

Primary Source Readings

AP US History

Legacies of the American Revolution

Document **Correspondence between John and Abigail Adams**

2.10

Abigail Adams had high hopes not only for independence for the United States, but also for independence from the subservient position of women in British society. What does the correspondence between John and Abigail Adams say about the relationships between men and women at that time? How seriously did John Adams take his wife's suggestions?

Document **The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (1786)**

2.11

After the American Revolution, Virginians debated the proper relationship between government and religion. Thomas Jefferson authored the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which ended any official association between the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Christian religion. In his old age, Jefferson considered this legislation one of his three greatest accomplishments. How do Jefferson's words embody the ideals of the American Revolution?

Correspondence of John and Abigail Adams (Spring, 1776)

ABIGAIL ADAMS TO JOHN ADAMS

March 31, 1776 ([Link to Full Letter](#))

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 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 [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 vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

JOHN ADAMS TO ABIGAIL ADAMS

April 14, 1776 ([Link to Full Letter](#))

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 everywhere. 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 won't 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. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticcoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight.

ABIGAIL ADAMS TO JOHN ADAMS

May 7, 1776 ([Link to Full Letter](#))

I can not 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 to subdue our Masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet.

The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom

Written by Thomas Jefferson (1786)

I. Well aware that Almighty God has created the mind free; *that* all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burdens or by civil incapacitations tend only to ... [produce] habits of hypocrisy and meanness and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion, who, being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do; *that* the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible [ones], and, such, endeavoring to impose them on others, have established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time; that to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves is sinful and tyrannical; *that* even ... forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the particular pastor whose morals he would make his pattern and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness ... ; *that* our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions any more than our opinions in physics or geometry; *that* therefore the proscribing [of] any citizen as unworthy [of] the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which in common with his fellow citizens he has a natural right... and, finally, *that* truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, *that* she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate, [for] errors [cease] to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

II. *Be it enacted by the General Assembly* that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

III. And though we well know that this assembly, elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, [has] no power to restrain the acts of succeeding assemblies, constituted with powers equal to her own, and that therefore to declare this act to be irrevocable would be of no effect in law; yet, as we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind, and that if any act shall hereafter be passed to repeal the present or to narrow its operation, such act will be an infringement of natural rights.