

A Shared Sensibility

Examining the Legacy of John and Mary (Mason) Norton, Maternal Great-Grandparents of Abigail Smith Adams

Abigail Smith Adams (1744–1818), wife of one president and mother of another, is a deeply admired and much-studied figure in American history, and deservedly so. Her sharp intellect, commitment to social justice, and eloquent observations on eighteenth-century social and political life—not to mention the sheer volume of writings she left behind—provide a wonderful lens into the early years of our nation. A glance at Abigail Adams's family tree reveals that certain of her ancestors also possessed some of her signature qualities. Examining the lives of her maternal great-grandparents—the Reverend John Norton (ca. 1651–1716) and Mary (Mason) Norton (ca. 1659–1740)—leads to greater understanding of this compelling couple, as well as a deeper context for Abigail Adams's own life and family history.

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Portrait of Mary Mason by an unknown artist, ca. 1670. Courtesy Adams National Historical Park. Anne Bradstreet's *Several Poems Compiled with Great Variety of Wit and Learning* (1678). From digital.library.upenn.edu/women/bradstreet/1678/1678.html.





Old Ship Church, Hingham, Mass. Photo courtesy of the author.

Born in Boston, Mary Mason was the daughter of Joanna Parker and Arthur Mason, an upwardly mobile baker, constable, and public office holder. Described by one of his contemporaries as a “grave, sober Merchant, a good Man and well respected,” Arthur was also reported to be “downright honest but very blunt: One that wou’d speak his Mind, howe’re Men took it.” (Once, according to this commentator, Arthur visited a “Bostonian Gentlewoman, [who] told him she was glad to see him, but sorry that he came at such a time when her House lay so dirty, and so much out of Order,” to which he replied, “Why, prithe, when [is it] otherwise?”) In 1664 Arthur’s propensity for speaking his mind led to serious criminal charges after he berated a group of royal commissioners for having beaten a fellow constable. When rebuked by one of the commissioners for daring to meddle, Arthur declared that he would not be afraid to haul away the King himself—for which he was charged with treason. (Fortunately for Arthur, he was ultimately found innocent of this capital offense.) One can’t help but think Abigail Adams would have approved of her ancestor’s willingness to speak out against the abuse of royal authority.¹

Abigail’s great-grandfather John Norton was a native of Ipswich, Massachusetts, and a nephew of the

renowned Puritan divine of the same name. A 1671 Harvard graduate, John distinguished himself while still in his twenties by becoming one of the editors of the first American edition of Anne Bradstreet’s poems. Published in 1678, the volume, *Several Poems Compiled with Great Variety of Wit and Learning*, included John’s four-page funeral elegy for Bradstreet, whom he proclaimed the “Mirror of Her Age [and] Glory of Her Sex.” John’s high regard for Bradstreet’s eloquence—her “virtues were so great,” he wrote, “that they do raise/A work to trouble fame, astonish praise”²—suggests an openness to acknowledging the literary achievements of women, which would have pleased Abigail greatly.

The same year John composed his elegy for Bradstreet, he also dedicated a poem to his future wife Mary. Included in a letter that is the earliest document in the extensive Adams Family Papers collection at the Massachusetts Historical Society, the lines express John’s hope “That Hearty love may ever be Reciprocal in us/Looke thou to thine/I’le looke to mine/Let’s ever keep it thus.”³ His declaration of devotion seems to have served its purpose, for he and Mary were married just a few months later.

Unlike John—and her famous great-granddaughter—Mary (Mason) Norton left behind no writings to provide

us with a glimpse into her personal thoughts and feelings. Yet she evidently shared John and Abigail’s flair for literary expression, if we can read anything into a comment made by her brother-in-law, the Reverend Samuel Shepard. In response to a (sadly, lost) 1704 letter Mary wrote to Samuel and her sister Alice, which Mary dismissed as a “heap of Nonsense,” Samuel protested that it had “more Retorick in it than one of Tully’s Orations.”⁴ Samuel clearly enjoyed corresponding with his sister-in-law, to whom he declared, “If I once enter into discourse wth yu[,] I know not when to leave of[f].”⁵

Although no writings in Mary’s hand have survived, other evidence can be pieced together to help tell her story. The most striking of these artifacts is her portrait, painted by an unknown artist circa 1670 when she was about eleven. (That same year an unsigned painting of Mary’s 2-year-old sister Alice and a group portrait of their 8-year-old brother David, 6-year-old sister Joanna, and 4-year-old sister Abigail were also completed; these may have been painted by the same artist responsible for the contemporary Freake and Gibbs family portraits.) The painting of Mary shows a girl with dark eyes, delicate features, and a thoughtful yet resolute expression who looks older than her 11 years. She bears more than a passing resemblance to Abigail Adams as a young woman, as painted by Benjamin Blyth around 1766, when Abigail was in her early twenties. (This portrait is reproduced on page 35.)

The image of Mary is a rare surviving example of seventeenth-century New England portraiture, and it is also what first drew me to her story. Upon learning of her connection to Abigail—whose legacy I seek to preserve as a member of the board who oversees the home where she lived for the first twenty years of her life, in Weymouth, Massachusetts—I wondered whether the two women might have shared any similarities in outlook or temperament.



I already knew much about Abigail's male relatives, prominent figures in American politics for generations, and thought it would be worthwhile to try to find out more about one of her female ancestors.

With the serendipity that historical and family researchers often encounter in their work, I soon learned that Mary and John had been residents of the same town where I live: Hingham,

Massachusetts. Just before their 1678 marriage, John was ordained a minister at Hingham's First Church. In 1681 he became the leader of its newly built Old Ship Meetinghouse, the only seventeenth-century Puritan meetinghouse still in use today. (Designed in the Elizabethan Gothic style, Old Ship is noted for its curved interior roof beams shaped like the hull of a ship.)

Mary and John had two surviving children, a son John born in 1680 and a daughter Elizabeth—who would become Abigail Adams's grandmother—born in 1696. (They also had a son and daughter who both died shortly after birth.) Overall, John and Mary's lives appear to have been relatively quiet ones, yet on a few occasions their names materialize from the historical record. One particular instance—when, in 1709, they came to the defense of a woman accused of witchcraft—seems to indicate John and Mary each possessed a measure of the

Left, top: Portrait of Alice Mason by an unknown artist, ca. 1670. Courtesy Adams National Historical Park. *Left, middle:* Silver sugar box, ca. 1680–85, given by Mary Mason Norton to Anna Quincy. John Coney (American, 1655 or 1656–1722). Gift of Mrs. Joseph Richmond Churchill. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Left, bottom: Silver porringer, ca. 1655, formerly belonging to Arthur and Joanna Parker Mason, which descended through Mary Mason Norton. John Hull (American [born in England], 1624–1683.) The Philip Leffingwell Spalding Collection—Given in his memory by Katharine Ames Spalding and Philip Spalding, Oakes Ames Spalding, and Hobart Ames Spalding. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts. *Right, below:* Silver porringer, ca. 1710–15, given by John and Mary Mason Norton to Elizabeth Norton. John Coney (American, 1655 or 1656–1722). Gift of Barbara Zinszer Hyre and Paul Harvey Zinszer. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts.





The Abigail Adams Birthplace in Weymouth. Courtesy of Michelle McGrath.

broadmindedness—and bravery—associated with Abigail Adams. The accused woman, Mehitable (Wilder) Warren, a widow and Hingham native, had been charged with witchcraft while living in Plymouth. John and Mary, along with about sixty of their neighbors, signed a petition in Warren’s defense, stating that they “never have had any thoughts, or sispition that ever [Warren] was guilty of the sin of being a witch, or anything that may occation such suspition of her,” instead asserting that she had been “A person of great [bodily] affliction.”⁶ Keeping in mind that Mary and John (and Warren’s other supporters) took this position less than two decades after the Salem witchcraft crisis, at a time when many people believed in witches, their support can be read as both a compassionate and courageous act. Their defense of Warren was ultimately vindicated when she was not only acquitted, but successfully sued some of her accusers for slander and defamation.

To some extent, John and Mary’s support of Mehitable Warren brings to mind Abigail Adams’s stand on behalf of one of her servants, a young black man named James, who decided to take night school classes. When some of James’s classmates objected to his presence and threatened to withdraw from the school, Abigail demanded an audience with them. “Merely because his Face is Black,” she asked the father of two of the students, “Is he to be denied instruction[?] . . . Is this the Christian Principle of doing to others, as we

would have others do to us? . . . [S]end the young men to me. I think I can convince them that they are wrong.”⁷

In general, John Norton’s thirty-eight-year tenure as leader of the Hingham church was marked by a spirit of tolerance. Although

his theology was in an orthodox vein, he was known for his belief in the importance of “spiritual independence,” even before liberty of conscience became guaranteed in the Massachusetts charter of 1691. He wrote, “None can command the conscience and heart but God: man can reach to the outward man, they cannot command man’s heart and will.” One historian has described John’s surviving sermons as revealing someone “who preached to his Hingham flock with wit, grace, eloquence, and moving imagery.”⁸

In the fall of 1716, when John was about 65, he died unexpectedly. (An item in the *Boston News-Letter* reported on his “very sudden” passing, noting that he had been “a very Excellent Scholar, a sound Divine and a laborious Preacher.”⁹) John had not left a will, so his old friend and former Harvard College classmate Judge Samuel Sewall appointed 57-year-old Mary as administrator of his estate. The subsequent details are sketchy, but it appears Mary and John’s adult son John found fault with the way Mary handled the property. Their disagreement reached the attention of Sewall, who called upon some high-ranking colleagues known to Mary, including Massachusetts Attorney General Paul Dudley and court clerk Addington Davenport, to help arbitrate the dispute. Sewall, who hosted this gathering, wrote in his diary that those present hoped to “see if an Accommodation might be [arranged] between [Mary] and her Son: But the Son came not, nor sent any excuse nor answer’d my kind Letter.” Another

gentleman present suggested that, “if Madam Norton would give her Son her Land in Boston which she promis’d, he thought there would be no Money wanting.” Eventually Mary and John seem to have resolved their differences, since in 1719 John signed a quitclaim deed stating he had received his full portion of the estate, £80. (He died two years later.)¹⁰

It is unclear what sparked the rift between Mary and John Jr., but Samuel Sewall had evidently thought sufficiently highly of Mary’s management abilities to have appointed her administrator in the first place. Mary’s attempts to oversee the estate as she saw fit call to mind Abigail Adams’s own efforts to acquire and manage property while her husband John was away on political business; her oversight of the Adams farmlands proved a great asset to the family. Abigail strongly believed that women should have a say in how marital property was managed—she even went so far as to make a will to distribute gifts of personal property and cash to some of her female relatives, despite the fact that it was technically illegal for her to do so. (Under the contemporary legal concept of coverture, anything Abigail earned during her marriage would have been considered John’s property.) Although Mary did not leave a will, she, too, appears to have distributed certain personal items of value to her female heirs—in her case, treasured family silver. Among the collections of Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts are a circa 1715 porringer gifted to Mary’s daughter Elizabeth, perhaps at the time of her marriage; a mid-seventeenth-century porringer once owned by Arthur and Joanna Mason that Mary also likely gave to Elizabeth; and a late-seventeenth-century sugar bowl Mary left to Elizabeth’s daughter Anna Quincy (b. 1719).¹¹

Abigail Adams was known for maintaining a wide network of female kinship connections throughout her life, and was particularly close to her

sisters. In Mary's case, we can also find traces of a lasting bond with her sister Alice. At some point after John Norton's death, Mary went to live with her daughter Elizabeth and Elizabeth's husband, Colonel John Quincy (after whom Abigail would name her son, the future president). After Mary's sister Alice's own husband died in 1723, and the court declared her "bereaved of her understanding" (she had likely suffered a mental breakdown), John Quincy became Alice's guardian, and she joined Mary at the Quincy family home. The two sisters spent the rest of their lives in each other's company.¹²

Alice's date of death is unknown, but Mary passed away in early 1740, four years before Abigail's birth. Paul Dudley, who had been present at the arbitration proceedings between Mary and her son and who had since become a Massachusetts Superior Court Justice, observed in his diary that Mary had been "a very worthy religious person, in the eighty first year of her age." Mary and Alice's places of burial

are unknown, but it is quite possible they were laid to rest in the Hancock Cemetery plot belonging to Mary's daughter and son-in-law in what is now Quincy, Massachusetts. Mary's husband John is interred in the burial ground behind Old Ship in the "Three Ministers' Tomb," which contains the remains of the Hingham church's first three leaders.¹³

Mary and John Norton's daughter Elizabeth became the person who most influenced Abigail's early life, apart from her parents, Elizabeth (Quincy) Smith (1721–1775) and the Reverend William Smith (1707–1783). When, as a girl, Abigail felt too constrained at home—her parents sometimes frowned on the "wild[ness]" and "giddy[ness]" she claims to have displayed—she would escape to the house of her beloved "Grandmamma." Abigail not only enjoyed Elizabeth's "lively, cheerful disposition [that] animated all around her," but was comforted by her assurance that "wild colts make the best Horses." Years later, Abigail would recall

the still-valued insights her grandmother had shared with her, noting that "The instructions of my own Grandmamma are as fresh upon my mind this day as any I ever received from my own parents and made as lasting and powerfull impressions."¹⁴

In addition to whatever role John and Mary Norton may have played in passing along character traits that led Abigail Adams to become the strong, intelligent, and compassionate person she was, they also left a legacy to Abigail in the form of their daughter. Elizabeth (Norton) Quincy not only provided Abigail with a second home and life lessons that left a lasting impact, but with the freedom to indulge her true nature and to seek her full potential. We are fortunate that a wealth of documentary evidence generated by and about Abigail Adams can inform us of such relationships, and that a variety of records allow us to look further back in her family history, enabling us to appreciate the connections between generations.

Notes

- ¹ John Dunton, *Letters Written from New-England, 1686* (Boston, 1867), 90 (accessed via Google Books); Thomas Hutchinson, *History of Massachusetts*, 2 vols., 3rd. ed. (Boston, 1795), 232–234 (accessed via Google Books). For more information on Arthur Mason, see D. Brenton Simons, *Witches, Rakes, and Rogues: True Stories of Scam, Scandal, Murder, and Mayhem in Boston, 1630–1775* (Beverly, Mass.: Commonwealth Editions, 2005), 107–111.
- ² John Norton, "A Funeral Elogy [sic], upon that Patern and Patron of Virtue, that truly pious, peerless & matchless Gentlewoman, Mrs. Anne Bradstreet," in Anne Bradstreet, *Several Poems Compiled with Great Variety of Wit and Learning* (Boston, 1678), 252, 254.
- ³ John Norton to Mary Mason, September 23, 1678, *Founding Families: Digital Editions of the Papers of the Winthrops and the Adamses*, ed. C. James Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2014), masshist.org/publications/apde2/view?mode=p&vol=AFC01&roman=1&page=xx#xx.
- ⁴ Marcus Tullius Cicero, a Roman orator, author, and statesman sometimes referred to as "Tully," is regarded as a master of Latin prose.

- ⁵ Samuel Shepard to Mary Mason Norton, June 17, 1704, Adams Papers microfilm reel 343, Massachusetts Historical Society.
- ⁶ "Witchcraft in Hingham," *The New England Historic Genealogical Register* 5 [1851]: 263; Emily Czirr Finelli, "Mehittable Warren Is a Witch" [unpublished manuscript, 2012].
- ⁷ Quoted in Woody Holton, *Abigail Adams* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 305.
- ⁸ Robert J. Wilson, *The Benevolent Deity: Ebenezer Gay and the Rise of Rational Religion in New England, 1696–1787* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 37–38.
- ⁹ *Boston News-Letter*, October 3, 1716, Issue 651, Oct. 1–8, 1716.
- ¹⁰ Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 2 vols., ed. M. Halsey Thomas (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), June 18, 1717. Samuel Sewall was a former Salem witch trial judge, the only one later to publicly apologize for his role in the crisis. In 1704 he became the author of the first American anti-slavery tract, *The Selling of Joseph*.
- ¹¹ The sugar bowl is inscribed, "The gift of Grandmother Norton to Anna Quincy born 1719."
- ¹² There is a suggestion that Alice may have suffered from mental health issues many years

- prior to her husband's death; Samuel Sewall remarked upon her presence at a 1710 visit to John and Mary Norton's home, noting that John claimed "she is perfectly well" (*Diary*, March 26, 1710). After Alice's death, the portrait that had been painted of her as a 2-year-old descended through the family of John and Elizabeth (Norton) Quincy. In time, it was forgotten that Alice had been its subject, and the family came to believe the portrait had been painted of John Quincy as a young boy. In 1821, Louisa Catherine Adams, the wife of John Quincy Adams, brought the portrait to Peacefield, the Adams family home in what is now Quincy, where it remains today. In time the fact that Alice had been the portrait's true subject was discovered.
- ¹³ "Diary of Paul Dudley, 1740," *The New England Historic Genealogical Register* 35 [1881]: 28.
 - ¹⁴ Quoted in Holton [note 7], 3, and Edith B. Gelles, *Abigail and John: Portrait of a Marriage* (New York: William Morrow, 2009), 8; Abigail Adams to John Adams, Oct. 25, 1775, *Founding Families*, masshist.org/publications/apde2/view?id=ADMS-04-01-02-0206.