

AMERICANA UNLIMITED

Abigail Adams

Art Form: Storytelling/Historical Character

Style: Contemporary

Culture: North American

MEET THE ARTIST:

Actress **Judith Helton** literally steps into the past when she goes to work. Since 1976, she has brought history to life with her intriguing portrayals of women of accomplishment and artistic talent. Her versatile repertoire of one-woman shows consists of three from American history -- First Lady *Abigail Adams*, Gold Rush entertainer *Lotta Crabtree*, pioneer author *Laura Ingalls Wilder* -- and England's author/illustrator, *Beatrix Potter*. Each portrayal is meticulously researched from an historical perspective. Ms. Helton's professional theatre credits include work in resident acting companies in Baltimore, Milwaukee, Houston and San Diego. Internationally she has performed at the Edinburgh, Scotland "World Theatre Festival," and in Dublin and Cork, Ireland. Ms. Helton's commitment to authenticity in her performances has led her to master such specialized skills as spinning, weaving, banjo playing and antique costume construction. She so truly 'becomes' the women she plays, that it is little wonder when leaving her home she is asked by neighbors, "Who are you today?"

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

The year is 1789. Abigail Adams is packing to leave for the capital of the United States, at that time, the city of New York. Her husband, John Adams, has just been notified that he is to become the first Vice-President of our new nation, the United States of America. The audience becomes part of the crowd gathered outside the Adams' home in Braintree, Massachusetts, as Abigail relives many of the outstanding events in her life. During our visit with Abigail Adams, we learn about education during the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary years; the role women played in the fight for freedom; the legal status of women; and the establishment of a new nation. This woman who was the wife of one American president and the mother of another was truly a "founding mother" of our nation. Students are encouraged to prepare for the discussion period that follows the presentation by studying the information provided in these pages.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Abigail Adams is one of only two women in American history to be both the wife (John Adams -- 2nd President) and mother (John Quincy Adams -- 6th President) of a President, Mrs. Barbara Bush being the other. An eyewitness to many of the great events of the American Revolution, Mrs. Adams knew outstanding figures of that time -- Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Revere, Hamilton, Lafayette and King George III. Herself a patriot, she braved life on the home front in Braintree, Massachusetts. While her husband fought for liberty in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia and in Europe, Mrs. Adams endured wartime conditions. Like other daughters of liberty, she provided aid to our Continental soldiers by making bullets and gunpowder, and joined in celebration when independence was declared. Abigail was born in Weymouth, Massachusetts, on November 11, 1744, the daughter of Elizabeth Quincy Smith and William Smith, a Congregational minister.

Abigail never attended school; education for women was considered unnecessary. She was, however, determined to become educated and became an "eager gatherer" from the books available to her. In addition to learning to read, write and speak well, she taught herself English and Latin well enough to be able to teach these subjects to her children. Well read and articulate, one of her goals was to gain equal educational opportunities for women, a concept much ridiculed during her time.

Abigail married John Adams in October, 1764. From 1784 to 1788 she accompanied her husband to France and England, where he represented their new country, the United States of America. He was elected to Vice President of the United States in 1789 and served two terms. In 1796 he became the second President of the United States.

She died at the age of 74. She is considered to be one of the outstanding women of her time, and was an outspoken supporter of women's rights and racial equality. Leaders such as Thomas Jefferson respected and sought her advice on political matters. In the 20th century, former President Harry S. Truman said of Abigail Adams, "She would have made a better president than her husband."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How did the actress, Judith Helton, help you believe that the real Abigail Adams was visiting your school? Have you seen any other plays where historical people were shown onstage?
- Who was Abigail Adams? Who was her husband? Her son? Why was her family important to our country?
- Abigail Adams is often considered to be one of the outstanding letter writers of her time, and often corresponded with very important people. If you could write a letter to an important person today, to whom would you write? Why?
- Discuss what conditions were like for those who lived and fought during the Revolution. What major problems did they face during their fight for freedom? (separation from family, confiscation of personal property, charges of treason, homefront and battlefield hardships)

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SOCIAL STUDIES:

Female patriots such as Abigail Adams played an important role in America's fight for freedom. They ran farms and shops when their men went off to fight, and also risked their lives in the cause for liberty. Following are a few examples of these patriots:

Sybil Ludington -- At age 16, she rode through the countryside of Connecticut warning patriots of a British raid.

Mary Hays -- Sometimes called Molly Pitcher because she carried pitchers of water needed to cool down cannons after firing, she fired a cannon herself after her husband was wounded.

Deborah Sampson -- This lady changed her name to Robert Shurtleff, dressed as a man and joined the Continental army as a soldier. She fought in battles, was wounded and treated the wound herself.

Select one of the women listed above and write an imaginary letter from her to a relative or friend, describing the exploits mentioned above. Use descriptive phrases to help the reader imagine what it was like to ride that horse through the countryside, or to fire those cannons. Read the letters to the class.

Legend:

- Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▶ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- Discuss how the performance about Abigail Adams' life and adventures reflected the time and place in which she lived. Select one event of the time period that was most interesting to you, and try to imagine how that particular event would be different today. Write a short essay to describe the differences.
- ❖ In a letter to her husband dated March 31, 1776, Abigail Adams wrote, "In the new code of laws ... I desire you would remember the Ladies ... If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice, or Representation." What did she mean by this comment? In partners, make a list of reasons why or why not women should have representation in a government. Each partner should take one of the sides (pro or con) and argue for that point of view.
- ▶ During her lifetime, Abigail Adams helped in the founding of our country. She witnessed the transformation of America, which started as an English colony and became a free nation. What countries do you know that have struggled for freedom in the past or today? Discuss the similarities to our fight for freedom.
- * During the Revolutionary War, important information was spread through letters, newspapers, word of mouth and riders like Paul Revere. Often it took many days for letters to reach the intended recipient. By what new ways do we communicate? Write a paragraph describing how modern inventions have affected our lifestyles and how we share information.
- * In discussion or in a written assignment, compare life today with life in Abigail Adams' time. Imagine living through a typical day over 200 years ago. Would you wake to an alarm clock or to a rooster crow? Would your water come from a faucet, or a well or stream? Would your breakfast be cooked on the stove or in a fireplace? Continue the discussion or select one topic (schooling, games, clothing, chores, etc.) to research, write about and present to the class.



BIBLIOGRAPHY/WEBLINKS:

Bober, Natalie S.. *Abigail Adams, Witness to a Revolution*. Antheneum Books for Young Readers, New York, New York: 1995

Info about the Revolution: www.ushistory.org/march/