

Mercy Otis Warren was a poet, playwright, and social critic during the era of the American Revolution, a time when women were expected to remain silent about politics. In defiance of that norm, Mercy's friendship with patriotic figures like John and Samuel Adams led her to become an outspoken commentator and historian of the Revolution and early republic.

Born on September 14, 1728, in Barnstable, Massachusetts, Mercy was the third of thirteen children of James Otis and Mary Allyne Otis. Her exposure to politics began early. Her father, a self-taught attorney, was elected to the Massachusetts legislature in 1745. Like most girls, she received only a minimal education but after pleading with her father, she joined her oldest brother James, Jr. as their uncle prepared him for Harvard. After reading John Locke's theories about the natural rights of man, Mercy became fascinated by history and politics.

In 1754, she wed James Warren, one of her brother's classmates at Harvard, who encouraged her to write. The couple had five sons. After James Warren's 1766 election to the Massachusetts legislature, he and Mercy hosted prominent citizens from Boston who were opposed to British politics. During those meetings, John Adams became so impressed with Mercy's knowledge and literary skills that he encouraged her to write about politics. So, too, did Abigail who became a close friend.

Mercy consequently produced a trio of political dramas denouncing British officials and policies. Her 1772 play, *The Adulateur*, anonymously published in the Massachusetts Spy, satirized British officials, especially Governor Thomas Hutchinson. Equally popular were *The Defeat* of 1773 and *The Group* of 1775 which appeared just weeks before the start of the Revolution. But words were not enough, leading Mercy to support boycotts of tea and other British imports.

From the start of the Revolution, Mercy began recording key events, resulting in the 1805 publication of *The History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*. It was one of the first nonfiction books published by an American woman. Mercy was also the third woman to write a book of poems, preceded by Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley. Several of her other works -- notably *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous* ----similarly reflected her first-hand experience with the war. Imbued with the natural rights philosophy which once inspired the Revolution, Mercy hoped her *History* would again foster egalitarian and democratic policies in the new republic.

Her stance as a Jeffersonian Republican who critiqued the U.S. Constitution for ignoring the rights of individuals and states, put Mercy at odds with her former mentor, the conservative John Adams, a champion of that document. Like her British friend, Catharine Macaulay, she believed women should be educated as well as men.

Mercy lived to be eighty-six. She remained vital to the end, continuing to write and correspond with political friends.

Nancy Rubin Stuart