

Abigail Adams Writes a Letter

Women in eighteenth-century America were expected to remain silent on most matters and defer to men. One famous European American woman, Abigail Adams, refused to do this. She was the wife of the second president of the United States, John Adams. She was a prolific letter writer to her husband, who was often away on governmental business. Read the excerpts below of some of these letters to understand her views on women's position in eighteenth-century American society. She used very complicated English of the times to express herself. After each excerpt, explain what Mrs. Adams was saying in words that a teenager would understand today.

". . . and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make [referring to the Constitution] I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable 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 perticular 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."¹ Abigail Adams says in a letter to her husband.

"I cannot say that I think you 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 subdue our Masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet. . . "² Abigail Adams writes in another letter to her husband.

Below is a list of women's legal limitations during the eighteenth century. Read this list and think about how you would feel living in a society like the following:

1. Women were not allowed to vote.
2. When a woman married, all of her property became a legal possession of her husband. She no longer had control over it.
3. Women were allowed only to run small businesses (inns, shops, etc.) on a very limited basis.
4. Men were allowed to use corporal (physical) punishment on their wives.
5. If a divorce occurred, the husband would retain custody of the children. Women had no rights with regard to the children.