

REMEMBER THE LADIES

NOTABLE
CHILDREN'S TRADE
BOOK IN THE FIELD
OF SOCIAL
STUDIES

FROM AMERICAN WOMEN: THEIR LIVES
IN THEIR WORDS

EDITED BY DOREEN RAPPAPORT

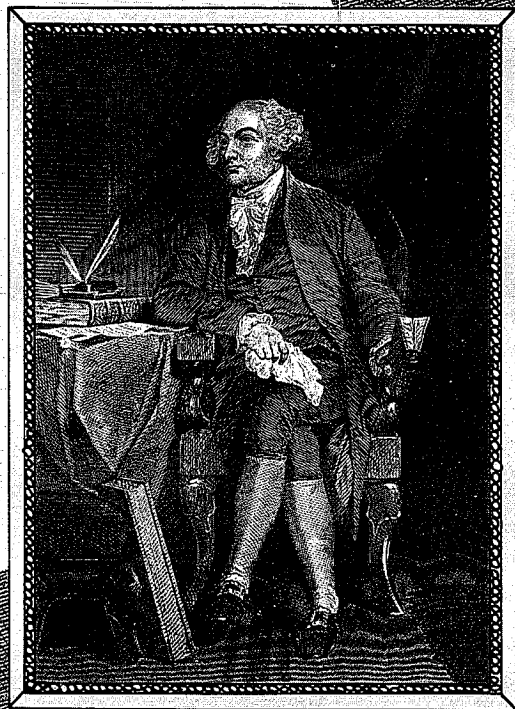
*I*t was the beginning of the American Revolution, and the colonists were challenging the authority of the king of England and fighting for the right to make their own decisions about their lives. Though everyone understood that politics was the business of men, many women, fired by patriotism, rallied to the cause. Banding together, women refused to buy English goods until the Townshend Act of 1767, with its excessive taxes, was repealed. Women joined the "home manufacture" movement, weaving their own cloth, sewing their own clothes, and concocting home brews to replace the "illegally" taxed tea.

When war came, hundreds of women

followed their husbands to battle, serving as cooks, bakers, laundresses, and nurses. The women at home kept the farms and businesses going, took care of the children, and worked for the war effort. They collected money for new recruits, sewed clothing for the army, and nursed the sick and wounded. When storekeepers tried to take advantage of the shortage of goods by selling what they had at higher prices, women organized committees to pressure merchants to set fixed prices for all goods. In Boston when a greedy merchant didn't cooperate, the women wheeled him through town, took his keys, and hoisted barrels of coffee out of his warehouse.

Abigail Adams was one of many women who managed her husband's farming and business affairs during the war. In 1776 her husband, John, who went on to become the second president of the United States, was a delegate to the First Continental Congress. Like other patriots, Abigail Adams anxiously awaited news of the Declaration of Independence. In letters she prodded her husband to "remember the ladies" in the new laws. She saw the setting up of this new government as both an opportunity to rectify the injustices

of English rule and a chance to transform women's powerlessness at the hands of their husbands as well as their invisibility before the law.





Molly Pitcher took her husband's place beside the cannon after he suffered heat stroke during the Battle of Monmouth, 28 June 1778.

Braintree, 31 March, 1776

I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. 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.

That your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute; but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing one of friend. Why, then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity? Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the [servants] of your sex; regard us then as being placed by Providence under your protection, and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

From John Adams to Abigail Adams,
April 14, 1776

As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bonds of government everywhere; that children and apprentices were disobedient; that schools and colleges were grown turbulent; that Indians slighted their guardians, and negroes grew insolent to their masters. But your letter was the first intimation that another tribe, more numerous and powerful than all the rest, were grown discontented. This is rather too coarse a compliment, but you are so saucy, I won't blot it out. Depend upon it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems. Although they are in full force, you know they are little more than theory. We dare not exert our power in its full latitude. We are obliged to go fair and softly, and, in practice, you know we are the subjects. We have only the name of masters, and rather than give up this, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat, I hope General Washington and all our brave heroes would fight.

From Abigail Adams to John Adams,
Braintree, 7 May 1776

I cannot say that I think you are very generous to the ladies; for, whilst you are proclaiming peace and good-will to men, emancipating all nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over wives.

But you must remember that arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken; and, notwithstanding all your wise laws and maxims, we have it in our power, not only to free ourselves, but to subdue our masters, and without violence, throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet.

No one remembered the ladies. The new Constitution [eleven years later] simply ignored them. They remained without public or political power, still legally subject to their husbands. Blacks, Native Americans, and white men who did not own property also were given no rights of citizenship.



Which argument do you find more reasonable, Abigail's or John's? Explain.

Why do you think no one "remembered the ladies" when the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were written?

How would you describe John Adams's attitude toward his wife's request?

WRITE Would you call the new United States proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence a free country? In a paragraph, explain why or why not.