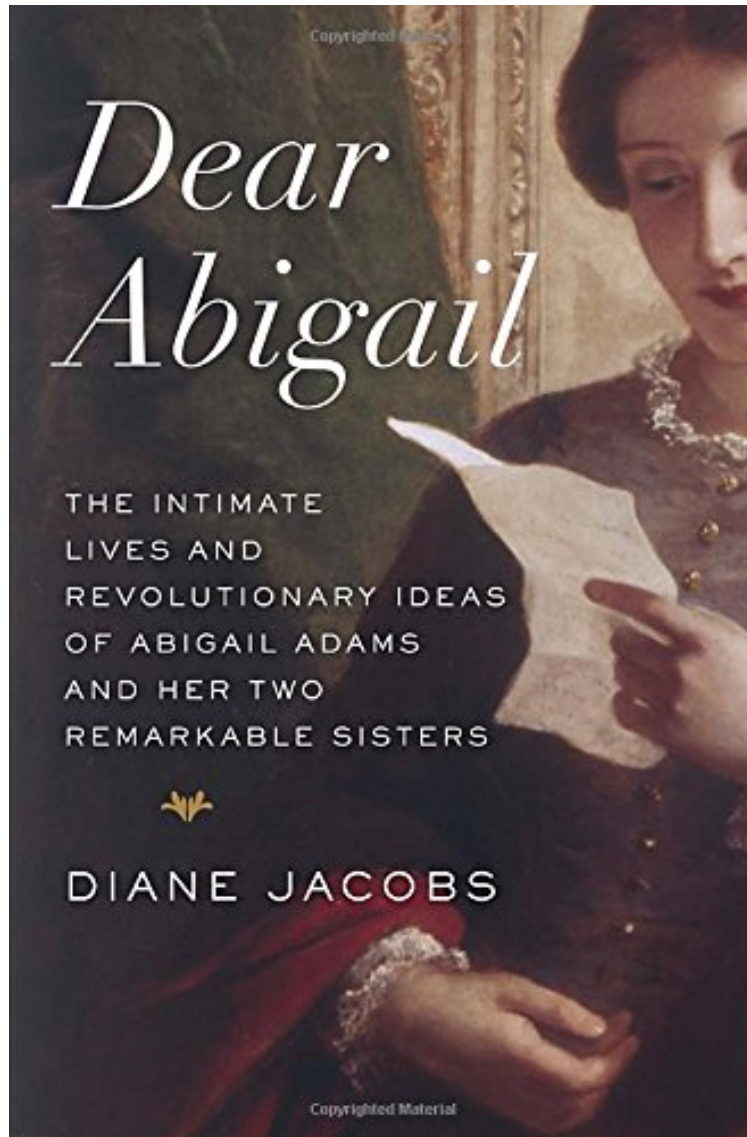


[Free and download] Dear Abigail: The Intimate Lives and Revolutionary Ideas of Abigail Adams and Her Two Remarkable Sisters

## Dear Abigail: The Intimate Lives and Revolutionary Ideas of Abigail Adams and Her Two Remarkable Sisters

*Diane Jacobs*

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#664070 in Books 2014-02-25 2014-02-25Format: Deckle EdgeOriginal language:EnglishPDF # 1 9.53 x 1.29 x 6.58l, 1.91 #File Name: 0345465067528 pages | File size: 23.Mb

**Diane Jacobs : Dear Abigail: The Intimate Lives and Revolutionary Ideas of Abigail Adams and Her Two Remarkable Sisters** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Dear Abigail: The Intimate Lives and Revolutionary Ideas of Abigail Adams and Her Two Remarkable Sisters:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating to read but only one writer's viewBy AnnaLiviaThis is

the kind of book that makes history come alive: through the medium of their letters historical characters are truly grasped and history itself is far better understood than from a dry recitation of facts. I appreciated the American revolution and the early days of independence far better after reading this. The book is well structured - if overlong and sometimes more detailed than necessary about minor figures, although even these can be fascinating - and beautifully written. I did wonder about the author's interpretation of the tone of some of the letters, which she firmly labeled as cajoling, or satirical, or critical, and so on, whereas in fact a number of different interpretations seemed equally valid to me. It can be very difficult to understand the tone and intent of any written document, let alone across the divide of several centuries, and it seemed occasionally that Diane Jacobs was selecting, and massaging, the historical letters and her own narrative to fit her storylines of three devoted sisters and a passionate marriage, not always successfully. It's instructive to read other biographers of Abigail and John Adams for different takes. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. It was difficult to put this book down. By Humzzalong What a fantastic read. Three amazing sisters who, by their correspondence give us a clear view, unvarnished by 'historians', of the difficulties of everyday life during the formation and infancy of our nation. Bright and capable women who toiled selflessly for others. Abigail's comments regarding the 'politics and press shows that some things really don't change' 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Good Nonfiction Read about Revolutionary War/Constitution Era Book By Retired Reader I enjoyed this book. To be able to hear first hand what the women and men of the era when our country was formed were thinking and feeling is truly amazing. Even though communication was much slower than today, through letters people did communicate and provide us with wonderful documentation of their lives and history. It was not a quick read, but I found myself becoming involved with the "characters" in the book and sometimes felt like I was reading a historical novel. These people had rich, although precarious, lives. Illness loomed almost constantly, threatening their and their families often. I would recommend this book to anyone who loves history, especially the history of the Revolutionary War and how our country began.

For readers of the historical works of Robert K. Massie, David McCulough, and Alison Weir comes the first biography on the life of Abigail Adams and her sisters. Never sisters loved each other better than we. Abigail Adams in a letter to her sister Mary, June 1776 Much has been written about the enduring marriage of President John Adams and his wife, Abigail. But few know of the equally strong bond Abigail shared with her sisters, Mary Cranch and Elizabeth Shaw Peabody, accomplished women in their own right. Now acclaimed biographer Diane Jacobs reveals their moving story, which unfolds against the stunning backdrop of America in its transformative colonial years. Abigail, Mary, and Elizabeth Smith grew up in Weymouth, Massachusetts, the close-knit daughters of a minister and his wife. When the sisters moved away from one another, they relied on near-constant letters from what John Adams called their elegant penton buoy them through pregnancies, illnesses, grief, political upheaval, and, for Abigail, life in the White House. Infusing her writing with rich historical perspective and detail, Jacobs offers fascinating insight into these progressive women's lives: oldest sister Mary, who became de facto mayor of her small village; youngest sister Betsy, an aspiring writer who, along with her husband, founded the second coeducational school in the United States; and middle child Abigail, who years before becoming First Lady ran the family farm while her husband served in the Continental Congress, first in Philadelphia, and was then sent to France and England, where she joined him at last. This engaging narrative traces the sisters' lives from their childhood sibling rivalries to their eyewitness roles during the American Revolution and their adulthood as outspoken wives and mothers. They were women ahead of their time who believed in intellectual and educational equality between the sexes. Drawing from newly discovered correspondence, never-before-published diaries, and archival research, *Dear Abigail* is a fascinating front-row seat to history and to the lives of three exceptional women who were influential during a time when our nation's democracy was just taking hold. Advance praise for *Dear Abigail* In a beautifully wrought narrative, Diane Jacobs has brought the high-spirited, hyperarticulate Smith sisters, and the early years of the American republic, to rich, luminous life. . . . A stunning, sensitive work of history. Stacy Schiff, Pulitzer Prizewinning author of *Cleopatra* Jacobs is a superb storyteller. In this sweeping narrative about family and friendship during the American Revolution, Abigail Adams emerges as one of the great political heroines of the eighteenth century. I fell in love with her all over again. Amanda Foreman, *New York Times* bestselling author of *A World on Fire* Beauty, brains, and breeding Elizabeth, Abigail, and Mary had them all. This absorbing history shows how these close-knit and well-educated daughters of colonial America become women of influence in the newly begotten United States. Jacobs's feel for the period is confident; so is her appreciation of the nuances of character. Daniel Mark Epstein, author of *The Lincolns: Portrait of a Marriage*

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Never sisters loved each other better than we... One hot July evening in 1766, 22-year-old Abigail, the wife of rising young lawyer John Adams, stayed up late to write her 25-year-old sister Mary Cranch how much she missed her. Both were living in the outskirts of Boston—Abigail in Braintree and Mary in Salem, but there were twenty-five miles of bad roads and a river between them. Each had teething infants, reams of housework, and husbands setting out to make their marks in the world. Still, Abigail was determined to get to Salem before the end of the summer. I have been scheming of it this fortnight, she told her sister. But then John was assailed by one law case after another. She couldn't see herself clear until the lower court adjourned, and then I hope there will not any more Mountains arise to hinder me. Mole hills I always Expect to find, but them I can easily surmount. 1 Mary had told Abigail she woke up at four to cook and clean, mother her baby daughter, and scurry Richard, her brilliant but impractical spouse, off to work. Abigail joked that she and John dozed until eight at least, enjoying the breeze off the Atlantic and indulging my inclination to Laziness. Both Mary and Abigail were deeply in love with their husbands, yet lonely for each other and for their teenage sister, Elizabeth, who was still living with their parents a few miles from Braintree in Weymouth. Sister Betsy, poor Girl her heart is with you, but when her Body will be, is uncertain, Abigail lamented to Mary, for their worrying mother always found some excuse—Betsy's cough, the sultry New England weather—to keep her home. So the sisters clung to one another by writing. 2 They wrote with homemade quill pens and ink produced from their own recipes on Massachusetts bond from the new paper mill in Milton. Composing in moments stolen from spinning or churning butter, or while everyone else was sleeping, with candle wax dripping on their prose, they lamented all the errors they made. Mary had no need to explain that she wrote in great haste: her spotty ink and wild scrawl announced her endless workload. Burn this letter! she and Abigail frequently enjoined each other. Betsy made no such request. Yet, even Betsy, who kept her pen sharp and took pride in her fine cursive, rarely wrote in a tranquil moment. My brains are all roiled, she characteristically fretted at the end of one letter. What's more, the colonial postal system, years behind Great Britain's, was so notoriously unreliable that, through no fault of her own, Abigail had just gotten back a letter she wrote Mary a week earlier like a bad penny. The nearest post office was in Cambridge, so if no neighbor carried it directly, another week might pass before Abigail found a Harvard-bound neighbor willing to send the letter back off. Still, it was all worthwhile since reading a letter from Mary brought new spring to Abigail's nerves and a brisker circulation to my Blood, creating a kind of pleasing pain. I feel so glad that I can scarcely help feeling sorry, she now wrote, and while she conceded this reaction might seem strange, it was perfectly normal when people were connected as deeply as Mary and herself. Never Sisters Loved each other better than we, I believe I can truly say, she declared. 3 I daily count the days between this and the time I may probably see you, Mary agreed; though, being the eldest, it did not behoove her to effuse as much as her middle sister, and while assuring Betsy, the baby, that she longed for a visit, Mary felt impelled to remind her that their parents' needs came first. 4 Honoring those above you and commanding those beneath made life run

smoothly: besides, it was Gods will. It would have been obvious to anyone who met them that Abigail, Mary, and Betsy were sisters. Though Mary was darker and taller and Betsy was the slimmest, all were small and slender with oval faces; narrow, decisive mouths; smooth noses; shining brown hair; and clear skin. Their bright dark eyes conveyed authority and a marked intelligence, and they all shared their mothers energetic, self-confident air and passion for doing good, but were surprisingly delicate they were the first to catch colds and the last to recover. When she was very young, Abigail had been paralyzed for two weeks with rheumatic fever,<sup>5</sup> and her childbirths had been far more treacherous than Marys. It was a battle with death for her to produce a child.<sup>6</sup> Betsy, frailest of them all, wilted in the heat and was so weak after one childhood illness that the doctor ordered her not to read, write, work, or even think. It was lucky the ill humours attacked her body rather than her mood or shed be impossible to live with, Abigail observed.<sup>7</sup> These sisters had been inseparable since their Weymouth childhood. Weymouth where their father, William Smith, had been minister of the First Congregational Church since 1734 was a crooked, twelve-mile ride away from Boston. It was a typical New England village, smelling of the yellow blossoms of locust trees in the spring and bayberry bushes in the autumn, sweltering in summer and so cold on a winter night that ink could freeze in your pen. Wild ducks flew overhead, and the wind carried fish scents from the ocean. The town had a population of just over a thousand; its dwellings were wood versions of the brick houses the Puritans had left behind in England, and they ran up and down old Indian trails. The sisters were born in an age of inspiration and conflict, with the Great Awakening stirring evangelical conversions in the Puritan churches and the Enlightenment championing rational thinking in the libraries of Harvard and Yale. It was the era of Voltaire and Rousseau, Locke and Hume, reason and feeling. Such questions as what constitutes a social contract preoccupied the great minds of the time. In New England, womens fight for social involvement had died a century before with the banning of Anne Hutchinsons weekly meetings in 1637. Where Hutchinson had borne sixteen children and co-founded the colony of Rhode Island, mothers of the mid-eighteenth century generally sought power only in the private sphere. Out of necessity or conviction, they colluded in their own economic and physical dependence. Most mothers set an example of subservience for their daughters and left public discourse to their husbands and sons. In 1754 the year Mary turned thirteenth the French and Indian War broke out, extending the worldwide Seven Year War to the colonies. Here it became a contest between England and France for American wealth. Most of the Indian tribes allied with the French hoping to thwart the aggressive spread of the British, while colonists from Maine to Georgia identified wholeheartedly with their English kin. American militias rushed to assist the British forces. In the 1750s, young George Washington made a name for himself vanquishing Indians attacking early pioneers. Around the dinner table at their fathers parsonage, the Smith sisters listened silently as the wisest men in Weymouth analyzed battles in Ohio or Pennsylvania or Louisiana. Out the window crashed the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. Across it lay their King and culture. The girls craved British books and British dresses, British concerts and parties and plays. Weymouth, Betsy quipped, was distinguished only for its inactivity.<sup>8</sup> But its wild, hilly farmland and lofty oak trees also moved her, for she was full of delicate feeling or, as her epoch phrased it, sensibility. Females ran in the family. The girls mother, Elizabeth Quincy Smith, was like Betsy the youngest of three close sisters. When Elizabeth Quincy married William Smith on October 16, 1740, she moved across the pond from Braintree to Weymouth, where she gave birth to her first child, Mary, on December 9, 1741. Next came Abigail on November 11, 1744, and last Elizabeth on April 7, 1750. Between Abigail and Elizabeth, in 1746, William Smith was born, assuring them a male heir. In terms of salvation, though, men and women were on the same footing. All four siblings, baptized in their fathers parish, set off on the uncertain road to eternal life.<sup>9</sup> But in the hierarchy of New England, where your family name determined where you sat in church<sup>10</sup> and the order in which you graduated in your class at Harvard, the children of William and Elizabeth Smith were already assured a distinguished place. On their fathers side of the family lay a line of successful businessmen going back to Thomas Smith, who sailed from England and opened a butcher shop ten miles from Weymouth in the village of Charleston in 1663. His son, the sisters grandfather, became a wealthy merchant farmer, while their maternal forebearers Quincys and Nortons were landed gentry, pastors, and statesmen. On an old parchment, their adored grandmother Quincy traced a family tree back to an ancestor who had fought with William the Conqueror at Hastings and another who had signed the Magna Carta beside King John. In 1633, the first American Quincy, Edward, had arrived in Massachusetts Bay with a band of defiant English Puritans, who called themselves Congregationalists. These men and women rejected Englands state religion, Anglicanism, for its ostentation but accepted its emphasis on the inequality of the educated and the ignorant, the wealthy and the poor. Order, they believed, demanded that one man answer to another. There would be no grandiose Bishops or Lords in Puritan America, but also no pretense of egalitarianism; the humble would doff their hats to privilege just like at home. Edward Quincy arrived in America as a gentleman with six servants and enhanced his fortune farming the hilly land he named Mount Wollaston in Braintree, which elected him to the first Massachusetts court. Edwards grandson, John Quincy, the girls grandfather, all but ran Braintree, serving as Colonel in the Army, Speaker in the Massachusetts House of Representatives, and moderator for every town meeting in the precinct for years. A local Indian tribe even chose him as their guardian, praising his fair-mindedness. John Adams complained in his diary that Colonel John Quincy never said anything good about anyone, but admitted he did not often speak evil either. He did accumulate the largest library outside of Boston and was as devout as his grandfather Edward. The

church remained the most powerful agent in New England life, though over the past half century, religion in New England had changed. Gone, for instance, was the founders law, which defined anyone who was not a Puritan as a heretic, subject to having an ear lopped off if he practiced his wayward faith. By Colonel John Quincys time he lived from 1689 until 1767 Anglicans and Quakers could not only worship as they liked but exert power in town meetings. These local governments were true democracies for their era. Name and fortune for once were irrelevant. Every property-owning male carried the same weight. Congregationalism, meanwhile, had radically polarized. On the one hand, the so-called Old Lights continued to cherish emotional reticence; on the other, the New Lights began fanning self-display. Faith, which for the former was inborn or gently encouraged, came for the latter as ecstatic revelation. Writhing was an inevitable consequence as was in Abigail's words foaming.<sup>11</sup> Reverend Smith managed to appease both camps, though he himself was an Old Light, believing, like John Locke, in the superiority of reason to feeling, and refusing to dwell on mans sins. Abigail spoke for her father when she said, Gloom is no part of my Religion.<sup>12</sup> Nor was it easy for him to hide his scorn for the Born Again awakenings that charismatic evangelicals like the British George Whitefield and the American Jonathan Edwards were fomenting in New England in the middle of the eighteenth century. Reverend Smith voted against the New Lights in clerical meetings, but would not speak against them at the pulpit. As he saw it, remaining impartial made him popular and therefore useful. Usefulness was the most crucial virtue a Congregationalist could possess. Besides, he loved philosophy and had an aversion to petty gossip talk about things, not people, he advised his daughters. He prized forgiveness. On the wall of his main parlor hung a Biblical painting of the brothers Esau and Jacob, embracing after a lifetime of envy and hate. Parson Smith subscribed to foreign papers like the literary Spectator and Tatler and was a shrewd reader of human nature, with a sometimes lurid humor, according to his friends.<sup>13</sup> Loss troubled him. Houses struck by lightning and fire were the sort of events he recorded in his diary. Yet he had faith in human endeavor. In August of 1751, only four months after his church burned to the ground, he had already begun raising another. Here he preached a month later, with his family listening from the best pew.<sup>14</sup> One evening Reverend Smith amused company by speculating that printing was invented by luck when some careless boy whittled his name onto a tree bark.<sup>15</sup> But nothing of importance was left to chance in his home. Self-control and self-improvement carried the day. Typically, ministers paid for their great prestige with a low standard of living. Salaries were meager and often as in William Smith's case based on the price of crops in a given year. Reverend Smith's diary is filled with jottings about minute rises in the costs of wheat or rye, for he was careful about money and determined to get his fair share. Like most ministers, he also farmed to augment his salary. As little girls, the sisters fell asleep beneath the eaves in their wainscoted second-floor bedroom to the trembling of cow bells. They awoke to the sight of three lofty hills, the sound of woodpeckers drilling nests into the spring trees, and a view of fruit orchards and grazing sheep.<sup>16</sup> But the Smiths did not rely solely on William Smith's preaching and farming. Thanks to their wealthy relatives, the minister and his wife could afford a silver rather than the standard wood tankard for their dining board and a light, one-horse carriage for two with a calash or hood. They had an upstairs library and paid over a hundred pounds to add a barn-size L-extension to their two-floor wooden home. The house had a slanted roof and sat on the corner of North and East Streets. Windows were taxed, so it was a mark of wealth that they had four, all flooding sunlight into the large formal parlor. Here each of the girls had composed her first letter on a lap desk and here Betsy now wrote longingly to her married sisters in what John Adams called her elegant pen.<sup>17</sup> Unless, of course, she was visiting the Adamses in their smaller house near their First Congregational Church, in Braintree. Here Betsy and Abigail would talk[] and wish[] for Mary while gazing outdoors at the upward swing of Penns Hill.<sup>18</sup> Light and perspective mattered deeply to all of the sisters; so even frugal Mary had thrown caution to the wind when she moved to Salem. Mary's house, which Abigail now had her heart set on visiting, had not only brightness but a splendid view of the wharfs and the sea. The home the girls grew up in had more than a good lookout. You must remember that very few children have had such advantage as you have and that where much has been done by way of culture good from it is expected, Elizabeth Quincy Smith wrote her son, Billy, when he left home to work in his teens.<sup>19</sup> Billy had been taught Greek and Latin by the finest tutors and plied with new books imported from London. He had the chance to go to Harvard and cared so little for knowledge that he turned it down. Mary loved Billy, more, she believed, than brothers ever loved sisters,<sup>20</sup> but was vexed by his indifference to education when she and her sisters were so avid to learn. And whereas in England daughters were often educated by their fathers and the early feminist Mary Astell had gone so far as to advocate college for girls! in the New World females had half the literacy rate of their brothers<sup>21</sup> and were taught by their mother only reading, religion, and basic math. Dancing and music classes were considered too frivolous in the Smith household, though William Smith's library was open to everyone, and their mother was advanced in promoting reason rather than dogma. I have always endeavored to persuade you to act from principle, Elizabeth Smith explained to Billy in a letter that described her method with all four children. As soon as you were capable of reasoning you [were] treated like a reasonable creature when any thing was demanded of you the reason was given.<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth taught charity to her daughters by example, as when she turned down stylish imports and hired indigent neighbors to spin the family clothes, or when she risked her own health to visit sick neighbors. She prayed with her children at night and in the morning and sat with them through two church services on Sunday not only because she was pious, but because she was convinced that fear of God warded off sin.<sup>23</sup> Industry was also a powerful

agent for good. She taught her girls the arduous process of mixing grease and ashes to make a barrel of soap on a spring day and how to trap a goose in a stocking so they wouldnt get their fingers bitten off plucking its feathers for their quill pens. From an early age, Mary, Abigail, and Betsy joined their mother in the autumn ritual of making candles by spinning hemp into wicks and dipping them in kettles filled with water and tallow hung on trammels over the kitchen fire. Though her life was hard enough, Elizabeth Quincy Smith felt lucky by comparison to other Weymouth families and told her children they were too.<sup>24</sup>The girls mother was a model of thrift, and her warning that it was better to save every apple paring than to waste spoke especially to Mary, who was the most cautious of the three.<sup>25</sup> Mary was also the most easily comforted, always feeling better as soon as she had opened my heart to someone.<sup>26</sup> All three girls were disgusted by females who squandered time or money, for this offended not just God but the sort of man they hoped to wed.Elizabeth Smith was full of contradictionsso relentless about chaperoning her daughters fiancs that Abigail suspected she had never been in love herself, but so skillful and kind that Betsy yearned for her nursing for the rest of her life whenever she got sick.<sup>27</sup> The community perceived her as the ideal ministers wife, adept at settling quarrels and avoiding feuds.<sup>28</sup> Yet, while she held a high standard of excellence, her desires were modest. She wanted to shine in the world as it was, and she did.Mary, with her pleasing ways, seemed the most like her mother, though inwardly she seethed at the neglect of her mind. Method was wanting in our studies and we had no one to point us to it, she reminded Abigail when they were both out of the parsonage. . . . Our parents felt the necessity of keeping us from scenes of dissipation and frivolity and left the rest to nature.<sup>29</sup>Still, on the outside at least, Mary was the dutiful firstborn, while Abigail was openly rebellious and wild. You will either make a very bad or a very good woman, a family friend told her: obviously suspecting the first.<sup>30</sup> In her teens Abigail committed the sacrilege of opposing her mothers authority, or, as she saw it, made clear she resented how her mother denied her most innocent requests.As a child, Abigail was often sent away for long visits to her grandmother Quincy, whom she sometimes thought she loved more than her own mother because she did not invidiously compare her to Mary or rebuke her more than once for a crime. Besides, Grandmother Quincy could be wicked herselfwhispering to Abigail that it was a mercy to the world some people they knew were kept poor or they would be even haughtier than they were already,<sup>31</sup> and regaling her with spicy anecdotes from the local newspapers, such as the story of the wife who poured red wine in her husbands pipe.<sup>32</sup>And then there was Betsy, who was just as high-spirited as Abigail and even less free to express herself. She could not run off to her grandmothers because she was the youngest andunlike her also unmarried and far less industrious brotheralways had duties to perform at home. Where Billy wasted his chances to learn, she grasped every free moment to read, and not just enthusiastically, but with a cultivated taste that would have ranged wider, she was sure, if one duty or another wasnt always calling her from her fathers books. The final insult came during Marys and Abigails brief visits whenrather than at last having time to enjoy herselfBetsy was given the further burden of amusing their little girls. I am almost crazed with the natural Blessings of Matrimony, she wrote her cousin Isaac during one such visit. Then she herself got sick, and four months passed before she had the strength to read, which would not be so terrible for this cousin, who was off at Harvard and could spend whole years in the delightful employment of improving [your] mental powers. Shortness of the time enhances its value and makes the loss greivous to me, she reported with her normal dramatic flair.<sup>33</sup>