MERCY OTIS WARREN

THE CONSCIENCE OF THE REVOLUTION

By Daniel S. Marrone, Ph.D.

Mercy Otis Warren galvanized the Patriot cause with her satirical anti-British poems, plays and pamphlets, and her astute observations helped guide many Founding Fathers in their pursuit of freedom.
In many of her polemical writings, first anonymously and then signed with her own name, Mercy wrestled with and persuasively advocated for the firm establishment of individual rights in the new American nation.

A Gifted Youth
Mercy was born in West Barnstable, a coastline community in the Massachusetts Colony, on September 14, 1728. She was the third of 13 children of retired militia officer James Otis Sr. and Mary Allyne Otis. Mary Otis—a direct descendant of Edward Doty, a Mayflower passenger—was frequently bedridden due to illnesses and complications from her many pregnancies. Five of Mercy’s siblings died in infancy or at very young ages. Mercy, who wrote little about her mother, often served as a surrogate mother to her younger siblings.

In contrast, Mercy described her father at length. James Otis Sr. was a farmer and colonel in the Massachusetts militia. He later became a lawyer and judge magistrate and, in 1745, he was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives. The colonel was strict with his children, but he treated Mercy more as a peer, likely because, even in her youth, she displayed exceptional intelligence. Mercy was not formally educated, but she read voraciously and participated in the studies of her brothers James Jr. and Joseph with their tutor, Reverend Jonathan Russell. Though Mercy described the colonel as a strict disciplinarian and formidable patriarch, she also warmly referred to him as a “venerated father.”

‘To Cement the Union’
In 1743, now a politically active lawyer, James Jr. introduced his sister to a Harvard classmate: James Warren from the village of Plymouth, who was also descended from Edward Doty. Not long after James met Mercy, who was his second cousin, marriage was on his mind, but not on hers—at least not right away. After 11 years of courtship, she finally accepted his proposal, and they married on November 14, 1754.

In 1757, the couple and their infant son, James Jr., moved into the Winslow House. Built in 1726, the house was named after James’ ancestor: British army General John Winslow, a grandson of Edward Winslow, the founder of the original Plymouth settlement. Once the Warren family began living there, the house bore both the Winslow and Warren names. Except for a short period when they lived in Boston, the Winslow-Warren House was the Warrens’ permanent home—and still stands on the corner of North and Main streets in Plymouth. Here they had four more sons: Charles, Winslow, Henry and George.

The couple hosted protest meetings in their home, inviting her brother James (famous for his rallying cry, “Taxation without representation is tyranny!”), Samuel Adams and John Hancock to join them in a clandestine letter-writing campaign that connected revolutionaries throughout the Colonies. These ad hoc networks became known as the Committees of Correspondence. Mercy later wrote that, “No single step contributed so much to cement the union of colonies as did the Committees of Correspondence.”

Her husband, James, was elected to the lower house of the Massachusetts General Court and Provincial Congress in 1766. He ultimately served 12 years as a legislator. James also fought at Bunker Hill, one of the first major military engagements of the Revolutionary War. For his leadership under fire, he was appointed major general of the Massachusetts militia in September 1776. He also served as paymaster general of the Continental Army from 1776 to 1781.

In 1788 James joined Elbridge Gerry as candidates of the anti-Federalist Party in the Massachusetts gubernatorial race. Wealthy mercantilist John Hancock ran and helped fund the Federalist Party to victory. As a result of the bitter loss, James...
became an entrenched political foe against his former close friend, Hancock. For the remaining two decades of his life, James refrained from running for political office, but he stayed active in writing about—and often criticizing—the Federalist Party.

**Poking the British Powers**

Until 1790, Mercy signed all of her works under pseudonyms to avoid arrest by British authorities. The first of these anonymous works appeared in the July 1768 issue of *The Boston Gazette* with the title, “The Song of Liberty.” An excerpt:

*Come swallow your bumpers, ye Tories, and roar
That the Sons of fair Freedom are hamper’d once more;
But know that no Cut-throats our spirits can tame,
Nor a host of Oppressors shall smother the flame.
In Freedom we’re born, and, like Sons of the brave,
Will never surrender, But swear to defend her
And scorn to survive, if unable to save.*

Her next composition was 1772’s provocative “The Adulateur.” Though Mercy called this work a play, it was written to be read aloud as an unrhymed blank verse poem rather than performed by actors on a stage. The main character of Rapatio bore an unmistakable resemblance to Royal Governor Thomas Hutchinson, who, though born in America, was staunchly opposed to the Patriot cause. Rapatio was portrayed as a villainous government official who murdered innocent citizens of ancient Rome.

In 1773, Mercy published “The Defeat,” a play in which Rapatio was again depicted as the central villain, in *The Boston Gazette*. An excerpt:

*Go tell thy master he deceives no more,
The cover’d sting, the half disguid’s plan,
Peeps through the veil, and shows the abject man,
Who for a place, a grasp of shining earth,
Has stab’d the vitals that first gave him birth.*

In 1775, Mercy wrote “The Group,” a satirical play that mocked King George III for repealing local rule in the Massachusetts Colony. The next year, she published “The Blockheads: or The Affrighted Officers, a Farce,” which targeted Loyalist Bostonians cowering to British rule. In 1779, she authored “The Motley Assembly, a Farce,” which derided fence-sitting Americans, who publicly were neutral but, in reality, were pro-British.

Mercy’s satirical plays and persuasive political tracts inspired her fellow Americans, some perhaps never knowing who wrote them, to agitate for freedom and resist British rule.

**A Voice of the Anti-Federalists**

The first Patriot attempt at a structure to govern the Colonies in rebellion were the Articles of Confederation, signed into law in 1777. However, in the years following the 1783 Treaty of Paris, it became apparent that substantial revisions to the Articles were needed.

For the purpose of restructuring the government, delegates from the newly formed states were sent to Philadelphia in May 1787. After months of heated debate, a compromise proposal was finally reached. The delegates approved the final draft of the U.S. Constitution on September 17, 1787.

However, before the document could go into effect, it first had to be ratified by at least three-quarters of the 13 states. This gave an opportunity to those opposed to the Constitution—labeled anti-Federalists—to create a groundswell of public opinion that would scuttle ratification. Mercy was an ardent anti-Federalist, and in her 1788 political tract, “Observations on the New Constitution,” written under the pseudonym “A Columbian Patriot,” she did not mince words. Mercy warned that the new Constitution would mean Americans would be governed by authoritarian rule like that endured under the British Crown.

The anti-Federalists were unable to thwart ratification, but they helped ensure ratification of 10 amendments to the Constitution that protected individual rights. Ratified on December 15, 1791, these amendments became known as the Bill of Rights.

**Anonymous No More**

In 1790, Mercy began signing her works with her full name, Mercy Otis Warren. That year, she published a huge collection under the title, “Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous.”
The compilation included two new plays, “The Sack of Rome” and “The Ladies of Castille.” Reviewers, including George Washington and John Adams, praised these writings. Bolstered by the recognition, she retroactively acknowledged many of her past compositions, some more than two decades old.

However, Mercy’s works written under the name “A Columbian Patriot” were for many years misattributed to Elbridge Gerry, signer of the Declaration of Independence and one of the drafters of the Bill of Rights. This mistaken authorship included the political tract, “Observations on the New Constitution.” In the early 20th century, Mercy’s great-great grandson, the Pulitzer Prize-winning legal scholar Charles Warren, examined stacks of family papers. He discovered a letter written by Mercy to her friend, the English radical Catherine Macaulay, in which Mercy described in detail the content and purpose of “Observations on the New Constitution.” Charles painstakingly authenticated Mercy’s authorship of this and other plays and poems as well as numerous ephemera. However, not all of his attributions have been universally accepted. Scholarly debate continues over authorship of a significant number of pre-1790 anonymous writings.

Mercy corresponded with and advised George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and other key figures in the emerging nation, and they lauded her for her insightful, persuasive writings. In a July 1791 letter to Mercy, Alexander Hamilton wrote: “In the career of dramatic composition at least, female genius in the United States has outstripped the Male.”

Mercy’s Magnum Opus

During the last years of the 18th century, Mercy completed a 1,317-page history of the American Revolution titled, A History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution. She recalled the anger and fear she experienced during the rise of the rebellion and the war years. At first, Mercy withheld the massive work from publication because of fear of potential political, perhaps even criminal, repercussions stemming from the Alien and Sedition Acts enacted during the Adams Administration in 1798.

The three-volume work was finally published in 1805. Thomas Jefferson was by then president, and Democratic-Republicans were in control of Congress. Jefferson admired her History, noting that Mercy had attained “a high station in the ranks of genius.” However, after having a longstanding alliance with John Adams and a close friendship with his wife, Abigail, Mercy denigrated Adams’ role in the Revolution in her work, which broke all ties between them. The former president privately fumed for two years before writing to Mercy a seven-part chain of spiteful rebuttal letters that were publicized. In one correspondence, Adams wrote, “History is not the Province of the Ladies.”

Though the Adamses and Warrens lived near each other in the Boston area, neither a visit nor a letter was exchanged between them from 1808 until 1811. In that latter year, Mercy, at age 83, chose to “forgive and forget” by resuming correspondence with John and Abigail. Mercy’s rekindling of friendship had an unexpected benefit. Shortly before she passed away in 1814, Mercy asked Adams to testify in court verifying her authorship of “The Group.” This was necessary because another playwright, Samuel Barrett, claimed to have been the author of the play. With Adams’ testimonial endorsement, Mercy was legally declared the author.

Loss and Legacy

Sadly, Mercy suffered the death of three of her five sons: Charles died of tuberculosis in 1785; army officer Winslow was killed at the Battle of the Wabash in the Indian Wars on November 4, 1791; and George died of an unknown cause in February 1800. Despite these painful losses, Mercy was continually supported in her politics, writing and other pursuits by a loving marriage of 54 years with James Warren. While serving in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, he wrote to Mercy: “I have read one Excellent Sermon this day & heard two others. What next can I do better than write to a Saint.” James died on November 28, 1808, at age 82. Mercy died on October 19, 1814, at age 86.

Mercy’s achievements are especially noteworthy because she lived in an era when women were excluded from political discourse. For someone who never ventured outside of Massachusetts, she earned a worldwide reputation as an essayist and astute assessor of both politics and politicians.