

Adams Family Correspondence, Volume 1 and 2: December 1761 - March 1778 (Adams Papers)



The Adams Family Correspondence, Mr. Butterfield writes, is an unbroken record of the changing modes of domestic life, religious views and habits, travel, dress, servants, food, schooling, reading, health and medical care, diversions, and every other conceivable aspect of manners and taste among the members of a substantial New England family who lived on both sides of the Atlantic and wrote industriously to each other over a period of more than a century. These volumes are the first in the estimated twenty or more in Series 2 of The Adams Papers. Including about six hundred letters to and from various members of the family, the Adams Family Correspondence begins with a series of hitherto unpublished courtship letters between John Adams and Abigail Smith. The weekly and sometimes daily reports by Adams of what was going on in the Continental Congress during the years 1774-1777 are a far fuller and franker record than has been available before. His wives letters in reply recount her difficulties in raising a family of young children and operating a farm while war went on not far from her doorstep, refugees inundated Braintree, local epidemics raged, prices soared, and goods and labor became ever scarcer. We learn for the first time that amid these distractions Abigail lost a baby daughter, that getting herself and four children inoculated against smallpox was an agonizing ordeal of months in 1776, that after Burgoynes defeat at Saratoga she wrote a long, lecturing letter to her single relative who had chosen the Loyalist side, and that her comments on blundering politicians, lax generals, and unpatriotic neighbors were more frequent and incisive than has been supposed. Thinking her letters too careless and too intimate for preservation, Abigail Adams pleaded at the end of one of them, written a couple of months before the Declaration of Independence was voted and while British

warships hovered within range of her house, I wish you would burn all my Letters. To which John Adams replied, The conclusion of your Letter made my Heart throb, more than a Cannonade would. You bid me burn your Letters. But I must forget you first. So he faithfully kept hers, she kept his, and they both kept their childrens. Their grandson Charles Francis Adams chose some of these for publication in a succession of small editions in the nineteenth century, but he was highly selective, and he discreetly pruned away from the letters that he printed much that is both revealing and engaging. Here, as is the practice with all the Adams documents in this edition, every letter used is given in full. The second of these first volumes ends in March 1778 with John Adams on a Continental frigate bound for his first diplomatic mission in Europe, accompanied by his ten-year-old son, John Quincy.

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