Chapter One

The First Friends of Her Heart

Key terms and ideas

puritanism; patriarchy; female literacy; female education; companionate marriage

Fourteen-year-old Mercy Otis had dreamed for months about her brother James's upcoming graduation from Harvard. Never before had she ventured more than a few miles from her childhood home in the Cape Cod town of Barnstable, Massachusetts. The local church, an uncle's library, and the Great Salt Marshes had marked the confines of her daily existence. In her mind, she had traveled far beyond – to ancient Greece and Rome, to Elizabethan England, and to fabulous places that existed only in her imagination. But the upcoming trip to Cambridge was to be her first real

A Woman's Dilemma: Mercy Otis Warren and The American Revolution,
Second Edition. Rosemarie Zagarri.

entrée to the outside world. As a young woman, she would never be allowed to attend college. Still, the Harvard commencement would expose her to learned men and great ideas, abstract disquisitions, and intense debates. For a short while she would be able to share – if only vicariously – her brother's role in that world.

In her enthusiasm for learning, Mercy was unlike most of her female contemporaries. Educated by a tutor along with James, she had consumed the classics of literature, mythology, and history – and begged for more. She had learned to write, and, with her brother's encouragement, she had begun to compose poetry. When he had left for college a few years earlier, she had been heartsick. He was her best friend and closest intellectual companion. Though he had written and visited home often, she missed his daily encouragement and constant companionship. Now, in 1743, she would see the happy results of their painful separation.

The Harvard commencement promised to offer great excitement to the entire Otis clan. Her father James, Sr, was as eager as Mercy to behold this day. Although locally successful as a lawyer, merchant, and farmer, he had not attended college. His son's graduation would affirm his own growing status and prominence in the community. The event itself would be enjoyable and memorable. Indeed, in a colony whose ancestors were called "Puritans," public days of celebration were few and far between. As one of the largest and grandest holidays, commencement provided a rare occasion when the normally self-restrained colonists tolerated merrymaking. On commencement day itself, and intermittently for many days afterward, Cambridge was the site of a raucous revelry that still had a slightly forbidden air around it. People flocked to the town from all parts of New England. Tents were set up along the roads leading to and from the college. Before and after the solemn graduation exercises, graduates and guests indulged in all sorts of festivities – feasting, drinking, wrestling, card playing, and dancing. In a tightly controlled society, commencement also offered one of the few opportunities for young men and women to socialize freely. As a 1718 commencement poem put it,

"Amorous Lads to shady Groves resort,/And under Venus with their Misses sport."

Mercy, too, had thoughts about "amorous lads." As unconventional as she was in some ways, she was in many respects a typical eighteenth-century adolescent girl. And like most women her age, she envisioned her future as a wife and a mother. For better or worse, she had few other choices. She knew that a woman's happiness hinged on her judicious selection of a companionable and financially secure mate. In every sense, her spouse's fate would become her own. It was thus not too early for Mercy to begin thinking about what kind of husband she wanted. And at James's graduation, she would encounter a variety of potential marital prospects.

As fate would have it, Mercy did indeed meet her future husband on one of those hot July days in Cambridge. Sandy-haired James Warren of Plymouth had become acquainted with James Otis when they both were undergraduates at Harvard. Sharing a lively wit and a mutual passion for politics, they had quickly become friends. It is likely that Otis introduced Warren to his favorite sister at one of the many post-commencement parties. Although it took eleven years for their acquaintance to blossom into marriage, Mercy remembered that James had appealed to her from the very start. He was, she said, a "powerful magnet, the center of my early wishes and the star which attracts my attention." She apparently never entertained any other serious suitor.

James's graduation, then, was nearly as significant in his sister's life as it was in his own. It also, however, reflected a powerful image of the dynamics that shaped Mercy's life. On that July day, Mercy was surrounded by the three most important influences in her life: her father, her brother, and her future husband. In an era in which women had no legal existence apart from their fathers or husbands, it is not surprising that three men should be pivotal to the young woman's development. But what made Mercy different from most other women of her generation was the way the men in her life treated her. Her father supported his daughter's wish for a highly unorthodox education, one more appropriate for a boy than a girl. Her brother cultivated his sister's native

intellect, promoting her continuing self-education and eventually giving her access, through his own activities, to the world of politics. Her future husband James was perhaps the most unusual of all. He not only tolerated but actually encouraged his wife's "unfeminine" interests in politics and writing. Ironically, Mercy Otis Warren came to be who she was because the men in her life allowed her to violate the established boundaries of womanhood. She could express her talents because they gave her the sanction to do so. Few other women of her time received such liberal dispensations.

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A major part of Mercy's life was spent in the shadow of wars – wars that shaped the course of her personal development. During the first half of the century, the English and the French, aided by their Indian allies, struggled for control of the North American continent. Resolution of the struggle took many years. Although Queen Anne's War ended in a virtual stalemate in 1713, armed confrontation resumed in 1739 with the coming of King George's War. The peace, concluded in 1748, was brief. By 1754, the antagonists were at it again, this time in the climactic conflict known as the French and Indian War. During one of the few lulls in the fighting, on September 25, 1728, Mercy was born.

War also shaped some of her most outstanding childhood memories. An event occurring during King George's War proved to be particularly noteworthy. At 1.00 o'clock on the morning of July 3, 1745, bells in the West Barnstable meeting-house pealed. As residents rushed out of their houses to hear the news, they learned that the alarm was not a warning of an imminent attack by their papist enemies, but word of a great victory. Over a month before, more than three thousand Massachusetts inhabitants had launched an assault on Fort Louisbourg, the mightiest fortress in French Canada, indeed in all of North America. Fighting largely unaided by the mother country, often attacking from mere fishing boats, the colonists had vanquished the "Gibraltar of the New World." Providence, it seemed, had aided the godliest, most

determined side. As it would later turn out, the colonists' mammoth effort had been for naught. Under the terms of the treaty ending the war, British negotiators returned the fort to the French. From that time on, some Americans began to wonder where Britain's interests truly lay.

It would be many more years, however, before the Otises harbored such suspicions. Mercy's family was proud of their English identity and heritage. Their history recapitulated the prototypical tale of the colony's early settlement and development. On both sides, Mercy traced her ancestors back to some of the region's earliest settlers, the Puritans. As dissenters from the Church of England, the Puritans fled to the New World seeking an opportunity to associate with like-minded people and create a godly commonwealth on earth. Her mother's family found its roots in Edward Dotey, one of the signers of the Mayflower Compact and a founder of the Plymouth Colony. Over time, as the colony grew more crowded, Mercy's maternal grandfather decided to seek out better opportunities on the Connecticut frontier. He relocated the family to Wethersfield, where Mercy's mother was born. Her father's ancestors, on the other hand, had settled in Hingham, a town in the original Massachusetts Bay Colony. Arriving in 1631 as part of the Great Migration, the first Otises quickly accumulated substantial amounts of land and property. Seeking to expand his holdings, Mercy's paternal grandfather moved in 1683 to Barnstable, where he soon gained prominence as a leading merchant and politician. Her father James, born in 1702, capitalized on his father's substantial legacy. For the first generations of Puritans, the drive for economic self-improvement reinforced their religious zeal; worldly ambitions coexisted with divine aspirations.

By the time Mercy's parents were born, the tenor of life in Massachusetts had already changed considerably. In 1684, Britain revoked the Massachusetts Bay charter, a document that had given colonists great freedom to enforce their religious ideals through the mechanisms of the civil government. Under the new charter, Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay were joined into a single colony under royal jurisdiction. In the new government, the church possessed much less civil power and legal authority.

Although Congregationalists, as the Puritans came to be known, still received preferential treatment, they now had to share their commonwealth with other religious groups, such as Quakers and Baptists. They no longer could dream of erecting a pure city on a hill, a model for the rest of the world to follow. By the turn of the century, although the colonists were not necessarily less spiritual than their ancestors, they no longer exhibited the singleness of purpose or sense of religious unity that had characterized the earlier settlement.

Time had also allowed the colony to prosper. No longer a struggling frontier community, Massachusetts was now one of the most populous of Britain's New World possessions. Although mostly composed of small farmers, the colony's inhabitants produced enough to feed themselves, often with enough left over to engage in local trade. In Boston, international trade and shipbuilding had made the city the largest urban center and most important port in the colonies. By the end of the seventeenth century, Massachusetts merchants controlled 40 percent of the carrying capacity of all colonial-owned shipping. Although economic change may have heightened disparities between the rich and the poor in the capital, it raised the standard of living for most inhabitants. By the mid-eighteenth century, the colonists enjoyed a level of comfort and material prosperity that would have stunned – and appalled – their forebears.

Despite profound changes altering the landscape of Massachusetts society, the seacoast town of Barnstable was something of a backwater, or, to put it more positively, an island in the midst of the ocean. Located about twenty-five miles southeast of Plymouth, most of Barnstable's eight hundred or so residents supported themselves through farming, and, to a lesser extent, through small-scale shipping, whaling, or trading. Stable, homogeneous, and self-contained, the community, with the exception of a few elite families, tended to look inward rather than outward. As in many Massachusetts towns, a small group of families ruled the town government with a firm hand. Men from these families – the Bacons, Bourns, Gorhams, Lothrops, Thatchers, and Mercy's own family, the Otises – tended to be elected and

reelected to positions in town and colonial government. Although attentive to their constituents' needs, representatives were thought to be independent of the people; their warrant came more from God than from the voters. Massachusetts was thus more democratic in form than in substance.

The people of Barnstable, moreover, tended to be conservative economically as well as politically. In 1740, the town's electors rejected a proposal for the creation of a land bank, an institution that would have generated a paper currency and eased the plight of debtors. Whatever its potential benefits, the Barnstable town meeting concluded that the bank represented a dangerous innovation that threatened to destabilize the economy and disrupt business as usual. They preferred to grapple with the known rather than take a risk on the unknown.

Unlike many other Massachusetts towns, Barnstable was still conservative in religious matters as well. It remained virtually untouched by the Great Awakening, the great religious revival that swept through the colonies during the 1740s. Featuring new, more emotional styles of preaching, sometimes delivered by nonresident, or itinerant, ministers, the Awakening often proved to be a divisive force. Support for the Awakening often turned clergyman against clergyman, split congregations in two, or wrenched towns apart. In 1740, the most famous preacher of the revival, George Whitefield, ventured as close to Barnstable as Boston. But the Second Church in the East Parish of Barnstable remained a bulwark of orthodoxy. Congregants neither wanted nor needed outside preachers to stir them up to new heights of religious "enthusiasm" – a dirty word in those days. They preferred to practice a more traditional religion inherited from their Puritan forebears, a religion of duty, discipline, and rationality. The Barnstable of Mercy's youth, then, was a safe, predictable place where the outside world did not much intrude.

Mercy's parents were stalwart citizens of that world. In 1724, James Otis had brought Mary Allyne of Wethersfield, Connecticut, home to be his bride. They were each only twenty-two years old. In the small world of Barnstable, Mercy's family stood near the top rung of society. Her grandfather and father were prominent

figures in business and local politics. Fortunately for Mercy, her father, though the youngest son, had inherited from his father substantial lands and the family homestead. Overlooking Barnstable's Great Salt Marshes, near Cape Cod Bay, the house was described at the time as a "high double house with a gambrel roof and three dormer windows." Outside, huge buttonwood trees shaded the yard and provided firewood for the family – fifty cords would keep the fireplaces roaring through the winter. Possibly to accommodate a growing family, possibly to announce his increasing social status, James added two wings to the home. Inside, mahogany chests, elaborate mirrors, and one of the first clocks in the county graced the house. Reflecting the colonists' growing appetite for luxury goods, the Otises purchased pewter plates, engraved silver bowls, and damask tablecloths. The children slept on feather beds and ate with silverware. Despite these creature comforts, Mercy grew up in comfort but not amidst splendor. The Otises were large fish in a small pond.

Like many other New Englanders, Mary and James were eager to have many children. The Otises, however, were unluckier than most. At a time when the infant mortality rate was about 25 percent, six of the family's thirteen children did not live to adulthood. In this situation, religion provided a needed measure of consolation and comfort. If, as Puritans believed, death was God's will, then individuals must accept the pain, resign themselves to the inevitable, and meditate on the event as a way of increasing their own godliness. Still, each of the deaths engendered a profound sense of loss and caused the Otises to grieve afresh. A sensitive child, Mercy no doubt found the episodes traumatic.

Notwithstanding the frequency of the deaths of her infant siblings, Mercy grew up in a fairly typical Puritan home. Her parents regarded their family as a "little commonwealth," a microcosm of the larger society and an agent for inculcating religious values. Together, Mercy's parents exercised unquestioned authority over their children. In accordance with good Calvinistic doctrine, they attempted to vanquish sin, extirpate any signs of their children's willfulness, and teach them the way to salvation. Although Mercy's parents most assuredly loved her, they expressed that

love in the form of discipline rather than affection. Sparing the rod, they feared, might spoil the child. This method left some scars. Much later, Mercy explicitly repudiated the "Irksome Methods of Severity" that had characterized her upbringing. She did not want to inflict the excesses of what historian Philip Greven has called the "evangelical mode" of childrearing on her own children.

The Otis family exhibited domestic arrangements typical for the time. Although hierarchical and patriarchal in structure, the Puritan family also assigned a dignified place to women. As wife and mother, the woman was regarded as the husband's essential friend, companion, and helpmeet. While she must defer to her husband, she had a particular realm of authority of her own – the household.

In the eighteenth century, running a successful household depended enormously on the efficiency of the women in the house. In keeping with the Otises' relatively high social status, several servants, including a black slave, assisted Mary Allyne Otis in performing the domestic chores and taking care of the children. Yet the ultimate responsibility for the household fell largely on the mistress herself: she had to do many jobs personally or supervise the servants closely. These chores were burdensome, demanding, and physically exhausting. Each day female servants and family members had to milk the cows, build the fires, prepare and cook the meals. Clothes, sometimes made from thread and fabric made by the women themselves, had to be sewn and washed. On larger farms, women might produce other goods – candles, cheese, or butter – that could be used by the family or traded for other useful items.

Strong taboos prevented the men, even the boys, from helping the women do their work. So it was up to Mrs Otis, her four daughters, and the female servants to keep the Otis house functioning. As the third child and eldest daughter, Mercy bore an especially heavy burden. During Mary's many pregnancies and postpartum recovery periods, Mercy increasingly acted as her mother's "deputy" and assumed many of Mary's duties around the house. In the process, she learned the practical skills that

would one day enable her to become the effective mistress of her own household. Mercy also learned about the demands of motherhood. The birth of ten younger siblings initiated Mercy into the female-centered rituals surrounding childbirth and prepared her for the day when she too would have children.

Mercy's mother also passed on to her daughter more sophisticated skills. For good Puritan men and women, reading the Bible was an essential part of religious education and a staple of devotional practice. The rate of female literacy in New England was high – perhaps as high as 70 percent in the early eighteenth century. It is likely, then, that Mary taught her daughters how to read, as well as instructed them in the feminine arts. Embroidery, for example, was a skill thought to be both useful and aesthetically pleasing. Mary no doubt spent many hours demonstrating the stitches and supervising her daughter's efforts. Mercy, it seems, enjoyed and even excelled at this task. Contemporaries remarked on the beauty of an elaborately embroidered satin dress that she wore the day after her wedding. And even today the Plymouth's Pilgrim Hall Museum displays Mercy's intricately stitched, brightly colored card-table cover, a work that reveals both her fine sense of detail as well as her mastery of a difficult craft.

Figure 1.2 Card table: Needlework by Mercy Otis Warren, 1754
Source: Courtesy of the Pilgrim Hall Museum, Plymouth, Massachusetts

Mercy once referred to her mother as a "blessed Saint … from whose lips flowed … the pure fountain of Religion, arguments sufficient to console a rational mind under the adverse strokes of a momentary existence." Although she admired her, Mercy and the rest of the Otis children seem to have regarded their mother as a remote and moody figure. The fact that Mrs Otis bore thirteen children and buried six of them might reasonably account for this sense of melancholy and distance. Whatever the cause, Mercy's relationship with her mother never evinced the warmth she felt toward her father, with whom she was demonstrably close.

Colonel James Otis, as he was called, exercised his authority over his family with a firm hand. Even Mercy spoke of her father's control in terms of a "patriarchship." At times, his domineering character seems to have caused tensions between him and his sons. But James seems to have had a special fondness for his eldest daughter, who reciprocated his sentiments and took care of him in his later years. She often referred to him as her "venerated father."

Colonel James was a man of great native intelligence, substantial charm, and immense energy. Although he had not attended college, he was a quick learner and a man of vision. He wanted to be more than a simple farmer. Soon after taking up residence on the family lands, he began to direct his prodigious energies toward gilding the family dynasty. Aggressively setting out to improve his status and wealth, he expanded the family storehouse, sought out new trading partners, and invested in new business endeavors, such as whaling. In 1730, he branched off in an entirely new direction, establishing himself in the practice of law.

At this time, lawyers required no special schooling or licensing; any literate man could practice law. As he gained experience, Colonel James proved to have a special knack for litigation. Although he handled some criminal cases, he found himself increasingly involved in civil matters – the recovery of debts, the mediation of property disputes, and the arbitration of wills. Always seeking to expand his clientele, Otis rode the circuit to neighboring towns and villages. In little more than a decade, he came to represent nearly half the litigants bringing suit at the Barnstable County Court. These endeavors brought him success.

Not only did he earn substantial fees (as much as £1,200 per year), he also gained the confidence and acquaintance of many people, becoming the center of an influential network that extended throughout Barnstable County. These contacts enabled him to invest in lucrative trading ventures and, eventually, to make his way into politics.

Despite his frequent absences from the household, Colonel James apparently took a strong interest in his eldest daughter. At some point, perhaps when she was nine or ten, he granted permission for Mercy to be educated by a private tutor along with her older brothers. We can only speculate on the precise course of events that led to this rather unorthodox decision. Like other girls in New England, Mercy had learned to read at an early age. But the education of many women stopped there. Writing was often treated as vocational for males who would need to be able to write to do business. Many females never learned to write.

Mercy, however, yearned to learn more than just the basics. A girl of great curiosity and enthusiasm, she sensed there was a wider world awaiting her. She watched enviously as her two older brothers, James and Joseph, went off to school – not to Barnstable's public grammar school, but for tutoring with their uncle, a Yale-trained minister. The Reverend Jonathan Russell provided the boys with a rigorous classical education that would prepare them for college. Mercy, too, had visited her Uncle Russell's house many times. When she entered his study, lined with hundreds of books containing the accumulated wisdom of theology, philosophy, history, and natural science, her skin would prickle in anticipation. She longed to touch the leather volumes, hold them in her hands, devour their contents. But girls were not supposed to want such things.

Fortunately, her brother James knew of Mercy's interests. Acknowledging her precocity, he took an active hand in encouraging her intellectual development. Together they explored the labyrinthine excesses of Greek mythology, exulted in the heroic achievements of the Roman republic, and plumbed the delicate intricacies of Shakespeare's sonnets. He didn't seem to mind that Mercy was a girl; he treated her as an intellectual equal. At some

point, the siblings must have wondered why Mercy, who was so quick and clever, did not also attend school at their Uncle Russell's house. Soon thereafter, Mercy began to go to school with her brothers.

Under Russell's tutelage, Mercy obtained a rigorous, classical education. Because she would not be going to college, she was not instructed in Greek or Latin. But in most other ways, she was treated as one of the boys. She studied Greek and Roman literature in translation, learned ancient and modern history, and explored the works of English authors such as Shakespeare, Pope, Dryden, and Milton. She also learned to write. Not only did she absorb the basic elements of composition, she perfected a subtle and refined prose style capable of conveying complex notions and learned ideas.

Mercy's education provided her with more than just intellectual knowledge; it shaped her image of herself. In the Reverend Russell's study, she demonstrated that she was as quick and competent as her brothers. She could write as well as they could, hold her own in discussion, and master the same subjects. She gained the boys' respect as they gained hers. In the process, she began to have some of the same aspirations as they did. She came to love politics and the study of history. Raleigh's *History of the World* was said to be one of her favorite works. She began to have a literary bent – or at least to realize that she could express herself through literary means. Over time, she would turn more deliberately to these avenues of expression. For now, she gloried in the realization that in the realm of ideas, gender was no barrier to equality. To their credit, the men of her family did not disabuse her of that notion.

Mercy's bond with her brother James deepened over the years. Three and one-half years her senior, Jemmy, as he was called, was her closest friend, her trusted companion, and constant adviser. Although she had younger sisters, it was to Jemmy that Mercy turned in times of trouble or distress. When he left for college, he continued to supervise her reading and offer his support for her endeavors. She loved him dearly.

In subsequent years, Jemmy would become one of the first, most articulate, but also one of the most erratic leaders of the

revolutionary movement. After graduating from Harvard in 1743, he returned home to Barnstable. Following a traditional path, he studied privately for two years in order to obtain his master's degree. A brilliant classicist, he published a book on Latin prosody and completed a manuscript on Greek prosody. He then went off to Boston to read law with one of the most prominent attorneys of the day, Jeremiah Gridley. He immersed himself in the English common law tradition and read the great legal theorists: Pufendorf, Grotius, Vatell, and Justinian, among others. With his razor-sharp mind and stubborn intensity, Jemmy mastered his studies quickly. In 1748 he moved to Plymouth, where he established his own legal practice. Though successful in winning cases, he was not as successful in attracting clients. On at least two separate occasions, father and son tangled with each other in court. Representing opposite sides, in both instances the fancily educated son triumphed over the self-educated father. Nonetheless, Colonel James had more work than he could handle, while the son could barely make a living. For the younger Otis, the pursuit of abstract legalisms was far more interesting than the pursuit of potential clients, a necessary step in building a small-town legal practice.

Jemmy also seems to have needed a broader canvas on which to display his talents. In 1750, the young attorney returned to Boston to seek his fortune. He acted as his father's agent – shopping for goods, arranging for shipments, representing him in certain legal matters. He also built on his connections from Harvard to forge a flourishing legal practice. Soon he represented various prominent merchants from such eminent families as the Hancocks, the Vassals, and the Halls. Ingratiating himself with royal officials, he also acquired a variety of minor, and then not so minor, political appointments. By the 1760s, he began to emerge as a leading spokesman of the opposition party and one of the first proponents of American rights in the face of British oppression.

As Jemmy achieved success, and then notoriety, in the realm of politics, he brought Mercy along with him on his intellectual journey. Their frequent correspondence allowed her to keep

abreast of the rapidly changing political scene and her brother's evolving views. Their mutual affection never waned. "This you may depend on," he told her in 1766. "No man ever loved a sister better, and among all my conflicts I never forget that I am endeavoring to serve you and yours." By the late 1760s, an encroaching insanity made Jemmy increasingly unpredictable and irresponsible. Mercy worried about him constantly: he was, she told him in 1771, "the continual subject both of my sleeping and waking thoughts." Although she acknowledged his faults, Mercy regarded her eldest brother as a flawed genius, one "whose superior abilities are such that with a calm and steady mind, he is capable of promoting the greatest good to his fellow creatures – and in consequence thereof to secure to himself eternal felicity." She ignored or tried to explain away his eccentricities. She assumed his political passions as her own and followed his logic down its tortuous path. When he was no longer able to wage the fight against British tyranny, she picked up the gauntlet. Their bond transcended that of brother and sister; it became a merger of two exceptional intellects and wills.

Yet Jemmy's relationship with Mercy had transformed him as well as her. His sister's brilliance led him to an unfashionable belief in the equality of the sexes. From personal experience, he knew that with the proper encouragement and opportunity women could attain intellectual parity with men. In the 1760s, he oversaw the education of a young girl who would one day write the first American novel, *Charlotte Temple*. As a close friend of the family, he had recognized the incipient genius of the young Susanna Haswell Rowson and promoted it. Jemmy also went public with his views on women's equality. In his 1764 pamphlet, *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*, he asked,

> Are not women born as free as men? Would it not be infamous to assert that the ladies are all slaves by nature? … If upon the abdication [of James II] all were reduced to a state of nature, had not apple women and orange girls as good a right to give their respectable suffrages for a new King as … the politician?

His attachment to Mercy may have also made it difficult to find a wife that would measure up to her abilities. It seems no accident that Jemmy did not marry until six months after his sister had done so. Even then, although he wed a wealthy, beautiful woman named Ruth Cunningham, with whom he had three children, his relationship with his wife never appeared to be as fulfilling as his connection with his sister.

As important as Jemmy was to Mercy's life, she would not have had a career as a writer without the support and encouragement of her husband, James Warren. Warren hailed from a family at least as prominent in Plymouth as Mercy's family was in Barnstable. He, too, traced his ancestors back to the *Mayflower*. His family, too, engaged in a profitable mixture of agriculture and trading. Born in 1726, Warren, as the eldest son, expected to inherit the largest portion of his father's estate. After his graduation from Harvard in 1745, he apprenticed himself to his father in anticipation of that day.

From the first day that Mercy laid eyes on James Warren at her brother's graduation until her wedding day, more than a decade passed. Although we do not know the details of their courtship, we can reasonably speculate on the course of events. It seems likely that Jemmy reintroduced his friend to his sister in 1748 or 1749, while he was living in Plymouth, Warren's hometown. The courtship was likely to have occurred under the watchful eyes of Mercy's family. James probably visited her in Barnstable. To get to know one another, they may have strolled around the Great Salt Marshes, attended barn raisings, or accompanied one another to church services. Because Warren lived in a different town, he even may have spent the night at the Otis household occasionally. Under these circumstances, some New England families allowed a courting couple to sleep in the same bed – fully clothed with a "bundling board" separating them. (Such precautions seem to have had limited success in preventing intimate contact between the bundled bedmates. The rate of prenuptial pregnancies skyrocketed around this time.) The Otis home, however, was probably large enough that they did not need to resort to bundling.

Eventually, they decided to marry. Once Mercy and James made their decision, they issued the banns, a public announcement of their intentions. Following an ancient custom, they posted the banns three times on the door to Mercy's church building, the West Barnstable Meetinghouse. Yet the wedding itself would not be a religious affair. Unlike Anglicans and Roman Catholics, Puritans believed that marriage was a civil contract rather than a religious sacrament. Consequently, a magistrate rather than a minister presided over the actual ceremony, which probably occurred in the Otis home.

Mercy Otis wed James Warren on November 14, 1754. November was the favorite month for Puritan weddings; by that time of the year, the community's inhabitants had finished the work of the busy harvest season but had not yet begun the preparations for the spring planting. Both parties were somewhat older than the norm: she was 26, at a time when women in Massachusetts usually married at 23, and he was 28, at a time when men usually married at 26. Yet like many other Massachusetts men, Warren may have wanted to postpone marriage until he had reached a point in his life at which he had the financial means to establish a family on his own. It would be several more years before Warren's father died. So he would wait longer than most to receive his full inheritance.

On the day of the wedding, members of the two families and a few close friends gathered at the Otis family house. In a brief service, the couple exchanged vows. A restrained celebration followed, at which guests were treated to a hearty wedding dinner, bridal cakes, and cups of sack posset (a wine punch that was used to toast the bridal couple). In keeping with Puritan decorum, there was no excessive drinking and no dancing at the reception. Soon after dinner, the assembled guests sang a psalm and the newlyweds excused themselves. The ancient custom of charivari encouraged friends to tease and taunt the newlyweds, even as they secreted themselves in the bridal chamber. Shortly after the wedding day, Mercy and James moved into the Warren family home at Eel River near Plymouth.

The two had wed at a time when older, more economic notions of marriage were giving way to more romantic, companionate ideals. Mercy and James's relationship reflected the influence of both the older and newer ideas about marriage. While they experienced a deep affection for and strong attraction to one another, they also shared a common social, economic, and religious background and held similar values. Both were highly principled, even to the point of rigidity and self-righteousness. Both had cut their teeth on politics and retained a lifelong fascination with the affairs of state. Both even had a common ancestor, a certain great-great-grandfather named Edward Dotey.

As the descendants of Puritans, both Warrens shared a firm belief in God. Unlike their ancestors, however, their belief tended to be more rationalistic, restrained, and stoic, rather than fervent and all-consuming. While spirituality shaped the contours of their mental outlook, their daily life tended to be centered on more earthly concerns. As children of the Enlightenment, they also shared a love of nature. Galileo and Newton had shown that nature operated according to certain predictable laws; the universe was not a random occurrence. The Warrens saw no necessary contradiction between faith and reason, as one of Mercy's poems made clear:

> Not even Newton's godlike mind,
> Nor all the sages of mankind,
> Could e'er assign another cause,
> Though much they talk of nature's laws
> […]
> All perfect wisdom still directs
> Their revolutions; – knows the hour
> When rapid times resist less pow'r,
> In mighty ruin will involve,
> And God – this grand machine dissolve.

Science, as the Warrens saw it, might explain the natural order, but God still directed it. In addition, they enjoyed the aesthetic pleasures provided by nature. James frequently expressed his

contentment with the agrarian life. Like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and many other patriots of the founding era, he was a gentleman farmer who liked nothing better than to contemplate new systems of crop rotation, experiment with exotic seedlings, or read "Tull's fine Phylosophical System of Vegetation." For Mercy, the appeal of nature was "beauteous and sublime" rather than scientific, providing her with a reservoir of peace or a reminder of the awesomeness of divine power.

Whatever the constraints of a hierarchical and patriarchal society, Mercy and James enjoyed a partnership grounded in mutuality and reciprocity. Mercy often referred to James as the "first friend of my heart." Throughout a series of personal crises and disappointments in the 1780s and 1790s, she unerringly supported him and took his side in public disputes. "Your father," Mercy wrote her eldest son in 1797, "is the philosopher and the Christian: – he is the best husband, the best father – the best friend." She frequently expressed her affection for and dependence on him. "All my Earthly Happiness," she wrote to him in 1772, "depend[s] on the continuance of [your] Life."

James felt the same way about his beloved wife. "How can I love and esteem you enough," he proclaimed during the Revolution, "and yet no Husband ever loved and respected a Wife more?" At a time when it was most unusual for women to think about politics or have literary aspirations, he actively supported her efforts and cherished her unique talents and abilities. As Mercy was preparing her first book for publication, he wrote, "I suppose you are busily Engaged in the Business of an Author of great Abilities, discernment & Judgment, yet diffident & therefore hunting for Criticism & advise & correcting the draft with a trembling heart. If you had half the good opinion of yourself that I have of you[,] you certainly would not feel half the anxiety that You do now." Secure in his own talents, he freely acknowledged her superiority in certain arenas. Later in her life, Mercy would often experience debilitating depressions and physical ailments. Through it all, James would patiently try to cajole her into good spirits and facilitate the expression of her genius. "[A] brilliant

and Busy Imagination often if not always Accompanys great qualities," he observed in 1779. "It Commands Admiration but is often Mischievous and when yours is not directed to the bright side of things, I often wish it as Sluggish as my own, but I long to Banter and Laugh you out of your whimsical Gloom." As exceptional as Mercy was, only an exceptional husband could have enabled her to express her talents.

The marriage of Mercy Otis and James Warren was notable for its intimacy, passion, and mutual respect. In their fifty-four year union, they produced five children and weathered numerous personal, political, and professional crises. Although their love for one another never seemed to waver, even an idyllic relationship took work. Writing to her newly married daughter-in-law, Mercy observed, "Many of our thoughtless sex as soon as the connubial knot is tied, neglect the continual attention (which is necessary without discovering the exertion) to keep the *sacred flame* of love alive." Both Warrens seemed committed to doing the hard work necessary to sustain the "sacred flame of love."

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Mercy Otis Warren's early years contain only a few hints of the unconventional path her life would later take. Certain men – most especially, her father, her brother, and her husband – recognized from early on that she was a woman of exceptional talents and ability. Through them, she received an unusually good education, access to the world of politics, and the encouragement to write. In the 1750s and 1760s, Mercy Otis Warren envisioned her life much as other women at the time did. What she wanted most of all was to be a good wife, an efficient housemistress, and a loving mother. Despite a flair with the pen, her writing might well have remained a private hobby or a curious feminine affectation. In the mid-1760s, however, an extraordinary series of political events began to unfold. These events would eventually propel her – as an Otis, a Warren, a patriot, and a woman – into the public realm.

Study questions

1. How did Mercy Otis Warren's education differ from that of most eighteenth-century girls in the North American British colonies?
2. How did Mercy Otis Warren's religious upbringing shape her decisions about what she planned to do with her life?
3. How did Mercy Otis Warren's father and her brother encourage her intellectual development?
4. What were the typical expectations of a woman like Mercy Otis Warren about courtship and marriage in mid-eighteenth-century Massachusetts?
5. What was the nature of Mercy Otis Warren's relationship with her husband James? In what ways was their marriage similar to or different from other marriages at the time?