Gendered Law in American History (2016)

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Chapter 1

Women and Citizenship at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century

A. Introduction

In its most common usage, the concept of "citizenship" is described as a way of separating those who may participate in the political life of a nation from those who must watch from the sidelines. Those who are citizens of the United States, for example, may vote, while resident aliens may not. A closer study of the idea, however, suggests that citizenship is a quite complex construction. Many citizen felons retain their national identity while losing their political rights. Some countries revoke the citizenship of any person who accepts membership in the polity of another state. In many nations, male citizens are obligated to complete some form of military service while their female peers are not. Citizenship, then, is not a simple proposition. Both access to citizenship and the shape of national privileges and duties are culturally and legally defined.

Three sets of related materials explore the concept of citizenship for women and men during the years surrounding the creation of the United States of America. The first explores a series of letters written by Abigail and John Adams while the Founding Fathers were deliberating the contents and release of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia. One of the letters contains the famous statement by Abigail warning John that the ladies may "foment a revolution." But reading that missive as part of a series of letters makes its meaning much more ambiguous and constrained than one might initially imagine. The correspondence provides an entree into the subtle notions of citizenship that surrounded American women during the years just before the Revolutionary War.

The Adams correspondence is followed by materials on the fascinating case of Martin v. Commonwealth of Massachusetts—a dispute over the propriety of Massachusetts seizing the property of a married woman after she went to England with her Tory husband during the Revolutionary War. The impact of gendered legal rules about property ownership, cultural attitudes about the appropriate roles of women and men, and Revolutionary era politics led to a surprising result—an order requiring Massachusetts to return assets to the son of a married woman.

The Martin case is followed by material on the only episode of women lawfully voting in early nineteenth century America—in New Jersey between 1790 and 1807.
The origins of this brief outbreak of women's suffrage are somewhat mysterious. It ended with something of a whimper. But enough is known about this unusual story to make it a quite helpful means of exploring citizenship and gender in early American history.

B. The Gendered Politics of Citizenship and Suffrage in Early America

1. Enlightenment and the American Revolution

Enlightenment thinkers heavily influenced those founding the American republic. The works of Thomas Hobbes, Montesquieu, John Locke, Condorcet, Rousseau, and a group of radical Whigs in England including John Trenchard, John Toland, Thomas Gordon, Algernon Sidney, James Harrington, James Burgh and Catharine Macaulay, were familiar to the literate elite of colonial America. Their influence was dramatically visible in the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

In the most often read version of Enlightenment thought, John Locke argued that in a state of nature men were equal and independent. Though "Right Reason" would guide most men to the appropriate rules for living in a natural state, some would succumb to selfishness. Government, legitimated by consent of the governed, was necessary to control such impulses. This social contract would guarantee men both their liberty and their right to control the benefits produced by their labor. The central purpose of government, formed by consent of the governed, was to protect the natural rights of all men to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Property ownership—generally male dominated—was a pivotal feature of this political philosophy. It guaranteed the independence of male citizens by precluding their social and economic dependence on others and, therefore, insured their capacity to intelligently participate in government.

Rejecting monarchy in favor of the social contract carried with it an assumption that men had to be free of undue influence by others when they agreed to form, allow

2. John Locke, Two Treatises of Civil Government (1689).
3. Wood, supra note 1, at 179.
4. Through much of our history the law of "domestic relations" included not only marriage and divorce, but also the status law surrounding children, servants, slaves, apprentices and other dependent souls.
time. New Jersey’s Quaker community barred its members from holding slaves. A few women also began to raise questions about their right to claim a role in consenting to governance as well as to marriage. Two English women, Catharine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft, began publicly to attack traditional assumptions about women. Wollstonecraft, taking the “Right Reason” of Locke and the dependency notions of Toland seriously, argued their implications for women:

> The being who discharges the duties of its station is independent; and, speaking of women at large, their first duty is to themselves as rational creatures, and the next in point of importance, as citizens, is that which includes so many, of a mother.

But, to render her really virtuous and useful, she must not, if she discharge her civil duties, want, individually, the protection of civil laws; she must not be dependent on her husband’s bounty for her subsistence during his life or support after his death—for how can a being be generous who has nothing of its own? or virtuous, who is not free?

Wollstonecraft’s strongest points were directed not at Locke, for he at least found assurance of economic support, and they should not have to rely on marriage to a state of perpetual childhood”; she deplored the “false system of education” that made women “only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact from others. Wollstonecraft ventured the suggestion that women might study medicine, politics, and business, but whatever they did, they should not be denied civil and political rights, they should not have to rely on marriage for assurance of economic support, and they should not “remain immured in their families groping in the dark.”

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6. Id. at 184–186.
The influence of Wollstonecraft and Macaulay on American culture is difficult to measure. Thought of by many as scandalous, both were subjected to widespread public ridicule.11 Wollstonecraft's death due to complications from childbirth in 1797 removed her from the intellectual scene. Macaulay, however, mounted a successful United States tour in 1785, including a ten-day stay at Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington. At a minimum, it is likely that both women broached topics that many people were willing to thoughtfully discuss. The famous correspondence excerpted just below between Abigail and John Adams, in which Abigail accused John to "Remember the Ladies" as he helped draft a new code of laws, confirms that talk about gender was in the air even before the works of Wollstonecraft and Macaulay hit these shores.12 Despite fears that intellectual achievement and housekeeping could not coexist in one person, the rhetoric of the Enlightenment left room for new forms of discourse about gender to emerge.

This discourse rarely occurred in public spaces with mixed audiences of men and women. There were few public fora in late eighteenth century America available for women to state openly their political and cultural preferences. Mary Wollstonecraft never ventured to a speaking dais, although she did participate in various "salon" meetings in England. The earliest known speech by a woman before a "promiscuous" audience was a salutary oration delivered by Priscilla Mason in 1794 as she graduated from Poor's Female Seminary of Philadelphia. Deborah Sampson Gannett, who managed to serve as a soldier in the Revolutionary War went on a speaking tour in 1802.24 Fanny Wright, a Scottish woman who challenged slavery as well as standard notions of female sexuality,13 was the first woman to speak to large "promiscuous" audiences of men and women in many parts of the United States. Her 1828 tour helped set the stage for public participation by women in the abolitionist movement. She was followed by the abolitionist Grimke sisters in the 1830s and a stream of women in the following decade. During the same era, many female academies opened, and social organizations flourished.16

Though most women were unable to make use of public fora to state their views during our early history, some found other ways to make their opinions known in the late eighteenth century. Abigail Adams took advantage of one avenue of communication open to her—letter writing. Other women participated in boycotts of English goods, and organized spinning bees to make cloth. Some churches allowed women to undertake active roles in their organizations and rituals. A few women even took the extraordinary step of signing public pledges or petitions. And many, including wives and their families, accompanied troops during the Revolutionary War as cooks, nurses and supporters.17 These activities provide additional support for the proposition that talk about the role of women was "in the air." Perhaps James Cooper and his fellow Quakers in southern New Jersey were among those willing to think about gender in new ways when they supported the voting by women explored in the concluding segment of this chapter.

2. Suffrage, Dependency, and Gender: The Adams Correspondence

The view of Cooper, his Quaker peers and the members of the New Jersey legislature in the 1790s countenancing voting by women was a decidedly minority position. John Toland's notion that all of society was divided "into those who were free and those who were dependent"18 dominated the national debate about gender. The contours of this debate are made vividly clear in the famous correspondence between John and Abigail Adams in which Abigail asks her husband to "Remember the Ladies," and in other correspondence between each of the Adams and their peers on gender related questions.

This correspondence occurred while a vibrant debate over the proper form of a republican government transpired. The founding fathers generally agreed that power was derived from the consent of the governed and that liberty was every man's right. Since practically precluded the participation of all free men in governance, some form of representation was required. In thinking about the nature of that representation, the early republicans did not distinguish between the capacity of a man to govern and the capacity of a man to select those who govern. Whether exercising power directly or by vote, men had to be free of the control of others in order to behave in a responsible fashion. Men without property and all women lacked the necessary freedom of action. Landless men were dependent upon others for their livelihood and women were dependent upon men.

Various founders had different visions about the basic nature of those men who actually held sufficient resources to responsibly exercise power. The early civic re-

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13. This was the now quaint description used for audiences of men and women.
15. Wright, along with fellow utopian Robert Dale Owen, believed in "free love." That did not mean freedom to have multiple sexual partners, but the right to select sexual partners for monogamous relationships outside of marriage. She also believed that miscegenation was a solution to race problems.
17. Id. at 43-66.
18. See supra p. 5.
publicans, including Jefferson and Adams, believed that such men would recognize the need to share in self-government, deliberate "with their fellow citizens about the common good," and pursue policies designed to reduce disparities in economic power. Others, including the Federalists who dominated the drafting of the Constitution over a decade after Abigail and John Adams wrote the letters reproduced here, were less optimistic about human nature. They assumed that those in power would pursue their own self-interest and that the public welfare would be best served by structuring the government to bar dominance by any particular faction. In this view sharing would not necessarily arise out of a common national vision, but out of a common desire for structured decision making. The founders also shared some common ground. Both views of government relied upon deliberation by an educated electorate free of control by others. Whether the debates were over a common national vision or differences in factional views, independence, literacy and intelligence were a prerequisite.

The Adams correspondence is a particularly telling commentary on the gendered qualities of early republican citizenship theory. Abigail Smith was hardly the dependent female soul presumed by either republican or federalist theorists. She married John Adams on October 15, 1764, when she was nineteen and he was twenty-nine. By all accounts they had a long and happy marriage; Abigail and John were "dearest friends." The pain and loneliness of their many separations is quite palpable in their correspondence. During John's frequent absences from home participating in the formation of a new nation and then serving as one of its leaders, Abigail ran their Massachusetts farm and educated their children. Of necessity, she was an independent, literate woman fully capable of managing all of the family's affairs. Perhaps the many months without John present helped nurture her independent instincts. She was also a woman of uncommon curiosity. Raised in a large family of highly educated men, Abigail, from an early age yeared to study with the "great Masters" who taught the male members of her family. Convinced that women played no less a role than men in the "Great Theater" of life, being responsible for the care and early instruction of their children, she mourned their lack of training for this "Trust."

Despite her lack of a formal education, Abigail was frequently exposed to discussions among educated men in her youth. She read avidly and was mentored by several men in her family.

Her marriage to John Adams, who never exercised the plenary authority men legally had over their wives, allowed some room for her talents to blossom. Though Abigail never became a public advocate, she had a lively and wide ranging correspondence with her husband and other literati of the time. The correspondence covered all manner of subjects, from family problems and educational policy to matters of state. Through the early months of 1776, Abigail and John wrote each other about politics. Thomas Paine's pamphlet Common Sense had appeared in January, causing a major stir. While they both had doubts about the open democracy Paine advocated, Abigail was much more enthusiastic than John about the impetus Paine's work gave to the movement for independence. Her spirits were further raised when new gun batteries convinced the British to leave Boston in mid-March. It was shortly after that event that their series of letters containing comments on the status of women were written. Abigail wrote the opening missive to John as he sat in Philadelphia with the Second Continental Congress and she, wondering about the fate of their Boston house following the departure of the British from the city, tended their farm in outstate Massachusetts.

a. Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams (March–April, 1776)

Braintree March 31, 1776

I wish you would ever write me a Letter half so long as I write you; and tell me if you may where your Fleet are gone? What sort of Defence Virginia can make against our common Enemy? Whether it is so situated as to make an able Defence? Are not the Gently Lords and the common people vassals, are they not like the uncivilized Natives Brittain represents us to be? I hope their Riffel Men who have shown themselves very savage and even Blood thirsty; are not a specimen of the Generality of the people.

I am willing to allow the Colony great merit for having produced a Washington, but they have been shamefully duped by a Dunmore.

I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it is not founded upon that generous and christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us.

Do not you want to see Boston; I am fearfull of the small pox, or I should have been in before this time. I got Mr. Crane to go to our House and see

23. You will notice many "misprinted" words when reading these letters. The quite formal spelling rules we abide by were not prevalent during our early history. Various authors often penned words differently. The shifts in syntax were hardly indications of literary ineptitude. The original spellings are used in all the letters reproduced here.
24. John Dunmore was the British Governor of the Virginia Colony. In 1775 he declared martial law in the colony in an effort to suppress rebelliousness. He led a series of political and military skirmishes with the elite of Virginia participating in the nascent Continental Congress and local efforts to control military facilities. For a summary of his life see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Murray_4th_Earl_of_Dunmore (visited Mar. 29, 2016).
what state it was in. I find it has been occupied by one of the Doctors of a
Regiment, very dirty, but no other damage has been done to it. The few
things which were left in it are all gone. Cranch\(^{25}\) has the key which he never
delivered up. I have wrote to him for it and am determined to get it cleaned
as soon as possible and shut it up. I look upon it a new acquisition of
property, a property which one month ago I did not value at a single Shilling,
and could with pleasure have seen it in flames.

The Town in General is left in a better state than we expected, more owing
to a peremptory flight than any regard to the inhabitants, tho some individuals
discovered a sense of honour and justice and have left the rent of the Houses
in which they were, for the owners and the furniture unhurt, or if damaged
sufficient to make it good.

Others have committed abominable Ravages. The Mansion House of your
President is safe and the furniture unhurt whilst both the House and Furniture
of the Solisiter General have fallen a prey to their own merciless party. Surely
the very Fiends feel a Reverential awe for Virtue and patriotism, whilst they
Detest the parasite and traitor.

I feel very differently at the approach of spring to what I did a month ago.
We knew not then whether we could plant or sow with safety, whether when
we had toild we could reap the fruits of our own industry, whether we could
rest in our own Cottages, or whether we should not be driven from the sea
coasts to seek shelter in the wilderness, but now we feel as if we might sit
under our own vine and eat the good of the land.

I feel a gaiety de Coar\(^{26}\) to which before I was a stranger. I think the Sun
looks brighter, the Birds sing more melodiously, and Nature puts on a more
clearfull countenance. We feel a temporary peace, and the poor fugitives are
returning to their deserted habitations.

Tho we felicitate ourselves, we sympathize with those who are trembling
least the Lot of Boston should be theirs. But they cannot be in similar cir-
stances unless pusillanimity and cowardice should take possession of
them. They have time and warning given them to see the Evil and shun it.—
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 hand 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 de-
termined 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,\(^2\) 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 immi-
tation of the Supercilious Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

April 5

Not having an opportunity of sending this I shall add a few lines more;
Tho not with a heart so gay. I have been attending the sick chamber of our
Neighbor Trott whose affliction I most sensibly feel but cannot describe,
striped of two lovely children in one week. Gore the Eldest died on Wednes-
day and Billy the youngest on fryday, with the Canker fever, a terrible disorder
so much like the throat distemper, that it differs but little from it. Betsy
Cranch has been very bad, but upon the recovery. Becky Peck they do not
expect will live out the day. Many grown persons are now sick with it, in this
street 5. It rages much in other Towns. The Mumps too are very frequent.
Isaac is now confined with it. Our own little flock are yet well. My Heart
trembles with anxiety for them. God preserve them.

I want to hear much oftener from you than I do. March 8 was the last
date of any that I have yet had.—You inquire of whether I am making Salt
Peter. I have not yet attempted it, but after Soap making believe I shall make
the experiment. I find as much as I can do to manufacture clothing for my
family which would else be Naked. I know of but one person in this part of
the Town who has made any, that is Mr. Tertias Bass as he is call’d who has
got very near an hundred weight which has been found to be very good. I
have heard of some others in the other parishes. Mr. Reed of Weymouth has
been applied to, to go to Andover to the mills which are now at work, and
has gone. I have lately seen a small Manuscript describing the proportions
for the various sorts of powder, fit for cannon, small arms and pistols. If it
would be any Service your way I will get it transcribed and send it to you.—
Every one of your Friends send their Regards, and all the little ones. Your
Brothers youngest child lies bad with Convulsion fits. Adieu. I need only say
how much I am Your ever faithful Friend.\(^2\)

b. Commentary and Questions

1. Abigail's Code of Laws: What did Abigail want John to include in the new "Code
   of Laws"? Was her statement that women would "not hold themselves bound by any

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25. Richard Cranch was Abigail's brother in law—the husband of her older sister Mary Smith.
26. The phrase means "happiness of the heart."
27. Note the similarity in language to that of Catharine Macaulay, excerpted supra at p. 7.
Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation,” a call for women’s suffrage? Or was her concern about male tyranny a signal that domestic violence or family and property law were her first priority? Do you think Abigail understood that the Declaration of Independence then being considered in Philadelphia by her husband and his colleagues was unlikely to deal with any of these issues? If she did understand that, why did she write the “rebellious” part of the letter?

2. Fomenting Rebellions: Excerpted versions of this letter have been reprinted in numerous anthologies, often as an example of early, vociferous feminism. Is that a correct reading of the letter? There is no doubt that Abigail Adams put some of the political and revolutionary rhetoric of her husband and his peers to good use. Hobbes would have been comfortable with her warning that men were “Naturally Tyrannical.” Her longing to hear an “Independency” declared surely resonated with John Adams. In short, there is much in the letter to suggest that Abigail Adams’ concern with the status of women was quite serious. But what are we to make of the first part of the letter’s April 5th continuation, saying that she was no longer writing “with a heart so gay”? Did she pen her famous rebellion phrase in jest? Was she tweaking the serious political mind of her husband and his peers? Or did she simply feel a need to “wrap her barb in velvet”?

3. Women, Patriotism and Politics: Putting aside the rebellion statement, note the opening segments of the letter. Adams wrote at length about the affairs of war, politics, important personages, and other public events. And, as you will soon see, John’s responding letter answered all her questions in a very straightforward manner. Any notion that women like Abigail Adams were politically naive, immune to patriotism, and unconcerned about events of the day is surely wrong. That is also confirmed by her correspondence letter’s April 5th continuation, saying that she was no longer writing “with a heart so gay”? Did she pen her famous rebellion phrase in jest? Was she tweaking the serious political mind of her husband and his peers? Or did she simply feel a need to “wrap her barb in velvet”?

This is a critically important observation about the meaning of citizenship for women like Abigail Adams. Some political writers widely read in her time diminished the roles of women in at least two ways. For some, domestic concerns were separate from other cultural or political roles. There was no sense that the educational, social, and other formative aspects of family life were important for the future of the state. Second, though many commentators recognized that the rearing of civically minded offspring was a prerequisite to the creation of a modern republic, that role was treated as separate from politics, governance and patriotism. Adams had clearly read works of both sorts. Her letter should be read in part as a critique of both attitudes about women. It was filled with comments about the state of the home front, neighbors, children, disease, living quarters, and farming, in addition to admonitions and opinions about war, politics, generals, leaders and independence. The author was clearly a woman who deeply believed that domestic roles were critical to the formation of a republic, that the proper rearing of children was essential to the development of an intelligent body politic, that women’s roles on the home front were a critical part of the politics of the day, that patriotism was a duty of all citizens, and that, especially in time of conflict, patriotic devotion took precedence over her personal desires for husbandly companionship and personal needs. As Teresa Anne Murphy instructs us, Adams turned “her legal disabilities into a political virtue. Thus, while [some] argued that patriotism in men derived from pride and a rather selfish pursuit of recognition, Adams argued that in women patriotism was a more disinterested virtue. Even though women lacked property and were denied a place in the government, they still supported it.”

4. Reading the Letters to Follow: Come back to this first letter again after you read the rest of this section. Does John’s chortling response in the next letter to his wife’s rebelliousness suggest that Abigail was also writing humorously? Or does it suggest that Abigail had to present her claims to John with humor in order to maintain her relationship with him? Was Abigail more serious in her letter to Mercy Otis Warren than she was in her letters to John? In short, think about the extent to which Abigail Adams felt limited in her ability to challenge the political stance of her husband, about the constraints culture may have imposed on her ability to vocalize all her concerns to various segments of her circle of social acquaintances, and about the ways her citizenship in the then emerging United States was limited by her gender.

c. Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams (April 14, 1776)

John, perhaps prompted by Abigail’s desire for more frequent correspondence expressed at the beginning of her March 31 letter, responded quickly.


You justly complain of my short Letters, but the critical State of Things and the Multiplicity of Avocations must plead my Excuse,—You ask where the Fleet is. The inclosed Papers will inform you. You ask what Sort of Defence Virginia can make. I believe they will make an able Defence. Their Militia and minute Men have been some time employed in training them selves, and they have Nine Battalions of regulars as they call them, maintained among them, under good Officers, at the Continental Expenze. They have

29. Holton, supra note 20, at 100.
30. That is made abundantly clear by the work of Linda Kerber, supra note 1, and Zagari, supra note 12, as well as by Mary Beth Norton, Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800 (1980).
32. Id. at 44.
set up a Number of Manufactories of Fire Arms, which are busily employed. They are tolerably supplied with Powder, and are successful and assiduous, in making Salt Petre. Their neighbouring Sister or rather Daughter Colony of North Carolina, which is a warlike Colony, and has several Battalions at the Continental Expence, as well as a pretty good Militia, are ready to assist them, and they are in very good Spirits, and seem determined to make a brave Resistance.—The Gentry are very rich, and the common People very poor. This inequality of Property, gives an Aristocratical Turn to all their Proceedings, and occasions a strong Aversion in their Patricians, to Common Sense. But the Spirit of these Barons, is coming down, and it must submit.

It is very true, as you observe they have been duped by Dunmore. But this is a Common Case. All the Colonies are duped, more or less, at one Time or another. A more egregious Bubble was never blown up, than the Story of Commissioners coming to treat with the Congress. Yet it has gained Credit like a Charm, not only without but against the clearest Evidence. I never shall forget the Delusion, which seized our best and most sagacious Friends the dear Inhabitants of Boston, the winter before last. Credulity and the Want of Foresight, are Imperfections in the human Character, that no Politician can sufficiently guard against.

You have given me some Pleasure, by your Account of a certain House in Queen Street. I had burned it, long ago, in Imagination. It rises now to my View like a Phoenix.—What shall I say of the Solicitor General! I pity his Father, and his sisters. I wish I could be clear that it is no moral Evil to pity him and his Lady. Upon Repentance they will certainly have a large Share in the Compassions of many. But let Us take Warning and give it to our Children. Whenever Vanity, and Gaity, a Love of Pomp and Dress, Furniture, Equipage, Buildings, great Company, expensive Diversions, and elegant Entertainments get the better of the Principles and Judgments of Men or Women there is no knowing where they will stop, nor into what Evils, natural, moral, or political, they will lead us.

Your description of your own Gaity de Coeur, charms me. Thanks be to God you have Cause to rejoice—and may the bright Prospect be obscured by no Cloud.

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 powerful 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. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight. I am sure every good Politician would plot, as long as he would against Despotism, Empire, Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy, or Ochlocracy. A fine Story indeed. I begin to think the Ministry as deep as they are wicked. After stirring up Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadians, Indians, Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholicks, Scotch Renegades, at last they have stimulated the __________ to demand new Priviledges and threaten to rebell.

**d. Commentary and Questions**

1. "As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh." Whether or not Abigail Adams wrote her husband with tongue in cheek, John certainly found her letter funny and perhaps annoying. But the jocular part of his response appeared after lengthy discussion of issues she had raised in her letter. John certainly took seriously the political and social questions and arguments of his wife, even while he chuckled at or perhaps mocked her rebellious pretensions. Was his chortling a sign that Abigail's letter was also not totally serious? What do you think Abigail expected John to do when reading her letter—chuckle, laugh derisively or ponder its significance?

2. "Despotism of the Peticoat": To whatever extent John took seriously Abigail's threat to foment a rebellion, how did he respond? Do you think John believed that the "Tribe" of women were "more numerous and powerful than all the rest," that he was "obliged to go fair, and softly" in the presence of his wife, and that men "are the subjects"? Was at least part of John's tongue in his cheek when he wrote these passages? Or was he simply reflecting the common notions of the day about the proper domestic roles of women?

3. Republican Motherhood: As suggested in the prior two notes, John Adams took seriously his wife's comments on various issues and suggested he was in some sense the "subject" of his wife. At the very outset, he admitted that her complaints about his letters were justified. But then he immediately launched into a fairly detailed response to all her questions about politics, the war, and independence deliberations. While there are reasons to wonder about the degree of his candor, there is little doubt that he found the probing by Abigail totally appropriate. Their correspondence was representative of their culture recognizing and structuring a political role for women.

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33. This means mob rule.
34. John Adams to Abigail Adams, April 14, 1776, Correspondence, supra note 28 at 381–383.
as the republic was in its formative stages. Linda Kerber, in her classic book on the
history of women in the Revolutionary War era, WOMEN OF THE REPUBLIC: INTELLECT
AND IDEOLOGY IN REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA, argued that “Republican Motherhood”
infused woman’s traditional private role in the family with public significance and
made her maternity a matter of civic duty:

The Republican Mother’s life was dedicated to the service of civic virtue: she
educated her sons for it, she condemned and corrected her husband’s
lapses from it. If, according to Montesquieu’s commonly accepted claim,
the stability of the nation rested on the persistence of virtue among its citi-
zens, then the creation of virtuous citizens was dependent on the presence
of wives and mothers who were well informed, “properly methodical,” and
free of “invidious and rancorous passions.” It was perhaps more than mere
coincidence that virtu was derived from the Latin word for man, with its
connotations of virility. Political action seemed somehow inherently mas-
culine. Virtue in women seemed to require another theater for its display.

To that end the theorists created a mother who had a political purpose and
argued that her domestic behavior had a direct political function in the
Republic.12

Does the idea of “Republican Motherhood” help explain the contents of either
or both of the Adams’ letters?

e. Letter from Abigail Adams to Mercy Otis Warren (April 27, 1776)

After Abigail received John’s reply, she wrote about their exchange of views to
Mercy Otis Warren, a poet, historian and famous writer of the period:

Braintree April 27, 1776

I set myself down to comply with my Friends request, who I think seem’s
rather low spirited.

I did write last week, but not meeting with an early conveyance I thought
the Letter of But little importance and too’d it away. I acknowledg my Thanks
due to my Friend for the entertainment she so kindly afforded me in the
Characters drawn in her Last Letter, and if coveting my Neighbours Goods
was not prohibited by the Sacred Law, I should be most certainly tempted
to envy her the happy talent she possesses above the rest of her Sex, by adorn-
ing with her pen even trivial occurrences, as well as dignifying the most
important. Cannot you communicate some of those Graces to your Friend and
suffer her to pass them upon the World for her own that she may feel a little
more upon an Equality with you? — Tis true I often receive large packages
from Philadelphia. They contain as I said before more News papers than Let-
ters, tho they are not forgotten. It would be hard indeed if absence had not
some alleviations.

I dare say he writes to no one unless to Portia oftner than to your Friend,
because I know there is no one besides in whom he has an equal confidence.
His Letters to me have been generally short, but he pleads in Excuse that
critical state of affairs and the Multiplicity of avocations and says further that
he has been very Busy, and writ near ten Sheets of paper, about some affairs
which he does not chuse to Mention for fear of accident.

He is very saucy to me in return for a List of Female Grievances which I
transmitted to him. I think I will get you to join me in a petition to Congress.
I thought it was very probable our wise Statesmen would erect a New
Government and form a new code of Laws. I ventured to speak a word in behalf
of our Sex, who are rather hardly dealt with by the Laws of England, which
gives such unlimited power to the Husband to use his wife ill.

I requested that our Legislators would consider our case and as all Men
of Delicacy and Sentiment are averse to Exercising the power they possess,
yet as there is a natural propensity in Humane Nature to domination, I
thought the most generous plan was to put it out of the power of the Arbitrary
and tyrannick to injure us with impunity by Establishing some Laws in our
favour upon just and Liberal principals.

I believe I even threatened a Rebellion in case we were not con-
sidered, and assured him we would not hold ourselves bound by any Laws
in which we had neither a voice nor representation.

In return he tells me he cannot but Laugh at My Extraordinary Code of
Laws. That he had heard their Struggle had loosened the bands of Government,
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 my 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 complement, he adds, but that I
am so sausy he wont blot it out.

So I have help’d the Sex abundantly, but I will tell him I have only been
making trial of the Disinterestedness of his Virtue, and when weigh’d in the
balance have found it wanting.

35. Kerber, supra note 1, at 229. From WOMEN OF THE REPUBLIC: INTELLECT AND
IDEOLOGY IN REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA by Linda Kerber. Published for the Omohundro
Institute of Early American History and Culture. Copyright © 1980 by the University of North

36. Among other things, Warren published the three volume HISTORY OF THE RISE,
PROGRESS, AND TERMINATION OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION (1805). Warren was
also in contact with Catharine Macaulay in England, a woman much admired by both Adams and Warren. Kerber, supra note 1, at
82. For more on these two famous women, see Kate Davies, Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren: The Revolutionary
Atlantic and the Politics of Gender (2005).
It would be bad policy to grant us greater power say they since under all the disadvantages we Labour we have the ascendency over their Hearts

And charm by accepting, by submitting sway.

I wonder Apollo and the Muses could not have indulged me with a poetical Genius. I have always been a votary to her charms but never could ascend Parnassus myself.

I am very sorry to hear of the indisposition of Your Friend. I am afraid it will hasten his return, and I do not think he can be spaired.

"Though certain pains attend the cares of State
A Good Man owes his Country to be great
Should act Abroad the high distinguished part
or shew at least the purpose of his heart."

Good Night my Friend. You will be so good as to remember me to our worthy Friend Mrs. W____ when you see her and write soon to your Portia

f. Commentary and Questions

1. Portia: Portia was the wife of Brutus, the assassin of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. She was deeply involved in the civil conflicts of her time—an image of obvious importance to Abigail Adams. Teresa Anne Murphy, after commenting on the frequent use of important historical figures from the past as namesakes, notes the importance of the reference.

In deciding on Portia, Adams chose someone who not only was married to a political leader revered for his opposition to tyranny, but also was a woman who demonstrated the ability to partake fully in the political activities of the rebellion. As the wife of Brutus, Portia had stabbed herself in the thigh to prove to him that he could trust her in discussing his political plans. Thus, Adams adopted a pseudonym that suggested not only her love of her husband and her willingness to support him in his political activities, but also her ability to act decisively and heroically with respect to the politics and the tyranny he opposed. Her love of her country and her love of her husband were distinct, but they did not demand different sensibilities. Here, history once again suggested a kind of patriotism that could be both personal and political.

2. Abigail Adams’ Self Concept as a Woman: How did Abigail Adams view herself in comparison with Mercy Otis Warren? She claimed to have thrown out the first version of this letter, deeming it of “little importance.” Then, marveling at the talents Warren “possesses above the rest of her sex,” Adams asked if her friend could “pass [some of those graces] upon the World for her own that she may feel a little more upon an Equality” with Warren. Do these passages suggest that Adams felt less accomplished than Warren? Was she demonstrating her own intelligence by adroitly flattering Warren? Or was she simply being polite, as women of means might generally have behaved with each other in the late eighteenth century? Though very well educated for her time, Abigail never had any formal schooling. Raised in a largely male household, she often measured her own capacities against those of her well educated relatives. On the other hand, her thirst for knowledge equipped her well for her often independent married life. Do you think Adams was wistfully comparing herself to Warren or placing herself on the same intellectual plane?

3. Another Look at Irony: Were Abigail Adam’s comments to Warren about her rebellion more serious than those she wrote to her husband? Adams’ claim that she had submitted a “List of Female Grievances” to John was a bit overdrawn. No such list appeared in the opening letter in this run of correspondence. Does this mean she wanted Warren to take her seriously? Do you think Warren chuckled when she read about Abigail being “so saucy” that John declined to blot out his “coarse” compliment? Or might she have been a bit piqued?

4. “And charm by accepting, by submitting sway”: Near the end of the letter Abigail reported that the men thought it had policy to “grant us greater power” since women had “the ascendency over their Hearts and charm by accepting, by submitting sway.” This portion of the letter is written as reportage; there is no editorial commentary for us to parse. It is left for us to decide if she found the “power behind the throne” argument of John and his peers convincing. But compare this ambiguous use of the phrase in the letter to Warren with her use of the same “by submitting sway” language in her next letter to John. Did she grant John the validity of his claim even as she left the point open in her correspondence with Mercy Warren? If so, what might that say about gender and culture among the elites of early American history?

5. Abigail Adam’s “True” Opinions: Do you think the letter to Warren reflects Abigail Adams’ true views on the need for legal changes in power rules more than her letter to John? Was she more honest with Warren? If so, this letter also is a commentary on the limits—self imposed or not—constraining Abigail’s behavior with her husband.

g. Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams (May 7, 1776)

Abigail wrote the final letter in this series, a reply to John’s letter of April 14. Braintree May 7 1776

How many are the solitary hours I spend, ruminating upon the past, and anticipating the future, whilst you overwhelm’d with the cares of State, have but few moments you can devote to any individual. All domestic pleasures and enjoyments are absorbed in the great and important duty you owe your Country “for our Country is as it were a secondary God, and the First and greatest parent. It is to be preferred to parents, Wives, Children, Friends and all things the Gods only excepted. For if our Country perishes it is as impossible to save an Individual, as to preserve one of the fingers of a Mortified
Hand." Thus do I suppress every wish, and silence every Murmer, acquiescing in a painful Separation from the companion of my youth, and the Friend of my Heart.

I believe it is near ten days since I wrote you a line. I have not felt in a humour to entertain you. If I had taken up my pen perhaps some unbecoming invective might have fallen from it; the Eyes of our Rulers have been closed and a Lethargy has seized almost every Member. I fear a fatal Security has taken possession of them. Whilst the Building is on flame they tremble at the expense of water to quench it, in short two months has elapsed since the evacuation of Boston, and very little has been done in that time to secure it, or the Harbour from future invasion till the people are all in a flame; and no one amongst us that I have heard of even mentions expense, they think universally that there has been an amazmg neglect some where. Many have turned out as volunteers to work upon Nodles Island, and many more would go upon Nantaskit if it was once set foot on. "Tis a Maxim of state That power and Liberty are like Heat and moisture; where they are well mixt every thing prosper, where they are single, they are destructive."

A Government of more Stability is much wanted in this colony, and they are ready to receive it from the Hands of the Congress, and since I have begun with Maxims of State I will add an other viz. that a people may let a king fall, yet still remain a people, but if a king let his people slip from him, he is no longer a king. And as this is most certainly our case, why not proclaim to the World in decisive terms your own importance?

Shall we not be despised by foreign powers for hesitating so long at a word?

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 —

"Charm by accepting, by submitting sway
Yet have our Humour most when we obey."

I thank you for several Letters which I have received since I wrote Last. They alleviate a tedious absence, and I long earnestly for a Saturday Evening, and experience a similar pleasure to that which I used to find in the return of my Friend upon that day after a weeks absence. The Idea of a year dissolves all my Phylosophy.

Our little ones whom you so often recommend to my care and instruction shall not be deficient in virtue or probity if the precepts of a Mother have their desired Effect, but they would be doubly inforced could they be indulged with the example of a Father constantly before them; I often point them to their Sire

"engaged in a corrupted State
Wrestling with vice and faction."

May 9

I design to have finished the sheet, but an opportunity offering I close only just inform you that May 7 our privateers took two prizes in the Bay in fair sight of the Man of war, one a Brig from Ireland the other from Fylall [Fayal] loaded with wine Brandy and the other Beef &c. The wind was East and a flood tide, so that the tenders could not get out tho they tried several times, the Light house fired Signal guns, but all would not do, they took them in triumph and carried them into Lyn.

Johnny and Charls have the Mumps, a bad disorder, but they are not very bad. Pray be kind enough to remember me at all times and write as often as you possibly can to your

Portia

h. Commentary and Questions

1. Revisit "By Submitting Sway": This letter arguably gives us more information than the others about the nature of Abigail's interest in her revolution. In contrast to the opening letter, she lectured her husband a bit. There is little obvious jesting in either her complaint that John was not "very generous to the Ladies" or her warning that " Arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken * * * notwithstanding all your wise Laws and Maxims." But this potentially severe tone was broken by two other parts of the letter. First, she opened with a paragraph of deep longing—a sad commentary about how deeply she misses "the Friend of my Heart." While this might have been an effort to assuage any of John's hurt feelings, it surely had the effect of reassuring him of her deep love. And, second, later in the letter she agreed with John that his authority was subdued with "charm by accepting, by submitting sway." Did she write with a sense of resignation as she enlarged the couplet beyond what she wrote in her letter to Warren by adding, "Yet have our Humour most when we obey"? Did Abigail, while believing deeply that family property laws and other rules of marriage were unfair, feel that explicit complaints about such things to her husband were too risky?

2. Abigail Adams as Patriot: This series of letters provides an interesting feel for Abigail as a patriot. Her pleas in the first letter for the men to quickly declare an independence must be taken quite seriously. How did she understand her own role in the emerging nation? Did she imagine herself as a political adviser? Was her vision limited to the domestic sphere? Was her willingness to discuss politics, war, important personages and affairs of the world a sign of things to come?

3. Adams to Sullivan: The next and final letter produced here provides a fuller explication of John Adams' views on suffrage and gender. Does it suggest that Abigail could have taken more risks than she did in her correspondence with John?

i. Letter from John Adams to John Sullivan (May 26, 1776)

About two months after Abigail Adams penned the prior letter in which she advocated for “the Ladies,” the “Independancy” she desired was declared in Philadelphia. But the members of the Continental Congress writing the Declaration of Independence did not remember the ladies. The preamble’s ringing proclamation that “all men are created equal” cannot be understood as encompassing women. Indeed, it did not even include “all” men. Universal male suffrage was not to be a routine feature of political life in the new republic.

John Adams, responding to a letter written by John Sullivan, a member of the provincial Congress of Massachusetts who advocated liberalization of property restrictions on male voting, described his reasons for favoring limited male suffrage and for denying women access to the ballot. It makes clear that his perhaps humorous response to Abigail’s request to “remember the ladies” was grounded in his political philosophy.

Philadelphia, 26 May, 1776

Your favors of May 9th and 17th are now before me; and I consider them as the commencement of a correspondence which will not only give me pleasure, but may be of service to the public, as in my present station I stand in need of the best intelligence, and the advice of every gentleman of abilities and public principles in the colony which has seen fit to place me here.

Our worthy friend, Mr. Gerry, has put into my hands a letter from you, of the sixth of May, in which you consider the principles of representation and legislation, and give us hints of some alterations, which you seem to think necessary, in the qualification of voters.

I wish, Sir, I could possibly find time to accompany you, in your investigation of the principles upon which a representative assembly stands, and ought to stand, and in your examination whether the practice of our colony has been conformable to those principles. But, alas! Sir, my time is so incessantly engrossed by the business before me, that I cannot spare enough to go through so large a field; and as to books, it is not easy to obtain them here; nor could I find a moment to look into them, if I had them.

It is certain, in theory, that the only moral foundation of government is, the consent of the people. But to what an extent shall we carry this principle?

Shall we say that every individual of the community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent, expressly, to every act of legislation? No, you will say, this is impossible. How, then, does the right arise in the majority to govern the minority, against their will? Whence arises the right of the men to govern the women, without their consent? Whence the right of the old to bind the young, without theirs?

But let us first suppose that the whole community, of every age, rank, sex, and condition, has a right to vote. This community is assembled. A motion is made, and carried by a majority of one voice. The minority will not agree to this. Whence arises the right of the majority to govern, and the obligation of the minority to obey?

From necessity, you will say, because there can be no other rule.

But why exclude women?

You will say, because their delicacy renders them unfit for practice and experience in the great businesses of life, and the hardy enterprises of war, as well as the arduous cares of state. Besides, their attention is so much engaged with the necessary nurture of their children, that nature has made them fittest for domestic cares. And women have not judgment or will of their own. True. But will not these reasons apply to others? Is it not equally true, that men in general, in every society, who are wholly destitute of property, are also too little acquainted with public affairs to form a right judgment, and too dependent upon other men to have a will of their own? If this is a fact, if you give to every man who has no property, a vote, will you not make a fine encouraging provision for corruption, by your fundamental law? Such is the frailty of the human heart, that very few men who have no property, have any judgment of their own. They talk and vote as they are directed by some man of property, who has attached their minds to his interest.

Upon my word, Sir, I have long thought an army a piece of clock-work, and to be governed only by principles and maxims, as fixed any in mechanics; and, by all that I have read in the history of mankind, and in authors who have speculated upon society and government, I am much inclined to think a government must manage a society in the same manner; and that this is machinery too.

Harrington has shown that power always follows property. This I believe to be as infallible a maxim in politics, as that action and reaction are equal, as in mechanics. Nay, I believe we may advance one step farther, and affirm that the balance of power in a society, accompanies the balance of property in land. The only possible way, then of preserving the balance of power on the side of equal liberty and public virtue, is to make the acquisition of land easy to every member of society; to make a division of the land into small quantities, so that the multitude may be possessed of landed estates. If the multitude is possessed of the balance of real estate, the multitude will have
the balance of power, and in that case the multitude will take care of the liberty, virtue, and interest of the multitude, in all acts of government.

I believe these principles have been felt, if not understood, in the Massachusetts Bay, from the beginning; and therefore I should think that wisdom and policy would dictate in these times to be very cautious of making alterations. Our people have never been very rigid in scrutinizing into the qualifications of voters, and I presume they will not now begin to be so. But I would not advise them to make any alteration in the laws, at present, respecting the qualifications of voters.

Your idea that those laws which affect the lives and personal liberty of all, or which inflict corporal punishment, affect those who are not qualified to vote, as well as those who are, is just. But so they do women, as well as men; children, as well as adults. What reason should there be for excluding a man of twenty years eleven months and twenty-seven days old, from a vote, when you admit one who is twenty-one? The reason is, you must fix upon some period of life, when the understanding and will of men in general, is fit to be trusted by the public. Will not the same reason justify the state in fixing upon some certain quantity of property, as a qualification?

The same reasoning which will induce you to admit all men who have no property, to vote, with those who have, for those laws which affect the person, will prove that you ought to admit women and children; for, generally speaking, women and children have as good judgments, and as independent minds, as those men who are wholly destitute of property; these last being to all intents and purposes as much dependent on others, who will please to feed, clothe, and employ them, as women are upon their husbands, or children upon their parents.

As to your idea of proportioning the votes of men, in money matters, to the property they hold, it is utterly impracticable. There is no possible way of ascertaining, at any one time, how much every man in a community is worth; and if there was, so fluctuating is trade and property, that this state of it would change in half an hour. The property of the whole community is shifting every hour, and no record can be kept of the changes.

Society can be governed only by general rules. Government cannot accommodate itself to every particular case as it happens, or to the circumstances of particular persons. It must establish general comprehensive regulations for cases and persons. The only question is, which general rule will accommodate most cases and most persons.

Depend upon it, Sir, it is dangerous to open so fruitful a source of controversy and altercation as would be opened by attempting to alter the qualifications of voters; there will be no end of it. New claims will arise; women will demand a vote; lads from twelve to twenty-one will think their rights not enough attended to; and every man who has not a farthing, will demand an equal voice with any other, in all acts of state. It tends to confound and destroy all distinctions, and prostrate all ranks to one common level.

j. Commentary and Questions

1. Women's Legal History and Notions of Dependency: The republican idea in Adams’ letter that property ownership and political competence were intimately linked provides clues about the path the legal history of women would follow in the early nineteenth century. First, the linkage between wealth and political participation makes it easier to understand why reform of property and contract laws was high on the agenda of the women’s movement that emerged in the 1830s and 1840s. Amelioration of the harshest of the legal rules was necessary not only to allow women to participate in the commercial world on their own terms, but also to provide them with the cultural attributes necessary for participation in governance. In the absence of property ownership, women would continue to be treated as dependent souls. Second, broadening suffrage to include all men by breaking down the links between property ownership and voting rights had to happen before suffrage for women would be seriously considered. Even if property ownership was no longer a prerequisite to voting, it still was deeply embedded in cultural notions of dependency. Women had to be able to make claims about both the right to own property and to manage the assets of others. Third, the critical links between notions of dependency and political competence make study of the family central to any inquiry into the legal status of women in the nineteenth century. Finally, before fundamental changes in legal norms about property, contracts, participation in governance or family could occur, cultural barriers to women publicly voicing their aims had to fall. Do you have any hypothesis about how women acquired a public voice? Remember that the subject matter of the Adams’ correspondence was not part of widespread public discourse across gender lines during the Revolutionary War period.

2. Dependence and Male Suffrage: White male suffrage was significantly broadened during the first half of the nineteenth century. Most property restrictions disappeared, to be replaced by requirements that men be taxpayers, leaseholders or wage earners. A source of support other than ownership of the soil came to suffice as a foundation for independent thinking. This left only the paupers among white men without the franchise. In order for these changes to occur, Adams’ focus on ownership of land as the sine qua non of political independence had to be modified. Robert Steinfeld described how that happened. Most early suffrage reformers, he wrote,

did not dispute that only property ownership conferred real independence on a man. And most also agreed that the dependent should not be permitted to participate in the self-governing people, even under broadened suffrage. As a result, when they argued for a broadened suffrage, reformers were faced with the task of reconciling underlying beliefs which appeared flatly contra-

dictory. In order to do so, they had to offer a way of thinking about independence which did not turn on property ownership, but which recognized the indisputable fact that property ownership did bring power, and did confer a degree of personal independence.

* * *

The suffrage reformers * * * justified the continued exclusion of so many from the franchise on the basis of natural or individual capacity. This preserved the idea that only the self-governing were entitled to participate in politics, but it added a new twist. Dependence was no longer associated with propertylessness, but dictated by nature and character and embodied in legal relationships of dependence, like husband and wife, parent and child, and pauper and town. The law of nature guaranteed the suffrage to all, reformers urged; "unless it be those on whom the same natural law has pronounced judgment of disability, or those who have forfeited it by crime and profligacy."

* * *

In other words, the real question in separating the self-governing from the dependent should be whether a man had the legal right to dispose of himself or whether that right of control lay in another.

The early nineteenth century suffrage reforms, of course, still left women defined as dependent and therefore ineligible for the franchise. This outcome makes New Jersey's brief dalliance with women's suffrage, taken up later in these materials, all the more remarkable and its demise easy to understand. The general assumption was that voting women, particularly married women, would vote the preferences of others. The coexistence of fraud and open suffrage in Essex County in 1807 only confirmed the truthfulness of John Adams' warning that all but property owners were "too dependent upon other men to have a will of their own." It would be more than a century before women's will was deemed independent enough to warrant granting them the ballot.

3. The Life of Abigail Adams: The Adams correspondence tells us much about the life of Abigail Adams. She was busy coping not only with the British invasion of Boston and the completion of tasks typically performed by husbands whenever John was absent, but also with the more common vexations of surviving in late eighteenth century America. Making or obtaining cloth, producing clothing, harvesting crops, maintaining a household, and educating children took enormous amounts of time and energy. The letters also contain many references to the perilous nature of life itself—disease, death, and infant mortality. It is difficult to imagine what daily life was like over two hundred years ago. But the impact of tragic events on the lives of women and men of Adams' time must have been large.


Birth rates, infant mortality rates and maternal mortality rates were very high. Life expectancy was low. In 1800, there were 278 live births for every 1000 white women of childbearing age. In contrast, the 1990 rate for white women had fallen to 66.9 and for black women to 91.9. Early in the twentieth century, crude measures placed fetal mortality rates at about 40 per 1000 live births. Even if this rate was only slightly higher in 1800, it means that about one-third of all white women of childbearing age were pregnant each year during our early history. Infant mortality in Massachusetts averaged 127 deaths per 1000 live births during the 1850s. There is no reason to believe that number was any lower in 1800. Most families either experienced or knew of other families who experienced the death of an infant. Strolling through a New England cemetery with plots dating back to the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries is a revelation. The number of graves of little children is stunning. Early in the twentieth century, maternal mortality rates for white women were about 60 per 10,000 live births and 110 for non-white women. The comparable rates in 1990 were .54 and 1.9. If a typical white woman had six pregnancies, then the likelihood of death from complications of pregnancy and birth was about 360 per 10,000, or about 4%. It is not unreasonable to suggest that a century before, at least one out of every twenty married women died in childbirth. In 1850, an average white man born in Massachusetts could expect to live only about 38 years, an average woman about 40. The sadness in some of Abigail Adams' letters reflected the pervasiveness of death in early America.

Despite the grim statistics on infant mortality, families were large. Average household size in 1790 was 5.79. Over one third of all households had 7 or more persons. These figures include household residents who were not members of the immediate family, such as boarders or apprentices. But whether a person was related or not, her or his presence meant there was work to be done. The large household size and lack of labor saving devices made routine tasks time consuming and arduous. Abigail Adams had a busier life than many of her peers, but running a household was an all-consuming occupation for all family women. Was the invention of labor saving devices for the home a prerequisite to women becoming full political citizens? Was reduction in the birth rate? Greater longevity?

44. Statistical History, supra note 43, at 57. The rate for non-whites was approximately 75.
45. 278 live births plus 40 fetal deaths equals 318 pregnancies per 1000 women.
47. I have taken such strolls through cemeteries in Massachusetts. It is a sobering reminder of the ways our perceptions about being able to control our health are historically new.
49. Statistical History, supra note 43, at 56.
50. Id. at 41.
51. Id. at 42.
52. If you are interested in the relationships between technology, family and gender, read the wonderful book Susan Strasser, Never Done: A History of American Housework (1982).
4. Speaking of Rebellions! Would Abigail Adams have been upset by the result in Martin v. Commonwealth of Massachusetts that you will read next? If so, do you ascribe that to her patriotic opposition to returning property seized from a Tory or to her vision of women's roles in society?

5. The Constitution of 1789: Those drafting the Constitution did not remember the ladies any more than those writing the Declaration of Independence. If Mary Wollstonecraft, Catharine Macaulay and Abigail Adams had been allowed to sit in the Convention drafting the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, what terms might they have sought to add or delete from the document? What would have been the “code of laws” Abigail wrote about in her first letter to John?

In considering this question, note that most historians now agree that the civic republican vision of many of the founders did not control most of the central features of the Constitution of 1789. Rather than trusting in the ability of responsible citizens to directly elect a parliament to govern in the best interests of the republic, the drafters of the Constitution created a structure with many checks and balances. Fears that individual self interest, group power, class antagonism and thoughtless momentary hysteria would control decision-making led to a charter favoring the ruling elites and creating a number of hurdles to the speedy adoption and enforcement of laws. Would women have operated on a different set of assumptions? Even if women of Adams’ time were as self-interested as men, would men have assumed that to be so? Would women have crafted a different governing structure?

C. Property and Citizenship: The Status of Women During and After the Revolutionary War

As the Adams correspondence indicates, the structure of citizenship in our late colonial and early national history was heavily influenced by gender. Though women were citizens they were almost completely barred from participation in both the civil legal system and the political process. Indeed, as the story of Anna Martin that unfolds below suggests, the national status of wives was sometimes dependent upon the actions of their husbands.

In 1801, James Martin sued to recover land that had been taken by the State of Massachusetts and sold at auction in 1781 after his parents, William and Anna Martin, sided with the British during the Revolutionary War. The Martins owned a substantial amount of land, including 844 acres outside of Boston, and a large house with out-buildings on Boston Harbor. These assets were left to Anna Martin in 1770 when her father, James Gordon, died and left her a third of his estate. Though the land was titled in Anna’s name, common law rules of coverture gave her husband the right to manage and control the assets during his life. If she survived him, the land was returned to her. The impact of the husbandly management rights became the focus of James Martin’s post-war attack on the seizure of his mother’s estate by Massachusetts. The case became an important test of the nature of women’s citizenship and civil legal status at the turn of the nineteenth century.

1. Opinions of the Massachusetts Supreme Court in Martin v. Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Martin v. Commonwealth of Massachusetts
1 Mass. 347 (1805)

Sedgwick, J. The plaintiff in error alleges that he is the son and heir of Anna Martin the wife of William Martin * * * which fact is, by the pleadings, admitted. This libel was founded on the act of the legislature passed on the 30th day of April 1779. The libel was made, by the then Attorney-General, (a) to the court of common pleas, * * * holden in this county on the second Tuesday of July, 1781 — from thence it was continued to the October term of the same court in the same year, when, upon proclamations being made, as required by the statute, and no person appearing to defend against the libel, a default was entered and judgment was rendered that the described premises escheat to the State.

* * *

The present United States, which had been previously, the acknowledged colonies of Great-Britain, on the 4th of July 1776, by their representatives, declared themselves independent of the mother-country; and justified themselves by certain acts of aggression and oppression which were deemed proper to be proclaimed and explained to the world. The constituents of those representatives adopted their sentiments and undertook to assert and support their new situation. In this new and untried assumption, the Attorney General, with sentiments which are equally just and liberal, admits the right of each individual to consult his own conscience in deciding on the past which it was his duty to adopt. While those generous spirits who united in defending, at every risk, the liberties and independence of their country were in the opinion of their fellow citizens entitled to deserved applause, those who from timidity, or doubt, or principles of duty and conscience adhered to their former allegiance were guilty of no crime, for which a punishment could be justly inflicted; and if from such opinions and impressions they withdrew from the country, all the evils to which


54. The only significant exception to the all male quality of suffrage in our early national history arose in New Jersey in the years surrounding the turn of the nineteenth century. That story is taken up in the next section of this chapter, beginning at p. 37.


56. The nature of these coverture rules is the subject of the next chapter.
they could justly be subjected would be complete dissolution of their connexion with the country from which they voluntarily withdrew, and the natural consequences thereof. They could not be punished for treason, for they never had united with the new independent society. They had created no new allegiance, for it would be inconsistent with that to which they had a right to adhere. They had an election, and engaged, required that they should be permitted to do nothing which would weaken the means of the defence of the country—and especially such property as might aid this. It was determined by their own opinions of interest and duty. If they chose thereof. They could not be punished for treason, for they never had united with the country from which they voluntarily withdrew, and the natural consequences.

* * *

By the record before us it appears that William Martin and Anna Martin, the father and mother of the plaintiff in error, are jointly charged with the several acts which are alleged in the libel of the Attorney-General as incurring the forfeiture for which he sued—that, since the 19th day of April 1775, they had levied war and conspired to levy war against the provinces, or colonies, or United States; that they had adhered to the king of Great Britain his fleets and armies and had given to them aid and comfort; that since that time they had, without the permission of the legislative or executive authority of any of the United States, withdrawn themselves therefrom into parts and places under the acknowledged authority of the king of Great Britain—all these are charged as done jointly by the husband and wife—and we are called upon, by matter apparent on the record and by one of the errors expressly assigned, to say whether a feme-covert for any of these acts, performed with her husband, is within the intention of the statute: and I think that she is not. In construing statutes the great object is to discover from the words, the subject-matter, the mischiefs contemplated and the remedies proposed, what was the true meaning and design of the legislature. In the relation of husband and wife the law makes, in her behalf, such an allowance for the authority of the husband and her duty of obedience, that guilt is not imputed to her for actions performed jointly by them, unless of the most heinous and aggravated nature. For instance—the law says, whoever steals shall be punished, and yet if the wife participates in a theft with her husband she is not punishable. Innumerable other instances might be given. She is exempted from punishment, not because she is not within the letter of the law if she had sufficient will to be considered as acting voluntarily and as a moral agent but, because she is viewed in such a state of subjection and so under the control of her husband that she acts merely as his instrument, and that no guilt is imputable to her. Compare this with the case under consideration. In a case of great political interest, in which men of great powers and equal integrity, as is said by the Attorney-General, divided; and where a feme-covert is not expressly included, shall we suppose her to be so by general words? Can we believe that a wife for so respecting the understanding of her husband as to submit her own opinions to his, on a subject so all-important as this, should lose her own property and forfeit the inheritance of her children? Was she to be considered as criminal because she permitted her husband to elect his own and her place of residence? Because she did not, in violation of her marriage vows, rebel against the will of her husband? So hard and cruel a construction, against the general and known principles of law on this subject, could be justified by none but strong and unequivocal expressions. So far is this from being the case in this statute, that it seems to me there are no words by which it can fairly be understood that such was the intention of the legislature—but
the contrary. The preamble of the statute described the persons whom it intended to bring within it. It is that member who “withdraws himself from the jurisdiction of the government and thereby deprives it of the benefit of his personal services.” A wife who left the country in the company of her husband did not withdraw herself—but was, if I may so express it, withdrawn by him. She did not deprive the government of the benefit of her personal services—she had none to render—none were exacted of her. “The member who so withdraws, incurs,” says the preamble, “The forfeiture of all his property, rights and liberties held under and derived from that constitution of government, to the support of which he has refused to afford his aid and assistance.” Can any one believe it was intention of the legislature to demand of fames-covert their aid and assistance in the support of their constitution of government? The preamble then goes on to particularize the violation of our rights of our former sovereign, and proceeds to declare that it thereupon became the indispensable duty of all the people of said states forthwith to unite in defence of their common freedom, and by arms to oppose the fleets and armies of the said King; yet, nevertheless, divers of the members of this, and of the other United States of America, evilly disposed or regardless of their duty towards their country did withdraw themselves, &c.

Now it is unquestionably true that the members here spoken of as “evilly disposed” are included in the people above-mentioned. What then was the duty of these evilly disposed persons, for a violation of which they were to be cut off from the community to which they had belonged, and rendered aliens to it? It was “to unite in defence of their common freedom and by arms to oppose” an invading enemy. And can it be supposed to have been the intention of the legislature to exact the performance of this duty from wives in opposition to the will and command of their husbands? Can it be believed that an humane and just legislature ever intended that wives should be subjected to the horrid alternative of, either “* * * separating from their husbands and disobeying them, or * * * of sacrificing their property?” What does the gendered structure of the questions posed in this case tell you about the concept of citizenship at the turn of the nineteenth century? Can you define the variations of citizenship held by single women, married women, single men, and married men? Would the legal status and citizenship of a single woman have changed during the era giving rise to the Martin case if she moved to England?

2. Commentary and Questions

1. Citizenship: The statute at issue in Martin provided that a person who abandoned the United States and went to England “renounced all civil and political relation to each and every of the United States, and was to be considered an alien.” It is hard to imagine a clearer statement about citizenship. William Martin’s decision to go to England during the Revolutionary War resulted in his becoming an alien—a foreigner. He chose England over the fledgling United States and citizenship rules abided his election. The choices confronting Anna Martin were said to be dramatically different. She, the court opined, was forced to chose between the United States and her husband. “Was she to be considered as criminal because she did not, in violation of her marriage vows, rebel against the will of her husband?” Judge Sedgwick asked. “Can it be believed that an humane and just legislature ever intended that wives should be subjected to the horrid alternative of, either * * * separating from their husbands and disobeying them, or * * * of sacrificing their property?” What does the gendered structure of the questions posed in this case tell you about the concept of citizenship at the turn of the nineteenth century? Can you define the variations of citizenship held by single women, married women, single men, and married men? Would the legal status and citizenship of a single woman have changed during the era giving rise to the Martin case if she moved to England?

2. Wives and “Settlements”: The court in Martin claimed that a wife who left Revolutionary America with her husband “did not withdraw herself—but was * * * withdrawn by him.” It was a commonplace of late eighteenth century law that the residence of her husband determined the residence of a married woman. She was duty bound to follow him about. A married woman who refused to move west when her husband went to settle on the frontier, for example, lost her right to claim support from both her spouse and her government. Her breach of the rules of marital governance made her a civil pariah. While most states imposed a (difficult to enforce) duty of support upon husbands who abandoned their wives, the reciprocal rule left wives without any means of support when they “abandoned” their husbands by refusing to accept the latter’s choices of residence. Even the welfare apparatus—then in the form of poor laws—was governed by the same principle. For a woman could only receive assistance from the local government where she had a settlement. The residence of her husband determined the location of that settlement. Do these rules mesh well with the provision in the Massachusetts statute providing for protecting the property of married women who refused to follow their husbands to England during the Rev-

olutionary War? The court described the 7th section of the statute, noted at p. 35, as one that protected the economic interests of wives “withdrawing” from their husbands. Is it fair to say that the court effectively declared wives to be citizens of the United States regardless of whether they followed their husbands to England or stayed here? Does that outcome mesh with the declarations about wife-duely enunciated by both the court and the poor laws? Was the citizenship status of wives manipulated to serve a variety of political and cultural interests?

3. Women and Property: Anna Martin was said to be a feme covert—a woman “covered” by marriage and “protected” by her husband. That status, which will be studied in detail in the next chapter, carried a number of very important consequences. In Martin, the wife’s duty of obedience led the court to note that married women were not responsible for all of their actions, including some criminal behavior undertaken in the presence of their husbands. Coveture also meant that wives were obligated to follow their husbands’ preferences in the management of property, including assets owned by wives. How can these sorts of rules be reconciled with the actual result in the case? When William Martin elected to go to England, that decision was made with knowledge of the risk that the family’s property would be lost. Why didn’t that “management” decision bind Anna Martin? Note that when a husband died, his widow regained the right to control any land she owned during her marriage. Did the Martin court, in essence, conclude that loss of citizenship is analogous to death, providing ample basis for returning management and control rights to a married woman? Or was the court declaring that Massachusetts could seize only the husband’s lifetime management rights, but not the remaining interests in the property? There was, of course, no small amount of irony in the conclusion that a woman who declined to follow her husband to England retained property rights to the same degree as a woman married to a malefactor who fled the realm.

4. Dependency: Can a person who is wholly dependent on another person be an effective citizen of a democracy? Presuming that a married woman should act independently of her husband, Judge Sedgwick argued, was a “hard and cruel” construction, contrary to “general and known principles of law on this subject.” What was the structure of wife’s dependence created by this decision? Were women thought of as political creatures incapable of exercising independent judgment? Create a list of the characteristics that a person must be thought to have before American culture at the turn of the nineteenth century would allow her or him to fully participate in the political and legal process. Think about how single women might fit into the image of women described in the Martin opinion?

D. The Brief History of Woman Suffrage in New Jersey after the Revolutionary War

1. The Story

We know that women voted in New Jersey between the 1780s and 1807, that women appeared on at least one list of electors in 1787, and that the state legislature explicitly sanctioned their voting in 1790. The brief era of women’s suffrage ended after the 1807 election. Ten years earlier, John Condect, a Newark Republican, and William Crane, an Elizabethtown Federalist, were candidates for a seat in the state legislature from Essex County. In a last minute effort to sway the outcome of what was predicted to be a close election, Crane’s campaign mobilized a group of women to vote just before the polls closed. Condect won a narrow victory, but didn’t forget Crane’s tactics. In 1807 Condect shepherded the following act through the state legislature:

WHEREAS doubts have been raised, and great diversities in practice obtained throughout the state in regard to the admission of aliens, females, and persons of color, or negroes to vote in elections, as also in regard to the mode of ascertaining the qualifications of voters in respect to estate. — AND WHEREAS, it is highly necessary to the safety, quiet, good order and dignity of the state, to clear up the said doubts by an act of the representatives of


60. Sec. 11 of An Act to Regulate the Election of Members of the Legislative-Council and General Assembly, Sheriffs and Coronors, in the Counties of Bergen, Monmouth, Burlington, Gloucester, Salem, Hunterdon and Sussex, Acts of the Fifteenth General Assembly of the State of New Jersey, ch. CCXXII, at 672–673 (Nov. 18, 1790), provided:

And be it further Enacted, That all free inhabitants of this State of full Age, and who are worth Fifty Pounds Proclamation Money clear Estate in the same, and have resided within the County in which they claim a Vote, for twelve Months immediately preceding the Election, shall be entitled to vote for all public Officers which shall be elected by Virtue of this Act; and no Person shall be entitled to vote in any other Township or Precinct, than that in which he or she doth actually reside at the Time of the Election; and no Person who shall be convicted of Treason against this State or the United States, or any of them, shall be entitled to vote at any such Election. [Emphasis added.]

The terms of this statute were extended to Essex County in 1796 and to the entire state in 1797.

the people, declaratory of the true sense and meaning of the constitution, and to ensure its just execution in these particulars, according to the intent of the framers thereof;—therefore,

SEC. 1. BE IT ENACTED, by the council and general assembly of this state, and it is hereby enacted by the authority of the same, That from and after the passing of this act, no person shall vote in any state or county election for officers in the government of the United States, or of this state, unless such person be a free, white, male citizen of this state, of the age of twenty-one years, worth fifty pounds proclamation money, clear estate, and have resided in the county where he claims a vote, for at least twelve months immediately preceding the election.

2. And be it enacted, That in order to establish an uniform practice throughout the state, and to avoid all questions in regard to the qualification of the voter as to estate, as aforesaid, every person in other respects entitled to a vote, who shall have paid a tax for the use of the county, or support of the state government, and whose name shall be enrolled on any duplicate list of the last state or county tax, shall be adjudged by the officers conducting the election to be worth fifty pounds clear estate, and entitled to vote for all officers of government chosen by the people at large.*

The roots of New Jersey’s brief experience with women’s suffrage are obscure. The 1709 colonial charter of New Jersey, which remained in effect until the end of the colonial period, confined the privilege of voting to “male freeholders having 100 acres of land in their own right, or £50 current money of the province in real and personal estate.” But the state constitution drafted between May 26, 1776, and July 2, 1776, by the Provincial Congress of New Jersey, removed the requirement that a voter be a “freeholder” and contained no language specifying the gender or race of voters. The state’s first charter provided:

That all Inhabitants of this colony, of full age, who are worth fifty pounds proclamation money, clear estate in the same, and have resided within the county in which they claim a vote for twelve months immediately preceding the election, shall be entitled to vote for Representatives in the Council and Assembly; and also for all other public officers, that shall be elected by the people of the country at large.**

The intended meaning of “all Inhabitants” worth fifty pounds is unclear, though it is unlikely those drafting the language intended to rid state law of gendered limits on suffrage. The New Jersey Provincial Congress met “in secret, and very scantly records have been preserved.”* There is evidence that the Provincial Congress was responding to pressure to extend male suffrage generally to non-landowners. The gathering received a number of petitions to liberalize voting rules and, in February of 1776, created a committee to draft an ordinance to extend suffrage to “every person” of full age residing in the state for one year and worth fifty pounds.** A few months later this concept found its way into the new state constitution. Once adopted, it had a significant impact on male voting patterns, not least because the fifty pounds limitation lost much of its exclusionary effect during the inflationary years following the Revolutionary War. Additional reforms in 1797 required the operation of polling locations in all townships, rather than just at county courthouses, and further loosened the property restrictions. By 1800, more than two-thirds of adult white males voted in elections.***

Most commentators doubt that the gender neutrality of the voting provision in the New Jersey constitution was designed to grant women suffrage.** Nor is there any evidence that women actively lobbied for access to the ballot.*** But there is growing evidence that the equality rhetoric of the Enlightenment led to discussion if not casing of racial and property voting limitations in many jurisdictions during the Revolutionary War period, that political activity by women was encouraged in a variety of ways during and after the Revolutionary War in a number of areas including New Jersey, and that New Jersey’s politicians sought the votes of women as well as men after hostilities ended.†† By 1790 there certainly were men pressing for women’s suffrage—an undertaking made possible by the open ended quality of the state’s constitutional suffrage language. A revised election law passed that year referred to voters as “he or she,”‡‡ That usage continued as the election laws were further modified in 1797.
in their religious meetings for some time, are thought to have supported adoption of the rules allowing women to vote. Joseph Cooper, a prominent member of the Society of Friends, proposed the suffrage language in the 1790 election law. Cooper’s motivations may have been political rather than religious. The areas of the state with Quaker settlements were more conservative and Federalist than the rest of New Jersey. The provisions allowing town voting in the 1790 act applied only in the six counties with large Quaker populations. Perhaps Cooper wanted women to vote to offset the rising population in the more urbanized areas in Essex County. In any case, the 1790 election law apparently was uncontroversial. It passed both houses of the General Assembly by wide margins.

Though women were explicitly granted voting privileges in 1790, there is scant evidence of significant numbers of women voting until the Condect-Crane election of 1797. That year also marked legislative extension of township voting to all counties in the state, making it easier for women to vote in all areas, not just those dominated by the Federalists. Crane’s attempt to mobilize women to vote for him was widely reported in the newspapers. Despite the lack of major controversy in the legislature when women’s suffrage was expressly recognized in 1790, some of the newspaper commentary after the 1797 election suggests that women’s suffrage was hardly looked on favorably by everyone.

The following tongue-in-cheek article appeared in the October 18, 1797, edition of the Centinel of Freedom, published in Newark. Too much credit cannot be given to the Federal ladies of Elizabeth, for the heroic virtue displayed on Wednesday last in gallantly advancing in a body to the poll to support their favorite candidates. It is a pity that this singular instance of female patriotism should be attended with any ill consequences, but it is said that the husbands and sweethearts of these heroines begin to suspect that some motive other than a love of the federal cause excited the enterprise. It is to be hoped, that this suspicion will not create a resentment that will reach the honorable candidates, who were highly flattered by this Amazonic exercise; and Fortune must be a malicious tide indeed, after all to render it unsuccessful. The exclusive patriots had for some days discovered symptoms of deep distress, but at 12 on Wednesday approaching Labour was evidently to the most careless observer. The alacrity with which the materna, and even maids, assembled, afforded a transient prospect of immediate relief; but, horrible reverse! aristocratic imbecility gave way to republican vigour, and the hope of the aspiring family was strangled in embryo — the abortion took place on Saturday, at 3 o’clock, P.M. amidst the sighs and groans of the disconsolate friends of good order and good government.

This item was followed by another equally sarcastic note:

A Correspondent remarks, notwithstanding the imputation of aristocracy under which Essex county has for a long time laboured, it must now appear incontestably that they are the friends and persons of Equality, since no less than seventy-five women were polled at the late election in a neighboring borough. The Rights of Man have been warmly insisted on by Tom Paine and other democrats, but we outstrip them in the science of government, and not only preach the Rights of Woman, but boldly push it into practice—Madame Wollstonecraft has certainly the merit of broaching this subject, and as women are now to take a part in the jurisprudence of our state, we very shortly expect to see them take the helm —of government.

Other critiques of woman suffrage were even more explicit. William Griffith, a lawyer, wrote a series of papers entitled “Eumenes” (the name of a famous Greek general) between 1796 and 1800 calling attention to fraudulent events at many elections in New Jersey. He also had strong views on voting by women. “It is perfectly disgusting”, he wrote, “to witness the manner in which women are polled at our elections. Nothing can be a greater mockery of this invaluable and sacred right, than to suffer it to be exercised by persons, who do not even pretend to any judgment on the subject.”

In spite of the displeasure of Griffith and other men, women began to vote more often after 1797. As William Whitehead noted in 1859, the Presidential election of 1800, between Mr. Adams and Mr. Jefferson, * * females voted very generally throughout the State; and such continued to be the practice until the passage of the act positively excluding them from the polls. * * At a contested election in Hunterdon County, in 1802, the votes of two or three such, actually elected a member of the Legislature. It is remarkable that these proceedings did not sooner bring about a repeal of the laws which were thought to sanction them; but that event did not occur until 1807, and it is noticeable that, as the practice originated in Essex County, so the flagrant abuses which resulted from it reached their maximum in that county and brought about its prohibition.

While there is no indication that women organized any of the nefarious activities during the Essex County election in 1807, fraud in that election was certainly a catalyst for the broader movement for women’s suffrage.

75. Whitehead, supra note 61, at 102, wrote that Cooper made the proposal. McCormick, supra note 59, at 93, urges caution, however, since Cooper, though a member of the assembly, was not on the committee that proposed the legislation.
77. Philbrook, supra note 61, at 89.
78. Some women were registered to vote. See supra note 59. It is therefore plausible that the 1790 legislation simply codified an extinct practice. But we can’t be sure.
79. Klinghoffner & Lois Elksis, supra note 61, at 175.
80. The examples of caustic humor used here were not unusual. For additional samples, see Zagarri, supra note 12, at 33–36.
81. Items also appeared in the New Jersey Journal (October 18, 1797) [Elizabethtown] and the State Gazette (October 24, 1797) [Trenton].
82. This refers to Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792).
83. As cited in Pole, supra note 61, at 53–54.
84. Whitehead, supra note 61, at 102.
for adoption of the statute repealing women's suffrage later that year. "In 1807," J. R. Pole wrote, "there took place, in Essex County, a holocaust of political morals in which every kind of abuse was exploited with festive extravagance." The issue in the election was where to locate a new courthouse for Essex County. The two major towns in the county, Newark and Elizabeth-town, were sharp rivals on any number of questions. Their inability to decide upon the location for the new facility led the state legislature to call for a county referendum. After the election, both towns correctly accused the other of fraud. The vote totals were extraordinarily high. Ballot boxes were stuffed before the scheduled opening time for the polls. Men voted more than once, sometimes by dressing up as women. Some said that women, even married women, were allowed to vote early and often, and that some of them did not possess the required amount of wealth.

Though allegations of fraud had surfaced in earlier elections in New Jersey, the courthouse election of 1807 was widely ridiculed and eventually voided. The notoriety of the scandal probably made adoption of election reforms inevitable. Participation of women and men disguised as women in the illegal voting made the gender provisions of the 1790 election law an easy target. John Condict, perhaps remembering the women who voted for his opponent ten years before, made the main speech in favor of the 1807 election law reforms. The bill swept to passage with widespread support from both Republicans and Federalists, the latter changing their position on women suffrage on the perhaps erroneous assumption that widespread voting by women would benefit the Republicans. Women's suffrage began under the terms of a constitution that ambiguously included them as electors and, lacking any strong supporting constituency, ended without much public clamor or legislative debate.

The demise of women's suffrage in New Jersey is typically viewed as evidence of the political powerlessness of women at the turn of the nineteenth century. Jean Matthews, for example, wrote that:

When New Jersey in 1807 rectified the oversight that had allowed a few women property owners to vote, no one seems to have objected, not even the disfranchised women. Women were seen as dependents of the male citizen, quite outside the fraternal bonds of the republic. They were also asociated with the fatal corrupting lures of luxury and self-indulgence. The most dire fate for the lapsed republican was to sink into "effeminacy." There is good evidence, however, that women's suffrage in New Jersey was not simply an "oversight." While the constitutional language extending voting rights to "all Inhabitants" adopted in 1776 may have inadvertently left the door open for women's suffrage, the use of language referring to voters as "he or she" in 1790 could hardly have appeared by accident. There are, therefore, some intriguing historical questions left open. What drove Joseph Cooper to sponsor the 1790 provisions giving women access to the ballot? Why did a male legislature pass the bill? On the other hand, what really led to the demise of women's suffrage seventeen years after it was first sanctioned by law? If New Jersey was ready to allow women to vote in the late eighteenth century, what led to the tightening of election rules early in the following century? Why did it seem so obvious to most early nineteenth century Americans that women's suffrage was inappropriate? Was it part of a conservative retrenchment after the heady days of the revolution? Perhaps the Martin case and the Adams correspondence help you answer some of these questions.

2. Commentary and Questions

1. Voting by Women and Property Ownership: During the 1797 election in Essex County, commentators expressed surprise when women showed up to vote. Consternation arose not merely because of cultural traditions linking married women to domestic duties. Their participation in many areas of public life was also severely constrained by legal norms. Women could not sit on juries, act as lawyers, serve as judges or assume other public positions. When married women voted in 1807, the level of incredulity must have increased another notch. While single women and widows were recognized as legal persons for purposes of contract and property law, marriage rendered women civilly dead for many purposes. After marriage, women could not make contracts or manage property. Their right to own personal property was virtually eliminated and their ability to own real property was severely constrained. Few married woman had fifty pounds under their control. As a result, most descriptions of women voting in the state between 1779 and 1807 spoke of single women and widows going to the polls. Their status as legally recognized persons made it possible for them to own sufficient assets to qualify as electors. The constraints on the legal status of nineteenth century married women are the subject of the next chapter. Can you think of any reasons why law at the turn of the nineteenth century made such sharp distinctions between the status of single and married women?

2. Newspaper Commentary: The commentary in the Centinel of Freedom on women voting in the 1797 election should be read with care. Modern pretensions of journalistic objectivity held little sway in early America. Papers usually had a political
slant that greatly influenced their reportage. The Centinel of Freedom, for example, was a Republican paper. How then should we read the article giving "credit" to the "Federal ladies" for their "heroic virtue" in "gallantly advancing in a body to the poll"? What do you make of the language calling the events an "Amazonic exercise"? Why did the author use imagery of pregnancy, childbirth labor and abortion? Do you think this was related to Jean Matthews' contention that it was a "dire fate" for politics to lapse into "effeminity"? What was wrong with "effeminity" in politics? Similarly, what effect was the assertion, in the second newspaper excerpt, that women suffrage would lead women to "take the helm — of government" meant to have on the Centinel's readers?

3. Humor and Irony: Compare the response of John Adams to his wife's threat to foment a rebellion to the commentary in the Centinel of Freedom on voting by New Jersey's women in 1797. Did the authors of the Centinel commentary use humor and irony in the same ways as John Adams? What was there about women claiming a right to participate in governance that led men to write with levity, sarcasm or sexually oriented hostility?

4. Public and Private: The preamble to the act eliminating women's suffrage provided that it was "highly necessary to the safety, quiet, good order and dignity of the state" to clear up doubts about who could vote. What did this language connote? Why should the presence of women at the polls threaten the good order and dignity of the state? If women in general, and especially married women, were thought of as dependent upon others for their economic well being and therefore lacking in the independent frame of mind necessary for intelligent exercise of the franchise, could their appearance at the polls be thought of as threatening? Was the concern that men threatened the dignity of women, or that women threatened the dignity of men?

Chapter 2

Property Reform and the First Women's Movement

A. Setting the Stage: The Ohio Married Women's Property Act of 1846

I. The Statute

On February 28, 1846, the state of Ohio enacted the following statute:

AN ACT
In relation to the interest of Husbands in the estate of their Wives.

SEC. 1. Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Ohio, That the interest of any married man in the real estate of his wife, belonging to her at the time of their intermarriage, or which may have come to her by devise, gift, or inheritance during coverture, or which may have been purchased with her sole and separate money or other property, and, during her coverture, shall have been deeded to her, or to any trustee in trust for her, shall not be liable to be taken, by any process of law or chancery, for the payment of his debt, during the life of the wife, or the life or lives of the heir or heirs of her body.

SEC. 2. All conveyances and incumbrances of the husband's interest in the real estate of the wife, in the first section mentioned, shall be void and of no effect during the life of the wife, and during the life or lives of the heir or heirs of her body, unless an instrument of such conveyance or incumbrance shall have been executed, attested and acknowledged according to the laws of this state, for the conveyance or incumbrance of the estate of the wife in lands, tenements and hereditaments situate within this state.

SEC. 3. No interest of a husband in any chose in action, demand, legacy or bequest of his wife, shall be liable to be taken, by any process of law or chancery, for the payment of his debt, unless such husband shall have reduced the same to possession, so as, by the rules of law, to have become the owner.

1. Some of the vocabulary in this statute may be strange to you. Translations of foreign language phrases and a glossary of legal terms may be found beginning at p. 49 infra.