

MERCY OTIS WARREN

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BASIC BIOGRAPHY

Mercy Otis Warren (1728–1814) was not formally educated, but studied alongside her brother as he prepared to attend Harvard, an opportunity denied to most women of her era. Living in Massachusetts during the Revolutionary period, her family regularly discussed politics, and she slowly became impassioned by the patriot cause. Her first notable work was a poem about the Boston Tea Party. Her male relatives encouraged her literary pursuits, and she was known for comedic plays that mocked Loyalists. Her intellectual prowess earned her the respect of many founding fathers, who hoped her writing would propagate the patriot cause. Warren felt torn between her passions and what society considered proper for a lady. In many ways she conformed to the gender roles of her time, although she advocated for formal education of women. She was portrayed in paintings as highly feminine. Throughout the war, she managed her family's affairs and followed her husband's militia, developing deep friendships with both Abigail Adams and Martha Washington. After the war, she wrote a controversial, three volume, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*.

KEY EVENTS

Boston Tea Party, Stamp Act, American Revolution, Federalist Debates, U.S. Constitution

KEY PEOPLE

Abigail Adams, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Warren, Martha Washington

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After the U.S. Constitution was drafted in September 1787, states began the process of debating and ratifying the document. Over several years, commentators from all backgrounds discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the document. Mercy Otis Warren, a prominent writer with connections to many of the men who drafted the Constitution, opposed many facets of the new proposed government. Her anti-federalist leanings eventually prompted her and her husband to distance themselves from their Revolutionary compatriots. Writing in 1788, under the pseudonym "Columbian Patriot," Warren outlined the flaws she saw in the new Constitution.



Mercy Otis Warren, line engraving by unidentified artist, after the portrait by John Singleton Copley, 1763, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/database/1759>

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Prior to analysis, students should be familiar with the structure and content of the Constitution and it would be helpful if they had a hard or digital copy of the Constitution for reference. See <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>.
- Make one copy of the document handout and organizer for each student.
- Divide students into pairs to discuss and each complete the organizer.
- After completion, discuss as a class, *Were Warren's critiques valid?*

LEARNING ACTIVITY

- Turn the room into a Four-Corner Debate by using paper to label the corners each the classroom:
 - » In favor of the U.S. Constitution as written;
 - » In favor of Warren's critique;
 - » In favor of *some* of Warren's critique; and
 - » Opposed to both.
- Direct students move to the area of the room that they feel best represents their opinion. Remind students that as discussion ensues, they may move if their opinion changes.
- Facilitate student discussion. Ask students to reference specific ideas or quotations to support their point of view.

Teacher Tip: If one corner of the room is empty, the teacher should assume that position and try to persuade students to that idea.

LOCAL CONNECTION

Mercy Otis Warren lived most of her life in Plymouth, Massachusetts. She lived in the Winslow Warren House on the corner of North and Main Streets and is buried in the Burial Hill Cemetery. Learn more about these sites from the Massachusetts Historical Society, visit: <https://www.masshist.org/blog/612>.

LEARN MORE

PRIMARY SOURCES

Correspondence of Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Winthrop, 1752–1789
Massachusetts Historical Society
<http://www.masshist.org/features/warren-winthrop>

Letters Between Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Warren
Digital History Project, University of Houston
<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/exhibits/dearmadam/index.html>

Mercy Otis Warren Papers
Massachusetts Historical Society
<http://www.masshist.org/collection-guides/view/fa0235>

SECONDARY SOURCES

“Abigail Adams Vents to Mercy Otis Warren About John”
New England Historical Society
<http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/abigail-adams-vents-to-mercy-otis-warren-about-john/>

Mercy Otis Warren
National Women’s History Museum
<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/mercy-otis-warren>

Erick Trickey, “The Woman Whose Words Inflamed the American Revolution,” June 20, 2017
Smithsonian Magazine
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/woman-whose-words-inflamed-american-revolution-180963765/>

NOTE TO STUDENTS

When a historical document is transcribed, sometimes it includes spelling or grammar that seems incorrect today. Sometimes documents contain true errors, and sometimes it was a proper or accepted convention at the time the document was written. The notation [sic] shows that there is a recognized issue, but that is how the source was originally written. Other words in brackets are designed to help improve your understanding of the primary source, but were not included in the original document.

Warren's Comments	So far, why is she writing?	What words does she use to describe the Constitution as written?
"Animated with the firmest zeal [enthusiasm] for the interest of this country, the peace and union of the American States, and the freedom and happiness of a people who have made the most costly sacrifices in the cause of liberty [died in the Revolution]—who have braved the power of Britain, weathered the convulsions [spasm] of war, and waded through the blood of friends and foes to establish their independence, and to support the freedom of the human mind, I cannot silently witness this degradation [humiliation] without calling on them..."		

Warren's Comments	What virtues does she admire?	What does she say has happened to them?
"An heroic love for the public good, a profound reverence [admiration] for the laws, a contempt [hatred] of riches, and a noble haughtiness [arrogance] of soul, are the only foundations of a free government..." "Do not these dignified principles still exist among us? Or are they extinguished in the breasts of Americans, whose fields have been so recently crimsoned to repel the potent arm of a foreign Monarch, who had planted his ensigns of slavery in every city, with design to erase the vestiges of freedom in this his last asylum..."		

Warren wrote a list of flaws she saw with the U.S. Constitution. To complete the organizer, identify the article of the U.S. Constitution with which she takes issue, explain why, and decide if you agree.

Warren's Comments	Article	Why?	Do you agree?
"2. There is no security in the profered [sic] system, either for the rights of conscience, or the liberty of the press:— Despotism [absolute rule] ... will suffer men to... the most unjust restrictions may take place..."			

Warren's Comments	Article	Why?	Do you agree?
"7. ...the most discerning eye could discover ...Every source of revenue is in the monopoly of Congress..."			
"8. ...the new Congress are impowered [sic] to determine their own salaries..."			
"11. One representative to thirty thousand inhabitants is a very inadequate representation..."			
12. If the sovereignty of America is designed to be elective, the circumscribing the votes to only ten electors in this state... is nearly tantamount to the exclusion of the voice of the people...			
13. A senate chosen for six years, will in most instances, be an appointment for life, as the influence of such a body over the minds of the people, will be coeval to the extensive powers with which they are vested...			
14. There is no provision by a bill of rights to guard against [sic] the dangerous encroachments of power in too many instances to be named...			