



[00:00:00] **Jeffrey Rosen:** I'm Jeffrey Rosen, President and CEO of the National Constitution Center, and welcome to We the People, for the weekly show of constitutional debate. The National Constitution Center is a nonpartisan nonprofit, chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people.

On today's episode, I'm thrilled to share with We the People listeners, the genius of a deeply influential figure in American constitutional history, Mercy Otis Warren, a poet, writer and historian. Warren was a trailblazing woman who influenced the framers and shaped the nation.

I'm joined by two of America's leading scholars of Mercy Otis Warren. Nancy Rubin Stuart is the author of *The Muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation*. She specializes in women's social history and her next book, *Poor Richard's Women: Deborah Read Franklin and the Other Women Behind the Founding Father*, will be published in February 2022. What a wonderful subject for your next book, Nancy, and thank you so much for joining.

[00:01:13] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** It's my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

[00:01:16] **Jeffrey Rosen:** And Rosemarie Zagarri, is university professor at George Mason University where she specializes in early American history. She is the author of *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution*, which is part of the American biographical history series. Her latest book is *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic*. Rosemarie, thank you so much for joining.

[00:01:40] **Rosemarie Zagarri:** Oh, thrilled to be here. Thank you.

[00:01:42] **Jeffrey Rosen:** I've learned so much from both of your wonderful books. And I'm so eager to begin with the legacy and accomplishments of Mercy Otis Warren. She was the third woman after Anne Bradstreet and Phyllis Wheatley to publish a book of poems. She was the author of *Observations on the New Constitution*, which warned of an aristocratic tyranny and uncontrolled despotism, and she's the author of *The History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*, which was among the first nonfiction books published by a woman in America.

Nancy Rubin Stuart, let's begin with you. Tell us about the historical significance of Mercy Otis Warren?

[00:02:32] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Well, she is the first female historian of the American Revolution. But of course, there's a long legacy behind that, because that's that's, for years, she's written poems and plays all, almost all anonymously protesting some of the some of the problems that came as a result, not only of, of fighting Great Britain, but in the aftermath. And she, she's very much interested in the republic, she's interested in the early patriotic values of virtue, thrift, simplicity and honesty. And her writings had a huge impact upon the Bill of Rights.

[00:03:12] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much for that. Rosemarie, how would you introduce, We the People listeners, to the legacy and significance of Mercy Otis Warren?

[00:03:22] **Rosemarie Zagarri:** Well, at the time of the American Revolution, women were politically invisible. Politics was considered to be an exclusively male realm, and they, of course, had no vote and no voice in politics. And they were assumed to really be political ciphers. But what Mercy Otis Warren did was actually intrude into that male realm, and write about politics and think about politics and publish about politics.

And so she was really an innovator by entering this male realm of politics and by writing about politics and by being a, a spokesman who was a woman. And her early writings were, indeed published anonymously. But by the time she started publishing after the American Revolution, she wrote under her own name, and she published her History of the American Revolution under her own name. And so it was really a significant new opening for women by doing so.

[00:04:30] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much for that. Well, her achievements were extraordinary. John Adams calls her a poetical genius and called her the most accomplished woman in America. Abigail, who is one of her closest friends loved the characters drawn by her pen Thomas Jefferson considered her brilliance itself. Alexander Hamilton talked about her poems as demonstrating remarkable genius.

What's so extraordinary about her was her classical education and she was largely self-taught. Nancy you described her emphasis on virtue and thrift, all of which came from her readings in the classics. And you also describe how she was prevented from studying Latin and Greek, but from her uncle learned to devour Pope and Dryden's translations of Virgil and Homer. You write that she read Raleigh's History of the World and other crucial books which just gave her remarkable classical education. Can you tell us more about the books that she read and how she was able to educate herself so remarkably?

[00:05:40] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Yes. Well, she really wasn't self educated. Her, her uncle, as you mentioned what, lived nearby and was a, a minister. And she, because she was the third child and the eldest daughter, she was her father's well, he became her favorite. He, she was intellectually obviously gifted, and breaking from tradition and what were the demands on a, on a young woman who's had many young, younger siblings. Her, she teased and wheedled her father, I think, to her mother's disapproval, and was able to be tutored with her older brother, James Otis, Jr who was being prepared for, for college, for Harvard.

And so she was able to attend many of, of those tutoring sessions. Then somehow from there, even when, when Jamie as she called her brother James Otis, Jr, she he, he even shared his books when he was at Harvard and he would come back with her. So, she did have a great deal of, of, let's say personal attention to her writings. But she, she devoured everything she could and went on, I, I'm quite sure later in in life, and with her husband, by the way, his, his encouragement to continue to read as many books of, as she possibly could to understand the full scope of government and its implications for, for the ordinary person.

[00:07:06] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much for that and for teaching us that it was her education with her brother James Otis, whose famous speeches Denouncing the Writs of

Assistance were said by John Adams to have spark the American Revolution that led to this remarkable, classical education. Rosemarie, what can you tell us about Mercy Otis Warren's education, the books she read, and what made her one of the best educated people of her time?

[00:07:36] **Rosemarie Zagarri:** Well, I, I mean, her education was unusual for a woman at the time, because when when actually a lot of women, young girls in New England, in the colonial period did learn to read, a fewer of them actually learned to write because it wasn't thought as necessary for women to write. But what's really significant is that she got, what we might call a higher education. And that is, she did that along with her brother at the hands of a tutor, and she did become introduced to these classical writings of, of Virgil and Homer and Cato. And, of course, then later on, you know, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.

But in that, what's interesting is that, she was better educated than most women, but also better educated than most men. And she had the equivalent of what we would call a college education. Now, she didn't actually go to college, of course, but you know, the level of her instruction was equivalent to that. And what's, what's fascinating there is that the elite, the political leaders of the Revolution, were all imbued with this classical understanding of history and understand what was, un- understood what was unfolding before them in the American Revolution in classical terms.

And so they saw, you know, the creation of the United States as the creation of a new Rome. And they saw the, the battle between the, the American colonies and Great Britain as this struggle between power and liberty that had been played out throughout ancient history, and the protection of liberties and the vigilance against corruption and conspiracy. All of those were classical tropes. And you know, people like John Adams, people like Thomas Jefferson they all understood the revolution in those classical terms. And Mercy Otis Warren was among them in, in understanding the revolution in this way.

And so, what's fascinating is that a woman at this time, had access to this higher level of education that made her appear of the leading American revolutionaries at the time, and allowed her to become one of the leading proponents of the revolution inspirers of the American Revolution and then later on, a, a, an, an accountant, a chronicler of the American Revolution.

[00:10:15] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much for that. And Rosemarie, as you write, in your book, Mercy Otis Warren took that classical perspective and imbued it into her History of the Revolution. And as you say, she saw the revolution as a morality play that pitted virtue against vice, liberty against tyranny, passion against reason. And you say that one of her major themes was the decline in public virtue and the transformation of American manners. And you quote the remarkable passage where she talked about, "Avarice without frugality, and profusion without taste, were indulged and soon banish the simplicity and elegance that had formerly resigned."

Nancy, you, of course, talk about these themes in Warren's, History of the Revolution as well, give our listeners a sense of how Warren's, History of the American Revolution was written through this classical republican lens.

[00:11:07] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Well, I have to say that she started doing so at the encouragement of John Adams. And as Rosemarie mentioned they all had the same overview, political lens and frame of reference with their understanding of, of classical history and the struggle between power and virtue.

So John prevailed upon her quite early in the revolution to, to begin writing it. And at first she hesitated but as she and her husband became more involved in the revolution, she, she began timidly to collect ideas in papers and, and before long she was collecting letters or newspaper articles if she could, from afar, as, as the war progressed and moved from, of course, Massachusetts south to New York, and then on, on so on, to Long Island and, and Pennsylvania, and, and so on.

So for her everything she collected was looked upon, she looked upon it, a, a, as in this lens of, of what was happening. She was hopeful, at first. And for, and for a number of years that things would change. And I, and I have to say that, while she was beginning to write *The History of the Revolution* before that, she had been already for quite a while writing plays that protested the the the, the oppression and the tyranny and the the power grabs that were happening in her own state. And so as, as early as well, quite early, as early as 1772, she'd written her first play, *The Adulateur* which had to do with mocking and castigating Hutchinson.

And, of course, the, *The Squabble of the Sea Nymphs* is is a sort of a, it's a humorous take on the, on the Boston Tea Party, which really wasn't very humorous. She wrote the next of the year ... In 1773, she wrote *The Defeat*, in which she predicts that this, this kind of tyranny and, and oppression among the Massachusetts governor, Hutchinson, could not continue. By the way she, all these characters, it's, they're plays, of course, plays were never produced in Boston. And they're plays in the broadest sense of the word but they were, they were widely reprinted in places like the *Massachusetts Spy* and the, and the *Boston Gazette*, all anonymously.

1770 1773, virtually, under the, under the nose of the British who were then occupying Boston she produces *The Group* which again goes even further and predicts, you know, the, the death of this, this oppressive regime and, and what was happening with, with Great Britain with, with the unfair taxes and the, and the writs, the, the seizures or the quartering of, of troops and so on in Boston, in people's homes and, and so on.

And she does these, these are all, I would say, warm ups, if you will. And they're all by the way, printed anonymously because of course, women were not supposed to be in politics. They weren't even supposed to discuss them, although some of them, she and Abigail briefly, must, and, and also with her friend Hannah, Hannah Winthrop do do discuss the implications of what's, what's happening before their, their eyes.

But these are all, these all precede and I think fuel into what happens when she starts writing the history because she's already set the stage for not only the framework of, of, well, it reflects back to an ancient history, but the framework of, of where this revolution is going.

[00:14:46] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much for that. Rosemarie as you note, it wasn't only her classical education, but also her perspective as a woman that influenced her narrative

voice in *The History*. She wrote, "Observations on the moral conduct of man on religious opinion or persecutions and the motives by which mankind are actuated in their various pursuits, will not be censured when occasionally introduced, they're more congenial to the taste inclination and sex of the writer than a detail of the rough and terrific scenes of war." Tell us about how her perspective as a woman influenced her voice in *The History*?

[00:15:29] **Rosemarie Zagarri:** Well, it's fascinating because women generally didn't write these kinds of political or military histories. Now, she did have an amazing contemporary in Catherine Macaulay, in England at this time, and Catherine Macaulay was actually a sort of colleague and correspondent, first of her brother James, James Otis, and then of Mercy Otis Warren herself. And so she did have this role model, who preceded her in writing about these male realms of politics and war. But it was not typical. It was frowned upon, frankly. And she really felt intimidated at first about doing this. She felt like she was transgressing the line of her sex, I think she says, at one point.

And so there was some self censure, I suppose you could say, in what she wrote about. But what's truly amazing about her *History of the American Revolution*, which she again began writing during the American Revolution, but actually wound up not publishing until 1805. And so, it really went through several iterations. And she actually wound up including the presidencies of George Washington and John Adams in that *History of the American Revolution*.

But in any case what's really fascinating here is that, she did include, you know, detailed discussions about, about the politics about the political ideas about the war itself. She does have some veiled references, for example, to, to the rape of women, of the sacrifices of women, for example, at the siege of Charleston. And she, she really includes the things that men include in their political histories, but I would say, even more. I mean, I think her perspective as a woman really allowed her to see the revolution more broadly.

And I think what's significant here is that, you know, she really felt that she as a woman, and that American women in general, should be considered citizens of this new republic, that they were as involved in their own ways as wives and mothers and as as, as the participants in the revolution as men were, they weren't on the fe- field of battle, they weren't in the legislative houses, but they experienced the war, they suffered because of the war, they had to take on new responsibilities because of the war. And in the New Republic, they were participating in making the new Republic a success. They were shaping the future citizens, the children of the Republic, and they were encouraging their husbands to be good citizens.

So I think her perspective actually brought in the audience for these histories and said, "Women are, are political beings and should be considered political beings. And we have, as women, the right, the right to write these histories of the American Revolution."

[00:18:44] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Nancy, what are your thoughts about how Mercy Otis Warren's perspective as a woman influenced her perspective in *The History*?

[00:18:52] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** She certainly does begin to mention women with their sacrifices. And, and again, she mentions several instances where there are tragedies and there are sacrifices that are horrifying in *The History*. What's interesting is that she's already set

that up in some of her earlier plays and her poems. She talks about some of the sacrifices that women have made and, and, and names some actually, well, veiled references to women being killed in, after child- after childbirth by British soldiers. She, she talks about some of the sacrifices women have made. I, I want to take this again, if you don't mind.

[00:19:39] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Of course. And this is great to talk about. The perspective is rather important.

[00:19:44] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Right. At least at least one of her and ... One of her plays talks about the, the, let me start again. One of, one of her earlier plays during the revolution talks, although it's all males, almost all male figures, it talks about the sacrifice, the the, the woman who is kind of trapped by her husband's political sympathies into positions.

And I have to say that Mercy also was instrumental, as the revolution proceeded with encouraging other women to boycott, to be involved in boycotting British goods in participating the non-importation agreements on, with encouraging women to wear homespun to drink herbal tea that were just picked in their own, their own land, not, not, not imported. And so she's already sort of rousing women one way or the other to, to their parades, of course of who she ... She makes, makes fun of in, in some of her writings, the women who are still buying English goods and clothes.

So this is all being set up well ahead. Now, of course, she's trying in her history, to be ... To compete with, with male authors and to dignify her, her interpretation has to be dignified. And yet she cannot help but bring in some of the the women who have sacrificed and the many sacrifices, not just the, the, the everyday sacrifices of food and, and shelter, but also some of them, of course, many of them are, are widows. And she, she mentions that in her history.

But for her and ... You know, Mercy, though, I, I have to say, Mercy had a, an interesting perspective on women. Women must be primarily wives and mothers. They should be educated so that they can understand the world around them. But she had a certain kind of a timidity, I'd say, a trent- she's transitional. She's not Mary Wollstonecraft, or, or Judith Sargent Murray, she's a transitional woman from the earlier more silent more, more traditional wife and mother into, and because of her education and because of her personality I think as a literary person, simply had to go further but, but holds herself back. So, you see that in, in *The History*, and yet you do see her advocating for women.

[00:22:15] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much for that. Well, let's talk about her portrayal in the history of John Adams and the fallout from that portrayal. She wrote in *The History* just four pages on Adams as she's stressed but they were explosive. She, she said of her old friend, "Mr. Adams was undoubtedly a statesman of penetration and ability, but his prejudices and his passions were sometimes too strong for his sagacity and judgment." she said that "Unfortunately for himself and his country, he became so enamored with the British constitution, and the government manners and laws of the nation, that a partiality for monarchy appeared, which was inconsistent with his former professions of republicanism." And then she very memorably said, "Pride of talents and much ambition, were undoubtedly combined in the character of the president, who immediately succeeded General Washington."

Rosemarie tell us about this portrayal, and the fact that she leavened it by praising Adams' morals in his private life, failed to assuage the reaction of her old friend John Adams.

[00:23:26] **Rosemarie Zagarri:** When John Adams read Mercy Otis Warren's, *History of the American Revolution*, he felt like he had been stabbed in the back. He had been from the time before the American Revolution been one of her greatest champions. He had encouraged her to write poems and the satirical plays. Before the American Revolution, they, John Adams and Warren were correspondence even intimate, the families were in intimate terms and Mercy Otis Warren was friends with, with Abigail Adams, as well as John Adams. And he encouraged her to write this *History of the American Revolution*.

And so when the, when the *History* was finally published in 1805, it was, of course, after his defeat at the polls by Thomas Jefferson, which he took very hard. And he picked it up. And then he saw that in her discussion of his presidency, she had basically betrayed him in, in, at least in his eyes. You know, she had praised his integrity and his character, but she'd basically accused him of being a crypto-monarchist of, of, you know, being aristocratic of betraying some of the most important republican principles of the American Revolution.

And if you recall, I mean, John Adams was President when the Alien and Sedition Acts were passed, which, you know, by any accounts, were incredible infringements on American freedom of speech and liberty. And, you know, he did do a lot of things and, and write some things that certainly led his opponents to believe that he was no longer the unfailing champion of, of liberty that he had been, you know, when they were fighting the British. And by this time, too, I mean, Warren, Mercy Otis Warren and her husband, had boast, both expressed overt sympathies for Thomas Jefferson.

So you have this partisan divide that had emerged in the early republic. And so this all played into her portrayal of John Adams. And so what ensued was just an amazing series of letters back and forth, where John Adams, basically, critiques minutely, almost line by line, Warren's *History of the American Revolution*. And he attacks her integrity, he attacks her accuracy, he attacks her motives and she is, at first, she's just shocked. Because in her view, and it's a rather naive view, you must say she just thought she was trying to be a faithful objective historian, but that's not how it looked to John Adams.

And and so, you know, she was really shocked and appalled by these accusations he leveled at her. And, and she really tried to reply to them and, and refute and rebuke them. But, you know, he really wouldn't have any of it. And finally, you know it, it's amazing, but she ends their last, the last letter in the exchange by, you know, "You're not going to intimidate me. You know, I'm, I'm, you're not going to silence me."

And later on, John Adams, still is, is unabashed in his, his criticism of her and writes to his good friend that *The History* is filled with errors and misstatements. And he says, "History is not the province of the ladies." And so really, he just dismisses her. And this causes a breach between the families, and they don't speak for many years after that. And it's really very sad, but it's also very human.

And I think it says a lot about both of them. They were both rather rigid people. Principled, you could say, but to the point of inflexibility. But it's a really very sad drama that was

breached toward the end of their lives but never restored to their previous level of comfort and intimacy.

[00:27:56] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Nancy, tell us more about the breach itself the, that, that exchange of letters between Adams and Warren after *The History* was published, and then tell us about the remarkable semi reconciliation which has such a memorable ending which you describe so well.

[00:28:12] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Yes. Well you know, as as Rosemarie said, there were many letters that passed between them in that, in that summer but there are 10 letters that, that Adams writes. Some of them 20 pages, Mercy writes six, and when the final, her final letter, where she, she defends herself. That's it. But it it's, it's it's tragic and seven years pass. Now she and Abigail had remained friends. And of course, she had been close to Nabby. Nabby had in fact, at one point, come and, and lived with her, their daughter the the Adams daughter. And yet so when, so this is awful silence that, that goes on.

And in, by the way, in the, in the interim Mercy's husband James dies in in 1808. And, and yet there is no, no reconciliation nor, I don't even know whether there was real acknowledgement of it. So, she's now getting towards her 80s at this point, and it is not until 1812 that, when Nabby becomes ill with breast cancer, and then there's, there's some kind of letters that pass between Mercy and Abigail, but they're always kind of sort of [inaudible 00:31:23], they're, they're quiet and they're not ... You know, John is, is out of this picture.

And and Nabby, Nabby dies, there's, there's some commentary and some return of friendship between Abigail and, and and Mercy. But two more years of ... Now, now Mercy is now in her 80s. And the, the war of 1812 is on. And, and there're, there are some beginning of letters, there were some things that are passed on to John Adams where he remembers Jamie, her brother in the early days of the revolution, and he of course is also aging.

He writes to her finally about that, this memory that they're sharing. And in 1814, Mercy is now 86 years of age and she discovers that her, her most famous play *The Group* which was published just before the outbreak of bloodshed, Lexington and Concord. It is, it is then that she writes to him that somebody has plag- not only plage but, of course she had, many of her things were plagiarized before, beforehand. But now that, that now it's at the Boston Athenaeum.

And so she, she asks John Adams, she writes him and she says, "Could you please, could you please correct this?" And he agrees. And he rides from Quinsey to Boston. And he, he scrawls all over the copy of *The Group* that this, this was authored by Mercy Otis Warren. And this, this, you know, is a warm, and again, sort of an a, a reconciliation, of course at that point. Now, she dies just a few months later. But so there is some mutual acknowledgement of respect and admiration for what they had done, and in some sense, it puts away or it negates the bitterness that had gone on about her and her *History of the American Revolution*.

I should say also that Adam, despite Adams' prickly temperament and egotism about his role in it, that the few critics that did review *The History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*, there were very few reviews, and even those castigated it as

having, "the scent of a woman." So it was enormous, you know, bias against the fact that here was a woman, having written *The History*.

[00:31:51] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much for telling that amazing story. What an image of John Adams riding into Boston saying, "I've certified in the book in the Athenaeum, that, to my certain knowledge of *The Group* was written by Mrs. Warren." And as you say, in your book, today, visitors to the Boston Athenaeum can see that copy of *The Group* with John Adams' confirming statement scrawled upon it. Rosemarie tell us more about the reaction to *The History*, to what degree was it influenced by the fact that Mercy Otis Warren was a woman? And is this a underappreciated work that, that *We the People* listeners and, and Americans should rediscover today?

[00:32:32] **Rosemarie Zagarri:** Well, I think that the writing style of Mercy Otis Warren's, *History of the Revolution*, might put some people off. However, I think they heard her message about the importance of civic virtue, about the importance of, of, you know, commitment to the public good. I think, though, that message is really important and of the need and the danger ... The need for a civic virtue because there's always danger that republics can decline and fall. That was, that was the history of republics.

But Mercy Otis Warren at this time, did publish this work under her own name, Mrs. M. Warren, and she actually got a copyright, which, there was a new copyright law in the United States at this time. And she took advantage of that, and in a very touching way and she wrote a letter to one of her sons and said, you know, "If I die, I bequeath the copyright to you, because this is the only thing that I can truly say, that is my own." In other words, because women couldn't own property, married woman couldn't own property at this time, she was, she regarded the, the copyright of this history as something so precious that you would give it to her most beloved son. So I think that's very significant.

But she was very disappointed in the reception of *The History of the American Revolution* that she published in 1805. To get it published, you actually had to get subscribers. So, actually, a friend of hers in Boston went around getting people to agree to, to buy the, the volumes when they were published. And so she, it was able to do that and get enough subscribers to have it published.

But then when it was published, it sort of landed with a thud, and didn't get a lot more buyers, partly because she was a woman, and partly because she was a, a Jeffersonian Republican who published this book in a, a very strongly Federalist Massachusetts environment. And partly because John Marshall actually had just published a very pro-Federalist, that is pro-Washington and Hamilton and Adams *History of the Revolution* around the same time.

And the few reviews that did appear were rather disparaging, and so that was very discouraging to her too. So I think that this magnum opus, which again, I think, you know, still has messages that have revers- resonance today really, really did not have the impact that she had hoped at the time. But I think now, perhaps with the distance of a couple centuries, we can appreciate it more.

[00:35:28] **Jeffrey Rosen:** We can indeed. And as you say, this remarkable Jeffersonian republican perspective combined with a classical republican perspective, leads to

observations such as her statement that, both history and experience have proved that when party feuds have us divided a nation or benignity and benevolence are laid aside and influenced by the most malignant and corrupt passions, they lose sight of the sacred obligations of virtue, until there appears little difference in the ferocious spirits of men, in the most refined and civilized society or among the rude and barbarous hordes of the wilderness.

Nancy, to what degree was the exchange and partial reconciliation between Adams and Warren influenced by their shared classical education? They both talked about the need to suppress their unruly passions. And to what degree was it a reflection of their personalities? We, we know about John Adams' personality. He famously described himself as obnoxious and disliked. What was Warren's personality and, and to what degree did it influence her behavior?

[00:36:29] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Well, Warren and Adams, of course, go way back in time almost 30 years before that, when she was a, a timid writer, that he encouraged and she knew her place as a woman. And Adams, of course, was an attorney, and very much involved in the ferment that, that produced the American Revolution of Sons of Liberty and, and all of the intercolonial activities and, and the Continental Congress. So she despite her lofty education, and I, and I will call it lofty because very few people, ... When you read her writings, you will see that they are indeed neoclassical in tone.

Despite that her, her demeanor as was typical for the era was, was that of, of acquiescence and some subservience to men. Yet she had this incredible background educationally and personally, and she was a, a strong woman in her own way. I mean, let's just look at her for a moment personally, she had five sons. She, she continued to write while she had these children and as they, and they grew up.

She rode to to Watertown to the, the safe house where, where the Provincial Congress was meeting in a chaise a singled chaise chair by herself. Unheard of for the, for that day for a woman to be with her husband and to report from there to John Adams while he was in Congress about what was happening. She was sort of his rapporteur.

So this is a woman with, with, you know, a strong personality. Despite the overlay of, of all of the social mores that, that dictated to her. So, her, her education and, and Adams' education, in many ways, was similar, on their background, their understanding of, of the Republic, of their understanding of history. And yet because of her place, as a woman, and her subservience and John's expertise in the world, women want to be in the world, they want to be the home and the hearth, she she, he was her mentor.

So, it's it's a good fit for a long time until Adams well, Adams goes to Europe, and then things happen there. And there's a lot of misinterpretation about what happens when he is in in, in France and then in Holland, and then in England, and they're living in ... Well, he and Abigail are living in what looked like very elegant quarters. And, you know, this, this becomes a flashpoint for Mercy and her husband who again, back to the ideas of simplicity and virtue, feel that the Adams are being corrupted. And, and of course, the ultimate of that is her, her so called, well, her accusation whispered accusation that he's, he's really sort of a, a quietly a monarchist.

So, this is, this becomes you know, this, that, that stews, that, that broods for maybe a decade or so before he becomes pre- he returns and he becomes the second President of the United States. But their fit, ultimately, when we look past the history and, and the dissension between them, their fit is I think what, what really unites them. Not only in their understanding of history, but in the, in the, aside from the pettiness, but their understanding of what they've endured and what they've been through in order to help birth the United States of America. And that is ultimately what brings them back to some kind of a mature respect and admiration for each other at the end of their lives.

[00:40:10] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much for that. Well because this is the We the People podcast, we need to discuss Mercy Otis Warren's observations on the new Constitution and on the new federal and state constitutions. It was published anonymously by a Colombian Patriot, but it offered 18 reasons why a strong central government would lead to despotism, many mirroring anti-federalists objections to the Constitution, beginning with, there's no security for liberty of the press, there are no well defined limits of the judiciary powers all the way down to the mode in which this Constitution is recommended to the people to judge without either the advice of Congress or the legislatures of the several States is very reprehensible. Rosemarie, tell us about Warren's observations on the new constitutions. What were her objections? And, and what was the response to the pamphlet?

[00:40:58] **Rosemarie Zagarri:** Warren's pamphlet opposing the US Constitution is extraordinary. It's extraordinary that a woman wrote it, and as far as I know, she's the only woman who wrote or published a document on the, the debate over the US Constitution. Now she did do this anonymously and it was signed a Colombian Patriot. But I think that that pseudonym is really fascinating, because Colombia is this symbolic figure at the time of the revolutionary era, and it's often portrayed as a woman and it's a symbol of America. So she's, she's acknowledging that and patriot, she's a Colombian patriot. So she's saying that this opposition to the Constitution is a patriotic response in line with the principles and legacy of the American Revolution.

Now, I will say that, you know at the time, some people knew that a woman wrote this, but many people did not. And actually for a long time, historians attributed it to Elbridge Gerry, another anti-federalist from Massachusetts. And it's only over time that it's been discovered that it was actually this woman from Massachusetts, Mercy Otis Warren, who wrote this. So it wasn't known at the time. And I should emphasize that, and it could hold its own with the best anti-federalist writings of the time, you know. So a federal farmer and things like that.

And so I think it's, was really influential, I think the, the part of her, her treatise, for the pamphlet that talks about the lack of a Bill of Rights was extremely influential in influencing the debate in the state constitutions, constitutional conventions, about, you know, the lack of a Bill of Rights and why that was such a, a grievous omission. I think, along with George Mason in Virginia, you know, may have been among the most influential pamphlets in, on that subject.

But she also had other concerns, which I think were really important, including, she was afraid that there would be too much of a centralization of power, that there would be too much of a, of a Neo-Aristocracy created in, in those who were elected to this new government, she was afraid that the government would be too far removed from the people

by being distant and far away. She really believed that the state governments which were embodied through their state constitutions, were closer to the people and really more reflective of the people's wishes.

Now, at the same time, she acknowledged that there were fundamental problems with holding the union together at this time. So she knew that something had to be done to strengthen the union. But she was really convinced that if this new constitution was adopted, that the United States might be putting itself on the road back to despotism and tyranny.

And so again, you know, there were other anti-federalists, who articulated this view, but she did so with very vivid writing, with very powerful writing with very, I guess, you could even say, inflammatory writing, and that her pamphlet was published in Massachusetts but also republished elsewhere and circulated throughout the United States. And I think it really was important in influencing this debate, and as I say, particularly, in motivating people to see the importance of the need for the addition of a Bill of Rights to the US Constitution.

[00:44:46] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much for that. Nancy, what would you like to tell our listeners about the influence and reception of Warren's pamphlet on the constitution?

[00:44:57] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Before I do, I just want to read what she wrote to Catherine Macaulay. When, in thinking about the Constitution. She, she wrote, "Our situation is truly delicate. On one hand, we stand in need of a strong Federal Government founded on principles that will support the prosperity and union of the colonies. On the other, we have struggled for liberty."

So, the struggle for liberty, the, the freedom for the individual, which of course, you know, it goes way back to the Magna Carta, if you will. We're talking about the, the, the rights of a man, the unalienable rights to guard the life liberty and, and property of, of the community and, and of the individual. And to her, the, the constitution was much too vague. And again it has, it has overlooked, the people, we the people. So, she, she wrote all kinds of, of, and if you look at the, if you look at the amendments, the first 10 amendments, the Bill of Rights, you will see that nine of, of her complaints, if you will, in a *Colombian Patriot*, are, are part of the Bill of Rights. They're the, those nine that she, she wrote about.

And you know, what, what to me is fascinating also is that these same, same issues are appearing today. These, these questions, questions of, of states rights, questions of individual liberty, questions of, of a government that, that may be, in her words too distant from the people or to anonymous that, that and, and that's, I mean, these are, these are obviously eternal questions and eternal struggles and have been throughout history, but, but here they are reflected in her complaint observations on the new constitution.

[00:46:46] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much for that. Rosemarie, let's talk about Mercy Otis Warren's poetry. It's remarkably classically influenced. There's a lovely piece she wrote to her husband James Warren, *An Invitation to Retirement* that begins, "Come, leave the noisy smoky town where vice and folly reign. The vain pursuits of busy men, we wisely will disdain, true happiness and lasting peace we [inaudible 00:50:17] and courts can find, ambitious views and sorted hopes by turn, distract the mind." And then she concludes, "Subdue each passion and calm the soul and teach the heavenly art, death to defy, and life

joy, with self approving heart." give us a sense of her poetry. And if you had to recommend a piece or two for We the People listeners to read, what would it be?

[00:47:32] **Rosemarie Zagarri:** Well, I think before you talk about her poetry, you have to talk about the relationship between Mercy and her husband and James Warren. And they were so incredibly close, and so amazingly supportive of one another. And, I mean, there were probably many marriages like this, but because they were apart, we have these wonderful letters that talk about their relationship and their feelings toward one another.

And so, and what's also amazing is that, that James Warren was very supportive of Mercy Otis Warren's gift with the pen. And he encouraged her to write, she did write even before she started being a published poet, she wrote poetry for her friends and family, which they would just circulate among themselves and read. And that's why when James Warren and John Adams began to, you know, become more active in the resistance movement against Britain in the 1760s and early 1770s, they thought, "Oh Mercy might be able to help us because she has such a gift with the pen."

Interestingly enough, James Warren, called her, his wife's poetical gifts, a, a masculine genius, those are the terms he used, a masculine genius. In other words you know, this, this ability to put words on paper in this poetical fashion was thought to be something that men did, but she was a woman who could do it. And he encouraged her to do it. And then John Adams encouraged her to use her gifts in the service of the Patriot course.

And so she did begin to publish poems for, to encourage to encourage the resistance again Bra- against Great Britain to encourage sacrifices, to encourage women to boycott British goods, to en- encourage people to think about the fact that they might actually have to take up arms against Britain, eventually in the 1760s and 70s, and then eventually, she started talking about the need to shed blood.

And she did all this in a poetical fashion. And I think this was, it's important to remember that poetry was a much more common genre at this time, that people wouldn't just sit around reading it at their desks, that they would sit in their parlors and read it to each other. And I think that was a very important in sort of conveying these, these sentiments to larger groups of people.

I think that, that her poetry was I think it, it's hard for Americans today to really access because it, it just seems unfamiliar in its style. But I think the more that you read it, the more you think that that, that, that it's you know, you see the meaning behind it.

The poem you quoted, where she talks about her husband leaving, again, that reflects the closeness between these two individuals, between this husband and wife, and how, and the kind of contradiction between her understanding that he needed to serve the public he needed to go off and, you know, be a participant in the Massachusetts legislature or to serve on a military board, and if necessary to take up arms against Great Britain. She knew that and she supported that, yet, she hardly could bear having him away. She had a lot of health problems, and that was part of it. But I think there was just this deeper level of dependence that made it very hard for her to let him go, to let him be away for long periods of time.

And in contrast to her good friend, Abigail Adams, I guess you could say, Mercy Otis Warren was a whiner and I think she complained a lot to her husband and to other people about how hard she found it for her husband to be away, and she really didn't like it, and she didn't suffer in silence. So I think that's one of the many contradictions in her, her character such a support for the revolution, and yet she didn't want to really allow her husband to go away for long periods, to do what he needed to do to support the revolutionary course.

In terms of her poetry, though, the poem that I find most beautiful myself, is a poem that she wrote after the death of one of her sons. She had five sons, and one of them, Winslow, died in an Indian attack. He was serving in the army in 1791. And I just believe she was just so consumed with grief, that the only way she could express it is through a poem. And I just find that kind of poem, that kind of private poem, very beautiful, very expressive, very touching. So she wrote a lot of political poems, a lot of political satire, a lot of political pamphlets. But this private poetry is perhaps the most compelling.

[00:53:00] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you for sharing that recommendation. And as you say, although initially I'm familiar, it is so moving when you read it, and I'm just finding another beautiful piece, which is speaking to me a thought on the inestimable blessings of reason occasioned by its privation. In 1770, she says, "What is it moves within my soul and as the needle to the pole, directs me to the final cause the central point of nature's laws." And she ends, "Creative being who reason gave, and by whose aid, the powers we have to think, to judge, to will, to know from whom these reasoning powers flow."

Nancy is there a poem or set of poems you want to recommend? And, and maybe also, you can give listeners a sense of her political plays? Which one of those should they read to be introduced to her genius?

[00:53:51] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Well just let me say that when you started to read that poem about reason you know, there's been a great deal of ink spilled over that that, that was obviously precipitated by the fact that her brother Jamie lost his reason. This, this brilliant young attorney who, you know, fought against Hutchison and, and protested the writs of you know, the search warrants the writs of assistance.

And then he, in, in 1769, was brutally beaten by a British officer. I mean, he had been writing inflammatory tracks and so on. But anyway, and he had already been showing signs of being well, mentally obsessed, maybe unstable. But after he was brutally beaten, he lost his reason. And eventually he had to be removed from public life and shunted off to several farms, one in Holland, one in Andover.

And this, this precipitated and had a great deal to do with Mercy Otis Warren becoming ... Ta- taking his place beginning to write. At first it was just correspondence, while excusing to people, especially people like Catherine Macaulay in, in in England, why he no longer could write and she would do that. But didn't she, she really took up his place with her own political poems and so on.

I mean, there were many beautiful poems that are, are written, The Genius of America Weeping is, is another, you know, and that's written in 1779. But already, it's about the sadness and what has been happening with the war and, and the excesses of that. And then

some other beautiful ones are her good friend Hannah Winthrop, her husband die- was a professor of, of natural philosophy and mathematics and died and, and she's written a, a memorial to him on, on that.

And, and one on, on the deaths of two lovely sisters. She had seven siblings and two, two of the sisters who were younger than she, who died. The, the poem simplicity is, is a call, excuse me, is a call for returning to, you know, clear values and assuring materialism and the, the importance of virtue and and the decency of simplicity.

It goes on and on. There are many different poems that not only catalogue her life, but also her, her heartfelt emotions about important people, and the consequences of what she was seeing around her.

[00:56:24] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much for that, and for teaching us that that owed to reason was occasioned by the brutal beating of her brother and the influence of the tragedy of the loss of his own reason on her life and career. Rosemarie we shouldn't end without some recommendations about her political plays, which were so influential and which John Adams and others consider works of genius. Tell us about the main ones and, and which, which plays should We the People listeners read to get a sense of her genius?

[00:56:54] **Rosemarie Zagarri:** I actually think some of her post-revolutionary plays are among the most fascinating, and she, these are published in her 1790 collection of poems and plays. But she wrote one called *The Ladies of Castile*, and another called *The Sack of Rome*. And they're very interesting plays. And again, I want to emphasize that you know, her plays were never actually performed on stage, but that didn't matter because they were meant to be read aloud. And you know, it, it, it's more important that they were read by people and then read to each other.

But these, *The Ladies of Castile* and *The Sack of Rome*, are very interesting, because they do have more female characters, and they also take up this notion of a decline in, in public virtue, and of the need to sustain public virtue in civic life, if the republic is going to be a success.

And even though they're set in different places and times, obviously, in either ancient times or in you know, another, another country, I think the message was clear to her American readers, that it was, the burden was on all of us, after the revolution, that we must continue to contribute to public life, be, to be willing to bear the burdens of sacrifice for the public good, if this republic is going to succeed. So I, I actually recommend those plays, even, even and above the pre-revolutionary plays, just because I think their message has more salience for the present day.

[00:58:48] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much for that. Thank you for recommending plays like *The Ladies of Castile* and thanks for your great suggestion that one good way to be introduced to them is to read them aloud. We the People friends, treat yourself to the experience of gathering with friends and family and, and reading these beautiful plays aloud. *The Ladies of Castile* begins, "The furious courser lists his dauntless head, fierce snaps the bit, and rolls his eye abroad, sees death and carnage mark the empurpled field, neighs for his

prey, and tramples o'er the dead." it's really fun, in fact, to read this stuff aloud and it comes to life in a remarkably meaningful way.

Well, it is time for closing thoughts in this wonderful discussion. I've learned so much and I hope that the great genius of, of Mercy Otis Warren has been patent in it. Nancy, first thoughts to you. Please sum up for We the People listeners, why Mercy Otis Warren was important and why they should read her work.

[00:59:46] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Mercy Otis Warren was important because she was the first female historian of the American Revolution, and equally important is that she was the, I will say, the unacknowledged conscience of the American Revolution. Continually prodding through her works of the ideas that the core values of, of the American Republic must be maintained, that they must not be lost sight of through materialism frivolity and dishonesty, but rather virtue, simplicity, honesty and thrift worthy values that were the, the core, the beginnings of our American dream.

[01:00:33] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much for that. Rosemarie, last word in this great discussion is to you. Why was Mercy Otis Warren important and why should We the People listeners read her work?

[01:00:46] **Rosemarie Zagarri:** I think Mercy Otis Warren was important because she shows us that even though the Revolution was not overtly about women, that women understood that they could be part of the American Revolution and can make a contribution to it. And that we've forgotten how many contributions women and of course, the African Americans and the poor white people, the people we don't hear of, have made. But she was a voice, that for, for these voiceless people that emerged out of the Revolution, and she should be heard. And one of the most important lessons that she taught over and over again, is that liberty is, is under assault.

Power is always challenging our liberty, and that republics are fragile kinds of political entities, and that the burden of keeping up a republic, to keep a republic to keep republican government in operation is on the people, on the citizens, and that we can't take it for granted. We can't assume that the government will do the right thing. We have to be virtuous and vigilant and participatory. And she knew that then, and I think that it's so easy over time to take that lesson for granted and forget about it. But if you read her work, you see how enduring that message is.

[01:02:22] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Thank you so much, Nancy Rubin Stuart and Rosemarie Zagarri for a superb discussion, and for your wonderful books which have done so much to shine the light of genius of this great woman, Mercy Otis Warren. Dear, We the People friends, your homework is obvious. Please read Nancy Rubin Stuart's, *The muse of the Revolution: The Secret Pen of Mercy Otis Warren and the Founding of a Nation*, Rosemarie Zagarri's, *A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and the American Revolution*. And of course, the works of Mercy Otis Warren.

Nancy, Rosemarie, thank you so much for joining.

[01:03:00] **Nancy Rubin Stuart:** Thank you.



[01:03:01] **Rosemarie Zagarri:** Thank you.

[01:03:04] **Jeffrey Rosen:** Today's show was produced by Jackie McDermott and engineered by David Stotz. Research was provided by Mac Taylor, Amy Lu, Olivia Gross and Lana Ulrich.

Friends, please rate, review and subscribe to We the People on Apple Podcasts and recommend the show to friends, colleagues or anyone anywhere who is hungry and eager for a weekly dose of constitutional education and debate. And always remember that the National Constitution Center is a private nonprofit, we rely on the passion, the generosity, the engagement, the devotion to lifelong learning, the willingness to read primary sources and the eagerness to learn about American history from people like you who are inspired by our nonpartisan mission of constitutional education and debate.

You can support the mission by learning, by reading, by writing to me and telling me what you find interesting and what you want to learn more about, and by becoming a member at constitutioncenter.org/membership, or give a donation of any amount to support our work, including this podcast at constitutioncenter.org/donate.

On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Jeffrey Rosen.