

Introduction

FORGING THE ROLE OF FIRST LADY

I have lived to witness changes, such as
I could never have imagined.

ABIGAIL ADAMS

to Catherine Nuth Johnson, August 20, 1800

Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison, the inaugural First Ladies of the United States of America, created a role that was uniquely American in both its style and substance. Each of them shaped the role of First Lady by placing their own imprint upon the position, but at the same time they learned from one another as they sought a path that would blend their roles as women, wives, mothers, and public figures. With no precedent to follow, Martha, Abigail, and Dolley began to construct the position of the president's spouse, often consciously working to make it distinct from that of consorts in European courts and aligning it more closely with emerging republican ideals and standards for presidential behavior.

In the American imagination, at the time Europe was viewed as the site of monarchial and aristocratic displays of power. That perception played an overarching role in the quest to define the roles that the wives and daughters of significant male political figures would play in the new American political culture, especially First Ladies. Use of the word "Europe" often became a code word for everything that needed to be eradicated in the new republican undertaking—from issues about rank, status, elaborate ceremonies, excessive luxury, corruption, and ostentatious fashions and lifestyles to the perceived "excessive influence of women on public life."¹ That is one reason that small gestures in

the quasi “courts” surrounding the Washingtons and Adamses, such as sometimes serving lemonade instead of fine wine, took on such significance.

To this day, the role of First Lady has no official mandate, and while in practice it was and is oftentimes a very constraining and conservative position, it continues to hold the potential for significant power, for it reflects informal but still critical political responsibilities that affect matters of state.² The three initial First Ladies directly or indirectly influenced one another in developing the parameters of that semi-official “office.” Few of their successors played as public and active a role as these exceptional women, who were among the most highly visible females among the early political social elite in the United States. To examine their political involvement demands that we view their endeavors against the backdrop of their times and not with a presentist lens.

This book examines the marital partnerships of America’s first three presidential couples, but it especially focuses on the prominent roles of Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison in their years as the nation’s earliest First Ladies. Martha Jefferson died at the young age of twenty-seven and never stood beside her husband as First Lady. Thomas Jefferson’s daughter Martha Jefferson Randolph sometimes supported her father as a substitute, but it was really Dolley Madison who experienced an “internship” as First Lady, so to speak, during Jefferson’s two terms in office.

The stories of America’s first three presidential spouses have received attention in countless volumes since the days in which they occupied their pioneering positions. However, we now have the opportunity to reassess their roles and ask new questions about their levels of political impact, and we can ask what Martha, Abigail, and Dolley—and other early elite American women who were related to significant political figures—might have done similarly or differently from one another as well as from their counterparts in Europe. After all, Europe, especially England and France, was the primary point of reference for early Americans. For example, female royal figures and French female *salonnières*

have achieved perhaps a mythical status in the American imagination, but were they indeed as influential as first thought?

Moreover, it might be more fruitful to look at the key players in the new American political order after the American Revolution as a *family unit* rather than as individuals. Certainly, in the case of the Washingtons, the Adamses, and the Madisons, they operated more visibly as a partnership than as a male/female binary divide. Martha, Abigail, and Dolley viewed themselves as wives of prominent leaders of the new American governing class with an important part to play, and they understood that it was through their traditional domestic roles that they acquired access to the public sphere as members of the political social elite. In other words, the three First Ladies stood at the center of America's political world through their husbands. That was the reality of their times, but it does not follow that they therefore did not possess significant influence.³

The term "First Lady" was probably not commonly used in print until the 1860s when Mary Todd Lincoln occupied the position, although President Zachary Taylor is reputed to have earlier referred to Dolley Madison as the "first lady of the land," and it may have first been formally applied to President James Buchanan's niece, who served as his White House hostess in the late 1850s. But in retrospect we can surely apply the title to the initial "First Ladies" examined in this book, who were all extremely capable, strong women. For the most part, they operated in the accepted contemporary boundaries of women's sphere, personally content overall with what they considered their primary roles as dutiful, loving, and nurturing wives and mothers. But because women, unlike men, at the time were considered to be disinterested parties "above" politics, in reality they were given a wider berth in exercising some level of political power behind the scenes.

Since the time that Martha Washington became the original First Lady, not only Abigail Adams and Dolley Madison but also all those who followed have struggled with the proper manner in which to carry out the role, one that conferred celebrity, public scrutiny, and, at the

least, close access to political power. This earliest trio was often involved in real-life politicking through patronage activities, interacting regularly with other political figures and their family members, as well as serving as unofficial advisers to their presidential spouses. At the beginning of her tenure as First Lady, Martha reported to her niece that she often visited with other female acquaintances—women like the “Vice President’s Lady,” Abigail Adams—who were an integral part of the contemporary “political circle,” as Martha described it.⁴

Probably influenced by a combination of her own personal preferences and her new good friend Abigail Adams, as well as her desire to deflect criticism away from her husband George, who increasingly came under attack from the Republican press for allegedly mimicking kingly behavior, Martha Washington adopted a more austere style than had been exhibited at the royal courts of the Old World. It was a style that attempted to reflect the dignity of those courts melded with the new republican ideals that had fostered the nascent American nation. In other words, elite women like Martha and Abigail, who had access to cultural power in the early republic, helped mold a ceremonial protocol that appropriated select European court manners “for republican elite purposes.”⁵

When Abigail later became the second First Lady, she expanded the model created by Martha to bolster and support her own husband John’s administration. Abigail had witnessed the British royal version firsthand while she was in England in 1785, when John served as minister to Great Britain on behalf of the United States. She had met both George III and Queen Charlotte at the Court of St. James and had found the two monarchs polite and civil but uninspiring and decidedly lacking in what she considered superior American virtues.

Moreover, Abigail had looked with disdain upon the drawn-out intricate rituals that surrounded the London court, where visitors at the queen’s carefully orchestrated drawing rooms often had to wait for hours before the royal couple briefly greeted guests and exchanged social small talk. Abigail described her first visit to the court to her sister back in America, noting that, after meeting the king, “it was more than two

hours after this before it came to my turn to be presented to the Queen. The circle was so large the company were four hours standing. The manner, in which they make their tour round the room, is, first, the Queen, the lady in waiting behind her, holding up her train; next to her, the Princess Royal, after her, Princess Augusta, and their lady in waiting behind them." The princesses were elaborately "both dressed in black and silver silk," while "the Queen was in purple and silver."⁶ Clearly, through their dress, the royal family exuded their privileged status. Back in America, over a decade later and as the wife of the second president of the United States, Abigail unsurprisingly and often consciously sought to distance her own "court" style from its European counterparts.

As the historian Catherine Allgor so succinctly put it, the initial two First Ladies of the United States, Martha Washington and Abigail Adams, "both strove to create personae that contrasted with a queenly one, using a dignified, formal style that could command respect without a crown or a throne."⁷ Still, both Martha and Abigail incorporated their own distinct elements of proscribed ceremonial protocol at the events they hosted, and the functions were aimed at decidedly elite participants. Ironically, and often to their chagrin, although both the first two presidential couples, first George and Martha Washington and later John and Abigail Adams, intentionally tried to strike a "proper" balance between an open ceremonial style and one that reflected the status, gravitas, and dignity of the new government and displayed the authority of the new executive position, detractors accused them of trying to bring back monarchical practices that would threaten the fragile democratic republic.

Dolley Madison was certainly aware—at times as a firsthand observer or often through newspaper reports and correspondence with family and friends—of the significant public efforts undertaken by the two First Ladies of the United States while they resided in Philadelphia during their husbands' terms in office. Dolley lived in the city during Washington's presidency when Philadelphia served as the temporary capital, and she became centrally involved in its political life after her

second marriage to Congressman James Madison in 1794. The Madisons remained in Philadelphia until James temporarily retired from politics in 1797, when they returned to the Madison Montpelier family estate in Virginia. James later served as secretary of state under Thomas Jefferson, the young nation's third president, and it was during that period that Dolley actively began building her own robust public social and political power base at their welcoming Washington City home on F Street.

Dolley likely appreciated Martha's and Abigail's earlier efforts to shape their respective "courts" through their hosting of drawing rooms and salons, for both women had understood the power of those social institutions to inform public manners and to display their presidential husbands' characters and agendas in the best possible light, thereby even influencing the direction of politics. Although on one level the social occasions operated as a venue for sociability and entertainment, they were fundamentally political in a practical manner, for many alliances were built or broken there, and the events also helped to smooth over regional and personal fissures that emerged. Yet Dolley undoubtedly found her predecessors' events to have been overly formal, elitist, and much too limited in reach. After her husband's election as president, Dolley would later adopt her own more accessible and flamboyant style as First Lady, even welcoming the sobriquet of "Queen Dolley," as she was dubbed, a title both Martha and Abigail would have very likely disdained.

But Dolley Madison did not create her political public persona as First Lady in a vacuum; she built her enlarged presence as a "republican Queen" on the foundations that Martha and Abigail had initiated. Dolley retained some of their practices and discarded others that she found were not useful in her concerted campaign to build unity in a nascent republic that had not yet developed a path for working with fragmented, competing political parties and interests. Dolley did not originate the position of First Lady, nor, as some writers have suggested, did she introduce the popular custom of hosting drawing rooms or even serving ice cream at those successful and highly crowded "squeezes," as her events were nicknamed.

Martha Washington pioneered the role of presidential wife, followed quite capably by Abigail Adams. And although the serving of a frozen dessert may seem to have been a rather inconsequential custom, it symbolically reflected republican simplicity over the excesses in cuisine of the European courts. We know from Abigail's letters to her sister Mary Cranch that Martha certainly served ice cream at *her* drawing rooms long before Dolley made the refreshment popular. From Dolley's correspondence written while she resided at Montpelier, we learn that she sought information about Abigail's drawing rooms from her own friends among Philadelphia's elite society women.⁸

Arguably, however, Dolley Madison went on to enthusiastically *expand* the position of First Lady in a manner that was at once more visible, intentional, and more "democratic." It was a role that ultimately earned her the admiration of many of her contemporaries and future generations as one of the most popular, well known, and acclaimed of the nation's First Ladies. For Mrs. Madison moved well beyond cultivating merely a select group of the nation's early elite to include male and female guests from virtually all classes at her social gatherings, although everyone realized that most real power was in the hands of the governing elite. Her efforts not only aided in promoting national unity in a highly contentious political environment but also helped the United States move forward as a budding democratic republic.⁹

First Ladies of the Republic embarks on an unusual path by examining as a group the three "First Ladies" of the American republic, Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison, whose lives intersected and who influenced one another during the nation's formative years. Indeed, shortly before Abigail stepped into the role of presidential wife and First Lady, she wrote to "her most amiable predecessor" Martha for advice and guidance.¹⁰ Although they exhibited vastly different personalities and came from varied backgrounds, the three women were among the most influential females in the history of the United States, part of the early inner elite political and social circle, and they created a distinctly American quasi-political role. The role of First

Lady was not an elected position, and none of three became policy makers, but they still were able to exercise considerable influence and even some measure of power through what today we would consider unconventional means.¹¹

When Martha supported the needs of Revolutionary War veterans she became the first presidential wife to take on a public cause. Abigail Adams was the first to voice her strong personal opinions on critical public issues, and Dolley Madison became an effective behind-the-scenes lobbyist. All three wielded at least some degree of the power of patronage, which even in the new republic proved a useful tool for building presidential authority. Without any roadmap to guide them, they crafted and shaped the unique position of First Lady and played a part in defining the tone and style of their husbands' administrations. Moreover, as leading American women, Martha, Abigail, and Dolley forged important social and political networks that helped influence the country's development during the early republic and national periods as it moved in small increments toward a more unified federal nation.

In an age when women were not allowed active political voices as either voters or elected politicians, Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison also had to learn how to negotiate their female roles to accommodate their new public responsibilities. All three women considered the eighteenth-century normative domestic role as primary and personally held it in great esteem. Yet we also need to reexamine some of our long-held views about an artificial "binary" division between the private and public spheres during their era.¹² For all three, and many other elite women in the early republic, the two areas were often connected, interrelated, and operated simultaneously. Their hosting of dinners, levees, and similar salon-like social events while they served as First Ladies not only called on their traditional robust domestic skills but also allowed them to help shape public opinion and the social and political parameters of the emerging republic, at times through what has become known as the "Republican Court." That paradoxical institution, which at first glance appears to be an oxymoron, was first launched by

the Washingtons in 1789 in New York, when that burgeoning urban center served as the seat of the new government.

Moreover, the salon-type events that Martha, Abigail, and Dolley often hosted and guided were not inconsequential: They allowed women to exercise some level of public power; they helped develop cultural unity and a distinctive American political style; and often the interactions and conversations held there became the “crucible in which the ideas of [male] politicians” were tested.¹³ They viewed, as should we, their domestic realm with its myriad responsibilities as requiring skill and possessing dignity and worth as well as being critical to the well-being of not only their families but also their surrounding community and country. For many years it was not uncommon for earlier generations of writers to dismiss their work in the domestic sphere as being of only modest importance. However, historians have increasingly come to realize not only that there existed “a fully formed woman’s domain in the public sphere” but also that it provided the opportunity for political and cultural influence.¹⁴ It is through those avenues that the three First Ladies made significant public contributions.

Although all three, particularly Abigail and Dolley, knowledgeably considered, discussed, and wrote privately about political issues and the inner workings of the American government and held considerable influence, their deep immersion in broader political life was still unusual at the time as political power was viewed as essentially the realm of men. Yet the American Revolution had politicized many white elite females, including Martha Washington and Abigail Adams. When women like Martha and Abigail supported independence, they often took up their husbands’ work at home, enabling men such as John Adams to serve in the Continental Congress or allowing others like George Washington to go to war. During the rebellion, many colonial women played an important role in the realm of political action through their opposition to British policies through the venues of boycotts and public protests via the economic domestic sphere, as well as by raising funds to benefit Patriot soldiers. They also served as military supporters and “exhorters

of men to direct action.”¹⁵ In other words, women began to test their political influence.

In Philadelphia, for example, elite women had mounted a successful fundraising campaign, amassing significant donations on behalf of the Continental Army troops, which had effectively moved them and other females in New Jersey, Maryland, and Virginia “out of doors” into the public arena, enabling women to display considerable agency as they turned “civic consciousness to action.” Indeed, Martha Washington, who was by then highly visible to colonial citizens as the wife of General Washington, was designated to receive the financial collections and help direct the funds to address the needs of the soldiers.¹⁶

Like many other female Patriots, both Martha and Abigail voiced their political opinions during the days of the Revolutionary War through strong support of their Patriot husbands and American soldiers, as well as more tangible and symbolic actions such as banning British tea from their tables and producing and wearing homespun. Women’s efforts were appreciated and afforded them an opening in which to be viewed as “political beings.”¹⁷ Both future First Ladies would have undoubtedly agreed with their friend, the Boston writer Mercy Otis Warren, who maintained, “But as every domestic enjoyment depends on the decision of the mighty contest, who can be an unconcerned and silent spectator? not surely the fond mother, or the affectionate wife.”¹⁸ For Mercy as well as Martha and Abigail, family was their underlying source of political commitment.

The first three presidential wives were women whose lives reflected the realities of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century life in the United States, and when studying them we need to retain the integrity of the past. In an era when women had no legislative voice, their primary connection to politics was through their husbands, all highly politically influential men, and for the most part Martha, Abigail, and Dolley approached political issues from the perspective of how they affected their spouses.¹⁹ They were always quick to defend their husbands against any criticism by fellow politicians, journalists, or other mem-

bers of the public, sometimes taking the heat themselves, and they also fiercely guarded the physical and emotional health of their spouses. In other words, they looked after *both* the personal and political welfare of their presidential husbands. For them, the private domestic and public spheres were not separate paths; one area influenced and interacted with the other in a reciprocal relationship.

Therefore their correspondence is often a melding of descriptions of momentous political events folded in with domestic themes, which included updates about household matters and the lives of family members and friends, with many references to health, illness, and child rearing. When Martha, Abigail, and Dolley ventured into public and even political life as the wives of America's first presidents, they likely viewed themselves first and foremost as carrying out their valued domestic responsibilities as good wives, who were also fulfilling their duty as patriotic Americans. Although republican ideology emphasized the domestic base of what would eventually be described as "republican motherhood" and "wifehood," at the same time it did not "entirely constrain women's work within the private household."²⁰

Thus the three First Ladies were at times able to use those contemporary social and cultural ideals to their advantage. The founders of the United States had attempted to stabilize the new republic and build the framework for an emerging national government by maintaining, to a large measure, the traditional societal hierarchical relationships, and they believed in an appointed order of society. During this period, the question of human rights, which had so occupied the revolutionists, did not emerge as a main focus. But a new suggested path for women did gain traction. The new role for women as patriotic republican wives and mothers may have been intended to restrict women from full political participation, but there still remained room for women's agency. For many middle-class and elite American women, republican motherhood justified their interest and involvement in contemporary political and social issues. It also offered many an important and visible (although not overtly political) position for them as both the guardians of the next

generation as well as the promoters of American moral and civic virtue as the nation developed a new culture of manners and societal guidelines that better aligned with the new type of republican government.²¹

Despite the plethora of studies about the founders, none has focused a lens specifically on America's first three presidents and their wives as a group during their presidential years, a period of time when their extraordinary, albeit far from equal, marital partnerships were most visible. Nor, for the most part, have the ways in which this *particular* trio of First Ladies navigated and at times expanded their public and private roles and how their experiences reflected changing cultural ideas about the proper role of women in American society received adequate attention.²² The early American republic was an evolving experiment, and in that fluid environment, Martha Washington—the original First Lady—Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison were often able to express considerable individual agency and influence that oftentimes extended to the world of politics before the parameters of women's sphere hardened in the coming decades, particularly during the Jacksonian era.

There has been a particular recent boom in books that have detailed the stories of the women who played such a central role in the lives of the male founders. A generation ago a number of historians and popular writers focused on several prominent founding mothers, most notably Abigail Adams, as examples of early pioneer feminists, at times anachronistically reading modern sensibilities into their lives. Even a few recent biographies have incorporated this theme of Adams as a "protofeminist."²³ Were these women poised to become nascent feminists, as some contended, or conventional eighteenth-century elite women, as others have affirmed? The reality probably falls somewhere in the middle, and certainly historians today acknowledge the complexity of the subject.

Nearly four decades after her essay first appeared, Linda Grant De Pauw's reevaluation of Abigail Adams and the question of her "feminist theory" still remains perhaps the most insightful analysis. As De Pauw points out, although Abigail was an uncommon woman of superior in-

telligence, with a sophisticated grasp of politics and liberal leanings, at heart, like her husband John, she was never an egalitarian. Both the Adamases hoped that, after the revolution, the new American government would allow for broader mass support. But at the same time, they believed in a hierarchical order that would not challenge the position of the elite. For the most part, American women of the eighteenth century, including Abigail, who exhibited concerns about the treatment of women, were focused narrowly on reform of the common law of coverture and legal equality, rather than on broad political equality.²⁴

The political historian Rosemarie Zagari has also suggested that, when post-Revolutionary American political theorists discussed human rights, they drew largely on Scottish philosophy, which stressed the strong connection between individual rights and duty to society. That resulted in the prevalent view that, although women certainly were entitled to “natural” human rights, they were “to be nonpolitical in nature, confined to the traditional feminine role of wife and mother.” Yet Zagari maintains that the early focus on natural rights had a positive effect because in reality it opened the door for discussion about the possibility of social and political equality for women in the future.²⁵

The intellectual historian Lynn Hunt has broadened our understanding of that perspective and has shown how print, especially epistolary novels of the eighteenth century, encouraged empathy among even ordinary people, which led to an enlarged construct of the “self.” That in turn influenced the development of the concept of the human rights of man, ultimately paving the way for the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution, later followed by the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, and the “foundations for a new social and political order.” Although those currents benefited many disenfranchised groups, women, who were not viewed as autonomous beings but as passive citizens, were not wholly included; they were broadly seen as entitled to fundamental *human rights* but not political ones. Still, like Zagari, Hunt maintains that it paved a path for discussion about women’s rights for the future as “the philosophy of natural rights had an implacable logic.”²⁶

During the era, women enjoyed few political rights, but that does not mean that women during the Revolution and in the early national period were wholly excluded from politics and had no voice. A number of elite women, like the three First Ladies, who possessed the education and leisure that enabled them to become involved in political life, occupied an often ambiguous position that blurred the demarcations between the private and public realms. If we view those spheres during their era as a continuum rather than as strongly bifurcated separate spheres, then their agency is brought into sharper focus. Moreover, it likely provides us with better insight into the manner in which contemporaries viewed them and how women of their class actually *saw themselves* during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Although the three First Ladies lived in an era when women were not able to exhibit overt political voices and during a time when none of the three men they married—not George Washington, not John Adams, and not James Madison—would have endorsed granting the vote to women or allowing them to hold public office, they all regarded their wives as political partners and took their wives' political engagement and advice seriously.

Social gatherings were often effective vehicles for middle- and upper-class women to bridge the separate spheres and exert a degree of political influence in an era in which they could neither vote nor hold office themselves.²⁷ Later in Washington City, Dolley Madison would expand those occasions hosted by the two first presidential wives and other prominent women of their class to include ordinary citizens alongside the elite from both the Republican and Federalists factions. At the center of early political life in the United States, and having intimate access to a president's ear, the three First Ladies were better positioned than most women to make an impact, and all three corresponded regularly with other influential men and women who lived in various locations around the nation.

Abigail Adams even ventured into the wider emerging print culture in the United States. She kept a finger on the pulse of the leading news-

papers of her day and provided “corrections” and comments when she felt editors had erred in their reporting or opinions.²⁸ If Martha Washington launched the first American political salon, Abigail transformed it into an intellectual hub, in which she participated fully and could hold her own in the most important political conversations of the day. Dolley was able to combine the talents of Martha as a skillful and highly congenial hostess with Abigail’s keen understanding of politics, fusing both those threads to excel as a social and political force on behalf of her husband. Far more than many male politicians of her day, Dolley understood the central importance of compromise, accommodation, and the need to build consensus in a republican form of government.

The social events that they hosted and attended became an integral part of the political culture that developed around the new federal government. These very capable and sometimes path-breaking women helped shape not only their own roles as prominent Americans and First Ladies but that of the presidency and the development of American social culture and politics. Long before the development of mass media and the official White House press agent, Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison served as effective presidential public relations envoys and at times even campaign managers for their husbands, building political capital and a power base through the social realm. For, as a number of historians have pointed out, it was often behind the scenes at social events conducted in the drawing room—the acknowledged province of women at the time—in which the most effective politicking and lobbying occurred.²⁹ Thus social and political life was often permeable and clearly intertwined in the early republic, and traditionally defined separate spheres for men and women frequently intersected.

Lively conversationalists and astute judges of human character, Martha, Abigail, and Dolley moved easily in the unofficial social sphere, and they often called upon their extensive female networks for support. At the time, fine conversation was seen as a hallmark of gentility and class, and all three First Ladies excelled in the ability to interact with people from all walks of life. Their significance and influence, although often

indirect, was far from inconsequential, and it is no exaggeration to assert that they served as the mainstays of support for their husbands' day-to-day existence on both a personal and public level. It is telling that Martha, Abigail, and Dolley were at times variously referred to as "The President's Lady," "Mrs. President," "Presidente," and "The Presidentess" as the political arena widened for these three women during and after the American Revolution and their husbands' presidential terms.

Although the early presidents and their wives may have displayed radically different personalities and temperaments, diverse political and social views, and varying outlooks about the ideal goals and structure of marriage, each of them shared the common desire to be supportive and caring partners to their spouses and nurturing and caring mothers to their children. Indeed, all three clearly viewed their domestic responsibilities as the most central and valued role in their lives. Examining their marital partnerships and their parenting styles lends them a corporeal presence that is often absent from many historical accounts and serves to humanize them. It reminds us that they were flesh-and-blood individuals who had to contend with personal, family, and public challenges in many ways similar to ours yet at the same time radically different from contemporary circumstances. And like most couples, their marriages endured ups and downs that included serious disagreements and disparate ideas about how best to navigate their complex lives. Yet it is telling that throughout their marriages, George Washington, John Adams, and James Madison all keenly respected the minds, work, and talents of their respective spouses.

Additionally, raising children in especially turbulent times often brought heightened burdens. Abigail Adams, for example, took the primary responsibility for caring for their children and capably overseeing the family farm and household during John's frequent absences as a member of the Continental Congress during a period when war and illness were constant backdrops. She also endured the heartbreaking loss of a stillborn daughter while John was in Philadelphia attending the Continental Congress, but her intense religious faith helped her over-

come the grief, comforted as well by her husband's supportive letters. Martha and Dolley also often had to supervise their large and complicated households and deal with numerous personal or family illnesses without their husbands by their sides. But in the process, Martha and George Washington, Abigail and John Adams, and Dolley and James Madison forged enduring partnerships that encompassed not only the bonds of marriage and mutual affection and respect but also political, social, and even economic alliances as well. Nevertheless, it is important to note, as one historian has recently observed, that "even the best eighteenth-century unions viewed men and women as unequal."³⁰

The noted early American historian Mary Beth Norton has carefully traced changing cultural perceptions of women's roles in America from the first early settlements in the seventeenth century through the American Revolution and the nascent republic of the late eighteenth century. She maintains that, before the late 1670s, "notions of rigid, gendered divisions between the terms public (male) and private (female) did not exist" and in reality public political roles much more closely reflected and were tied to social status rather than gender. However, by the mid-eighteenth century, the belief that women should be confined to what became termed the "private domestic sphere" "had become the assumptive norm," and by the advent of the Revolution, males dominated the public sphere, and even elite women had become marginalized politically.³¹

Yet the American Revolution disrupted those normal patterns of settled domestic life, blurring some of the lines that demarcated appropriate female and male behavior, at times breaking "the barrier which seemed to insulate women from the realm of politics."³² Those new social constructs, brought into play by a war and crisis that affected women as well as men, changed the political landscape and launched Abigail's and Dolley's overt involvement. Even the self-proclaimed apolitical Martha Washington avidly followed newspapers reports about the war battles and later developments in the early republic, and George Washington is reputed to have discussed details of his military operations with her as she joined him every winter in camp during the eight

years of the Revolutionary War. Her letters during that period certainly reflect a clear knowledge of ongoing political and military events.

Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison may have expanded their own female roles by conscious design or simply opportunity against the backdrop of new paths offered during the Revolution, but they did so within the framework of their acceptance and genuine appreciation of traditional societal norms.³³ For as Norton asserts, even for those women who had enlarged public experiences, “the developing notions of women’s sphere carried weight.”³⁴ Other historians, such as Karin Wulf, have also noted the new opportunities the Revolution created for women to expand their traditional roles to include political involvement, which continued on some level through the era of the Federalist administrations, but, as Wulf and other historians like Linda Kerber argue, those activities began to regress under Jefferson and then were submerged almost completely as time passed. Propelled by changing cultural ideas about women’s roles, soon even women’s indirect and supportive political roles were considered inappropriate, and their overall status did not change their opportunities.³⁵

However, in a cogently argued thesis, Zagarrri offers a fresh, convincing new perspective, in which she maintains that elite American women remained politicized in the new republic, certainly into the 1790s and even through the first decades of the nineteenth century before a “revolutionary backlash” became firmly entrenched by the 1830s. Female “politicians”—that is, women who understood and knowledgeably discussed contemporary political issues—took advantage of opportunities to engage in what we would today term “politicking,” and moreover, this phenomenon was most apparent when women were part of a *political family*.³⁶ Of course, individual personality and taste played a role, but when applied to the first three First Ladies, Zagarrri’s thesis helps explain how and why, albeit to different degrees, Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison, all members of influential political families, became visible political actors. And, of course, all three were active *before* the height of the backlash to push women out of politics.

In the early United States, as the two-party system developed, both Federalist and Republican politicians found it in their best interest to win women as well as men over to their particular party ideology. Indeed, from the Revolutionary era through the War of 1812, women were crucial to the unfolding of party structure and the manner in which party conflict evolved. Loyal republican wives, Martha and Abigail became ardent Federalists in concert with and in support of their husbands. Dolley emerged as an enthusiastic Republican in alignment with her husband James and his mentor, Thomas Jefferson, the co-founders of their party. All three women counted themselves as staunch adherents of the policies and broad views of their respective parties and worked alongside their presidential husbands to fulfill their political vision. But because of her reputation for charm and her conciliatory manner, Dolley appeared, at least in the popular imagination, to be above partisanship. Ironically, it is only with the increasing vituperative divisions between the new political parties, which even at times resulted in violence, and the widening of male suffrage that women became totally excluded from politics (by the 1830s women were officially denied the right to vote in all states). They were increasingly relegated to the newly emerging domestic sphere through a backlash against active female political participation. To encourage civility in American society, especially in print, women were exhorted to remove themselves from sordid politics and the commercial world and instead reserve their feminine influence to being peacemakers and mitigating dangerous factional strife.³⁷

Despite their unusual political involvement, all three women in this study were certainly influenced by the contemporary cultural norms referred to by Norton. Martha Washington and Abigail Adams especially were also informed by their strong religious beliefs, which included a highly cultivated sense of duty and long-held prescriptive views of marital roles, with the wife subservient to the husband in the vital family unit. Far from being merely theoretical, religious and cultural ideals were incorporated into their daily lives and world outlook. Although the religious and popular views of their era stressed that partners in a

good marriage had “symmetrical” roles, that did not mean by any stretch of the imagination marriage was considered a fully egalitarian partnership.³⁸ As many historians have reminded us, each generation tends to reshape its images of the founders to adhere more closely to the prevailing outlooks of its own era, unfortunately sometimes in an anachronistic manner or from a present perspective. We need to look at the lives of these founders on their own terms and in the historical context of their times, not ours.

Clearly marriage was different in the eighteenth century. As the historian Edith B. Gelles reiterates, the socially prescribed form of marriage during the era was one in which the wife was automatically the subordinate partner in marriage.³⁹ Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison would have never even contemplated deviating from that norm. Marriage was also considered an unbreakable lifelong commitment, and although many early Americans undoubtedly married, in part, for love, frequently political, economic, and social considerations played a pivotal, if not primary role, in the decision to marry.

This outlook was evident at least on some level for America’s early presidential couples, George and Martha Washington and James and Dolley Madison. Initially, they may very well have viewed their respective unions as marriages of convenience, which involved underlying practical financial and social considerations. Certainly marrying for money, security, and position was considered eminently sensible at the time, and social rank mattered. While he served as president, George Washington voiced this perspective very clearly in 1794 when he advised his step-granddaughter Elizabeth Parke Custis: “Do not then in your contemplation of the marriage state look for perfect felicity before you consent to wed. [Your prospective spouse] should possess good sense—good dispositions—and the means of supporting you in the way you have been brought up.”⁴⁰ It was certainly a direction Washington had taken to heart when he courted Martha Custis over thirty years earlier.

Wealthy widows, who as unmarried *femes soles* could make contracts as well as own and devise property in colonial America, often exercised

considerable economic and social power. However, they frequently remarried when faced with myriad estate and business challenges and the need to protect the interests of young children as well as the desire for companionship.⁴¹ As a rich, lively young widow, Martha Custis attracted a number of suitors. From Martha's perspective, the impressive-looking, dignified, and responsible George Washington must have been an especially attractive marriage prospect. Similarly, once challenging legal issues following her first husband's death were settled, Dolley Payne Todd also found herself a comfortably off widow. However, marriage to fellow southerner and rising politician James Madison held the promise of increased social status for Dolley. It provided her with the opportunity to become part of an elite and wealthy planter family and a participant in national politics, as well as providing stability for her fatherless son.

The exception of the three couples was John and Abigail Adams, who were lifelong loving soul mates, but even their marriage has often been idealized. One wag has observed that the reason their marriage was so successful was probably because they were forced by political circumstances to spend so much time apart! All three couples represented to varying degrees an emerging companionate style of marriage. They were at times forerunners of an ideal in which the relationship of husband and wife was changing. The largely accepted view of the wife being totally dependent on her patriarchal spouse had been evolving to one that encompassed and emphasized mutual bonds of friendship, shared interests, and support—yet still remained within a hierarchal structure, with the husband as the unquestionable head of the household.

In other words, expectations for marriage, particularly among the upper classes, were beginning to change, transforming the institution from an often economic or social transaction motivated to a large degree by practical considerations to a union in which compatibility and love were becoming vital ingredients. Still, for many decades to come, husbands remained in full legal control. According to the rules of coverture, a married woman did not have the status of legal personhood, and her identity was subsumed under her spouse. To put it another way,

she was “covered” by her husband, who had control of all her property and the children of the union, and she could not enter into binding legal contracts, even in the case of personal wills. Not until 1839 was the first American law passed to ensure women’s property rights.

As Kerber and others point out, from a legal standpoint the American Revolution was fundamentally conservative. Even the more radical revolutionists had not envisioned or desired an underlying change in status for women (or for enslaved people or for working-class men, for that matter), although they were considered citizens. But women’s active participation in the war had effected a subtle change on the perception of women’s role. After the Revolution, new ideas emerged that popularized the concept of the idealized republican mother and republican wife as a way to reconcile the inherent contradictions between the formation of a new public role for women and the fact that they were excluded from formal political involvement.

Hearth, home, and the supervision and education of children were increasingly considered crucial to the development of the virtuous good citizens who were necessary to the success and continuation of the new republic. Therefore women, who as a group represented moral stability and virtue in the popular mind, were lauded as critical to American progress and afforded a quasi-political role, albeit from the vantage point of their prescribed domestic sphere.⁴² In other words, their crucial moral role was validated. If we take into account the various perspectives offered by historians over the last decades, we can conclude that the Revolution closed some avenues for women and at the same time opened others.

In the final analysis, the American Revolution brought a “divided legacy to women,” as they were increasingly relegated to the domestic sphere at the same time that their political, economic, and intellectual expectations were raised.⁴³ Something similar occurred in France. French revolutionary republicanism, too, had left conflicting legacies regarding both women’s role within the household and in the larger state and political realm.⁴⁴ Looking back from the perspective of the

twentieth century, Kerber later described the ideology of American republican motherhood as the belief that women had “an obligation, both to themselves and to the political society” in which they resided, “to educate themselves for economic competence and intellectual growth.”⁴⁵ Perhaps Zagarri describes the situation best when she notes, “Republican motherhood preserved traditional gender roles at the same time it carved out a new political role for women.”⁴⁶ Others, such as the historian Jan Lewis, see the “new and unprecedented” role of the republican wife to have been even more significant than that of republican mother. In Lewis’s view, it was in that crucial position that American women could exert at least an indirect political influence.⁴⁷

Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison clearly accepted and valued the roles of what Kerber characterizes as the republican wife and mother. Those categories are a construct introduced by Kerber to help make sense of the manner in which early elite women in the United States conducted themselves. She notes that women of the era often used those positions as a justification for their interest and involvement in political affairs. As Kerber puts it, “The Republican Mother integrated political values into her domestic life.” Ironically, as men’s political enfranchisement widened in the early nineteenth century, women’s sphere of political involvement narrowed, for only males were allowed to vote. However, republican motherhood offered at least an indirect level of involvement in matters of state. Kerber further observes that “those who shared the vision of the Republican Mother usually insisted upon better education, clearer recognition of women’s economic contributions, and a strong political identification with the Republic.”⁴⁸

Although they were certainly not consciously trying to adopt a persona that was first described centuries later, surely the ideals Kerber explicates are ones that resonated with Martha, Abigail, and Dolley. However, far from being “merely” helpmates in that appreciated critical domestic sphere, all three women in varying degrees were also not only essential to the comfort and happiness of their spouses and their concerns about education and economic stability for the women in their

families but also to the development of their husband's political careers, their ascent to the highest office in the land, and in some cases even their sociopolitical outlooks. As the wives of men who served as the leaders of the emerging governing class, the First Ladies were better positioned than most elite women to participate in public affairs.

Martha Washington, in particular, surely appreciated the fact that, when she married in the 1750s, American women seriously discussing or writing about political events would have been "violating cultural norms,"⁴⁹ yet as First Lady she was widely appreciated as a skilled hostess who could converse comfortably on many subjects, including contemporary politics. Of the three women, she appears to have most conformed to a southern domestic feminine ideal of womanhood in which women remained (at least in the popular imagination) apart from the public or state realm. That outlook was clearly challenged for Martha and many women during the 1760s and 1770s in the days leading up to and during the American Revolution.

Although both John and Abigail Adams were deeply involved in American politics in those decades, even they were, according to Norton, also "influenced by the conventional wisdom that accepted a sharp division between the public realm of men and the familial province of women."⁵⁰ However, that division was probably more blurred than previously thought. It is noteworthy that the essentially socially conservative John exhibited a somewhat more progressive, although clearly ambivalent, outlook about women's political, social, and economic roles than most men of his time. No doubt his views were influenced by living with Abigail, whom he recognized as an exceptional woman, and he was visibly proud of her political abilities. One of her biographers declared that during her era she became "the nation's best informed woman on public affairs."⁵¹ Even Thomas Jefferson, who generally viewed women as idealized domestic beings, found her a stimulating and well-informed conversationalist and "one of the most estimable characters on earth."⁵²

Yet, even with the example of his unusually capable wife before him, John Adams envisioned only a very circumscribed political role for

women in the newly formed United States, and he affirmed that he believed that they had a different relationship to the state than men. In this outlook, he was a disciple of conservative Scottish political theorists such as Lord Kames and David Hume. In the momentous year of 1776, John fretted disapprovingly to a fellow politician that if the franchise was widened and qualifications for voting extended beyond propertied males (a situation that John regarded as a very serious threat), the United States would be set on a slippery slope on which eventually even “Women will demand a Vote.”⁵³

Ironically and fortunately, history would prove Adams right, but women’s suffrage was a long time coming. Early on, then, John was already foreshadowing his later Federalist vision, in which he and others in his party sought to maintain the hierarchical order of society. Later as president, John shared with youngest son Thomas his continued belief in the correctness of “true Family Authority. There can never be any regular Government of a Nation without a marked Subordination of Mothers and Children to Fathers.” Yet, at the same time John acknowledged rather sheepishly that his opinion would not prove very popular with his wife Abigail. Apparently, unwilling to antagonize Abigail, John asked his son to keep his views “a Secret.”⁵⁴

John’s hierarchical outlook reflected popular thought and extended not only to the place of women in the new nation but also to the question of enslaved people and of lower-class males. Although Patriot Revolutionary leaders had promised more opportunities for capable men based on a meritocracy, later many Federalists felt working-class men were to be encouraged to defer to the better-educated and politically sophisticated male elite. Too much emphasis on natural rights at the expense of duty and virtue, they warned, would lead to “social unrest, moral upheaval, and political chaos.”⁵⁵

However, the introduction of the theory of human rights proposed by Lord Kames and other Scottish philosophers had opened the Pandora’s box that led to increased public discussion, often fostering paradoxical views. Even the opinionated and outspoken Abigail, who was an espe-

cially vocal proponent of robust education opportunities and legal rights for women and believed they were intellectually equal to men, felt that the two genders were designed for different but complimentary roles. Her famous “Remember the Ladies” letter to John during the revolution was primarily aimed at overturning the practice of coverture and safeguarding women from tyrannical or abusive husbands, but it was by no means a broad feminist appeal for women’s rights and full political equality, as some past historians suggested.⁵⁶

As late as 1814, when she was in her sixties, Abigail maintained that “I believe nature has assigned to each sex its particular duties and sphere of action, and to act well your part, there all the honor lies.”⁵⁷ Although the American Revolution and her husband’s tenure as vice president and then president had opened new avenues of political involvement for Abigail, clearly she still placed the highest level of value for herself and other women in the domestic realm. Still, humans are full of contradictions. For in addition to her domestic responsibilities, Abigail had also ventured successfully and capably into traditionally male dominated economic arenas by selling a variety of imported domestic goods to neighbors and, more daringly, investing in real estate and government securities during her husband John’s many enforced absences from home on behalf of his country. During the periods she and John were separated, she clearly pined for him and often complained bitterly, but she also relished her position as the temporary “deputy husband,” or interim head of the family household and farm, enlarging her family and community status and even economic power. Those roles also brought her immense satisfaction and confirmation of her self-worth as well as her own personal measure of independence.

In carefully composing her own will, which had no legal standing at the time (she could not own property or make contracts as she was considered a *feme covert* under the dominion of her husband), Abigail was demonstrating, if not an “act of rebellion,” as the author Woody Holton termed it, then certainly a conscious desire to manage well the final actions of her life.⁵⁸ However, it is clear from the many vivid, revealing

letters she penned to John, other relatives, and friends over the fifty-four years of the span of her marriage that she found her greatest satisfaction in traditional domestic roles and hoped to return to those endeavors as soon as circumstances allowed. Indeed, she may have seen the composing of her will as responsibly and capably carrying out her duties as a good wife, mother, grandmother, and aunt. What is perhaps more impressive than Abigail's composing her will is that John honored her wishes, even though he was not legally bound to do so. That's what enduring partnerships are all about, and it highlights their extraordinary relationship.

Shared life outlooks may also have been the reason that Abigail Adams and Martha Washington got along so well, held each other in such mutual high regard, and developed a lasting friendship that began when they served respectively as the wives of the first vice president and president of the United States. For, like Abigail, Martha also regarded felicitous domesticity as a most estimable and valued goal, as did the future First Lady Dolley Madison. With obvious admiration after meeting Martha, Abigail declared, "Mrs. Washington is one of those unassuming characters which create Love and Esteem" and averred she found Martha's simple dignity and elegant but unostentatious clothing more impressive than that of the British monarchs she had met while John Adams was stationed in England.⁵⁹

It is interesting that the lives of the trio of First Ladies intertwined on numerous occasions during President Washington's tenure. They may have influenced one other's views, from visions for the future of the burgeoning nation and its nascent political structure to strong opinions about family life, child rearing, and matrimony. It was said that the Washingtons, especially Martha, even had a hand in encouraging Dolley's marriage to Congressman James Madison, whom both Washingtons admired at the time. Many elite women like Martha and others in her circle—such as Philadelphian Elizabeth Willing Powel and early New Jersey *salonnière* Annis Boudinot Stockton, an ally of the Washingtons who became an ardent Federalist—spent a good deal of time brokering matches between young emerging political figures and

the daughters of prominent local gentry, and they played a role in the formation of the governing class in the new nation.⁶⁰

In the memoir about Dolley Madison penned by her niece Mary Cutts, a perhaps apocryphal exchange between Martha and Dolley was reported and probably romanticized to fit Mary's vision of the proper feminine ideal of her own era. Cutts claimed that Mrs. Washington had declared, "He [Madison] will make you a good husband, all the better for being so much older, we [George and Martha] both advocate it."⁶¹ Certainly, the Washingtons were well acquainted with Dolley, as her younger sister Lucy was married to George's nephew, George Steptoe Washington.

The lives of the three women also overlapped after the seat of the government moved to Philadelphia. Owing, in part, to Abigail's ill health, which forced her to return from the capital to Quincy, Massachusetts, for long periods, Dolley and Abigail never met in person, but they certainly knew one another by reputation. However, at various times each separately interacted with Martha at her famous Friday receptions, or "levees," where the fledgling American government's leaders and their wives mingled socially and built political alliances. All three First Ladies were clearly familiar with the constraints under which women in their social class had to function, but they devised ways to get around them, make their views known, and take advantage of opportunities for political influence as they arose. American women were considered citizens, but in the early United States, they did not possess all the rights of citizens. Yet the three presidential spouses demonstrate that they could still operate as insiders in the political culture, as they worked in partnership with their presidential spouses.

If George Washington was America's "indispensable" man, as one of Martha Washington's biographers so aptly put it, "Martha Washington was the indispensable woman to him."⁶² Martha Dandridge Custis, America's first presidential wife, was a charming twenty-seven-year-old widow, perhaps the wealthiest widow in Virginia at the time, when she was first courted by George Washington in the late 1750s. When they

married on January 6, 1759, Martha brought the ambitious Washington the social status and position he had long craved, as well as eighteen thousand acres of land, forty thousand pounds sterling in cash, and the two surviving children of the four she had borne to her first husband. Although the practical, down-to-earth, and personable Martha may not have been “intellectually sophisticated,”⁶³ she was certainly a capable manager and an avid reader who appreciated music and artistic culture and followed current events as well.

Shortly after her first husband’s death, Martha dealt ably with his economic affairs and sought and retained the advice of sound, experienced business advisers. For at least a year, widowhood propelled her beyond the household into the largely masculine world of commerce. In one of her earliest extant letters, in 1757 Martha wrote confidently to the director of a prominent mercantile company in England to inform him of the untimely death of her first husband and the fact that “I have now the Administration of his Estate & management of his affairs of all sorts.”⁶⁴ That is not to suggest that, by stepping into the business world, the conservative but resourceful Martha Custis was attempting to overtly expand her authority and autonomy beyond the domestic realm into the traditional male sphere. Like so many other colonial widows of means, she undoubtedly acted from necessity to help preserve the family fortune for her children, particularly that of her remaining son, and maintain her family’s prominent position in the Virginia social order.⁶⁵ Although some married women at the time took part in economic ventures, the status of *femes soles* certainly provided expanded opportunities for widows like Martha.⁶⁶ It is noteworthy that Martha quite capably handled economic affairs and later during her second marriage often managed the extensive Mount Vernon household when Washington was away from home.

Much later in 1788, as the wife of the newly elected president, the self-effacing Martha maintained to a niece that she did not concern herself much about “politick” [*sic*].⁶⁷ But arguably Martha was more interested than she let on, for not only did she closely follow the newspapers of the

day and was cognizant of the political challenges her husband faced, but she also zealously guarded her husband's public reputation and image as well as his health. And it is Martha Washington who is credited with introducing the country's first "political salon,"⁶⁸ an innovation followed by Abigail Adams and later brought to a new level by Dolley Madison, who excelled at converting social occasions into political capital.

Although they were modeled loosely on French salons, American salons were much more intentionally political in nature. According to the French historian Antoine Lilti, Parisian salons were never in reality platforms for deep intellectual, literary, or political discussion; rather, they operated predominantly as "social spaces of elite leisure." Moreover, Lilti maintains that the French women who hosted the salons were celebrated only for their social skills as hostesses and their ability to maintain "*politesse* and harmony," not for their intellectual or political contributions to the French Enlightenment or for their involvement in a "distinctively republican form of government," as the influential historian Dena Goodman had suggested earlier. According to recent scholars, it appears likely those salons may not have been quite the protofeminist salons or incubators for open political debate that a number of historians postulated between the 1970s and 1990s.⁶⁹ The drawing rooms and salons in the developing but still fluid United States, however, may indeed have allowed for more open types of conversation about potentially controversial topics that were forbidden under the Old Regime in France. In other words, despite the fact that they were not formal state actors, some elite women in the newly emerging democratic republic of the United States were allowed more public agency than their European counterparts in creating a viable political culture.⁷⁰

Martha's disparaging remarks to her niece about politics may have reflected her belief that displaying overt political interest was unseemly and marred the image of feminine domesticity she wished to project. After all, Dolley Madison, one of the most intuitively political of women (and of men, for that matter), insisted in a letter to her husband James that "You know I am not much of a politician."⁷¹ And many other early

male American figures who aspired to the republican ideal of the repudiation of self-interest professed to be above politics, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, both highly skilled politicians.⁷²

By temperament Martha may not have relished public life, but ultimately, she proved a great source of political support and encouragement to her increasingly influential and famous second husband. She also oversaw domestic details and social obligations with great efficiency and flair at Mount Vernon and in the temporary presidential homes in New York and Philadelphia that the Washingtons occupied during George's years in office. As the "President's Lady," or "Lady Washington," as she was respectfully and affectionately known, Martha became a popular symbolic political figure and pioneered the role of First Lady. Moreover, Martha helped Washington forge advantageous political alliances from the vantage point of the arena that has so felicitously been dubbed "parlor politics" by Allgor.⁷³

For Martha, her husband's ambitions and comfort became paramount, and her primary goal in life was to become a "worthy partner" to Washington, as one newspaper obituary later described her.⁷⁴ Throughout their long marriage, first as the wife of a successful gentleman planter, then through his challenging days as commander of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, and finally as Washington became the first president of the new republic, Martha exhibited unwavering loving devotion, support, and concern. Washington, in turn, was known to have often extolled the married state on the basis of his own happy experience and demonstrated genuine concern for Martha's welfare and that of her remaining children and grandchildren.

During the war, Martha's active public service on behalf of and concern for the common soldiers earned her their sincere appreciation and respect, as well as having a political impact by raising George's popularity among his men. In essence, her experience as the wife of the leader of the Revolutionary Army served as a training ground in influencing public opinion that would serve her well in her later role as First Lady. The intellectually sophisticated and politically astute female Massa-

chusetts Patriot and writer Mercy Otis Warren, who first met Martha in camp during the war, described her to Abigail Adams in the most complimentary, albeit romanticized, terms. Warren reported that Mrs. Washington exhibited “Benevolence of the Heart, and her affability, Candor and Gentleness Qualify her to soften the hours of private Life or to sweeten the Cares of the Hero [General Washington] and smooth the Rugged scenes of War.”⁷⁵

Although the term “First Lady” did first not come into common usage until decades later, Martha Washington was the originator and pioneer of the role. Ironically, Martha notoriously displayed great aversion for public life and claimed to have found her greatest source of pleasure and contentment surrounded by family members with George at her side at the Washington plantation at Mount Vernon. As she wrote to her niece, her fondest ambition after Washington retired as commander of the Continental Army was to be “left to grow old in solitude and tranquility together.” Yet she was committed to supporting her husband’s call to public duty as the nation’s first president and observed that, despite her private wishes, “I am still determined to be cheerful and to be happy in whatever situation I may be, for I have also learnt from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our dispositions, and not upon our circumstances.”⁷⁶

In her position as the wife of the president, Martha Washington famously declared she often felt like a “State prisoner,”⁷⁷ locked into a highly visible public role that she neither desired nor enjoyed and that often prevented her from the informal lively social interactions she had previously and happily conducted. Yet she carried out her role as the president’s spouse with great aplomb and grace and became popularly known as a dignified, accessible hostess who could converse with people from all walks of life and as Washington’s helpmeet par excellence. She served as an engaging model for the position of “First Lady” for all her successors, lending her genial and diplomatic presence to all social affairs while her husband George served as president and softening his sometimes austere public demeanor. Perhaps more important, following accepted standards

for eighteenth-century wives, she supported Washington through numerous serious illnesses and political stresses, enabling him to devote his full attention to presidential responsibilities. As Martha noted sadly to her husband's successor, John Adams, after Washington's death in 1799, following Washington's example, she had long accustomed herself "never to oppose my private wishes to the public will."⁷⁸

More unusually for their era, the future second president of the United States, John Adams, and his wife, Abigail Smith, married for love. Their union was not the result of a quest for financial gain, security, or social position; rather, it was a deep emotional and intellectual partnership that characterized their over half-a-century-long marriage. As Joseph Ellis observes, the steady, practical, and intellectually gifted Abigail served as the ballast for the brilliant, brash, but far more mercurial John.⁷⁹ John Adams recognized from the beginning that his talented, strong-minded, and sometimes judgmental and stubborn wife Abigail was his intellectual equal and regarded her involvement as essential to all his endeavors, always turning to her first as a sounding board for his ideas and projects. They regularly discussed momentous political and social issues, and to his credit, John took Abigail's views seriously. She, in turn, was fiercely protective of his reputation. At times this proved to his detriment, especially when Abigail strongly (and unwisely) encouraged his signing of the notorious Alien and Sedition Acts, a key factor in his failure to gain reelection for a second term as president. But that incident does demonstrate that Abigail might have even exerted influence on political legislation, certainly something she was accused of by her detractors.

Abigail was always John's loyal critic and—as Gelles, the author of a fine dual biography on John and Abigail Adams, observes—John's "best support both as a theorist and as a politician."⁸⁰ As we have seen, the American Revolution had rocked some previously held views about appropriate roles for women, including within the realm of politics, an area that Abigail tested and found infinitely interesting and one that she often discussed with heated emotion and robust knowledge. While the

Adams family lived in England in 1785, when John served as the American ambassador, their daughter Nabby noted that during their frequent social calls Abigail was a lively conversationalist who visibly relished her “dish of politics.”⁸¹ Similarly, Mercy Warren noted that Abigail loved “a Little seasoning of that Nature [politics] in Every production [letter]” she received from her friend.⁸² Abigail Adams became the epitome of what was then termed “a female politician.”

Abigail was also John’s emotional bulwark in times of distress. As John famously declared after his presidential inauguration to Abigail, who was still back in Quincy: “The times are critical and dangerous and I must have you here to assist me. . . . You must leave our farm to the mercy of the winds. . . . I can do nothing without you.”⁸³ Although John sometimes had a tendency to be histrionic, he was indeed entering a most challenging period in American history, and once again he looked to Abigail for guidance, her stabilizing influence, and her political insight and skills. Theirs was a marriage grounded in deep mutual appreciation on many levels.

It was the infamous Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic of 1793 that first thrust Dolley Payne Todd Madison into her prominent role in American history.⁸⁴ Ultimately, it was that health crisis that led to her marriage to the rising politician James Madison. An attractive widow of twenty-six, Dolley would marry future president Madison, who at forty-three was seventeen years her senior, less than a year after the death of her first husband, the Quaker attorney John Todd, and their baby. It is clear that Madison was smitten with the charismatic Dolley, but financial stability and social status for herself and her remaining young son Payne were likely Dolley’s initial overriding concerns. Since Dolley appears to have experienced a happy marriage with her first husband, it is understandable that it took her a bit more time to develop the deep and abiding affection and concern she came to feel for James. Eventually, he became the beloved centerpiece of her life.

Whether living in Philadelphia, in Washington, or in Virginia at Montpelier, the effervescent Dolley dazzled and sparkled. The gregari-

ous and vivacious Mrs. Madison was much more than a mere decorative, supportive, and loving spouse during Madison's two terms as president. She carved out an especially visible role for herself as First Lady. Dolley was not only a consummately skilled hostess and diplomat, as so many of her contemporary observers and historians in our own time have noted, she was also a savvy and formidable political force in her own right, earning herself the nickname of "Mrs. Presidentess." As James Madison's political rival for the presidency Charles C. Pickney was said to have observed, "[I] was beaten by Mr. and Mrs. Madison. I might have faced a better chance if I had faced Mr. Madison alone."⁸⁵ She seemed to realize instinctively the political value of forming alliances through compromise and was able to successfully mold "a public arena" in which women were able to exert influence upon political men in her era.⁸⁶ Dolley became a celebrity even in her own day, widely viewed as a heroine for rescuing documents and Washington's portrait (what turned out in reality to be only a symbolically important copy) just before the British set fire to the White House.

Even after James died, Dolley Madison remained an impressive figure in Washington. Early American politician and statesman Daniel Webster was reputed to have dubbed Dolley "The only permanent power in Washington." He also was said to have claimed "all others were transient."⁸⁷ Although the quote is probably apocryphal, it illustrates the power of Dolley's reputation in the American imagination, even if we take the view that her political influence has been exaggerated. As her recent biographer Catherine Allgor has perceptively observed, Dolley grew especially skillful at building the necessary alliances that were essential for developing unity within the young nation. Although in many respects she was a conventional eighteenth-century woman, at the same time she was "an innovator as a politician."⁸⁸

Martha Washington was born in 1731 in Virginia. Abigail Adams, over a decade Martha's junior, was born in the Massachusetts Colony in 1744. Dolley Madison, born in North Carolina in 1768, was the youngest of the three women and literally a generation below Martha and

Abigail. She grew up in Virginia, but her family moved to Philadelphia when she was fifteen, in the same year the peace treaty to end the Revolutionary War was signed between America and England. To what degree did their specific age differences, era, and region influence these First Ladies?

Was Martha perhaps the least “political” of the three women because of encroaching old age as well as common rigid views about public and private spheres for women in early eighteenth-century Virginia? Historians have traditionally viewed southern culture as a strict patriarchal society. Yet newer research has suggested that patriarchy had its limits in the region, and stereotypical visions of white southern privileged women who never ventured into the public area was a myth before sectional differences hardened by the 1830s.⁸⁹ Was Abigail the strongest and most outspoken political theorist of the three because in early New England the patriarchal model was more permeable and flexible than in other regions of the country? It appears that women in at least that region of the early American colonies were able to assert themselves to some degree in a variety of public and private roles within the larger social framework while still conforming to broader cultural norms.⁹⁰ Had Dolley, who grew up during the American Revolution, been the most influenced by the enlarged roles many women experienced during the war as well as by aspects of her early Quaker roots? Quaker women in early America often possessed significant authority in their churches and community.⁹¹

Despite these differences, all three women shared a common upbringing in which formal education for women was often rudimentary and primarily focused on training them to competently run households. However, the trio appears to have been educated in a manner superior to most American females of their era. Martha may have attended a local country school or received private instruction from a tutor hired by a group of plantation families. She was certainly literate and was said to have closely followed the newspapers of the day and personally purchased a number of books, including histories of the French Revolu-

tion, while she was First Lady.⁹² And although her spelling was often idiosyncratic, her handwriting was neat, firm, and clear, and she was an engaging letter writer. Abigail Adams was educated by family members, what today would be termed “homeschooled,” but she read widely and deeply. Her voracious literary appetite was fed by her parents, Mary and Pastor William Smith, her erudite brother-in-law Richard Cranch, and later by her husband, John Adams. The Quakers were known for providing a strong education for girls as well as boys, and it is possibly one of their early schools or simply her enthusiasm for learning and passion for reading that allowed Dolley to develop her strong writing and communication skills.

Another common thread that ties the three women together is the family tragedies they endured. Like most early Americans, they were frequently challenged by the ravages of epidemics and diseases. Before the advent of the hallmarks of modern medicine—antibiotics, antiseptics, and reliable anesthesia—life could be abruptly shattered by contagion and death. That stark reality was, of course, commonplace for early Americans, regardless of social status, but the founders in this study appear to have suffered disproportionately. The lives of the first presidential couples were especially filled with the loss of loved ones, perhaps ultimately strengthening their characters and making them more resilient in the face of adversity. Martha Washington lost her first husband and all four of her children to illness. John and Abigail Adams were predeceased by four of their six children, and Dolley Madison’s first husband and their baby died during the notorious Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic of 1793, leaving her with just one young son, who would turn out to be her only child.⁹³

While all three couples experienced strong marriages, they fared less well with their children. Martha’s son, Jacky (John Parke Custis), and Dolley’s son, John Payne Todd, were for the most part feckless men who proved a great disappointment to their parents on numerous occasions. Two of the sons of John and Abigail Adams, Charles and Thomas, were similarly challenged, and their only surviving daughter, Nabby Smith,

endured a troubled marriage and sadly died when she was only in her forties of breast cancer. Although their eldest son, John Quincy Adams, achieved great political status, he was a dour, often embittered man, whose own marriage reflected more downs than ups.

Like all humans, America's early leaders were motivated by complex impulses. Of course, personal ambition and aspirations as well as individual temperament played a part in their rise to the pinnacle of political power and society, but in the eighteenth century the notions of duty and public service were ones that most Americans took very seriously. Indeed, members of the upper classes believed that public service was an obligation that was imposed upon them by their status. The Washingtons, the Adamses, and the Madisons were all influenced by a highly complex interweaving of religious, family, and Enlightenment-inspired shared values that formed the core of their desire to serve their country and fellow Americans in the early years of the new republic. Disciples of the Enlightenment, they all subscribed to the belief in the fundamental importance of working on behalf of the nation, and they all shared the conviction that public service, which emphasized unselfish devotion to the common good, was essential to the safeguarding and development of the republic. In other words, for the most part duty trumped their personal inclinations.

Over the span of their three administrations, America's early presidents and their First Ladies did indeed serve as "worthy partners" in relation to their spouses as well as the country. When the six were born, the American colonies were an integral part of the far-flung British Empire, and as the historian Alan Taylor has recently shown, by the mid-1700s, and even on the eve of the Revolution, Americans had become "more British than ever before."⁹⁴ They considered themselves English by birth, culture, and social orientation, and they were united by their allegiance to the British crown. In fact, the Washingtons and other members of the colonial elite prided themselves on their acquisition of imported English fine china, fabrics, and British tea, which would later become such a flash point of contention, as they viewed such accoutre-

ments as tangible demonstrations of their British identity and links to the English gentry class. But the perceived violation of their rights as Englishmen and their fear that their western expansionist aspirations would be thwarted led to a traumatic war and revolution. By the time the Washingtons, the Adamases, and the Madisons served as presidential couples, the United States was an independent nation and a rising power. Each of them had witnessed the birth of the new republic, and each had an impact on the transformation of their country from an unwieldy fragile confederation of states to the early configuration of one united nation.

Dolley Todd Payne Madison was only a child in 1776. She might have understood that it was the beginning of a momentous new era, but she could not have imagined to what extent the revolution would change her world and the lives of future generations of men and women throughout the United States. All three witnessed cataclysmic changes during their lifetimes. While some of the founders' outlooks in this study about what constituted the appropriate bonds of marriage, wifely "duties," and women's roles may offend modern ears, we need to take a step back and examine their stories in the context of their times. Their experiences focus a lens on the development of the role of presidential First Lady, as it would become known over time, as well as evolving views of marriage and women's place in the early republic. This book aims to locate their stories as the initial First Ladies of the land into the larger personal and political context, for all three, especially Abigail Adams and Dolley Madison, forged deep marital *and* political partnerships with their presidential spouses.

During the presidential years, and indeed throughout their marriages, each of the presidential wives developed robust skills as a political spouse, as part of a *family unit*. Their involvement in the public sphere stemmed from their attachments as the wives of the most prominent political players in the United States, but that does not diminish the importance of their own contributions. Circumstances and inherent talent conspired to thrust Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dol-

ley Madison out of the domestic shadows and into the public realm, ultimately pivoting them onto the stage of American history. Indeed, Abigail Adams may be viewed as a bridge between America's first and third First Ladies and the growing development of the evolving formal and informal roles of the position of First Lady, from the more overtly social role that Martha primarily occupied, to Dolley, who was able to meld Abigail's political acumen with Martha's highly developed social skills. And without question, each of them played a critical role in shaping a new American identity at a critical juncture in the birth of the United States republic.

Their experiences demonstrate that the public world of men and the domestic world of women of their era were not as starkly separated as has been thought, and at least in the lives of these three admittedly elite women, those realms sometimes intersected and overlapped. They capably managed their complicated households and carried out the normal duties of women of their status, dealt with heartbreaking personal losses and life-threatening illnesses, and at the same time engaged in the political currents of the day. The trio helped develop the temperament and tone as well as public perceptions of their husbands' administrations. Whether always consciously or not, as First Ladies, Martha Washington, Abigail Adams, and Dolley Madison each constructed a public identity for themselves, and in the process, they played an influential role in nation building and helped shape the contours of the future of the new United States of America.