

SECOND EDITION

# W A Woman's Dilemma

Mercy Otis Warren  
and the American  
Revolution

Rosemarie Zagarri

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WILEY Blackwell

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*Mercy Otis Warren and The American Revolution*

SECOND EDITION

Rosemarie Zagarri

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# A Woman's Dilemma

*To Anthony*

# Acknowledgments

Just as Mercy Otis Warren's *History* of the American Revolution owed its existence to the intervention and assistance of numerous friends and acquaintances, so, too, does this biography of its author. Reaching very far back, I would like to acknowledge the influence of four teachers, Sr Marie Blanche Marschner, SSND, Sr Miriam Catherine Wesselman, SSND, Sr Sheila Marie Hederman, CSJ, and Ms Mary Jo Mason, all of whom demonstrated in their lives and classrooms that gender was no barrier to intellectual equality. My graduate school mentor provided another kind of assistance. I owe my title to Edmund S. Morgan's *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop*, which remains a model and inspiration for all biographers.

More immediately, several people contributed to the origin and development of this project. Jon Wakelyn, my colleague and friend, proved to be a superb editor. He encouraged the idea from the start and nudged the skittish author toward the work's completion. Alan Kraut did yeoman service in providing helpful editorial comments and gentle recommendations for revision. The Charles Pyne Family of Sandwich, Massachusetts, kindly offered me a place to stay as I searched out Mercy's homes in the region. Alexa Crane of the Sturgis Library in Barnstable aided me in locating the site of the Otis family home. Although the

house has been destroyed, a stone marker in honor of James Otis near the intersection of Massachusetts Route 6A and Highway 149 provides a clue as to the location.

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The Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston has kindly granted me permission to quote from the Mercy Warren papers. For the convenience of scholars, I have deposited there a list of references to the quotations used within this book. Interested parties may obtain a copy of the citations from the Society. All quotations have been rendered as written in the original documents, complete with the irregular spellings and punctuation common at the time.

*Takoma Park, MD*

*July 1, 1994*

# Acknowledgments

## Second Edition

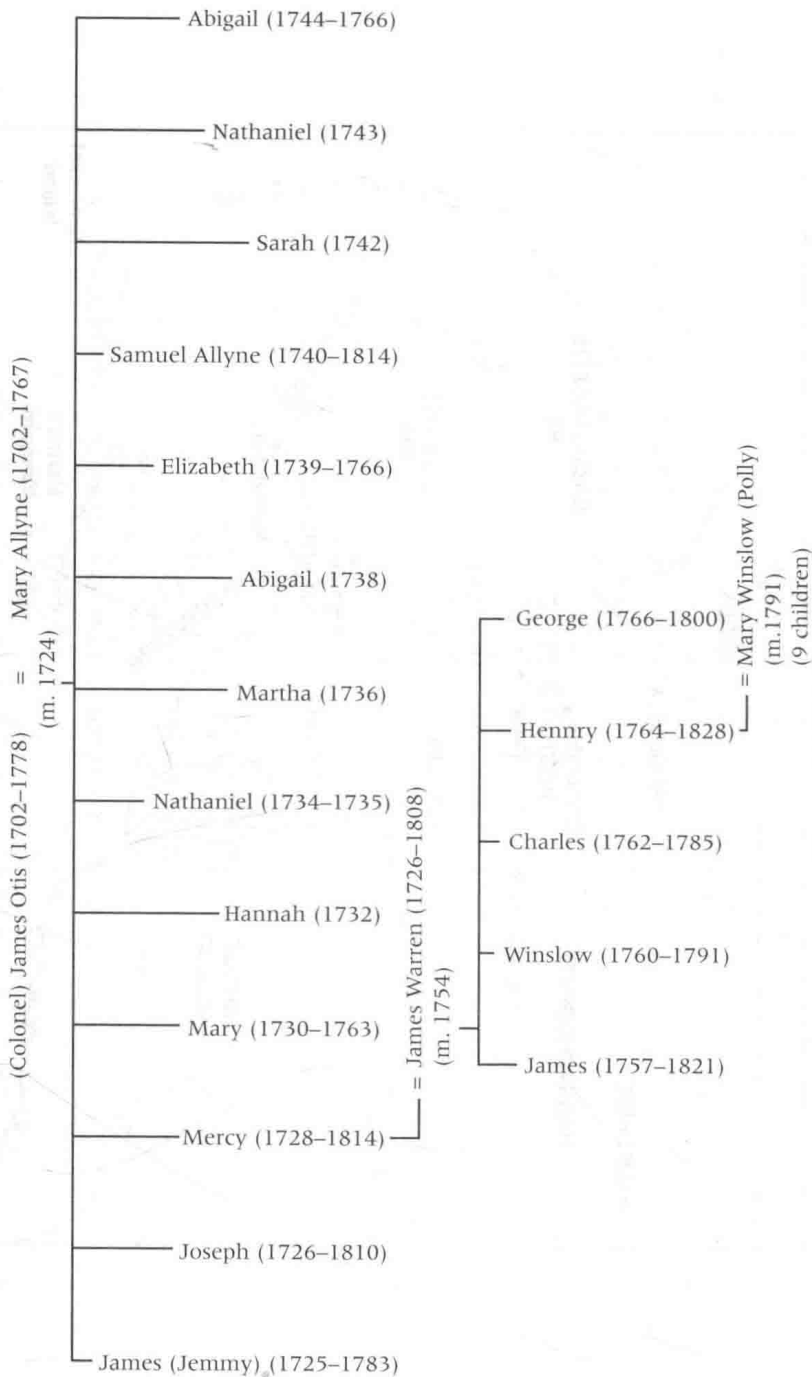
In the years since this book was first published, Mercy Otis Warren has begun to attract a substantial amount of attention from scholars. Nonetheless, she is still relatively unknown to the larger public. It is therefore a pleasure and a privilege to offer an updated edition of the book to those who might benefit from learning about Warren's life, literary works, and political contributions to the American Revolution. I am pleased to thank those who made the new edition possible. Georgina Coleby and Lindsay Bourgeois of Wiley did a diligent job of overseeing the production of the new edition. Andrew Davidson saw the need for a new edition and was a vigorous supporter of its publication. He and Linda Davidson did an immense amount of pre-publication work to make the manuscript ready for revision. I am very grateful for their efforts. Most especially, I thank Bill Gormley, Anthony Morley, and Angela Gormley, for giving me new insights into Mercy's world by supporting me as a wife, mother, and historian.

*Arlington, VA  
March 15, 2014*

Note: All quotations in *A Woman's Dilemma* are rendered exactly as they appear in the original sources, complete with irregular spellings and unorthodox punctuation.

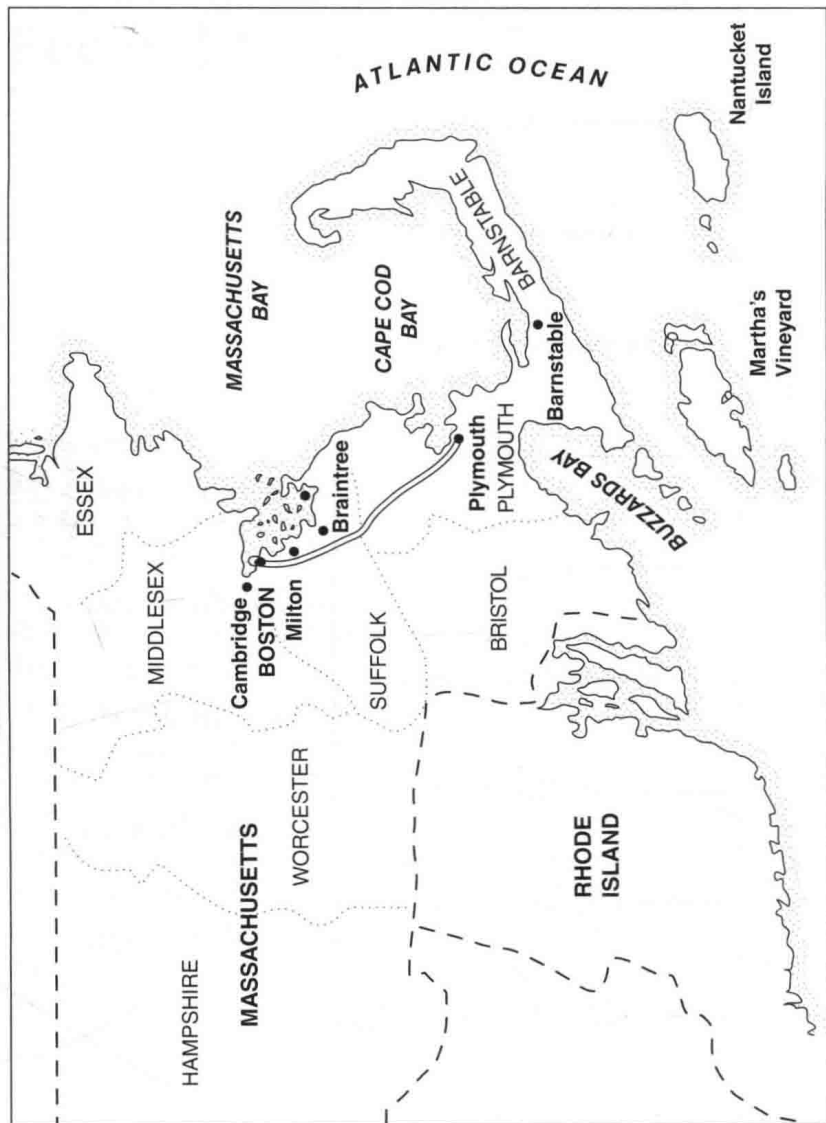


# A Partial Genealogy of the Family of Mercy Otis Warren



Sources: Horatio N. Otis, "General and Historical Memoir of the Otis Family," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, Vol. II (1848), 289-292; Maud M. Hutcheson, "Mercy Warren: A Study of Her Life and Works," PhD diss., American University, 1951, 350; and Edmund M. Hayes, "The Private Poems of Mercy Otis Warren," *The New England Quarterly* LIV (June 1981), 251 n. 12.

# MASSACHUSETTS IN 1782



# **TIMELINE** **Mercy Otis Warren/The American Revolution**

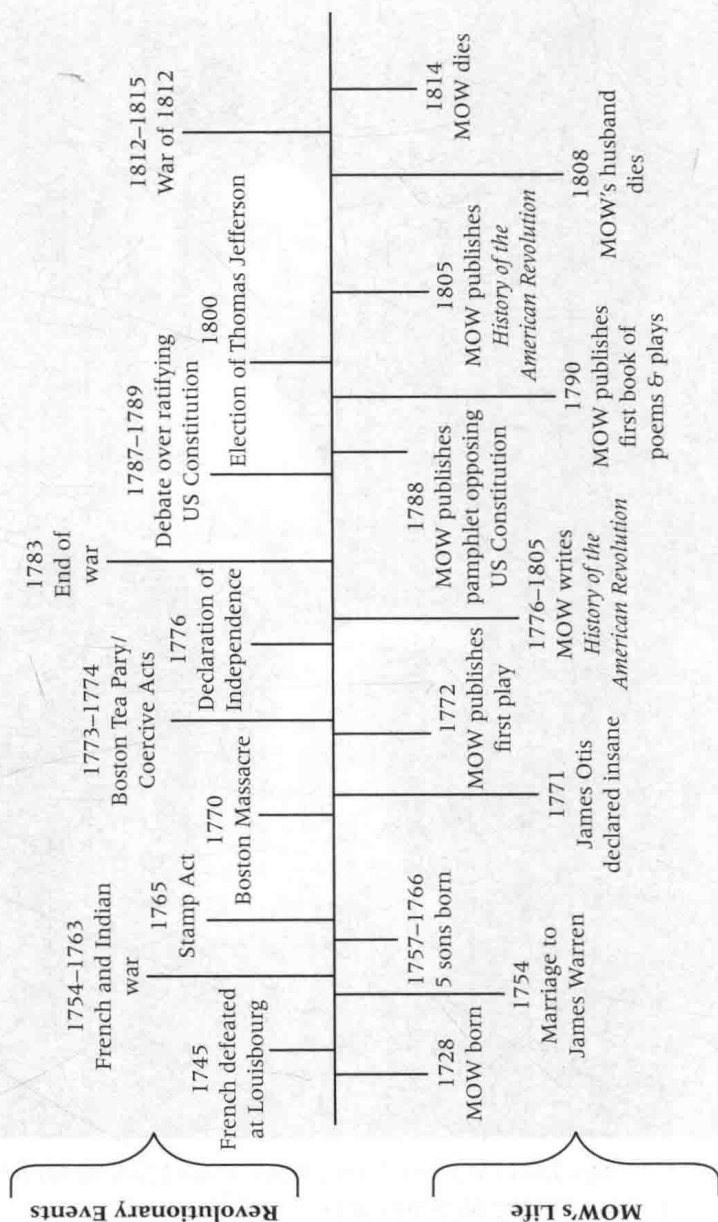




Figure 0.1 Mrs James Warren (Mercy Otis), about 1763, by John Singleton Copley  
Source: Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

# Introduction

In the pantheon of famous American women, figures such as Abigail Adams and Betsy Ross have often received considerable attention. Yet few people outside the world of academe have heard of the women's more accomplished contemporary, Mercy Otis Warren. Based solely on the record of their respective achievements, it is Warren who is the more deserving of recognition. Reviewing Warren's career, a personage no less than Thomas Jefferson commented on her "high station in the ranks of genius." John Adams regarded her, along with his wife, as "the most accomplished Lady in America." Considering her work, Alexander Hamilton remarked that "in the career of dramatic compositions at least, female genius has outstripped the Male." Judith Sargent Murray, an aspiring female author herself, saw in Warren a role model: "the literary Votaress, aspiring to distinction, will ambitiously seek to authorize her pretensions by the Celebrious name of Warren."

Mercy Otis Warren gained recognition on her own merits, not only through her relationships with famous men. She was a writer and a political thinker, a correspondent – some might even say consultant – to political leaders such as John Adams, George Washington, Elbridge Gerry, and others. She produced several

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caustic political satires lampooning British tyranny in the 1770s, authored an incisive tract opposing the ratification of the US Constitution in 1788, issued a volume of selected poems and plays in 1790, and in 1805 published one of the earliest histories of the American Revolution. Although she initially published her writings anonymously, she eventually became the first American woman to publish political works under her own name.

Nor was she a recluse as she penned these works. As the wife of one patriot and the sister of another, she ran a comfortable, well-ordered household that became a salon for revolutionaries. She was the proud mother of five sons. At the center of a network of female friends, she corresponded with well-known women such as Abigail Adams and the British historian Catharine Macaulay, as well as with a variety of lesser-known friends, acquaintances, and family members. Her long life lasted from 1728, when Massachusetts was still a British colony, until 1814, when the United States was now an independent nation, again at war with Great Britain.

To the modern reader, the life of Mercy Otis Warren may pose a paradox. Though confident of her literary and intellectual abilities, she depended on men, especially John Adams, to give her a special dispensation to write about "male" political matters. Though certain of the intellectual equality of the sexes, she believed in the "appointed subordination (perhaps for the sake of order in families)" of women to men. Though a productive author, she insisted that women must put their domestic, wifely, and motherly duties ahead of intellectual endeavors. With proper household management, she insisted, writing could be squeezed into the interstices of a woman's busy day. As immersed as she was in politics, she led no drive for women's suffrage. When Abigail Adams indignantly reported to Warren that her husband John had dismissed her plea to "Remember the Ladies" as delegates wrote laws for the new nation, Warren responded with silence. Though she chafed at "the narrow bounds, prescrib'd to female life," as she put it in one of her poems, Mercy accepted without question the existing gender status quo.

Eventually, however, the contradictions in her position came to haunt her. Toward the end of her career, in a sad denouement to their friendship, Mercy and her former mentor, John Adams, engaged in a bitter fight over her purportedly unflattering portrayal

of him in her *History* of the American Revolution. Once Mercy's pen had been turned on him, Adams dismissed her work, saying "History is not the Province of the Ladies." In an extended exchange of letters, Mercy defended herself as best she could against Adams's invectives, but the powerlessness of her position was evident. She had no explicit justification for her behavior. Her credibility ultimately rested on men's willingness to tolerate her encroachment into their territory. Warren was thus a woman of singular distinction – but also singularly vulnerable for having violated existing gender norms.

Mercy Otis Warren's life thus offers a fascinating perspective on the American Revolution. Like many other colonists, male and female alike, she moved within a relatively short time from unquestioned support for the mother country to loyal opposition to outright rebellion. As the author of political tracts, she became a propagandist against Britain, a critic of the US Constitution, and a staunch supporter of Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republican party. Voicing classical republican ideas, she consistently maintained that republican government depended on the virtue of its citizens. For most of her life, she found herself a member of the opposition, and she used her pen as her weapon.

Yet Mercy's life offers more than the typical example of one patriot's journey. Unlike her male counterparts, she had to overcome her sex in order to become a patriot. As a woman, she was neither expected to join nor automatically welcomed into the resistance movement. But she persisted and made an important, unique contribution. In the end, her career reveals both the limits and possibilities of woman's role in revolutionary America. Mercy showed what a smart, educated woman could accomplish with the necessary encouragement and ambition; but she also discovered that without an articulated rationale to explain her behavior – without an ideology of feminism – she constantly felt ill at ease about her activities. She frequently felt herself open to attacks, both real and imagined, for having violated her assigned domestic sphere. Her life thus demonstrates how an exceptional woman could manipulate existing gender roles with great success, but also how constricting those roles could ultimately be. Warren's struggle, then, represented not just a battle against Great Britain, but a struggle against the limits of womanhood itself.

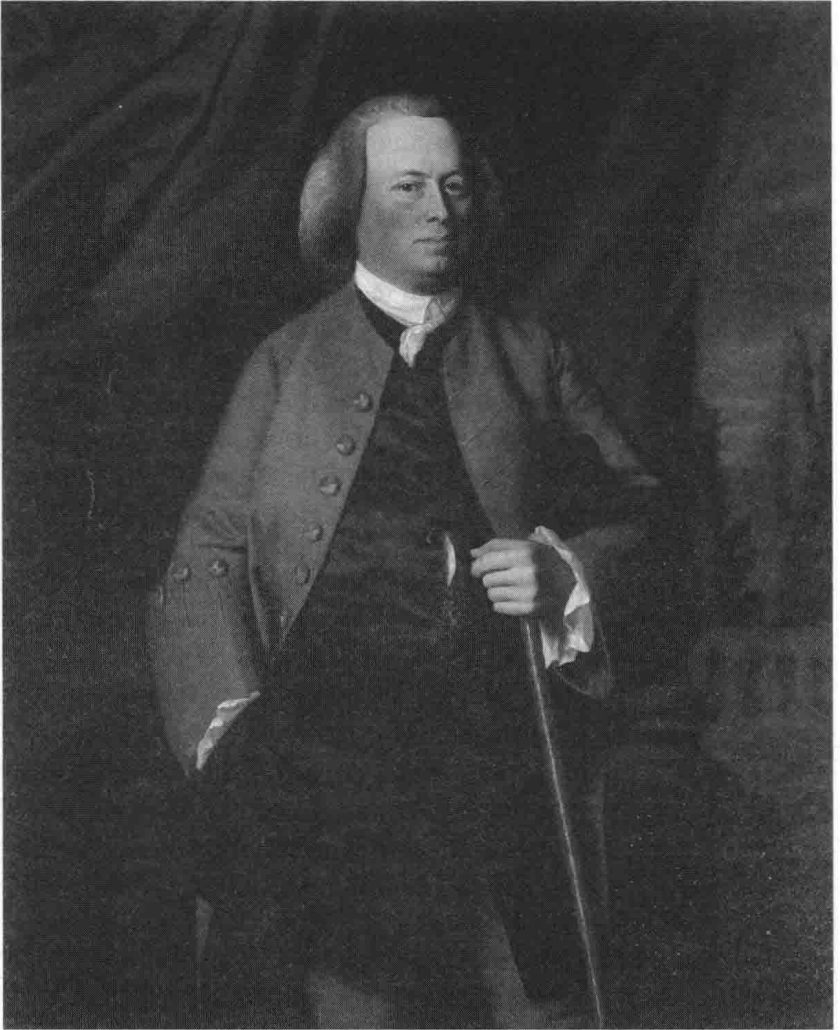


Figure 1.1 James Warren, 1761–3 by John Singleton Copley  
*Source:* Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	viii
<i>A Partial Genealogy of the Family of Mercy Otis Warren</i>	xi
<i>Map: Massachusetts in 1782</i>	xii
<i>Timeline: Mercy Otis Warren/The American Revolution</i>	xiii
<i>Introduction</i>	xv
1 The First Friends of Her Heart	1
2 Politics as a Family Affair	23
3 Her Pen as a Sword	49
4 War Widows	79
5 An Old Republican	99
6 "History is not the Province of the Ladies"	135
Conclusion: The Line Beyond Her Sex	164
<i>Bibliographical Essay</i>	172
<i>Index</i>	186