

Abigail and John Adams enjoyed an intense love affair that endured through fifty years of marriage, five children, multiple homes across three continents, and lengthy separations--not to mention a revolution, wars, and an array of political and diplomatic crises. We know of their romance from more than a thousand letters they exchanged.

John: (After meeting Abigail Smith in the summer of 1759):

“I was unimpressed. She was not fond, not frank, not candid”

(However, three years later, John wrote)

“Miss Adorable: By the same Token that I sat up with you last night, I hereby order you to give me as many Kisses and as many Hours of your Company after 9 O’Clock as I shall please to Demand, and just charge them to my Account.”

Abigail: (1774) “My Much Loved Friend, I dare not express to you at 300 hundred miles distance how ardently I long for your return. I have some very miserly Wishes; and cannot consent to your spending one hour in Town till at least I have had you for 12 hours. The Idea plays about my Heart, unnerves my hand whilst I write, awakens all the tender sentiments that years have increased and matured. May the like sensations enter thy breast.

John: “Is there no Way for two friendly Souls, to converse together, although the Bodies are 300 Miles off?— Yes, by Letter.— But I want a better Communication. I want to hear you think, or see your Thoughts. The Conclusion of your Letter makes my Heart throb. You bid me burn your Letters. But, I must forget you first.”

Abigail: (1776): "I long to hear that you have declared an Independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws, which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”

John: “You are so saucy! "As to your extraordinary code of laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our struggle has loosened the bonds of government everywhere; 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 your letter was the first intimation that another tribe, more numerous and powerful than all the rest, were grown discontented.”

From the *Journal of Elizabeth Drinker. The journal of Philadelphia Quaker Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker (1735-1807) is perhaps the single most significant personal record of eighteenth-century life in America from a woman's perspective. Drinker wrote in her diary nearly continuously between 1758 and 1807, from two years before her marriage to the night before her last illness. The extraordinary span and sustained quality of the journal make it a rewarding document for a multitude of historical purposes.*

Sept. 2, 1793: We heard this day of the death of a poor intemperate woman of the name of Clarey, who sold oysters last winter in a Cellar in Front Street, a little below Elfrith's alley. She was taken out of her senses and went out of town; was found dead on the road.

Sept. 4, 1793: We were told a sad story indeed It seems not unlikely, of a young woman who had nursed one or more in Water Street who died of ye disease. She, being unwell, the neighbors advised her to somewhere else, as none of them chose to take her in. She went out somewhere. I did not hear in what part of Town it was, and lay down ill at a door. A Magistrate in ye Ward had her sent in a cart to ye Hospital, where she was refused admittance, and was nar that place found dead in the cart, next morning.

Nov. 20, 1794. Polly Chapman who lived some years at service with us, came here yesterday to tell her troubles. She has lost her husband (a poor thing) and left with two young children. Our made Jenny who went out of town a little before our family, came here this evening, but talked of returning to ye country again. Good servants at this time are very scarce. Rain and hail this evening. Wind at N.E.

Nov. 22, 1794. Little Peter, a negro boy, aged 7 years, came to us today from Virginia. He has not had the small pox, and appears weakly, otherwise well disposed. We are to give, if we keep him, fifteen pounds for his time. Washed him this afternoon in a tub of warm soapsuds, his head with larkspur and rum, and changed his apparel.

Feb. 20, 1795. Alice, a yellow woman [mulatto], who has taken our clothes in to wash for sometime past, came here before dinner in great distress, her child in her arms; her husband, John Wright, a negro man, and a while girl, attended by a Constable, who was taking them all to Jail, for keeping, as he said, a disorderly or riotous House. As we know nothing of the business and but little of Alice, could say no more in her favor, but that we hoped she was honest. He took them off; I expected we should lose our Linen &c. that was in her custody – a dozen quite new shirts, aprons, and many other things – as they had left their house open and nobody in it. About an hour after she returned in good spiritus, informing us that her Husband and self had procured bailed, but the white girl was put in jail. Soon after, she brought our Linen home, nothing missing.

Dec. 7, 1795. Henry [Drinker] has sold Scipio to George Emlen, and we have given him our little Peter Savage. I hope he will be a good boy, 'tho he is but little worth at present.

Records of the Gloria Dei Church, A Swedish Luthern Church in the Philadelphia suburb of Southward, 1794. Entries by the Reverend Nicholas Collin.

January 2. Widow Fletcher came to inquire whether her daughter Jane had been married to a young Frenchman, Francis, as they had lately eloped; on hearing that they were not, she forbid the bans [notice of the proposed marriage published in advance of the ceremony] the girl being only 16 years of age, and he a very young tradesman.

January 8. Came Margret Power, who married to John Martin, on the 22d of December last, for a new certificate as he had taken the firs from her, and had left her on the very evening of the marriage. She was a widow, 27 years-old and he 26; natives of Ireland.

January 8. A negro came with a white woman, who called herself Eleonore King, widow of a sea captain. They were refused [marriage].

January 10. Came a man to ask whether a certain Mary White had been married. She was on the 10th of December last, as per record. He declared her to have been his wife, though she pretended widowhood. He had been from her in New York for 3 years. Note well – Hajams and his wife declared at the time of marriage, that this woman was pregnant by the party Philip Land.’

January 12. Sunday. At night came a party, and with strong entreaties called me out of bed. On my refusing to marry the couple, they went off in a vicious manner throwing a large stone against the entry door.

February 1. Rudolph Bartholomew and Alsey Levering, who had a child together, were married.

March 2. A Spanish mariner was to be married to a young girl, but did not come. I had requested a certificate from her father, though her mother was to present, this he could obtain because the father, who came that day to enquire, had refused his consent until his intended son-in-law had returned from the voyage on which he was going the next day. Same evening, late, came a couple; were refused chiefly because the hour was unpardonable, and no previous notice had been given.

April 24. ... A French captain of a privateer came with a young lady, from Baltimore. Begged very hard but were refused.

July 12. Came a man of mature age, to bespeak his marriage for the next day, his bride was an orphan. These came accordingly but she confessed that her father was living. Refused.

December. Parents came with their son and a girl, by him pregnant, as they said. He was not free [He was an indentured servant.] and therefore refused until his master should certify his consent, the declaration of said parents being insufficient.

In the 1760's, the Philadelphia's overseers of the poor abandoned the traditional system of providing cash, firewood, and to foods in their own homes in favor of an institutional solution, constructing a "bettering house," or Alms House, with tax money and placed it in the hands of a private corporation. This almshouse/workhouse was designed for the dual purpose of minimizing the cost of care for indigents and forcing capable paupers to labor for their livelihood. The following are taken from the Almshouse Daily Occurrence Docket, 1795.

Sept. 29. Admitted John Morris an Old German hath legal residence, he served his time in this City with old Mr. Gorman, Sugar Baker, many years ago; he was a Soldier in our revolutionary War from the beginning to the ending. He is now poor, sick, and palsied, and totally rendered incapable of rallying round the standard of Labour for a Living. Debit City.

October 3: Admitted Margaret Dillmore a Child between four and five years of age, her mother died in the [yellow] fever of 1789, the Father Thomas Dillmore is a Seaman and hath deserted his child ever since the death of his wife ... Debit City. [On December 8, Margaret apprenticed for fourteen years to Griffith Jones, a farmer in Chester County, Pennsylvania.]

October 6: Admitted Mary Berry a Mulatto young Woman twenty three years of age, of legal residence, is far advanced in her pregnancy and says the Father of the Child that she now bears is Named Matthias Clay, a Member of the [U.S.] Congress and to whom she has sworn it before Gunning Bedford Esquire. Said Mary lived with the Widow Sadie in Arch street (and at the same time Clay boarded there) between seventh and eighth streets ... Debit City.

October 7: Admitted Mary Wright, hath legal residence, is twenty years of age, born in this City. Her Husband Dominick Wright twelve months ago went to sea in the Ship Jane Brown to London (the Owner nor Captains Name she cannot tell) and heard only once from him since and as she says, never received one farthing of his Monthly pay ... However, unfortunate it is that she was taken with a fit and contiguous to the fire place, she fell into the Fames and got burnt in a most distressing manner Debit Southwark.

October 10: Admitted Sarah Baker, Pregnant, she was born in New England, is thirty years of age, came to Philadelphia very young, and was bound to one James Hanniker of said City, Gardener, who in about three months after, moved to the Bek [New Jersey], where she stayed and served her time out, which was nine years of Indenture. After she was free, went to Lancaster [Pennsylvania] and hired herself out as maid, when she got married and moved to Hanover, York County [Pennsylvania] were she continued seventeen months, when her Husband died. After which she went to Baltimore and hired herself out in different families for the space of four years and seven months, as it was in November 1795 when she went there and came to this City from there the 1st July last. The Father of the child she now bears is Named Jacob Adams of Baltimore, Merchant, and with whom she hired herself as a Maid, and she says he went to sea last May, and thinks to the East Indies. However, she never swore the child ... Debit City. [Sarah was discharged in April 1801.]