ABIGAIL ADAMS: EVERYDAY LIFE IN COLONIAL AMERICA

A One-Woman Program

by

Judith Helton

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OBJECTIVES:

1. The basic aim of this presentation is to explore everyday life in America during Abigail Adams' time. Objects and activities of the 18th century will be demonstrated with audience participation.

2. Students will gain new perspectives on the little-known role of women during the founding of our nation.

3. In Colonial Times it was said that "a girl knows enough if she can make a skirt and a pudding." Through viewing Mrs. Adams' efforts to educate herself and gain a voice for women in public life, students will understand that an essential part of freedom is the freedom to grow and expand one's mind and talents.

TO THE TEACHER:

You have an important role to play in making this program a meaningful experience for your students. First, by giving them some historical background on Abigail Adams as covered in this study guide, they can come to the presentation with a knowledge of her life and the time frame in which she lived. Next, to avoid confusion about how a person who was born in 1744 can be present today, the students should be prepared by letting them know that this is a game of *Let's Pretend*. The experience will be more meaningful if they play along. The performer, Judith Helton, has done a great deal of research so that the audience can ask her questions as if she really were Abigail Adams. If the real Mrs. Adams could be here, what would the students wish to know about her life and times? Finally, because of copyright considerations NO AUDIO OR VIDEO TAPING is permitted during the performance.

ABOUT THE PERFORMER:

Judith Helton has been a professional actress for over thirty years. Since 1976 she has written, costumed and performed four one-woman programs, each relating to an actual historic figure — Abigail Adams, Lotta Crabtree, Laura Ingalls Wilder and Beatrix Potter. For her work she won a "Lifetime Achievement Award" from PASA (Professional Artists in Schools Awards) in 1996. Ms. Helton's commitment to authenticity in her portrayals has led her to master such specialized skills as spinning, weaving, banjo playing and antique costume construction. Her background in drama includes a degree in Theater from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois, her hometown. She then became a member of professional theater companies in Baltimore, Milwaukee, Houston and San Diego. In addition, Ms. Helton appeared with the Penny Plain Players at the World Theater Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland, followed by performances in Ireland. Her one-woman shows have been performed for thousands of adult and student audiences throughout the United States.
ABIGAIL ADAMS (1744 -1818) is one of only two women in American history to be the wife of one President (John Adams - 2nd President) and the mother of another (John Quincy Adams - 6th President), Mrs. Barbara Bush being the other. An eyewitness of many of the great events of the American Revolution, Mrs. Adams also knew many of the outstanding figures of that time -- Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Revere, Hamilton, Lafayette and King George the Third. And she had opinions about all of them! She was also a female patriot and faced life on the homefront in Braintree, Massachusetts. While her husband was fighting for liberty in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia and in Europe, Mrs. Adams endured wartime conditions and, like other Daughters of Liberty, aided our Continental soldiers by making bullets and gunpowder. This female patriot was joyous when independence was declared.

Abigail Adams became one of the earliest advocates of more rights for women in this country. The power of her words still echoes through the centuries:

"...in the new Code of Laws... I desire you would Remember the Ladies... If particular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation."

(To John Adams, March 31st, 1776)

Note the spelling in the above quote. Abigail Adams never went to school a single day in her life, as was true for many girls of her time. Taught to read and write at home, she determined to educate herself and spoke out for female education all of her life. Despite her lack of formal schooling, Abigail Adams is now considered one of the outstanding letter writers of all time, as even her husband predicted...

"...I really think that your Letters are much better worth preserving than mine."

(John Adams to Abigail, June 2nd, 1776)

Mrs. Adams' letters reflect the great events of her time...

"The Battle began upon our intrenchments up Bunkers Hill, a Saturday morning about 3 o clock and has not ceased yet..."

(June 18th, 1775)
But these letters also reveal that the people of that time were very human...

"My fingers are so cold I can scarcely hold a pen."

(December 18th, 1788)

They also tell of everyday life of women in the 1700's in Colonial and Revolutionary America...

"I seek wool and flax and can work willingly with my Hands, and tho my Household are not cloathed with fine linmen nor scarlet, they are cloathed with what is perhaps full as Honorary, the plain and decent manufactory of my own family..."

(April 17th, 1777)

PRIOR TO THE PERFORMANCE:

Read a brief history on the life of Abigail Adams. This can be found in any book on "First Ladies" or see the reading list at the end. Become familiar with the status of women during the Colonial and Revolutionary period of American history. Also, students should be thinking of questions to ask of "Mrs. Adams" at the end of the presentation. The answers will be based on Ms. Helton's in-depth research into the life and times of this great lady of the past, using quotes whenever possible.

THE PROGRAM:

There will be a demonstration of turning raw wool into cloth by carding, spinning yarn and weaving. The making of homespun, homemade cloth, was an important contribution by women to American independence from Mother England. Students will be selected from the audience to try their hand at these "old fashioned" activities.

Also there will be a demonstration of Colonial toys with student participation, plus a discussion of the games of this period. How many of them have you played? In addition, subjects to be covered will be selected from the following depending on time:

  Household chores: cooking, preserving food, making candles and soap
  Schooling (If you were lucky enough to go to school)
Pen and ink (How to write a letter 200 years ago)
Songs
Manners
Clothing (Why you would have buckles on your shoes?)

CLOTHING - The costume used in this program is based on the pattern of an actual dress of this period in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Department of Textiles and Costumes. It was made by Judith Helton. How has clothing changed in 200 years? For Women? For Men? For Children?

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES:

MAKE A LIST of things in your life which require electricity to operate. Now imagine a world without the use of electricity. What would you have to know, what would have to substitute for those things? What if you didn't have electric lights or a refrigerator? Welcome the world of Abigail Adams.

At right is a drawing of a drop spindle used to spin yarn. Girls learned to spin about age six. At age four girls could knit a pair of stockings. Boys and girls both gather roots, leaves and berries which were used as dyes to color yarn. Boys chopped wood for the fireplace, which was used both for heat and for cooking. Since there was no faucet to turn on, the boys carried buckets of water from the well, the pump or a stream. Inside, girls helped their mother by churning butter, sewing, making candles and soap.

DISCUSS what chores children are expected to do around the house today. What skills do parents pass on to their children?

LEARN AN ACTIVITY from the past to share with your parents - weaving, games, manners.

DRY APPLES - Start with fresh, firm apples. With help from the teacher, cut them crossways in round slices. Hang the slices on a string and place them in a warm, dry place until the apples are leathery and can be squeezed without juicing. Drying was one method of preserving food before refrigeration.
DRAW A PICTURE - Put yourself back into Colonial Days. Draw a picture of yourself doing something that a young person of that time would do.

TAKE ONE GIANT STEP BACKWARD IN TIME - Pick one (or both) of the following:  

A. Make up a short scene as if you were living in Abigail Adams' time. Talk about your life as if you are living in Colonial Days. Mime an activity. What would you wear? What object would you carry?  

B. Write a letter as if the year were 1770 telling about your daily life, your schooling, your chores, your hopes for the future.

VOCABULARY

carding paddles -- Wire brushes used to prepare wool for spinning.
drop spindle -- Hand-held spinning tool, used to spin wool into yarn.
flax -- A plant whose fibers are used to spin linen thread.
homespun -- Homemade cloth.
loom -- A frame on which thread is woven into cloth.
shuttle -- A device used to carry threads back and forth across a loom to make cloth.
slate -- Old name for small chalk board; also the name of the stone from which it is made.
tricorn A three-cornered hat with a brim turned up on three sides. (See picture.)
warp -- Threads running lengthwise on a loom.
weft -- Threads woven across the warp to make cloth.

These are only a few of the words used during the program which are less known in your time. Language changes as the objects and everyday activities change over time. Sometimes words take on new meanings. For example, the word "shuttle" still means something that goes back and forth, but now it applies to outer space - the space shuttle.

Which of the following words would Abigail Adams NOT have known?

1. Electricity  
2. Ice Cream  
3. Balloon  
4. Sewing Machine  
5. Kite  
6. Telephone

(Answers on Last Page)
BIBLIOGRAPHY

These are only a few of the books used to prepare this program. Check your library for more information on Abigail Adams, Colonial life and the American Revolution.

BOOKS ON COLONIAL LIVING


BOOKS ON ABIGAIL ADAMS

(For the Young Reader)


(Continued on Next Page)
FURTHER READING FOR OLDER STUDENTS


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Answers to questions on Page 6: Abigail Adams would have known the following words:

**Electricity** (1) is part of nature. Benjamin Franklin proved that lightning is electricity when he flew his **Kite** (5) into a storm. **Ice Cream** (2) has been manufactured in America since 1787. The first **Hot Air Balloon** (3) to carry a person aloft was in France in 1783 and was the beginning of air travel. Mrs. Adams watched some of these early experiments in 1785 when she was in Europe.

Abigail Adams would NOT have known about the **Sewing Machine** (4), which was patented in 1846, after her lifetime. This meant that making clothing took longer in Colonial Days.

The **Telephone** (6) was not invented until 1876, a hundred years after the Declaration of Independence was written. Fortunately for our time, this meant that Abigail Adams had to communicate by letters, which we still have.