could be ambushed by his erratic, overly excitable, at times explosive instincts. “Ballast is what I want,” he lectured himself; “I totter with every breeze”—though the breezes were all blowing inside himself. Whether the source of John’s periodic bursts of vanity, insecurity, and sheer explosiveness was mental or physical—there is some scholarly speculation that he had a thyroid imbalance—remains a mystery. There is no question, however, that he was susceptible to swoonish emotional swings, especially when under extreme stress, and he would struggle with this problem throughout his life.²⁰

Whether she knew it or not, and there is some evidence she did, Abigail’s chief role as John’s wife was to become his ballast. She needed to create a secure domestic environment in which he felt completely comfortable, a calm space where his harangues and mood swings were treated as lovable eccentricities, the butt of jokes that would allow him to laugh at himself. He needed to be bathed in love, to be regarded not as an emotional liability but as a passionate asset. This was obviously a huge order. As it turned out, it came naturally to Abigail.

Why that was so is difficult to document, since Abigail did not keep a diary, and few letters before her courtship with John have survived. We

are therefore forced to tease out of the scattered evidence some kind of plausible glimpse of her personality at the threshold of her marriage, inevitably influenced by the much more plentiful evidence from her more mature years, then connect the dots backward to her youth.

On the one hand, we know she was raised to be a conventional New England woman, and groomed to live the life of a traditional New England wife: marry at around twenty and produce children every two years until her fertility faded, which meant that she expected to spend her twenties and thirties either pregnant or recovering from delivering a child. She presumed that she would run the household, educate the children at least to a level of literacy, and subsume her own ambitions within the life and work of her husband. These traditional expectations were always unquestioned presumptions for Abigail, and taken together, they constitute the primary reason that she does not fit comfortably into a modern feminist paradigm.²¹

On the other hand, while her mother encouraged her to adopt the traditional female virtues of the day, her father and grandmother encouraged her instincts to be opinionated. Reading was the chief form of rebellion. Her father owned an impressive library containing most of the classics in literature, history, and religion. Her interest in Milton, Pope, Dryden, and Shakespeare became a source of pride rather than a worrisome concern. (If she had been raised in Virginia, her reading habits would have been considered slightly scandalous and her tart tongue a liability that required correction.) Although she never received any formal schooling, she was “homeschooled” more like a boy than a girl. And while she was never exposed to Latin and Greek, she was learning to read French when she met John. Her later letters, even more than John’s, are littered with literary references that reflect the habit of reading acquired in her youth.

There are also frequent references to her obstinacy and stubbornness, which her father and grandmother Quincy found endearing. She preferred her hair to be done this way, not that, or to wear this dress rather than that one. She had strong views about how to manage the servants and whether the congregation responded properly to her father’s weekly sermon. And, in the end, she knew her own mind well

enough to reject her mother's advice that John was not her ideal mate. This independent streak was not the result of her reading; indeed, her passion for reading was its consequence. Like a beautiful woman's beauty, it was simply there, something she came by naturally and that no one tried to stamp out. On the contrary, as Grandmother Quincy once told her, "wild colts make good horses."²²

Logically, Abigail should have felt torn between her two sides as a traditional New England woman and a fiercely independent personality. But she did not. The apparent contradiction felt to her like a seamless continuity. She could mend a hem while engaging you in a discussion of Macbeth's fatal flaw. If that caused trouble for some people, that was their problem. One of the reasons she felt so confident about her marriage to John was that he loved the edgy combination and took great delight at the literary allusions sprinkled throughout her letters. She was simultaneously a dutiful wife and an intellectual equal, a lover and a friend, a heart and a mind.

In fact, on the heart side of the equation, Abigail was John's superior. Together with his gargantuan ambitions and overlapping vanities, he brought massive insecurities to the relationship: a nervous, excitable, at times irritable temperament rooted not so much in self-doubt—he was completely confident of his abilities—but rather in uncertainty that the world would allow him to display his talents. To be sure, John was hoping to play a bigger game on a much larger public stage, while Abigail's focus was the much smaller arena of the family. But within that orbit she was supremely and serenely confident, totally immune to the demons that bedeviled him, the even keel to his wild swings, the safety net that would catch him when he fell. In psychological terms, he was neurotic and she was uncommonly sane. His inevitable eruptions would not threaten the marriage, because she was the center who would always hold.²³

Abigail's bottomless devotion was put on display in April 1764, seven months before their marriage, when John decided to undergo inoculation against smallpox. An epidemic was raging in Boston, and John correctly calculated that inoculation, though risky, was much less so than catching the smallpox in "the natural wav." (In March 1764

Boston reported 699 cases of smallpox acquired in “the natural way,” causing 124 deaths.) John’s letters while he was quarantined were models of bravado—he was “as Happy as a Monk in his cloister or an Hermit in his Cell.”²⁴

Abigail had wanted to join him so they could undergo the inoculation process together. But John reasoned that as long as she remained in Weymouth or Braintree, the epidemic in Boston would not threaten her, so the risk of inoculation was greater than the risk of exposure. She sent him several parcels of tobacco so that he could “smoke” the daily letters she expected him to write, thereby removing any contamination. “I don’t imagine you will use it all for that purpose,” she joked, given his preference for a cigar as a companion to take her place.²⁵

Though they were only engaged, Abigail already thought of herself as his wife. “I am very fearful that you will not, when left to your own management, follow their directions,” she cautioned, “but let her who tenderly cares for you both in Sickness and Health interest you to be careful.” She felt guilty at not being there to take care of him. Even though she could not visit him in quarantine, she said she wanted to go to Boston anyway so she could just “look at him through the window.” She was completely smitten.²⁶

FAMILY VALUES

Most histories of colonial America for the decade between 1764 and 1774 are framed around several pieces of parliamentary legislation that led directly to the American Revolution. The key items are the Sugar Act (1764), the Stamp Act (1765), the Townshend Acts (1767), and the Coercive Acts (1774). Taken together, they represented a policy change by the British government designed to consolidate its control over a vast North American empire acquired in the French and Indian War. Imposing a higher degree of imperial control, and expecting American colonists to help pay for it, made perfect sense from the perspective of London and Whitehall, but it was regarded by most colonists as a dramatic change in the rules of the game, most especially in its

presumption that Parliament possessed the authority to tax them without their consent. What seemed so sensible to George III and his ministers was seen as tyrannical, arbitrary, and imperious by most colonists, who believed that their status in the British Empire had shifted from being equal members of the imperial family to abject subjects. And because this British legislative initiative led to the loss of its North American empire south of Canada, historians have tended to assess the effort harshly, as probably the most fatal blunder in the history of British statecraft.²⁷

Abigail was hardly oblivious to these legislative benchmarks of British imperial policy, but her own benchmarks were pregnancies and births: Abigail, called Nabby, arrived in July 1765; John Quincy almost exactly two years later; Susanna, a sickly infant who lived only fourteen months, in December 1768; Charles in May 1770; and Thomas Boylston in September 1772. In effect, she was pregnant or recovering from childbirth for most of the decade. Beyond much doubt she was reading the newspapers and pamphlets that defined the terms of the emerging constitutional crisis. And as John became more and more involved in the protest movement in Braintree and Boston, we can presume that they talked together about the political issues at stake. But her primary focus, what defined her daily life, was the growing brood of children and the demanding domestic duties they created for a young mother.

John's primary focus, on the other hand, was his legal career and his gradually expanding role as an outspoken opponent of British policy. He was almost surely involved in the family chores as well—putting the children to bed, reading to them, conferring with Abigail about disciplinary decisions and the educational program appropriate for each child. On this score we cannot be absolutely sure, however, because of what we might call “the paradox of proximity,” which is to say that we know most about the intimate lives of Abigail and John when they were apart and could converse only by corresponding. When they were together, the historical record of their family life is at best sketchy.

They did exchange a few letters during the first decade of their marriage, when John was on the road, handling cases from southern

Maine to Cape Cod. These letters provide some slivers of evidence that John was very much an involved father. "I know from the tender affection you bear me," Abigail wrote in September 1767, "that you will rejoice to hear that we are well, and that our daughter rocks him [John Quincy] to Sleep, with the Song of 'Come pappa come home to Brother Johnny.' " When John was trying a case in Plymouth in May 1772, he expressed frustration at being absent from the family routine: "I wish myself at Braintree. This wandering itinerating life grows more and more disagreeable with me. I want to see my Wife and children every day." He claimed that whenever he was on the road, his imagination carried him back to Braintree and "our lovely Babes": "My Fancy runs about you perpetually. It is continually with you and in the Neighborhood of you—frequently takes a walk with you, and our little prattling Nabby, Johnny, Charley, and Tommy. We walk all together up Penn's Hill, over the bridge to the Plain, down to the Garden, & c every Day." When he was home—his office was in the house—John did not have to imagine such outings, so it seems safe to conclude that interacting with the family was an integral part of his day.²⁸

The division of labor within the marriage, then, was clear but not absolute. Abigail was primarily a wife and mother who focused on the household. John was primarily the breadwinner pursuing a legal career. But she was also a political confidante, and he was an active father and husband. In that sense they were both androgynous, not for any deeply ideological reasons but because neither one was comfortable denying any important dimension of their respective personalities. And the more they interacted, the more they defied rigid gender categories and completed each other.

As they were working out their new roles as husband, wife, and parents, the American colonies were being asked to work out new roles within a reconfigured British Empire. Abigail and John launched their marriage at the same time the British ministry launched its legislative initiative to impose parliamentary authority over the colonies. In fact, Nabby arrived at almost the same time that news of the most offensive parliamentary initiative, the Stamp Act, arrived in America.

In one sense this convergence was purely coincidental. But the

coincidence is worth contemplating, because it permits us to recover the messier and more layered mentality of history happening, that is, as Abigail and John actually experienced it. The great public events of the time that stand front and center in the history books were only part of the story they were living, and the more private side of the story—their family life—became the lens through which they perceived and made sense of those grander events emanating from England. The prominent role that John came to play in orchestrating the opposition to British policy, a role that provided him with the revolutionary credentials that established the foundation for his entire career in public life thereafter, required great patience as well as bottomless conviction. He was ready for the role that history eventually assigned him after the marriage to Abigail in a way that he had not been before.

HISTORY CALLS

During the three years before his marriage, John began to write essays aimed at the public press. He was clearly not content to become a successful country lawyer, and the ambitions surging inside him were searching for an outlet on some larger stage. His first effort was a series of essays entitled “The Evils of Licensed Houses,” none of which was ever published. This was probably for the best, since their purported point—that most taverns were dens of iniquity—was contradicted by the evidence in his diary at the time, which depicted the boisterous camaraderie of dancers, drinkers, and singers at his favorite tavern as a beguiling portrait of the human menagerie at play. Perhaps he felt guilty about his own feelings of fun, so the essays were his clumsy effort at making amends. Or perhaps he simply was telling prospective readers what he thought they wanted to hear.²⁹

His next effort, which did make it into the Boston newspapers, was a series of pieces written under the pseudonym “Humphrey Ploughjogger.” Mostly moral lectures on the evils of political factions and partisanship, these essays were distinctive in their style, which attempted to mimic the voice of a quasi-literate farmer with a down-home sense of humor and a rustic kind of wisdom. For example.

Humphrey ridiculed “grate men who dus nothing but quarrel with one another and put pices in the nues paper,” which, if you think about it, was a parody of himself. One could read the Ploughjogger essays as a primitive version of an American literary tradition that reached its artistic culmination in Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In the context of the moment, however, its significance would seem more personal. John was trying on different identities and voices as he auditioned for a role in the limelight. At the cusp of his marriage, he comes across as a painfully earnest, still unfocused young man, full of himself in several senses of the term, but still very much a work in progress.³⁰

In the spring of 1764 Great Britain began to implement its new imperial strategy for the American colonies. The imperial initiative, most especially the Stamp Act (1765), was a heavenly gift for John, who had been searching for a cause of truly historic proportions, and the ministry of George III, along with the British parliament, now provided it almost providentially. Abigail and the soon-to-arrive children provided him with a family haven from the vicissitudes of the world, a comfort zone where he did not have to worry about constantly proving himself, a more stable psychological foundation for his ever-quivering ego. Not so incidentally, Abigail also offered an outlet for the long-suppressed sexual energies of a twenty-nine-year-old male. All at once he had a cause as large as an imperial crisis and a newfound confidence. The consequences were nothing short of spectacular.

The first consequence was a series of four essays in the *Boston Gazette* entitled *A Dissertation Upon the Canon and Feudal Law*. (John later made a point of mentioning that portions of this work were drafted in his Braintree study while Abigail was nursing Nabby upstairs.) His initial entry in the imperial debate—scores of others would quickly follow—*Dissertation* was perhaps the most intellectually cogent and stylistically satisfying collection of essays he ever wrote. Years later, he recalled its composition fondly, adding that “it might as well have been called an *Essay upon Forefathers Rock*.”³¹

Many of John’s subsequent contributions to the political debate were closely reasoned legalistic arguments, often of a tedious sort.

Dissertation, on the other hand, had a sweeping and soaring quality that derived from its central premise, which was that the political cultures of England and New England were fundamentally at odds. The former was rooted in the arbitrary and coercive forms of government of the Old World, legacies of the medieval fusion of church and state. The entire history of New England since the first settlements, on the other hand, was a repudiation of this legacy, which over the course of almost 150 years had yielded political and religious institutions based on the principle of consent.

Although John began drafting Dissertation before news of the Stamp Act arrived in Boston, his analysis of the inherently imperious character of the British Empire eerily foreshadowed the most offensive features of the Stamp Act. He was one of the first into the fight.

Dissertation became one of the earliest expressions of what came to be called American Exceptionalism, though in John's version only New England was featured as the unique depository of an essentially consensual and participatory politics. His argument laid the intellectual foundation for the more focused rejections of Parliament's authority that he published over the next decade, because it suggested that the disagreements between the American colonies and Great Britain were deeply rooted in two fundamentally different historical experiences, and therefore were probably irresolvable. It was a rather auspicious way to launch a political career, the kind of panoramic and prophetic contribution that one might expect from someone much older. It signaled the arrival of a major presence on the Boston political scene.³²

He followed up Dissertation with a more pointed attack on the Stamp Act as an illegal violation of long-standing American rights. This was Braintree Instructions, which he wrote at the request of the Braintree town meeting. He made three arguments, none particularly original but all rendered in a succinct and defiantly punchy style: first, that the Stamp Act was unconstitutional because Parliament was claiming a power to tax colonists that it did not possess; second, by taking this unprecedented step, the members of Parliament were the true radicals and the colonists the true conservatives; third, given the illegality of the Stamp Act, the proper way to proceed was to refuse to

obey it, since, as he later put it, “it was no more binding than an Act to destroy half of our Species.”

Forty towns in Massachusetts, including Boston, adopted the language of Braintree Instructions as the clearest and most forceful expression of their political sentiments. This made John, almost overnight, one of the most famous men in Massachusetts. And when Braintree Instructions was published in several London newspapers, he became one of the most infamous men in England.³³

Abigail had almost surely assumed that she was marrying a man of potentially local prominence who might achieve a lawyerly version of her father’s ministerial career at Weymouth. All of a sudden, the size of the theater and the stakes of the game had changed dramatically. We do not know how she viewed this escalation of prospects. She was nursing Nabby and about to become pregnant with John Quincy, so she already faced a demanding set of physical and emotional challenges. Now a new and at least equally demanding dimension was added to her life. She was being asked to accompany John—presumably the children, whatever their eventual number, trailing behind—as he strolled toward his appointment with destiny.

DRAWING LINES

“The year 1765 has been the most remarkable year of my life,” John recorded in his diary as the year was ending. “The enormous engine fabricated by the British Parliament for battering down all the rights and liberties of America, I mean the Stamp Act, has raised and spread through the whole continent a spirit that will be recorded to our honor, with all future generations.” This observation, made in the moment, turned out to be correct. American opposition to the act became the opening shot in a struggle that led to withdrawal from the British Empire, the creation of an American republic, and the ascendance of a country lawyer named John Adams to the top tier of a quite remarkable group of American statesmen, later capitalized and mythologized as the Founding Fathers.³⁴

John was extremely prolific during the next decade, publishing

between twenty-five and thirty essays that challenged Parliament's right to tax the colonies and, eventually, to legislate at all for them. One could argue that Abigail was equally prolific during this time, laying the biological foundation for what would eventually be called the Adams dynasty. John's political writings dominate the historical record of their lives together at this time, in part because they focus on major public issues that ended up altering the course of history, in part because of the paradox of proximity, meaning that there are very few letters offering a window into Abigail's domestic world.

One does get a few glimpses of Abigail's mentality every now and then, as when she complains to her sister that John's legal cases have made him "such an Itinerant ... that I have but little of his company." Or when she reports that two-year-old Nabby is "fat as a porpoise and falls heavy," thereby producing a continually bruised forehead. Or when, in 1774, John is preparing to leave for the Continental Congress in Philadelphia and worries out loud to Abigail about whether to buy a new suit and how much linen to pack. On a day-by-day basis, the primary lens through which both of them viewed the world—she, of course, more than he—was the family. As a result, the more publicly oriented historical record distorts their actual experience of living through a rather propitious moment in American history at the same time as they were defining their respective roles within the marriage and founding a family.³⁵

The unbalanced documentation also makes it difficult to know how fully informed Abigail was about the political debates that consumed so much of John's energy and attention. Her letters make clear that she was reading the Boston newspapers. Glancing remarks in his letters suggest that he shared his thoughts with her, read early drafts of his essays to her, and asked her advice about key decisions, such as whether to accept election to the Massachusetts legislature in 1770. (On the latter score, John mentioned in his autobiography that he "expressed to Mrs. Adams all my Apprehensions" and that Abigail, "that excellent lady, who always encouraged me, burst unto a flood of Tears" but eventually endorsed the decision to take the post.) We also know from later chapters in John's political career that Abigail was a fully

informed and deeply involved political confidante, so it is plausible to read that role into this earlier chapter.³⁶

The clearest evidence of her political posture comes in a letter to Isaac Smith Jr., a cousin who was living in London. “From my infancy,” she wrote, “I have always felt a great inclination to visit the Mother Country as tis called, and had nature formed me of the other Sex, I should certainly have been a rover.” Then she went on: “Dont you think this little spot of ours better calculated for happiness than any you have yet seen? Would you exchange it for England, France, Spain or Ittaly? Are not the people here more upon an Equality in point of knowledge and of circumstances—there being none so immensely rich as to Lord it over us, neither any so abjectly poor as to suffer for the necessaries of life.” Clearly, if the lines were ever drawn, she stood proudly with New England.³⁷

In his published essays John was also drawing a series of lines, the chief one being between American rights and Parliament’s authority, but not until the end of the decade, in 1774, was he prepared to contemplate drawing the ultimate line that severed the connection between the colonies and the British Empire, and even then he was reluctant to cut the cord with the Crown. As we have seen, the argument first advanced in Dissertation implied that the history of New England had created a fundamentally different set of political assumptions and institutions from those operative in England. And much later in his life he claimed that, at least in retrospect, the argument made by James Otis in the writs of assistance case in 1761, in which Otis denied the right of Parliament to sanction searches of Massachusetts homes, foreshadowed the eventual break. (Adams was present in the courtroom for Otis’s presentation, later describing himself as “a short, thick Archbishop of Canterbury” and Otis as a more impressive orator than Patrick Henry.) However, throughout the late 1760s and early 1770s John’s political agenda was not American independence, but getting the British ministry to come to its senses in order to recover America’s historic status within the empire.³⁸

Under the pseudonym “Clarendon,” he emphasized that it was the British constitution that guaranteed the rights of all Englishmen.

establishing as a principle of law that the British Empire was “not built on the doctrine that a few nobles or rich commons have a right to inherit the earth.” The Stamp Act was, by this reasoning, clearly a violation of “those ancient Whig Principles” and therefore no more binding on any true Englishman than some crazed pronouncement by the local drunk.³⁹

In late 1766 and early 1767 John published eleven essays, using multiple pseudonyms, to engage “Philanthrop,” who was really Jonathan Sewall, one of his Harvard classmates and closest friends. (Sewall had once proposed that they undergo inoculation together so that their constant banter would prevent boredom.) Sewall’s specific goal was to defend the governor, Francis Bernard, for his endorsement of the Stamp Act. His larger goal was to warn that organized opposition to Parliament’s authority was treasonable, and would lead inexorably to a break with Great Britain that would produce only anarchy and ruin in the colonies. Despite the fact that John continued to treat Sewall as a friend, he vilified Philanthrop as an “old Trumpeter ... spewing out venomous Baillingsgate.” And John countered the threats of social chaos by arguing that if it ever came to an open breach with Great Britain, the vast bulk of the Massachusetts citizenry would rally to the cause in a decidedly orderly fashion. The British, in short, had much more to lose than the Americans.⁴⁰

John’s other major effort, a series of eight essays published in the Boston Gazette early in 1773, focused on what was to become a trademark issue for the remainder of his political career—the essential role of an independent judiciary. His specific target was a proposal to have the salaries of Massachusetts judges paid by the Crown. The larger target was the entire system of patronage emanating from the governor’s office, now occupied by Thomas Hutchinson, which made all judicial appointments a corrupt bargain with the devil.⁴¹

In two senses, this debate was intensely personal for John, at times obsessively so. First, Hutchinson became the chief embodiment of British corruption and condescension even though he was a native New Englander who had written the authoritative history of Massachusetts. “Mr. Hutchinson never drank a cup of tea in his life.” John observed

much later, “without Contemplating the Connection between that Tea, and his Promotion.” When a visitor once asked him what he thought of Hutchinson, John was even more hostile: “I told him I once thought that his Death in a natural Way would have been a Smile of Providence ... and the most joyful News to me that I could ever have heard.” When John wanted to imagine the most tyrannical and corrupt features of the British Empire, the face he saw was Hutchinson’s. It was an early manifestation of what became a prevailing pattern throughout his political life, namely, to personalize the opposition by focusing his hostility on a single figure, who then became a wholly vile and contemptible creature worthy of permanent enshrinement in the Adams rogues’ gallery. Hutchinson was eventually joined there by Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and Alexander Hamilton.⁴²

Second, in 1768, soon after John moved Abigail and the family to a house on Brattle Square in Boston—the move proved temporary—he received a highly lucrative offer to become judge advocate in the Admiralty Court, one of those patronage plums that would set him up for life, but at the price of his subsequent silence on all the salient arguments about Parliament’s authority. The offer came from his old friend Jonathan Sewall, who had recently accepted the post of attorney general, an obvious sellout in John’s judgment. He rejected the offer immediately, but he began to realize that he was making life-altering decisions with huge consequences for his family on the basis of his political convictions, which, no matter how heartfelt, could very well lead to his professional and personal ruin. “I have a Zeal at my Heart for my country,” he confided to Abigail, “which I cannot smother or conceal ... This Zeal will prove fatal to the fortune and Felicity of my Family, if it is not regulated more than mine has hitherto been.”⁴³

There is no record of Abigail’s ever urging John to trim his political sails in order to protect the future of the family, or to accept a lucrative offer that would have compromised his political integrity. In fact, there is no evidence that she gave the matter any thought at all. Her husband had to do his duty as he saw it, and while she was an opinionated and independent-minded woman, her duty as a wife was to support him. “I must entreat you.” John pleaded with her. “my dear Partner in all the

Joys and Sorrows, Prosperity and Adversity of my Life, to take a Part with me in the Struggle.” The plea proved unnecessary. Abigail never entertained doing anything else.⁴⁴

The most severe test, which she passed with flying colors, occurred in 1770, when John was asked to defend the British soldiers who had fired on and killed six members of a Boston mob that was harassing them with taunts and snowballs. John agreed to take the case for two reasons: first, he believed that it was important to demonstrate that even vilified “Lobsterbacks” could get fair treatment in Massachusetts, despite the highly politicized atmosphere; second, he thought that the so-called massacre had been manipulated by Samuel Adams and the leadership of the Sons of Liberty for political purposes. “Endeavors had been systematically pursued for many months, by certain busy characters,” he observed, “to excite Quarrells ... between the Inhabitants of the lower class and the Soldiers, and at all risques to inkindle an immortal hatred between them.” Rather than a dramatic example of British tyranny, which he was on record of opposing so passionately, the Boston Massacre was, in truth, “planned by designing Men,” and the real victims were the British soldiers.⁴⁵

This was obviously a politically unpopular posture, and John made a point of consulting with Abigail before going forward. She concurred that the mob had been instigated, so that John’s decision to defend the British troops was the virtuous course regardless of the political fallout. She was, at the time, recovering from the death of Susanna, her third child, and pregnant with Charles, her fourth. So she was emotionally immersed in some rather dramatic events of her own, but still fully capable and willing to accompany John on a dangerously unpopular course.⁴⁶

Eventually Captain Thomas Preston, the British commanding officer at the scene, was found not guilty, along with all but two of the British soldiers, who had their thumbs imprinted as punishment for a lesser charge. John’s fear that his successful defense of the British soldiers would create implacable enemies proved wrong—the word “out of doors” was that John’s political credentials were beyond reproach and that his conduct had the approval of Sam Adams, the leader of the Sons

of Liberty, who had probably orchestrated the events leading up to the massacre in the first place. Indeed, John's reputation soared, and he was elected to the Massachusetts legislature a few months later by a comfortable majority, the epitome of the passionate patriot, now with personal integrity to boot.

CROSSING THE RUBICON TOGETHER

By the early 1770s John had reached the conclusion that the likelihood of a political reconciliation with Great Britain was remote in the extreme. The British ministry was committed to a strategy of American subjugation to Parliament's authority, and he could find no realistic reasons to believe that it would come to its senses before producing a permanent rupture in the British Empire. "I see that there is not Wisdom, Justice, and Moderation in the Mother Country," he observed to Isaac Smith Jr. in 1771, "to desist voluntarily from such Attempts to make inroads against us." But if American independence in some form was inevitable, he did not believe it to be imminent. It was probably several decades away: "You and I shall be saints in Heaven," he predicted to Smith, "before the Times we dream of. But our grandsons may perhaps think this a canonical Prophecy."⁴⁷

The events between 1770 and 1774 caused John to accelerate his sense of the historical schedule. In a somewhat overclever move, the British ministry removed import duties on all other commodities but retained the duty on tea at a very low rate, making it less expensive to purchase tea from Great Britain while simultaneously reasserting the principle of parliamentary sovereignty. Instead of co-opting the colonists, this provoked the Boston Tea Party (1773), a festival of raucous destruction organized by the Sons of Liberty in which a Boston mob, somewhat frivolously disguised as Indians, boarded three British ships anchored in Massachusetts Bay and tossed about £15,000 worth of tea overboard. (John was of two minds about mobs, finding the more impulsive version at the Boston Massacre disreputable but the highly organized effort that destroyed the tea wholly justifiable.) The British ministry responded by escalating the stakes, closing the Boston port to

all trade, shutting down all the Massachusetts courts, and imposing martial law on the city. Massachusetts was to be made into an object lesson of what happens when colonists brazenly defy the authority of the British government.

Predictably, but interestingly, John and Abigail responded to these harsh measures in the same dramatic (one might even say melodramatic) way: “We live my dear Soul,” he wrote to her, “in an Age of Tryal. What will be the consequences I know not. The town of Boston, for ought I can see, must suffer martyrdom. It must expire and our principal consolation is, that it dies in a Noble Cause.” This hyperbolic tone reflected John’s sense that a line had been crossed that could never be retraced. But he wanted Abigail to know that he was not despondent or depressed: “Don’t imagine from all this that I am in the Dumps,” he wrote her. “I can truly say, that I have felt more Spirits and Activity since the arrival of this News than I had done before for years.”⁴⁸

In John’s view, the Coercive Acts had exposed the latent agenda of the British ministry for all to see. Intricate constitutional arguments about long-standing colonial rights, debates in which John had been a major player, now paled in comparison to the total and wholly arbitrary revocations of colonial rights within the empire. From the British perspective, the colonists really had none, it was now clear. John had been saying that this was the unspoken assumption of the British ministry for ten years. The Coercive Acts proved that he had been right. Abigail concurred completely.⁴⁹

This placed them on the cutting edge of radical thinking within Massachusetts, and much further ahead of public opinion in the rest of the colonies, which remained wedded to the hope for a peaceful reconciliation. Both of them had come to see the imperial crisis as an all-or-nothing choice between American independence and slavery, with all efforts at a split-the-difference compromise nothing more than a seductive illusion. As John put it to Abigail: “And the Question seems to be, whether the American Colonies are to be considered as a distinct Community so far as to have a Right to judge for themselves, when the Fundamentals of their Government are destroyed or invaded?” This was

a defiant, even treasonable, position, which was one reason he asked her to “keep these letters chiefly to yourself.” He also asked her to “put them up safe, and preserve them,” for they provided “a kind of picture of the Manners, Opinions, and Principles of these Times of Perplexity, Danger, and Distress.” One of the reasons that so many of their letters have survived is that they both recognized, early on, that they were living through a truly propitious moment likely to find a prominent place in the history books.⁵⁰

In June 1774 they were apprised that John had been selected as one of four Massachusetts delegates to the Continental Congress. Accepting that appointment constituted a major public statement about his political loyalties, and Jonathan Sewall pleaded with him to refuse the offer, warning that attending the Continental Congress would brand him as a traitor and destroy his legal career. Remembering the poignancy of that moment many years later, John recalled his response: “I answered that I knew Great Britain was determined on her systems, and that very determination determined me on mine; that he [Sewall] knew I had been constant and uniform in opposition to all her measures; that the die was now cast; I had passed the Rubicon; swim or sink, live or die, survive or perish with my country was my unalterable determination.”⁵¹

Abigail was equally resolute. There was no question that John had to go to Philadelphia. Their minds were so perfectly aligned on that score that no discussion was necessary. There was also no question that she was perfectly competent to manage the farm and four young children, aged two to nine years, while he was away. The conversations were about details: What clothing should he pack? What horse should he take? Before he left, they needed to purchase more fertilizer for their fields, John insisting on “Mud Flatts or Creek Mud ... mixed with Dust and Dung.” It was the kind of privileged conversation that could occur only between two soul mates knowing they were entering a new chapter in their lives and their marriage, tending together to the details because the larger issues required only nods and glances.⁵²

John departed from Boston on August 10, 1774. An aspiring novelist could work wonders with the scene. The four Massachusetts delegates

boarded a well-appointed coach in full view of five British regiments encamped on Boston Common. They were preceded by two white servants, well mounted and armed, followed by four black slaves dressed in livery, two on horseback and two footmen. It was a motley mix of royal splendor, military power, social deference, and racial inferiority, all traveling together on a mission to oppose British tyranny. Though there were no women in the picture, Abigail was lurking in the background, cheering, worrying, and praying for John's safe return.⁵³