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A Blog About Abigail and John, Part 4: "My Dearest Friend/Miss Adorable" — Historic Deerfield

David Bruce Smith

10-13 minutes

By David Bruce Smith

This is the fourth part of a continuing series of blog posts with author David Bruce Smith about Abigail and John Adams. Historic Deerfield's resident historians will pose questions to Smith, who is the author of Abigail & John, a nonfiction children's book that offers readers the opportunity to view prominent scenes in American history through the remarkable lives of one of the country's most beloved couples—the Adams's. Exploring the historical significance of a partnership that spanned over five decades, the book details the love they shared for each other and the country. We hope this blog can be a helpful historical resource for learners of all ages.

1. While the Adams's may have been our first "power couple" and famous for it, did either John or Abigail have other love interests over

their long lives?

Before there was an Abigail, John was in love with the “witty, flirtatious”, Hannah Quincy. He was poised to propose to her in the late 1750s, but their “moment” was hijacked by his friends. (*Journal of the American Revolution.*)

Eventually, the romance ended--she was swooped up by another bachelor--and the 24-year-old Adams catapulted into a catch—of sorts. Though he was capon-shaped and prematurely bald, John had other attributes; he had already garnered accolades for his legal skills in Braintree and beyond.

When John met Abigail at fifteen, she was petite and dark-eyed; the daughter of William Smith, a well-to-do farmer and minister, who, according to Adams, was nothing more than a “...crafty, designing man”.

Their clumsy introduction in the pastor’s parlor was orchestrated by Richard Cranch—John’s best friend--who happened to be courting--and later married-- Abigail’s older sister, Mary.

At first, Abigail was not titillated, tantalized, or thrilled with John; that night, he noted in his diary that Abigail [was lacking] in “fondness and Tenderness.”

(*“The Adams Papers, Earliest Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, June 1753-April 1754, September 1758-January 1759, 1-42.*)

When Reverend Smith hired Adams, his casual contacts with

Abigail morphed into kinetic conversations; eventually, they discovered similar interests, and—slowly--their relationship was repositioned into a romance.

Meanwhile, the snobbish Elizabeth Smith, was aghast. She did not approve of John Adams; after all, the town of Quincy had been named in honor of her father—a colonel; a former forty-year Speaker of the Massachusetts Assembly, and—now—her daughter wanted to wed a farmer's son.

Abigail and John were married on October 25, 1764, with Reverend Smith officiating.

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In a union that produced five children, three lived unhappily into adulthood, and one soared to the presidency; throughout it all, Abigail was John's steadfast, strategic advisor; lover, confidante, partner—and--his "Miss Adorable". And while her "My Dearest Friend" traversed the world proffering patriotism, participation, and peace, they exchanged more than a thousand letters. But, without her steady, soothing strength guiding him through his manic moods from afar, John Adams would have never scaled the White House:

"There are few people in this world with whom I can converse. I can treat all with decency and civility, and converse with them when it is necessary, on points of business. But I am never happy in their company...I am in ear-nest [sic]. I cannot be happy, nor tolerable without you." (ibid., p. 4).

Until the family's 1784 reunification in Paris, Abigail had

never traveled outside of Boston. She was grounded at Peacefield, their farm in Quincy, tending to chickens and livestock in calamitous cold, and hellish heat; milking cows, laboring in the fields, tutoring the children, and taking the sometimes-deadly smallpox inoculation.

...

There is little doubt that the principles that Abigail and John promoted, helped to position America's vigorous democracy. They were a powerful couple, who usually worked from two different locations, but the future President and Mrs. Madison —operating from the same place—emerged as the nation's first "Power Duo".

...

John was the absolute, consuming love of Abigail's life; however, if she ever had a "forbidden" fantasy, then the complex, conniving, cad—Thomas Jefferson—was probably the only one who could have filled that space, and—briefly—raised her temperature.

Abigail and John had befriended Jefferson after his wife's 1782 death; two years later, the trio reunited in Paris. Now diplomats, Jefferson greased the Adams's entree into sophisticated society, and a scintillating swirl of soirees.

While John worked, Abigail and Jefferson bred a separate friendship based on unearthed, mutual interests in ornamental gardens, an appreciation of the beautiful music made by songbirds, and their children. Martha Jefferson; Nabby and John Quincy, were friends.

It was period of happiness for the two families--until their peaceful pause was pitched. John was ordered to report to the Court of St James in London, and the dejected Abigail wrote her uncle, Cotton Tufts:

"I shall regret...the loss of Mr. Jefferson's society."

(Adams Family Correspondence; April 26, 1785)

Abigail, John, and Jefferson remained friends. During George Washington's first term, Adams was vice president, and Jefferson was appointed Secretary of State. But, when Adams defeated Jefferson in the 1796 presidential election, Jefferson's loyalties lagged; though he was dissatisfied with the vice presidency, [the first and only time a presidential ticket consisted of two parties] Adams still anticipated an agreeable working arrangement; instead, Jefferson ramped up his rigidity, and discarded his desire to compromise on prickly political issues.

Always on the lurk for an advantageous angle, Jefferson choreographed an elaborate campaign to jettison Adams from the presidency. He hired James Callendar, a scandalmonger, to write a piece that accused Adams of being a crazy warmonger who planned to crown himself king.

Wielding the hefty powers of the Alien and Sedition Acts, Adams prosecuted Callendar, and tossed him into jail, but the public believed in the credible propaganda, and pivoted against their president. Jefferson defeated Adams, and they escaped Washington before the Inaugural ceremonies began.

Abigail and John were furious; they exiled Jefferson from their lives until they learned that Polly—his daughter, and their beloved charge in Paris—had died in childbirth. Abigail wrote Jefferson to express her sympathies; he acknowledged her note, and then trespassed, dangerously, by blaming John, again, for appointing the “Midnight Judges” —three years earlier--in 1801:

With asp-like anger, Abigail walloped him with her words:

“The Constitution empowers the president to fill up offices as they become vacant. It was in the exercise of this power that appointments were made...characters selected whom Mr. Adams considered...faithful to the Constitution...the different political opinions which have so unhappily dividing [sic] our Country, must have given rise to the idea, that personal unkindness was intended...You will please to [to] recollect Sir, that at the time the appointments were made, there was not any certainty that the presidency would devolve upon you.”

(“Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson: A Secret Correspondence” from Emerging Revolutionary War Era, p. 3)

Jefferson got 26,000 letters in his lifetime, but this was considered the angriest of all.

2. What was John and Abigail’s position on slavery at the time of the Revolution, and the creation of the new Massachusetts State

Constitution, and in the new nation?

John Adams was raised in a family that loathed slavery:

“I have, through my whole life, held the practice...in such abhorrence, that I have never owned a negro or any other slave; though I have lived for many years in times, when the practice was not disgraceful, when the best men in my vicinity thought it not inconsistent with their character...”

(John Adams, Wikipedia; p. 29.)

Abigail did not come from an abolitionist-pure milieu. Her father, Reverend William Smith, owned slaves, but when she married John, the option was eliminated.

In the beginning, the couple hired servants for their homes in Massachusetts, but eventually Abigail—activist-like—became more disturbed over the widespread injustice of servitude. She called it a sin, and “...wondered if disease and war were God’s way of punishing America for committing acts of slavery.”

Abigail discussed her feelings with John; urged him to deliver her opinions to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, but he knew the fifty-five representatives—almost all slave owners—were assembled only to draft an acceptable Declaration of Independence. That coterie had no interest in emancipation, and that included George Washington.

By 1789, Vice President Adams was at the beginning of his career apex. Gradually, his position on slavery got confused, contradictory, and out of focus. Some of the simplicity in their

lives vaporized, and suddenly, various households had to be set up, dismantled, and managed as he and Abigail hopscotched from Philadelphia to New York, and—then-- Washington.

Unlike George and Martha Washington, who owned their staff, the Adams's had to piece together a whole new infrastructure each time they were relocated:

“In each city, they [the Adams's] formed an official household, hosted family members, welcomed guests, and hired a staff of servants to maintain the home... Adams did not own enslaved people. Instead, the Adamses [sic] hired white and free African American workers to provide these services. However, that did not mean that they avoided slavery altogether. While the Adamses [sic] opposed slavery both morally and politically, they tolerated the practice in their daily lives and they may have hired out enslaved African Americans, paying wages to their owners, to work in the Vice President's and President's house.”

(“The Households of President John Adams” by Lindsay M. Chervinsky; White House Historian, pp. 1-7).

Domestic duties daunted and drained Abigail; in 1790, she wrote her sister from Philadelphia, complaining about her endless quandary with help. She had hired and fired seven cooks in a year and a half, but most of them turned out to be drunks.

Surviving records do not reveal much about their domestic staff in Washington, except that Abigail and John had a

“complicated relationship with race, slavery, and workers in their homes. At times, Abigail was condescending and racist: “I cannot find a cook in the whole city but what will get drunk, and as to the Negroes—I am sincerely sick of them.” (ibid).