

The Adams Women

ABIGAIL

AND

LOUISA

ADAMS,

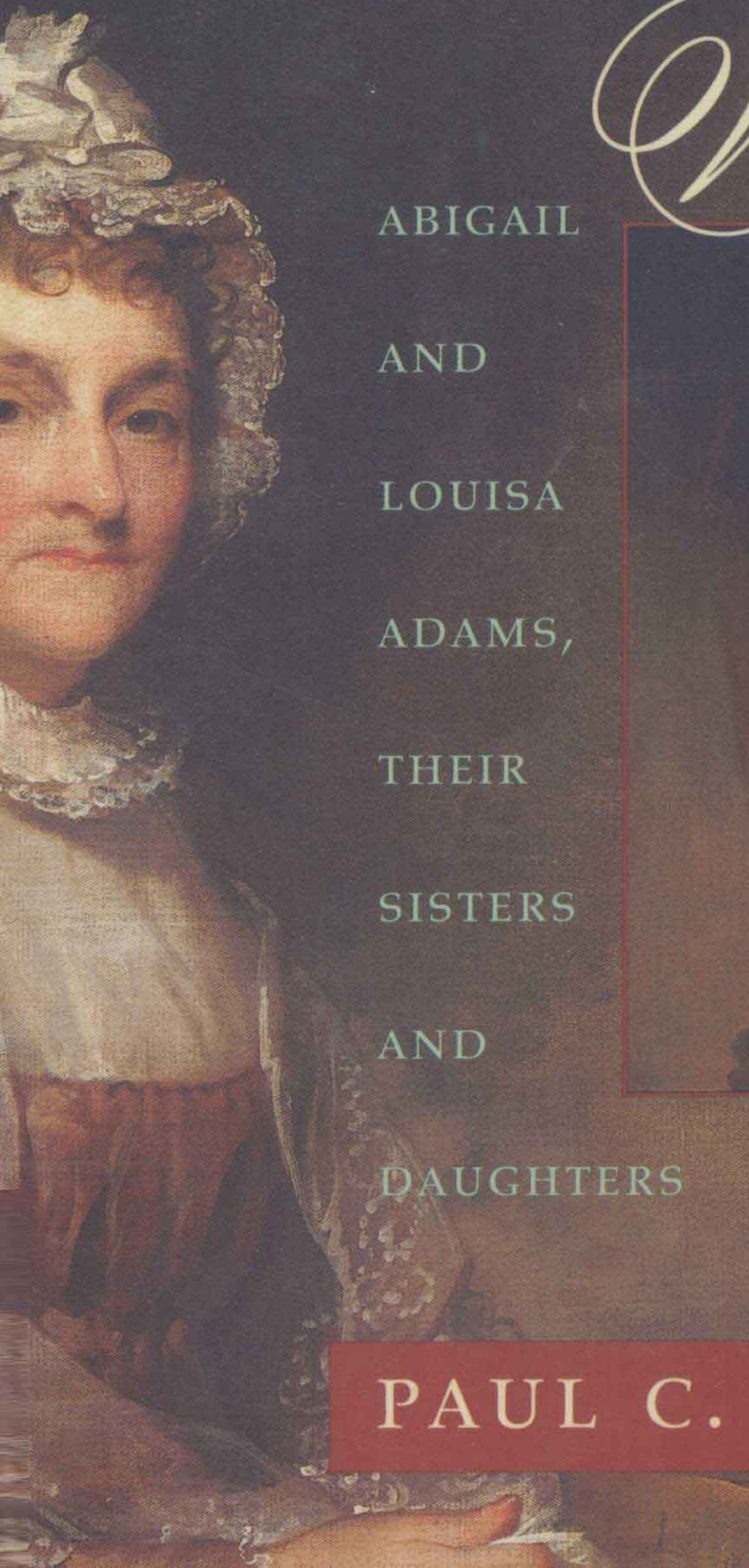
THEIR

SISTERS

AND

DAUGHTERS

PAUL C. NAGEL



The Adams Women

ABIGAIL AND LOUISA ADAMS,
THEIR SISTERS AND DAUGHTERS

Paul C. Nagel

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Foreword

This book has been a delight to write. Its principal characters form an amazing and attractive group which collectively offers the biographer an intimate view of how women lived and thought between 1750 and 1850. Reading the letters and journals of Abigail and Louisa Adams—two of America's first ladies—and of the women close to them, I found myself dealing one moment with their perceptive observations about human nature and democracy, and the next with their recipes for making rouge, for plum pudding, or for treating piles. At some points, I had before me their keen judgments about the strengths and weaknesses of males, and then their formula for enduring menopause. Present at every turn was their indignation at how a society ruled by men treated women, an indignation soothed by their humility before a very personal God. The manuscripts left by Abigail, Louisa, and the other Adams women are so revealing and detailed that even a man ought to be capable of giving a fair and thoughtful account of their lives.

Fifteen years ago, I began to think about the Adams family. It took a while before I recognized that more might be learned from their personal stories than from their public lives. It was even later when I realized the women in the Adams annals deserve at least as much attention from a biographer as their male counterparts have received. By then, it was 1981 and I had nearly finished writing *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family*, its pages dominated by famous statesmen and historians. Fortunately, even the comparatively minor role played in the book by the Adams females led many readers to ask for more about "those wonderful women."

Encouraged by Sheldon Meyer and Oxford University Press, I went back to the Adams family papers. From that awesome treasury I have

woven into one story the lives and thoughts of several highly talented and perceptive women, each of whom has an appeal and significance of her own. The association of the characters in this book with the Adams family provides only a background. In the foreground are women who triumphed in an era when it was more difficult to soften or disguise such fundamentals of existence as the endless childbirths, the preparation of daily bread, the need for mutual assistance, the acknowledgment before God of sinning, the enfeeblements of age, and the omnipresence of death. Seeing how these were confronted by the Adams women makes it difficult to give the latter enough credit.

Personally, I am thankful that friends kept after me to write this biography. A deepened acquaintance with the Adams women has humbled me as a male and helped dispel the fog from my perspective on American life and thought. Had I not returned to the Adams manuscripts, I would have missed knowing Mary Cranch, Elizabeth Shaw Peabody, Betsy Norton, Lucy Greenleaf, Nancy Harrod, Mary Hellen, Abby Brooks, and other companions to those American first ladies, Abigail and Louisa Adams. Now it is the reader's turn to enjoy their company.

Richmond, Virginia
November 1986

P.C.N

*This book is dedicated to dear ones, past and present,
who have taught me about women:*

*my grandmothers,
Ida Groenemann Nagel and Emma Blank Sabrowsky;*

*my mother,
Freda Sabrowsky Nagel;*

*my daughters-in-law,
Monica O'Brien Nagel and Maggie Dowd Nagel;*

*but, most of all, my wife,
Joan Peterson Nagel,
who, throughout our forty years together,
has brought me to treasure
what meant so much to Abigail and Louisa.*



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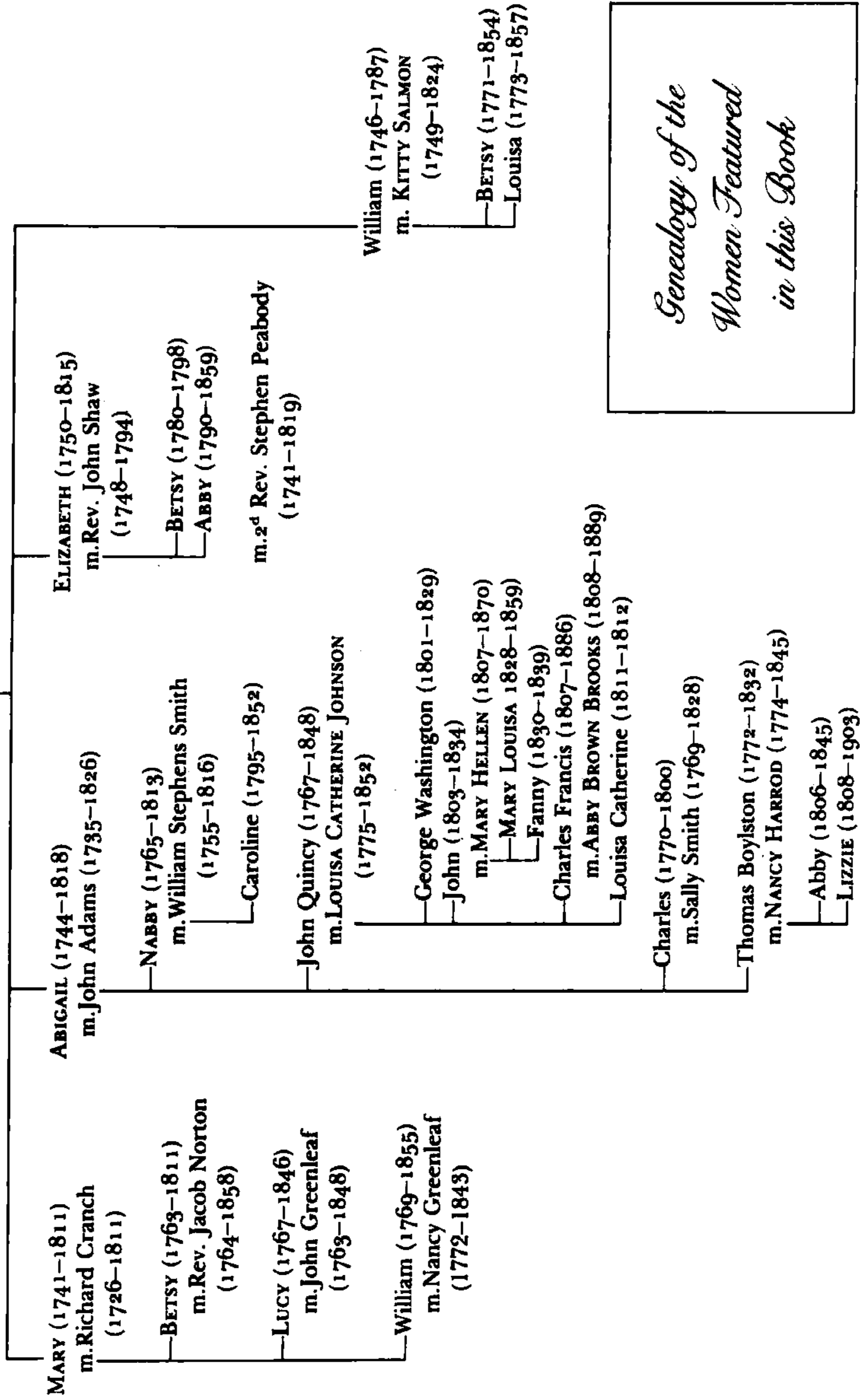
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The Adams Women

Rev. William Smith (1706-1783) m. Elizabeth Quincy (1721-1775)



*Genealogy of the
Women Featured
in this Book*

PROLOGUE

The White House

Tucked away in a pile of Adams family manuscripts is a copy of the November 1888 issue of *Wide Awake*. This popular magazine was published in Boston for readers of all ages, and its pages reflected the conventional American outlook, particularly on women and history. The November number was no exception; it featured an illustrated piece by Harriett Upton depicting the life of Mrs. John Quincy Adams during her husband's presidency. Perhaps the closest Mrs. Upton came to reality was when she called Louisa Adams "the most scholarly woman who has presided at the White House."

While this tribute might have pleased Louisa, she would have been astounded at *Wide Awake's* contention that "the family life at the White House during the John Quincy Adams administration was nearly ideally complete." Harriett Upton described Louisa as enjoying an existence of "wooings and weddings, baby life and christenings and many frolics, long old-fashioned visits from relatives, quiet hours when the President read aloud." The article pictured a first lady who, like all right-minded women, happily served in a man's world. Whether it was the White House or a laborer's cottage, the purpose of the home was to comfort a husband as he strove to meet the demands of the masculine life.

It is unlikely that the editors of *Wide Awake* realized how misleading was their version of the Adams White House. Mrs. Upton's portrayal of a contented Louisa acknowledged no dark side. The author probably did not know, for example, that Louisa despaired over two orphaned nephews who put the White House in an uproar because of their amorous romps with a chambermaid whom Louisa called "a bold and cunning minx." The first lady observed it would be impossible to say whether the nephews or the maid were the most "wheedled and dastardized."

Nor did Mrs. Upton mention that the sister of these nephews used the White House for scandalous behavior with one of Louisa's sons, although she was engaged to be married. These antics were not what *Wide Awake* had in mind when it said Louisa's White House was ruled by "family pride and family love." Mrs. Upton insisted that President and Mrs. Adams must have spent many quiet hours together. In fact, Louisa was left mostly alone, and called the White House her "prison," a place "which depresses my spirits beyond expression."

The fancifulness of *Wide Awake* may seem extreme, but it is a fair representation of how far the nineteenth century had gone in its sentimental view of women. Only now are historians and biographers seeking to understand the lives and thoughts of American women who lived a century and more ago. For this quest we can have no better guides than the Adams women.

Nor is there a more convincing place to introduce the story of these Adams women than the very location exalted by *Wide Awake*, the White House. For in that residence two female Adamses demonstrated a tough-minded realism which readers of Mrs. Upton's essay would most likely have considered unfeminine. Abigail Adams was mistress of the new executive mansion only during the winter of 1800-1801. Louisa Adams had a full four-year lease, from 1825 until 1829. Having had far from rapturous experiences in the president's house, both first ladies were impatient to leave the place. Both were also deeply pessimistic about the nation's political future; both suffered much personal tragedy while their husbands were in office; and both were indignant that America's women were beginning to be the victims of degradation. In short, Abigail and Louisa were independent, strong persons, and bore no resemblance to the gentle, retiring females portrayed in journals like *Wide Awake*.

There was no starry-eyed nonsense when Louisa described the president's residence in 1825 as a "half-finished barn," with windows so loose the wind rattled them in a din that made a person's head burst. The East Room, so grand today, was then an undecorated space. No running water entered the house, except for rain accumulated by attic cisterns on which two toilets depended. Otherwise, water was drawn from wells located where the presidential horses and cows were kept, not far from the west wing. Bathing for the first family was difficult, there being no space for this amenity. *Wide Awake* readers were spared these discouraging facts about what Louisa laughingly dubbed "this great palace."

Even so, a distant observer might be forgiven for calling Louisa Adams the most fortunate woman in America. Indeed, she had much for which to be grateful. She had grown up in England and France, and had lived abroad with her diplomat husband in several great cities. She was a gifted

writer of prose and poetry, a translator of the classics, and a discerning critic of society and politics. She also sang beautifully and performed on the harp and piano. She possessed a special talent for healing the sick and comforting the sorrowful and had proved herself the most accomplished hostess in Washington society. Her letters were rivaled only by those of another first lady, her mother-in-law Abigail Adams.

Yet with all of this attainment and advantage, Louisa was angry. She was angry about what she believed men were doing to humiliate women. Like Abigail, Louisa insisted that the relationship between men and women should be that of partners. The two contended that, while individuals in a marriage had different makeups, they deserved to be seen as equals. In eighteenth-century America life was concentrated in the home. There men and women labored together to sustain themselves and their children. In this setting, as Louisa and Abigail agreed, males and females needed each other, as both filled roles which nature and civilization had assigned them. John and Abigail Adams were speaking literally when they referred to each other as partners.

But with national independence had come centralization—in economy, politics, and society. To the alarm of perceptive women, the collaboration once characteristic of relations between the sexes began to disappear. The Adams first ladies never advocated that females should demand admission to roles for which males appeared obviously designed. There were already enough duties and specialties for women. The diverse talents that divided men and women were, in Abigail and Louisa's outlook, intended by the Creator to be combined in marriage. Marital partners were to live on an equal footing, in spite of differences.

When she was the president's wife, Abigail wrote to her sister Elizabeth, "I shall never consent to have our sex considered in an inferior point of light." Thick-skinned and aggressive, Abigail was very different from her daughter-in-law Louisa. After her childhood in a rural Massachusetts parsonage, Abigail had spent many years as a domestic and community leader while John Adams was off to Philadelphia or Europe on government business. Yet Abigail was no less disgusted with the White House and Washington than Louisa would be twenty-five years later. The elder woman called the new federal capital "the very dirtiest hole I ever saw for a place of any trade or respectability of inhabitants." She found every room in the president's house unfinished, and thirteen fires were required if the occupants were not to sleep in the damp. The autumn rains turned the city streets into bottomless tracks of mud. And though the town had merely three thousand citizens, this was humanity enough for Abigail to witness an abundance of greed, sensuality, and corruption, the elements she and Louisa feared were soon to rule and ruin American politics.

"My residence in this city has not served to endear the world to me," was Abigail's understatement just before she returned to Massachusetts. "I am sick, sick, sick of publick life." In this mood Abigail announced she would rather watch her promising son John Quincy "thrown as a log on the fire than see him President of the United States." Louisa knew what her mother-in-law meant by this statement. "Experience had taught her," said Louisa approvingly, "how valueless are such honours." This heresy, typical of Abigail Adams, was ignored by sentimentalists like Harriett Upton, who rendered Abigail as unreal for later generations as they did Louisa.

In mid-February 1801, Abigail Adams left Washington, starting out for her home in Quincy, Massachusetts. She was convinced that the election of 1800 would prove to be the nation's last, and that Thomas Jefferson's recent victory over John Adams was intended by God to punish America "for our sins and transgressions." Abigail predicted that a great darkness must cross the land, and that the day was coming when the United States would be "kindled into flames." Sixty years later, the horrors of the Civil War made a prophet of Abigail Adams.

It took until 10 March for Abigail to reach home, "bent and bang'd enough" despite frequent stops. She traveled with the aid of no man but the driver, having only her tiny granddaughter Susan Adams and a niece, Louisa Smith, as companions. As they lurched along, Louisa was bold enough to ask her aunt about the absence of males on the trip. Abigail replied that she was "too independent to want a gentleman always at my apronstring." She amused herself by contemplating what suitable punishment the terrible roads would be for the Jeffersonians if they could be compelled to make the same journey.

Abigail's mood rapidly improved as she drove into Quincy. But then, in her haste to alight, she thrust a leg through a snow-covered hole in the bottom of her carriage. Now bruised in body as well as soul, the retiring first lady turned for comfort to her sisters, her daughter, and her nieces, the women who dominate the following chapters. This circle of remarkable females had sustained one another during fifty years of sorrows and joys in scenes extending from New England farms and parsonages to the White House and they eagerly welcomed Abigail home.

The lives of these Adams women began in Weymouth, the oldest hamlet in Massachusetts, and the opening scene is the local parsonage, the center of life at that time in all New England villages. The setting of this book is thus as different from our late-twentieth-century existence as it would be if this were a biography of women in the age of the Pharaohs. However, the three daughters who grew up in that parsonage had the talent and charm to enliven any age.

1

Three Daughters

The village of Weymouth, where Abigail and her sisters grew up, was founded in 1622, the first community established in Massachusetts Bay Colony. It was also the last settlement through which early travelers passed in proceeding south from Massachusetts Bay into Plymouth Plantation. Such a trip remained rough going even in Abigail's time, for the road between Boston and Weymouth was little more than a path with dangerous crossings at the brooks and rivers. Journeys were taken by foot, horseback, or chaise, a sort of chair on wheels. The ten miles from Weymouth to Boston followed an ancient Indian trail that led north through Braintree, the next town, thence to the village of Milton, on the Neponset River. After ferrying the stream, travelers picked up the road again; it touched three hamlets—Dorchester, Roxbury, and Jamaica Plain—before it reached Boston. Another destination might be the nearby town of Cambridge, the site of Harvard College. These communities played important roles in the lives of the Adams women.

In 1750 this stretch of Atlantic coast between Weymouth and Boston was still a small world where residents knew virtually every neighbor along the route. The area retained much of its original beauty, although New England's cold winters had compelled settlers to harvest many trees for firewood. Even so, the region resembled what Thomas Morton, one of the earliest settlers, saw when he arrived in 1622. Morton later recalled how he doubted "that in all the known world" a place could be found which would match the "fair endowments" of this Massachusetts shore. Unforgettable to him were the "many goodly groves of trees, dainty, fine, round, rising hillocks, delicate, fair, large plains, sweet, crystal fountains, and clear, running streams," the latter twining through the land and "making

so sweet a murmuring noise . . . as would even lull the senses with delight asleep."

For Thomas Morton, the area around Weymouth was "Nature's masterpiece." Indeed, said he, "If this land be not rich, then is the whole world poor." Today's visitor must accept on faith what Thomas Morton saw. The Atlantic may still lie to the east and the Blue Hills to the west of Weymouth, but the rural beauty cherished by Abigail and, after her, by Louisa Adams and their dear ones has been obliterated by urban sprawl.

The story of the Adams women began in 1734 when the Weymouth congregation chose a new minister, a twenty-seven-year-old bachelor named William Smith. He was ordained on 4 December 1734 and accepted £160 as his annual salary. He also was given a settlement amount of £300. In those days a clergyman was appointed for life, so he and his family needed money for a residence befitting their place in the community. It took four years for the Reverend Smith to acquire the parsonage he preferred; his negotiations attested to his astuteness about money. In fact, business was in his blood.

Although William Smith's forebears had not been present at the beginning of Massachusetts Bay, they contributed to the colony's prosperity soon after its inception. No one knows when the family's founder, Thomas Smith, arrived in Boston, but by 1663 he had a butcher's business in Charlestown, just across the river from Boston, and had married Sarah, from the prominent Boylston family. Of their several children, two sons are remembered. One, the second Thomas Smith, established himself in South Carolina after prospering as a seafarer. His descendants would be important in politics, one serving as governor of South Carolina.

The other son who grew up in the Charlestown butcher shop was Abigail Adams's grandfather, the first William Smith, who, like his brother, succeeded as a mariner and earned the title of captain. Born in March 1667, Captain Smith lived mostly in the town of Medford, above Cambridge, northwest of Boston, where he had a farm on the Mystic River. After marrying Abigail Fowle, Smith gave his name to a son born in February 1707. The second William Smith graduated from Harvard College in 1725 with a reputation for piety and a fondness for recording rather tasteless jests in his journal.

After serving in Weymouth, the Reverend William Smith evidently improved his sense of humor; his parishioners admired how the biblical texts he selected for his sermons had a clever appropriateness to local or colonial events. He also became known as a crafty conciliator. By all accounts, Smith's most astute move was to marry Elizabeth Quincy on 16 October 1740. The bride was from Braintree, the town next to Weymouth, and was a daughter of that locale's leading citizen, Colonel John Quincy.

The bride was eighteen, and the groom thirty-three, an age difference typical among couples in a society where males were expected to be well established before marrying.

William and Elizabeth Smith spent the rest of their lives in the parsonage in Weymouth. As pastor for forty-five years, Smith was respected for his conservative theological views and for his ability to keep the parish united during the worrisome 1740s and 50s, when the so-called Great Awakening in American religion brought proposals even in staid Weymouth for a more spirited approach to faith and worship. The assistance Parson Smith received from his wife Elizabeth was, in the opinion of some Weymouth residents, the main reason for his successful ministry. His daughter Abigail and her sisters shared this view.

The bride who joined William in Weymouth was soon known for her open and affable manner. She brilliantly displayed the virtues and performed the deeds expected of a minister's wife. This came as no surprise since Elizabeth Quincy Smith had distinguished forebears on both sides. Her father Colonel John Quincy and her mother Elizabeth Norton Quincy lived, as befitted their prominence, on a large, oceanside Braintree estate called Mount Wollaston. The land had been in the family since the colony granted it in 1637 to the first Edmund Quincy, who brought to America a family line of which his descendants would be proud. It delighted Abigail that in 1066 an ancestor had traveled from Normandy with William the Conqueror to rescue Britain from misrule, and that a Quincy was present when King John was compelled to sign Magna Carta. When an ancient parchment of genealogical information about the Quincys was mislaid, it was Abigail who set up a search, saying of her Quincy lineage, "Money should not purchase it from me." Other families whose bloodline Abigail claimed with pleasure were the Nortons and the Shepards, who both filled New England pulpits with distinction. When he wrote the story of his grandmother Abigail, Charles Francis Adams asserted that her stock went back "to the most noted of the most respected class of their day."

Elizabeth Quincy had grown up with two sisters and a brother. Anna Quincy married Colonel John Thaxter of Hingham, and Lucy Quincy's husband was Dr. Cotton Tufts of Weymouth. Elizabeth's brother Norton became a recluse on the Mount Wollaston estate, which he had inherited. Colonel and Mrs. John Quincy's three successful daughters were thus left to worry over a disappointing brother. Curiously, this was precisely the outcome for Elizabeth and William Smith. Their children had the best possible beginnings at a time when a minister's family was treated with great deference. Yet it did their son as little good as it spurred their daughters.

The Smiths' first child was Mary, born 9 December 1741. Next came