



Presents

# *My Dearest Friend*

## Study Guide

### INTRODUCTION BY PLAYWRIGHT MARY G. KRON

When Mary Beth and Gary asked me to write *My Dearest Friend*, I immediately decided on two goals: 1) to emphasize that John and Abigail were real people ("warts and all," as Gary puts it) and 2) to add some color and texture to the flat black-and-white version of American history that I learned in school. John Adams himself wrote –

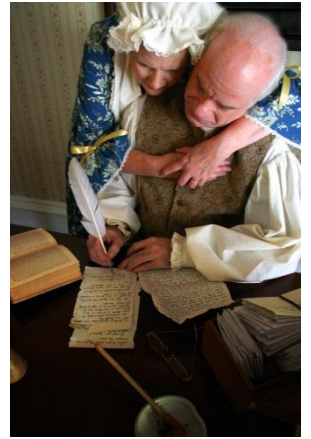
"The true story of the American Revolution will never get into the history books! A gloss of Coherence and Inevitability will be laid [over] the much messier Realities."

I think he was right. The history in schoolbooks is so condensed that it has to gloss over those "messy realities." For example, the Boston Massacre, a title from the "spin" doctors of the time, implies an unprovoked slaughter of innocents by an overwhelming British force. The reality was a violent mob, taunting and throwing bricks at a handful of soldiers on sentry duty. After bearing with the mob's abuse all afternoon, they fired one round -- from all accounts in Primary Sources -- by accident; provoked by a cry of "Fire!" from a rioter daring them or someone noticing a house ablaze nearby. John Adams was the only lawyer in town with the courage to defend the British soldiers in court - and they were acquitted of murder! This version of history is much more interesting, though it does require us to view the enemy as humans with fears and feelings.

Too often history "glosses over" that messiest of all realities -- the human element! Our founding fathers (and mothers) aren't like statues - frozen in poses showing their most memorable, and attractive, accomplishments. John and Abigail were sweethearts, lovers and best friends. They were married over 50 years, and their family life was very messy! Of their six children: Susanna only survived to age two, Elizabeth was stillborn, Nabby died of breast cancer, Charles drank himself to death, Thomas was a moderately successful politician, and John Quincy became our sixth president. Because John was an itinerant lawyer, a member of the continental Congress, then an ambassador and politician, he and Abby often lived apart. Sometimes for months and years at a time!

It's difficult for us to realize just how separated people really were back in the 1700s. Imagine living over 300 miles away from your best friend! (That's how far Abby in Boston and John in

Philadelphia were for most of the American Revolution.) There was no commuting by plane, train or on the expressway for the weekend! (20 or 30 miles a day is all the average horse can accomplish!) No phones or computers, no texting, email or instant messaging. John and Abby had to write letters. By hand. Dipping a **quill** pen into a bottle of ink every few words! Then they had to wait for those letters to be delivered. Not by Express Mail, FedEx, or Fax – but by a friend traveling on horseback, or a stagecoach. (Add in a ship sailing across the Atlantic when John represented America in Europe!) It could take weeks or months for a letter to travel the distance, if it got there at all! All sorts of things could happen – in wartime, mailbags onboard ships were often thrown overboard if an enemy ship was sighted! Several of John's letters were captured by the British and published in the newspapers! Even if a letter arrived, the answer would take just as long to return!



Though it was hard for John and Abby, their letter-writing is a blessing for us. Over 1600 of their letters survive and these Primary Sources are now available online. These letters are a mix of personal and political; public and intimate matters are discussed side by side. It was almost overkill to have so much material! And great material at that -- both were very good letter writers. A biographer said of Abigail that, "she never wrote an uninteresting letter!" To have their very own words -- words that air their different viewpoints, display their unique personalities, and tell their individual stories; what they experienced alone, when they agreed, what subjects they didn't see eye to eye on, was priceless! In fact, their letters, though for them separated by time and place, are a true dialog between two very strong, savvy, sensitive people. And dialog is what a playwright writes! There was no need for me to make up words for them to say -- they'd already written those words!

But I didn't want this to be a show about writing letters. I wanted them to interact! My dilemma was how to distil all those letters into real give-and-take scenes with conflict -- the drama in dramatic! John and Abigail themselves gave me a clue! While courting, John wrote Abigail a flirty letter listing her "faults" and what to do about them. Abigail wrote an equally flirty and just-a-bit pointed letter back answering each item in his list. It sounded to me like she was in the same room giving him a hard time! So in this show they are! That was the first scene I wrote.

However, that is virtually the only pair of letters that so neatly and directly answer each other. I needed a dramatic reason to take bits of one of John's letters to answer something Abby said in one of hers perhaps years apart, and so on ... So, I set the show just after Abigail's death; the entire play takes place in John's mind as he remembers Abby and tries to come to terms with missing her. Looking back, he thinks of conversations and letters out of context. Thinking back over their life together, Abby really becomes his conscience and better half giving him good advice and a just a few arguments!

So, I had to read a lot of their letters, and take a lot of notes. I ended up with 50 pages of single-spaced excerpts from their letters organized by topic. From those notes, I pulled their own words to shape the scenes. Because of this, over 90% of the words in the show are really John's or Abigail's! Most are from their letters to each other, but a smattering are from John's diaries and letters to other people. I only wrote lines for transitions, but even then I didn't put words in their mouths so much as summarize their own views. If you can't tell which words are theirs and which are mine, then my job is done!

This is not a romantic story "based on" the lives of John and Abigail. This is their life, or part of it, anyway. They really were lovers and friends their entire lives! There are no invented events, no changed dates, no made-up-to-be-more-dramatic experiences, stories or opinions. The two of them lived through quite enough excitement, and held strong enough views for one play. I found the conflict natural to their two very different experiences of the same history -- whether the American Revolution or the still-birth of their last child -- to be quite enough without "re-writing" their lives.

My hope is that after seeing *My Dearest Friend* you will see John and Abigail as individuals, friends, patriots and lovers - real people, not statues.



Mary G. Kron comes to playwriting from over 30 years' experience in the theater as a performer, director and instructor. She earned her BFA in Directing/Acting from Central Michigan University. In addition to GEM Theatrics, Mary's scripts have been commissioned by the Grand Haven Library's Historical Society, MomsBloom, and Grand Rapids Civic Theatre. Her plays have been produced by High Schools and Community Theaters around the country.

*My Dearest Friend* is produced by special arrangement with  
Dramagon Playwriting and Theatrical Services [www.dramagon.com](http://www.dramagon.com)

## BEFORE SEEING THE PLAY

1. Review the attached vocabulary list, or cover the definitions and assign small groups of students different parts of the list and have them present their findings to the class.
2. Discuss the organization and purpose of the Continental Congress. Why was independence important to Americans? Did everyone agree? Who were the major players?
3. Discuss how difficult communication was before the telephone and the internet. How would students feel if it took weeks or months to get a reply to a question?
4. Discuss our legal system and why it was important that the British soldiers accused in the "Boston Massacre" had a defense lawyer. How hard do students think it was for John Adams to take that job? How hard is it for students to do something unpopular, even when they think it is right?

## AFTER SEEING THE PLAY

1. Discuss the theatrical elements of the play. How did the sets, costumes, incidental music and sound effects enhance the story?
2. John Adams wasn't always very nice. Do students think more of him now, or less? Was it

surprising to learn that the “Founding Fathers” weren’t always perfect?

3. Discuss the different opinions between Adams and Jefferson. How can best friends become enemies? Is that healthy?
4. Abigail and John disagreed about women’s rights. Was Abigail brave to put her disagreement in her letters? Why do you think she never said such things face to face? Was this one time when their separation aided communication?
5. John Adams won a verdict of “not guilty” for most of the British soldiers. Was that the right result? Did he persuade you?
6. Abigail had to look after the farm and the family, mostly by herself for years at a time. Discuss how difficult that must have been. Could students do that today? Would it be harder now or easier?
7. We learn in school that John Adams was a success – a “Founding Father.” After seeing the play, what do students think? Was Adams a “success”? As a fighter for independence? As a diplomat? As President? As a husband and father?

## RESEARCH TOPICS FOR OLDER GRADES

1. ***The Fight For Independence.*** What were the root causes of discontent in the American colonies? Is violent overthrow of the government ever a viable option?
2. ***Our System of Justice.*** What does our Constitution say about the rights of the accused? How have those rights been protected/expanded over the years? Why is it important for accused defendants to have lawyers? Should lawyers have to take cases, even when they think their clients are guilty?
3. ***Propaganda.*** Political “spin doctors” of the day used incidents like the “Boston Massacre” to stir up the populous. Paul Revere’s famous engraving of the event is nothing like what actually happened. How do politicians and political parties today take events and “spin” them for their own use?
4. ***Adams In England.*** John Adams became our first Ambassador to England after the end of the Revolutionary War. Was he a wise choice? What sorts of strain did that place on his family (Ambassadors paid most of their own expenses while abroad)?
5. ***Adams As President.*** John Adams never had to “run” for President the way candidates do today. Knowing what you know now, if he had run, would he have won? What were his greatest strengths as a candidate and as President? What were his weaknesses? Would students have voted for him?
6. ***Abigail Adams.*** After seeing the play, do you think that Abigail Adams was an unusual woman for her time? Were there other strong colonial women? Was she brave? Or was anyone who

survived those times brave?

7. **Women's Rights and Slavery.** Abigail's father, who lived in Massachusetts, owned slaves. Discuss with students that fact that, early on, slavery was not just a Southern problem. Was Abigail ahead of John in her thinking about slavery? Or, did John have political concerns that went beyond whether slavery was right or wrong? This issue could spark a discussion of whether compromises must sometimes be made to achieve a consensus. Congress needed a unanimous vote to achieve a resolution of independence. What part does, or should, compromise play in the modern era with our current Congress to obtain results?

## VOCABULARY

**Affable, affability** --- easy to talk to, polite and friendly

**Approbation** -- approval

**Assiduous** – constant, unremitting

**Aurora** – Roman goddess of the dawn

**Colossus** – refers to the statue of Helios at Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World; meaning huge.

**Debauched** – displaying the effect of excessive indulgence in sensual pleasure; corrupted.

**Despotism of the petticoat** – a government ruled by an absolute ruler without constitutional limits; a petticoat is a woman's under skirt, not meant to be seen. John is laughingly referring to Abigail's plea to 'remember the ladies' as a plan for women to take over the country.

**Diana** – Roman goddess of the moon and the hunt; a protectress of women; Abby used this as her pen name and it became John's pet name for her.

**Discernment** – ability to see things clearly with good judgment

**Dissipation** – a wasting by misuse; a dissolute way of living; especially excessive drinking of alcohol; intemperance.

**Dryden** – a British poet, dramatist and critic; 1631-1700

**Duke of Braintree** – Braintree is the original name of the town of Quincy, MA; referring to John as a British nobleman holding the highest hereditary title outside the royal family, and holder of a large estate.

**Exasperating** – highly irritating

**Ginger-pated bean pole** -- referring to Thomas Jefferson, a tall (6'2" or more) red head, while John Adams at barely 5'9" and balding, was rather chubby.

**Grandiose** – grand in an affected or pompous way

**Grandisson** – Abigail credits the Bishop of Exeter (1327-1369) John Grandisson with the quote: "The falling out of lovers is the renewal of love." It was, however a popular English and early American proverb.

**Grim specter** – referring to death as a visible spirit; a source of terror

**Imperialist** – one who advocates extending rule or authority of an empire or nation over foreign countries; acquiring and holding colonies

**Indentured** – a servant who is bound by contract to serve a certain number of years. Children were often indentured to a family to serve as domestic labor until they were old enough to live on their own. Not as bad as slavery, but not as good as an apprenticeship.

**Lobster backs** – a slur describing British soldiers; because they wore red coats.

**Longevity** – a long individual life

**Lysander** – a Spartan naval commander and statesman; John used this as his pen name and it became Abby's pet name for him.

**Marlowe** – English dramatist and poet, 1564-1593

**Monticello** – the estate and residence of Thomas Jefferson near Charlottesville, VA

**Nuptials** – wedding ceremony

**Obnoxious** – annoying due to being a showoff or offensive

**Palpable** – readily or plainly seen, heard or perceived; capable of being touched or felt.

**Pecuniary** – monetary payment

**Portia** – another of John's pet names for Abby; perhaps a reference to the heroine of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, or Brutus' wife in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

**Pretentious** – making an exaggerated outward show

**Physiognomy** -- the art of determining character or personal characteristics from the features of the face or the form of the body.

**Rotundity** – being round, plump, fat

**Spare Cassius** – referring to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Act I, scene 2, line 200; referring to Cassius as lean or thin, symbolizing untrustworthiness

**Staunch** – firm or steadfast

The book from which Abigail quotes (in the two act version of the script) regarding education for women was from the *Second Volume of Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy Who Lived Five and Forty Years Undiscovered at Paris*. This book, originally written in Arabic (1642-1682), was translated into Italian, and thence into English and published in London in 1753.

## WEBSITES

Boston National Historical Park [www.nps.gov/bost/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/bost/index.htm)

Adams National Historical Park [www.nps.gov/adam/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/adam/index.htm) All things John, Abigail and John Quincy Adams; birthplace of John and John Quincy

The Freedom Trail [www.freedomtrail.org](http://www.freedomtrail.org) Historical walk through present day Boston to sites of all things Revolutionary; good map.

Massachusetts Historical Society [www.masshist.org](http://www.masshist.org) Maps, Adams papers online and more.

Monticello [www.monticello.org](http://www.monticello.org) All things Thomas Jefferson

## ADAMS TIMELINE AND IMPORTANT DATES

John Adams -10/30/1735—7/4/1826

Abigail Adams -11/22/1744—10/28/1818

John undergoes small pox inoculation April — May 1764

John and Abigail married on October 25, 1764

Abigail Adams 2nd (Nabby) 7/14/1765 — 8/14/1813 (1st child)

John Quincy Adams 7/11/1767 — 1848 (2nd child)

Susanna Adams 12/28/1768 — 2/4/1770 (3rd child)

Charles Adams 5/29/1770 — 11/30/1800 (4th child)

Boston Massacre Trial: October — November 1770

Thomas Boylston Adams 9/15/1772 — 1832 (5th child)

Battles of Lexington and Concord -- April 19, 1775

Battle of Bunker Hill -- June 17, 1775

Dysentery epidemic -- late summer and fall 1775

Abigail and the four children undergo small pox inoculation in Boston July 1776, while John is in Philadelphia drafting and debating the Declaration of Independence.

Elizabeth Adams 7/11/1777 stillborn (6th child)

John and John Quincy sail to France to join Franklin February 1778 – August 1779.

John drafts Massachusetts state constitution which is adopted in June 1780.

John in France, Netherlands and Great Britain -- February 1780-1784.

John signs the Definitive Treaty of Peace with Great Britain -- 9/3/1783.

Abigail Joins John in France and then England with Nabby -- July 1784 – June 1788.

John elected vice president under George Washington -- April 1789

John serves second term as vice president under Washington – 1793 – 1797.

John elected second President of the United States -- 2/8/1797.

John defeated for re-election by Thomas Jefferson -- 2/11/1801.

## *Selected Bibliography*

The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family 1762-1784, ed. by L.H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender and Mary-Jo Kline

A Nation Rising: Untold Tales of Flawed Founders, Fallen Heroes, and Forgotten Fighters from America's Untold History, Kenneth C. Davis.

Founding Mothers: Women of America in the Revolutionary Era, Linda Grant De Pauw

First Family, Joseph J. Ellis

Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams, Joseph J. Ellis

Abigail & John: Portrait of a Marriage, Edith B. Geddes

Portia: The World of Abigail Adams, Edith B. Geddes

Woman's Life in Colonial Days, Carl Holliday

Abigail Adams, Woody Holton

My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams, ed. By Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor

The Founders on the Founders: Word Portraits from the American Revolutionary Era, Ed. By John P. Kaminski

John Adams, David McCullough

1776, David McCullough

Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation, Cokie Roberts

Those Who Love, Irving Stone

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