

in behalf of greater rights. But the protests against England stirred up new thoughts about what seemed arbitrary or despotic in their own society, and many women began to think that what had been endured in the past was no longer acceptable. This paved the way for change. Abigail's reference to the cruelty men used against their wives probably refers to the "rule of thumb" that the law upheld. Deeply imbedded in England's common law, and encoded in Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, the rule of thumb made it permissible for husbands to beat their wives so long as the stick or club did not exceed the thickness of a male thumb. The reference to using women with indignity probably referred to the emotional and psychological domination of wives by husbands. For all his love of Abigail, John's reply to her letter of March 31, 1776, confirmed the point. "As to your extraordinary code of laws," he wrote, "I cannot but laugh." Then referring to the growing insubordination of children, apprentices, Indians, slaves, and college students, he sniffed that "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. . . ."

Abigail was not amused. She knew that it was not the British ministry that stirred up women and others grating against their subordination. Instead of writing John after receiving his dismissive letter, she unburdened herself to her friend Mercy Otis Warren, the sister of John Otis and wife of James Warren, a Massachusetts legislator. "He is very saucy to me in return for a list of female grievances which I transmitted to him," she wrote Mercy. "I think I will get you to join me in a petition to Congress." Why, she wondered, was her husband so insensitive to what seemed an opportunity to enact a more "generous plan," "some laws in our favor upon just and liberal principles" by which the law would curb "the power of the arbitrary and tyrannic to injure us with impunity?" Under revised law, women could gain court protection against abusive husbands and not lose their property and wages to men once they married. For raising just and liberal principles, she bitterly told Mercy, he scoffed at her and called her saucy. "So I have helped the sex abundantly," she closed, "but I will tell him I have only been making trial of the disinterestedness of his virtue, and when weighed in the balance have found it wanting." Mercy Otis Warren, who had already crossed the boundaries of correct female behavior by writing two patriot plays that pilloried Thomas Hutchinson and other Loyalists, sympathized with Abigail and told other women that the criticism of females who interested themselves in politics should be resisted. . . .

Adams tried to end the argument on a high note by complimenting Abigail as a "Stateswoman" as well as "a Farmeress." But for Abigail, the matter was not closed. Years later she insisted that "I will never consent to have our sex considered in an inferior point of light. Let each planet shine in their own orbit. God and nature designed it so—if man is Lord, woman is

Lordess—that is what I contend for." Like a stone cast into a pond, ripples radiated outward from this private family argument auguring currents of change far beyond the Adams family.

PRIMARY SOURCES

The primary sources in this section reflect the concerns and experiences of various people during the struggle for independence. As you evaluate these sources, consider what they reveal about the desire to achieve greater equality and to what extent they support the argument that the American fight for independence from Britain unleashed a struggle to achieve greater equality and rights at home.

2 When the Stamp Act went into effect on November 1, 1765, a crowd of angry men in New York targeted Lieutenant Governor Cadwallader Colden, a defender of British policy in the colonies. The crowd was led by a group of men from the middle rank of New York society that came to be known as the Sons of Liberty. Several days later, Colden recounted the incident in a report to officials in Britain. Note the type of property the mob attacked. Why do you think many of New York's "gentlemen" may have come out to "observe"?

An Account of a Stamp Act Riot (1765)

Sir,

In a day or two after the date of my letter of the 26th of last month. . . the packages of stamped papers were landed from His Majesty's ship *Garland* at noonday without a guard or the least appearance of discontent among the people. . . . But on the evening of the first day of this month the mob began to collect together, and after it became dark they came up to the Fort Gate with a great number of torches, and a scaffold on which two images were placed, one to represent the governor in his grey hairs, & the other the devil by his side. This scaffold with the images was brought up within 8 or 10 feet of the gate with the grossest ribaldry from the mob. As they went from the gate they broke open my coach house, took my chariot out of it & carried it

Source: Cynthia A. Kierner, *Revolutionary America 1750–1815: Sources and Interpretations* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 74–75; originally from Cadwallader Colden to Secretary Conway, November 5, 1765, in E. B. O'Callaghan and Berthold Fernow, eds., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 15 vols. (Albany, N.Y., 1853–1887), VII: p. 771.

round the town with the images, & returned to the Fort Gate, from whence they carried them to an open place, where they had erected a gibbet, within 100 yards of the Fort Gate & there hung up the images. After hanging some time they were burnt in a fire prepared for the purpose, together with my chariot, a single horse chair and two sledges, our usual carriages when snow is on the ground, which they took out of my coach house. While this was doing a great number of gentlemen of the town if they can be called so, stood around to observe the outrage on their King's governor. The garrison was at the same time on the ramparts with preparation sufficient to destroy them, but not a single return in words or otherwise was made from any man in the fort, while this egregious insult was performing. . . . It is given out that the mob will storm the fort this night. I am not apprehensive of their carrying out their purpose; probably it might be attended with much bloodshed because a great part of the mob consists of men who had been privateers & disbanded soldiers whose view it is to plunder the town.

This goes by Major James of the Royal Artillery who with much zeal for his Majesty's service put the fort in the best posture of defence he could, for reason which the mob, the same night they insulted their governor, broke open his house, burnt all his furniture, wearing clothes and every thing in it to a great value, at the same time threatening to take away his life in the most shameful manner.

3

In early 1766, the Sons of Liberty took action against two New York merchants who abided by the Stamp Act when they accepted customs documents issued on stamped paper. What does this account of that punishment reveal about the dangers facing the middling men in the Sons of Liberty as they turned to crowd action to protest the Stamp Act?

A Mob Punishes Merchants (1766)

The matter was intended to be done privately, but it got wind, and by ten o'clock I suppose two thousand people attended at the Coffee House, among them most of the principal men in town. The culprits' apologies did not satisfy the people. They were highly blamed and the Sons of Liberty found it necessary to use their influence to moderate the resentments of the people. Two men were dispatched to the collector for the stamped bonds, of which he had thirty in all. He desired liberty to confer with the governor, which was granted. The governor sent word, if the stamps were delivered to him, he would give his word and honor they should not be used; but that if the

Source: David Hawke, ed., *U.S. Colonial History: Reading and Documents* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), pp. 405–406; originally from John Holt to Mrs. Benjamin Franklin, February 15, 1766, *Franklin Papers*, XLVIII: p. 92.

people were not satisfied with this, they might do as they pleased with them. The message being returned to the gathering multitude, they would not agree to the governor's proposal, but insisted upon the stamp being delivered and burnt. One or two men, attended by about a thousand others, were then sent for the stamps, which were brought to the Coffee House; and the merchant who had used them was ordered himself to kindle the fire and consume them, those filled in and all. This was accordingly done amid the huzzas of the people, who were by this time swelled to the number I suppose of about five thousand, and in another hour I suppose would have been ten thousand. The people pretty quietly dispersed soon after, but their resentment was not allayed. Toward the evening, . . . though the Sons of Liberty exerted themselves to the utmost, they could not prevent the gathering of the multitude, who went to Mr. [Charles] Williams' [New York's naval officer] house, broke open the door, and destroyed some of the furniture. But through the influence of the Sons of Liberty and on his most earnest entreaty and promise in the most public manner to ask pardon next day, or do whatever they should require of him, they were prevailed on to leave the house, and then went to the merchants, where after huzzaing for some time, they were prevailed upon to forbear doing any mischief—on consideration that both men were well beloved in town and bore fair character. . . .

. . . [M]any of those of inferior sort, who delight in mischief merely for its own sake or for plunder seem yet to be in such a turbulent disposition that the two mortified gentlemen are still in some danger, but the Sons of Liberty intend to exert themselves in their defense.

4

Gouverneur Morris was a New York "aristocrat" opposed to British policies in the colonies. He also kept a close eye on his fellow colonists' responses to British actions. In this source, Morris discusses the people's involvement in anti-British protests after the passage of the Coercive Acts. What are his fears regarding the consequences of such involvement?

A Gentleman Comments on the Mob (1774)

Dear Sir:

You have heard, and you will hear a great deal about politics, and in the heap of chaff you may find some grains of good sense. Believe me, sir, freedom and religion are the only watchwords. We have appointed a committee, or rather we have nominated one. Let me give you a history of it. . . .

Source: Cynthia A. Kiemer, *Revolutionary America 1750–1815: Sources and Interpretations* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 102–103; originally from Gouverneur Morris to Thomas Penn, May 20, 1774, in Peter Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th ser., 6 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1837–1853), I: pp. 342–343.

The troubles in America during Grenville's administration. . . stimulated some daring coxcombs to rouse the mob into an attack upon the bounds of order and decency. These fellows became. . . the leaders in all the riots, the bell-weather of the flock. . . That we have been in hot water with the British Parliament ever since everybody knows. . . The port of Boston has been shut up. These [mobs], simple as they are, cannot be gulled as heretofore. In short, there is no ruling them, and now. . . the heads of the mobility grow dangerous to the gentry, and how to keep them down is the question. While they correspond with the other colonies, call and dismiss popular assemblies, make resolves to bind the consciences of the rest of mankind, bully poor printers, and exert with full force all their other tribunitary powers, it is impossible to curb them. . .

I stood in the balcony, and on my right hand were ranged all the people of property, with some few poor dependents, and on the other all the tradesmen, etc., who thought it worth their while to leave daily labour for the good of the country. The spirit of the English constitution has yet a little influence left, and but a little. The remains of it, however, will give the wealthy people a superiority this time, but would they secure it they must banish all school-masters and confine all knowledge to themselves. This cannot be. The mob begin to think and to reason. Poor reptiles! It is with them a vernal morning; they are struggling to cast off their winter's slough, they bask in the sunshine, and ere noon they will bite, depend upon it. The gentry begin to fear this. Their committee will be appointed, they will deceive the people and again forfeit a share of their confidence. And if these instances of what with one side is policy, with the other perfidy, shall continue to increase and become more frequent, farewell aristocracy. I see, and I see it with fear and trembling, that if the disputes with Great Britain continue, we shall be under the worst of all possible dominions; we shall be under the domination of a riotous mob.

5 Even before 1776, colonies began to create new governments to replace the old ones connected to the imperial government of Great Britain. Three weeks after the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia, citizens in one western North Carolina county passed resolutions designed to replace imperial rule there. To what extent do the provisions regarding military affairs and law enforcement reflect democratic or egalitarian sentiments?

Source: Cynthia A. Kierner, *Revolutionary America 1750–1815: Sources and Interpretations* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 123–124; originally from W. L. Saunders et al., eds., *The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, 30 vols. (Raleigh, Winston, Goldsboro, and Charlotte, 1886–1914), IX: pp. 1282–1284.

Mecklenburg County Resolves (1775)

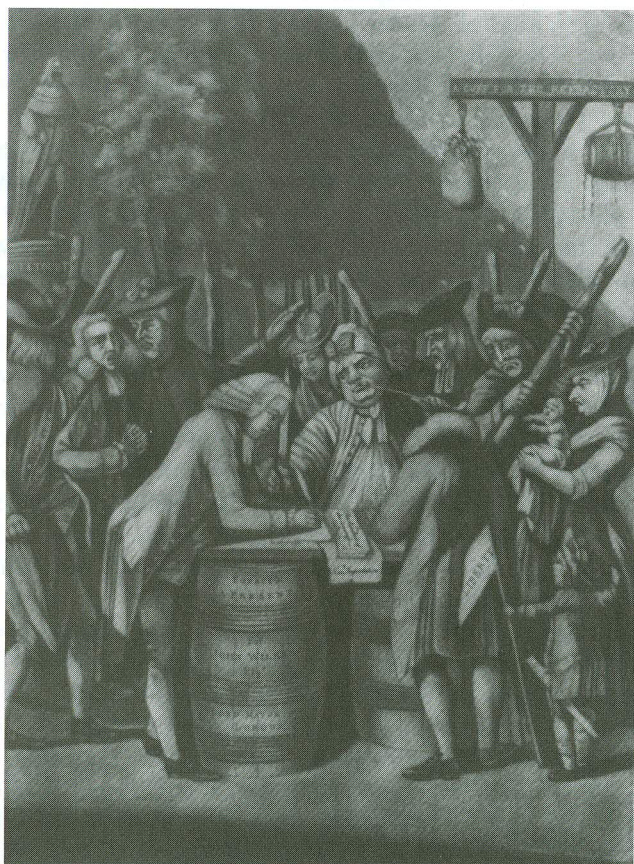
1. That all commissions civil and military heretofore granted by the Crown to be exercised in these colonies are null and void and the constitution of each particular colony wholly suspended.
2. That the Provincial Congress of each Province under the direction of the great Continental Congress is invested with all legislative and executive powers within their respective Provinces and that no other legislative or executive power does or can exist at this time in any of these colonies.
3. As all former laws are now suspended in this Province and the Congress have not yet provided others we judge it necessary for the better preservation of good order, to form certain rules and regulations for the internal government of this county until laws shall be provided for us by the Congress.
4. That the inhabitants of this county do meet on a certain day appointed by the committee and having formed themselves into nine companies. . . eight in the county and one in the town of Charlotte do choose a Colonel and other military officers who shall hold and exercise their several powers by virtue of this choice and independent of the Crown of Great Britain and former constitution of this Province.
5. That for the better preservation of the peace and administration of justice each of those companies do choose from their own body two discreet freeholders who shall be empowered each by himself and singly to decide and determine all matters of controversy arising within said company under the sum of twenty shillings and jointly and together all controversies under the sum of forty shillings, that so as their decisions may admit of appeal to the convention of the selectmen of the county and also that anyone of these men shall have power to examine and commit to confinement persons accused of petit larceny.
6. That those two selectmen thus chosen do jointly and together choose from the body of their particular body two persons properly qualified to act as constables who may assist them in the execution of their office.
7. That upon the complaint of any persons to either of these selectmen he do issue his warrant directed to the constable commanding him to bring the aggressor before him or them to answer said complaint.

6 As in other colonies, by 1775, patriots in Virginia often took it upon themselves to force merchants to sign agreements prohibiting the importation of British goods. This source depicts one such action, probably to enforce resolutions passed by the Williamsburg Convention, which was operating by then as an extralegal government in the colony. The merchants could either comply with non-importation agreements or face the

“alternative”: the gallows with a keg of tar and a bag of feathers. Notice, on the left, one merchant being led toward them. To the victim's right, a patriot with scissors in hand is ready to cut off his hair before tarring and feathering him. Finally, notice the mix of people, including women and, at the rear, an African American.

The Alternative of Williamsburg (1775)

PHILIP DAWE



Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. [LC-USZ62-9488].

7 After the decision for independence, the states began to draft constitutions for new state governments. One of the most important issues confronting the framers of these documents was whether to lower, or abolish altogether, the property qualification for voting. Some states, such as Virginia, left the colonial property qualification unchanged. In Pennsylvania, however, voting was opened to all male taxpayers at least twenty-one years of age. As this dialogue between fictional characters published in a Philadelphia newspaper demonstrates, that provision for broad voting rights aroused the concern of some people. What is the argument offered here against such a liberal standard?

“A Dialogue between Orator Puff and Peter Easy” (1776)

Orator: Now all will be put on a level with respect to this grand right of voting at elections, and that may in time bring them to a level in every other respect, as has happened in other countries.

Peter: This is a great step, neighbour Puff, and may have very extraordinary consequences. Thou must be convinced, I believe, that a large majority of Pennsylvania, at present, consists of freeholders, and honest, industrious, frugal people, who are worth at least fifty pounds each.

Orator: I am convinced of that truth; but what would you argue from that?

Peter: Why, I cannot perceive the propriety or prudence of putting these inhabitants upon a level with the indolent or prodigal, who have not acquired such a small sum as fifty pounds, in a country where the acquiring of such a sum is not difficult, especially for a single man. If the privilege [of voting] extended only to those who had families, here there would not be so much in it; or if there was any other “sufficient evidence” of their attachment to the state required. Besides, it appears clearly to be an injury to all the inhabitants of the state, who are worth *fifty* pounds in real or personal estate. For the right of electing is vested in them, by the laws of Pennsylvania, and in them alone, and therefore the extending the same right to all men without distinction. . . . takes away so much of their right, from those who are worth fifty pounds, and proportionately lessens their influence in elections, and therefore in the state. What necessity is there for this general alteration? Can't the liberties and happiness of Pennsylvania be trusted to those men in it, who are worth *fifty* pounds each? And should we go to wreck and ruin, unless we are saved by those who are not worth that sum? . . . Such people, having nothing to lose, and a prospect of gaining by public convulsions, are

Source: Cynthia A. Kierner, *Revolutionary America 1750–1815: Sources and Interpretations* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 205–207; originally from *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, October 24, 1776.

always the most ready to engage in seditions, tumultuous and factious proceedings. They are the people to whom artful, delighting, selfish, ambitious, daring, wicked men apply themselves, and make use of to promote their pernicious projects. They are generally the most illiterate and ignorant of the whole of society, and therefore, the most easily imposed on by such men as I have described. . . . On the other hand, while the rights of election, that is of sovereignty, as I said, are lodged in those who possess the general property, landed and personal within this state, it will ever be in their interest to keep things quiet, and to have officers go on with regularity; and if the other class grows turbulent, the whole force and dignity of the government can be exerted to keep them in order.

8 The large number of petitions for freedom by black slaves during the American Revolution demonstrates that many of them saw the hypocrisy in slaveholders' proclamations of liberty to protest British tyranny. This petition by free blacks to the Massachusetts legislature was one of many calling for the abolition of slavery in the state. Although the legislature never acted on those petitions, the state's supreme court declared slavery unconstitutional in 1783. What are the arguments against slavery in this petition? How do you account for its tone?

Antislavery Petition of Massachusetts Free Blacks (1777)

To the Honorable Counsel & House of *[Representa]tives* for the State of Massachusetts Bay in General Court *assembled, January 13, 1777*

The petition of A Great Number of Blackes detained in a State of slavery in the Bowels of a free & Christian Country Humbly sheweth that your Petitioners apprehend that they have in Common with all other men a Natural and Unaliable Right to that freedom which the Grat Parent of the Unavers hath Bestowed equalley on all menkind and which they have Never forfeited by any Compact or agreement whatever—but that wher Unjustly Dragged by the hand of cruel Power from their Derest friends and sum of them Even torn from the Embraces of their tender Parents—from A populous Pleasant and plentiful country and in violation of Laws of Nature and off Nations and in defiance of all the tender feelings of humanity Brough hear Either to Be sold Like Beast of Burthen & Like them Condemnd to Slavery for Life—Among A People Profesing the mild Religion of Jesus A people Not Insensible of the Secrets of Rational Being Nor without spirit to Resent the unjust

Source: Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States from Colonial Times through the Civil War* (Secaucus, N.J.: The Citadel Press, 1973), pp. 9–10; originally from *Collections, Massachusetts Historical Society*, 5th ser. (Boston, 1877), III: pp. 432–437.

endeavours of others to Reduce them to a state of Bondage and Subjection your honouer Need not to be informed that A Live of Slavery Like that of your petioners Deprived of Every social privilege of Every thing Requisite to Render Life Tolable is far worse then Nonexistence.

[In imitat]ion of the Lawdable Example of the Good People of these States your petitiononers have Long and Patiently waited the Evnt of petition after petition By them presented to the Legislative Body of this state and cannot but with Grief Reflect that their Sucess hath ben but too similar they Cannot but express their Astonishment that It have Never Bin Considered that Every Principle from which Amarica has Acted in the Cours of their unhappy Dificultes with Great Briton Pleads Stronger than A thousand arguments in favours of your petioners they therfor humble Beseech your honours to give this petion its due weight & consideration & cause an act of the Legislatur to be past Wherby they may be Restored to the Enjoyments of that which is the Naturel Right of all men—and their Children who wher Born in this Land of Liberty may not be heald as Slaves after they arive at the age of twenty one years so may the Inhabitance of this Stats No longer chargeable with the inconsistancy of acting themselves the part which they condem and oppose in others Be prospered in their present Glorious struggle for Liberty and have those Blessing to them, &c.

9 In 1780, seven black residents of Massachusetts petitioned the state legislature to exempt them from taxation. On what grounds do they do so?

Blacks Protest Taxation (1780)

To The Honourable Council and House of Representatives in General Court assembled for the State of the Massachusetts Bay in New England—March 14th A D 1780—

The petition of several poor Negroes & molattoes who are Inhabitant of the Town of Dartmouth Humbly Sheweth—That we being Chiefly of the African Extract and by Reason of Long Bondag and hard Slavery we have been deprived of Injoying the Profits of our Labourer or the advantage of Inheriting Estates from our Parents as our Neighbourers the white peopel do haveing some of us not long Injoyed our own freedom & yet of late, Contrary to the invariable Custom & Practice of the Country we have been & now are Taxed both in our Polls and that small Pittance of Estate which through much hard Labour & Industry we have got together to Sustain our selves &

Source: Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States from Colonial Times through the Civil War* (Secaucus, N.J.: The Citadel Press, 1973), pp. 15–16; originally from *Archives Division, Massachusetts Historical Society*.

families withal—We apprehend it therefore to be hard usag and [one word is illegible here—ed.] doubtless (if Continued will) Reduce us to a State of Beggary whereby we shall become a Berthan to others if not timely prevented by the Interposition of your Justice & power & yor Petitioners farther sheweth that we apprehend ourselves to be Aggrieved, in that while we are not allowed the Privilage of freemen of the State having no vote or Influence in the Election of those that Tax us yet many of our Colour (as is well known) have cheerfully Entered the field of Battle in the defence of the Common Cause and that (as we conceive) against a similar Exertion of Power (in Regard to taxation) too well Known to need a recital in this place. . . .

. . . We most humbly Request therefore that you would take our unhappy Case into your serious Consideration and in your wisdom and Power grant us Relief from Taxation while under our Present depressed Circumstances and your poor Petioners as in duty bound shall ever pray &c*

*In 1783, the Massachusetts Supreme Court declared that blacks who were subject to taxation were entitled to vote.

10 Joseph Brant, also known as Thayendanegea, was an Iroquois chief who was half white. Brant was in London in 1776 and declared his loyalty to the colonial secretary, Lord George Germain. What did Brant seek to gain from his loyalty to Britain?

Chief Thayendanegea Pledges His Loyalty (1776)

Brother.

When we delivered our speech you answered us in few words, that you would take care and have the grievances of the Six Nations on account of their lands, particularly those of the Mohocks and Oughquagas, removed; and all those matters settled to our satisfaction whenever the troubles in America were ended, and that you hoped the Six Nations would continue to behave with that attachment to the King they had always manifested; in which case they might be sure of his Majesty's favour and protection.

Brother. We return you thanks for this promise, which we hope will be performed, and that we shall not be disappointed, as has often been the case, notwithstanding the warm friendship of the Mohocks to his Majesty and his government, who are so immediately concerned, that the same has been often mentioned by the Six Nations and their getting no redress a matter of surprize to all the Indian Nations.

Source: *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York*, VIII, 678.

We are not afraid Brother, or have we the least doubt but our brethren the Six Nations will continue firm to their engagements with the King their father. Our Superintendent knows that in order to keep true to their treaties they have at times punished their friends and Allies.

Brother. The troubles that prevail in America and the distance we are from our country, allows us only to say that on our return we shall inform our Chiefs and Warriors what we have seen and heard and join with them in the most prudent measures for assisting to put a stop to those disturbances notwithstanding reports of their generally taking the strongest side. Which was not the case last Summer when we offered to prevent the invasion of Canada and lost several of our people in defending it. The only reason we mentioned the conduct of the Six Nations at that time was, that they might have credit for what they actually did, as we have heard much that affair has been attributed to the Nippissings and other Indians of Canada.

Brother. As we expect soon to depart for our own Country having been long here, we request you, and the great men who take charge of the affairs of government, not to listen to every story that may be told about Indians; but to give ear only to such things as come from our Chiefs and wise men in Council; which will be communicated to you by our Superintendent.

11 As independence drew near, many Americans began to focus on the question of drafting a new framework for a national government. One of them was Abigail Adams, whose husband John was in Philadelphia as a member of the Second Continental Congress. In March 1776, she wrote him a letter raising the issue of women's rights. How does John Adams deal with his wife's request?

Correspondence between Abigail and John Adams (1776)

Abigail Adams to John Adams:

Braintree March 31, 1776

I long to hear that you have declared an independancy—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 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

Source: Excerpts from select letters reprinted by permission of the publisher from *The Adams Papers: Adams Family Correspondence, Volume I: December 1761–May 1776*, edited by L.H. Butterfield, pp. 369–370, 381–382, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1963 by the Massachusetts Historical Society.

they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies 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 vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supream Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

John to Abigail:

Ap. 4. 1776

As to Declarations of Independency, be patient. Read our Privateering Laws, and our Commercial Laws. What signifies a Word.

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges 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 powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented.—This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it out.

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho 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.

12

Judith Sargent Murray was the daughter of a prominent Massachusetts family and the wife of a merchant. By her own later admission, the American Revolution first led her to question the prevailing attitudes toward women. In 1779, she wrote an essay on “the sexes” and eleven years later, during a period of considerable public discussion regarding women’s proper role in the new republic, she submitted a slightly revised version for publication. On what grounds does she argue that women are equal to men?

“On the Equality of the Sexes” (1790)

JUDITH SARGENT MURRAY

Is it upon mature consideration we adopt the idea, that nature is . . . partial in her distributions? Is it indeed a fact, that she hath yielded to one half of the human species so unquestionable a mental superiority? I know that to both sexes elevated understandings, and the reverse, are common. But, suffer me to ask, in what the minds of females are *so* notoriously deficient, or unequal. . . . Will it be said that the judgment of a male of two years old, is more sage than that of a female’s of the same age? I believe the reverse is generally observed to be true. But from that period what partiality! how is the one exalted and the other depressed, by the contrary modes of education which are adopted! the one is taught to aspire, and the other is early confined and limited. As their years increase, the sister must be wholly domesticated, while the brother is led by the hand through all the flowery paths of science. Grant that their minds are by nature equal, yet who shall wonder at the *apparent* superiority, if indeed custom becomes *second nature*; nay if it taketh place of nature, and that it doth the experience of each day will evince. At length arrived at womanhood, the uncultivated fair one feels a void, which the employments allotted her are by no means capable of filling. . . . Now, was she permitted the same instructors as her brother, . . . for the employment of a rational mind an ample field would be opened. In astronomy she might catch a glimpse of the immensity of the Deity, and thence she would form amazing conceptions of the august and supreme Intelligence. In geography she would admire Jehova in the midst of his benevolence; thus adapting this globe to the various wants and amusements of its inhabitants. In natural philosophy she would adore the infinite majesty of heaven, clothed in condescension; and as she traversed the reptile world, she would hail the goodness of a creating God. A mind, thus filled, would have little room for the trifles with which our sex are, with too much justice, accused of amusing themselves, and they would thus be rendered fit companions for those, who should one day wear them as their crown. Fashions, in their variety, would then give place to conjectures, which might perhaps conduce to the improvement of the literary world; and there would be no leisure for slander or detraction. Reputation would not then be blasted, but serious speculations would occupy the lively imaginations of the sex. . . .

Will it be urged that those acquirements would supersede our domestick duties, I answer that every requisite in female economy is easily attained; and, with truth I can add, that when once attained, they require no further

mental attention. Nay, while we are pursuing the needle, or the superintendency of the family, I repeat that our minds are at full liberty for reflection; that imagination may exert itself in full vigor and that if a just foundation early laid, our ideas will then be worthy of rational beings. If we were industrious we might easily find time to arrange them upon paper, or should avocations press too hard for such an indulgence, the hours allotted for conversation would at least become more refined and rational. Should it still be vociferated, "Your domestick employments are sufficient"—I would calmly ask, is it reasonable, that a candidate for immortality, for the joys of heaven, an intelligent being, who is to spend an eternity in contemplating the works of Deity, should at present be so degraded, as to be allowed no other ideas, than those which are suggested by the mechanism of a pudding, or the sewing of the seams of a garment? Pity that all such censurers of female improvement do not go one step further, and deny their future existence; to be consistent they surely ought.

Yes, ye lordly, ye haughty sex, our souls are by nature *equal* to yours; the same breath of God animates, enlivens, and invigorates us; and that we are not fallen lower than yourselves, let those witness who have greatly towered above the various discouragements by which they have been so heavily oppressed; and though I am unacquainted with the list of celebrated characters on either side, yet from the observations I have made in the contracted circle in which I have moved, I dare confidently believe, that from the commencement of time to the present day, there hath been as many females, as males, who, by the *mere force of natural powers*, have merited the crown of applause; who *thus unassisted*, have seized the wreath of fame.

CONCLUSION

Several points should be clear from your analysis of the sources in this chapter. First, primary sources are useful tools to help assess historical arguments. They may reinforce or contradict historians' conclusions, add insights, and raise new questions. Second, as we saw in the first chapter on interpretations in textbooks, often what is missing in a discussion about the past is as significant as those things that are part of the story. In this case, it is useful to think about the kinds of protest that were not included in even a small collection of sources intended to illustrate struggles for social equality during the Revolution. Their absence might also be an important clue regarding the limits of the fight over "who should rule at home."

This second point, in turn, is related to a third. These sources remind us that historians must be careful when generalizing about the past. That point is illustrated particularly well in this chapter's secondary source. Some of the old progressive historians at the beginning of the twentieth century argued that

the War for Independence was *primarily* the result of social conflicts within American society. The author of Source 1, however, makes a more circumscribed argument about the relationship between the fight over home rule and the one over who should rule at home. At the same time, the primary sources illustrate that it is not necessarily easy to prove something as sweeping as a social revolution.

These sources also demonstrate two other related points that will be more closely examined in the next chapters. First, historians must understand the ideas that moved people in the past—and the meaning of those ideas to people at the time. In the case of the Revolution, the idea of equality played a central role in the actions of those who supported independence. Yet, as this chapter's sources illustrate, it did not necessarily mean the same thing or hold the same implications in the minds of these Revolutionaries. Finally, historians must understand their subjects' motives. Did Revolutionaries challenge British actions out of principle? Or did more mundane considerations related to conflicts within American society move them to a certain course of action? Interpretations of the American Revolution cannot ignore this question. In fact, as we will see next, the question of motives is *central* to historians' interpretations and much of history's detective work is a search for clues to explain them.

FURTHER READING

- Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Slaves and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
- Charles Patrick Neimeyer, *America Goes to War: A Social History of the Continental Army* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).
- Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980).
- Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution: A History* (New York: Random House, 2002).

NOTES

1. Carl L. Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760–1776* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), p. 22.
2. Cited in Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *The American Revolution: Two Centuries of Interpretation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 73.