

## Mary Newbury Adams: Feminist Forerunner from Iowa

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*I only aim to be a forerunner opening up opportunities for those that come after me. . . .*<sup>1</sup>

THERE WERE FEW WOMEN LIKE MARY NEWBURY ADAMS living in Iowa in the middle and late nineteenth century. She believed that women should be educated to their fullest capacities and should take an equal part in social, intellectual, economic, and political life—an idea shared by contemporary feminists. Through her writing, speaking, and organizational abilities, she tried to change the attitudes of women toward themselves, an essential condition for bringing about effective improvement in their status.

Adams' parents were religious and social reformers working in the frontier communities of the Middle West. Her mother transmitted to her daughter the rich heritage of her forebears. As a result, she was aware that she came from a long line of achieving and frequently non-conforming individuals. Because her father was a proponent of equal education for women, she received a formal education beyond the elementary school level, a rare experience for women of her day. Her husband supported her beliefs and her efforts to improve herself and the position of women. Interaction with her sister Frances, and with other leaders in women's clubs and the equal rights movement, had a reinforcing influence on Adams' feminist views.

She became radicalized through these influences, and actively opposed the rigidly prescribed roles for women in the

<sup>1</sup>Mary Newbury Adams, a personal account, *Austin Adams Family Papers*, Iowa State University Library, Department of Special Collections, MS 10, 3-6.

Victorian era. As Barbara Welter has indicated, nineteenth century women were, figuratively speaking, hostages in their homes—their happiness and fulfillment dependent on the closed circle of their families.<sup>2</sup> Adams rejected the narrow definition of womanhood: daughter, sister, wife, mother. By refusing to accept the established boundaries for herself as well as for other women, by asserting that women had played a significant role in the development of civilization and therefore deserved an equal position with men, and by organizing women into groups for mutual education and change, Adams joined other feminists and suffragists in a battle against society.

Mary Newbury Adams was born in Peru, Indiana on October 17, 1837 to Mary Ann Sergeant and Samuel Newbury. Her parents were abolitionists and missionaries. They came from New England to establish churches and schools in the Middle West; and to carry the message of religious revivalism that had been sweeping through upper New York State and New England during the early 1800s. According to this new gospel, faith must be tested with community work to reform moral and social values. Women as well as men were encouraged to pray and speak at religious meetings and to take an active role in such matters as temperance, the abolition of slavery, and the elimination of brothels. Without education, women could not assume the responsibilities that were demanded of them.<sup>3</sup>

This religious orientation may partially explain the Newburys' support of coeducation. Adams' father, a Presbyterian minister, raised funds to establish Wabash College, founded in 1832 in Crawfordsville, Indiana. As acting president until 1835-36, he admitted women students. However, his views on women's education conflicted with those of his church members. His daughter later wrote, "The Presbyterians forbade his teaching young ladies geometry and Moral Philosophy."<sup>4</sup> In 1837 the family moved to Peru, Indiana—there Samuel New-

<sup>2</sup>Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" *American Quarterly*, 18:2, Summer 1966, 151-152.

<sup>3</sup>Alice Rossi, ed., *The Feminist Papers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), 254-265.

<sup>4</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to the Honorable B. H. Harrison, December 30, 1900, MS 10, 2-1.

bury started an academy for both sexes. Again, the Presbyterians opposed his efforts to provide women with equal educational opportunities, and the family moved on to White Pigeon, Michigan. In Michigan Newbury lobbied for the establishment of a state normal school to train women teachers, and he urged that the proposed state university at Ann Arbor be made coeducational, predicting that "In fifty years this will be the method of our best colleges."<sup>5</sup>

There were no elementary schools in the pioneer settlements where the family lived, so both parents assumed the task of educating their seven children. Cabin walls were covered with maps and periodicals; books were an important part of the family's possessions. The Newburys encouraged their children to read by reading to them. Mrs. Newbury was especially fond of reciting the poetry of her ancestor, Anne Dudley Bradstreet, probably the first American woman poet.<sup>6</sup>

An integral part of the children's education was family history. Stories were related about the eight generations of grandmothers. The family genealogy revealed that Adams was a descendant of John Cotton, William Pynchon, a patentee of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, three colonial governors, numerous non-conformist ministers, three physicians, and four judges. Adams also was aware that Pynchon had defended Anne Hutchinson who had challenged the assumption that women could have no voice in church affairs. (Her trial was the first time the question of equal status for women was raised in this country.)<sup>7</sup> Adams' identification with her ancestors must have urged her to reject the subordinate position of women.

Her mother also provided Adams with a living model of a strong-minded woman. One of the earliest memories which the daughter had of her mother related to the abolitionist move-

<sup>5</sup>Frances Elizabeth Newbury Bagley, *Sketch of the Life of Mrs. Frances Newbury Bagley*, MS 10, 3-4.

<sup>6</sup>Edward James, Janet Wilson James, and Paul S. Boyer, eds., *Notable American Women 1607-1950*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 1: 222-223.

<sup>7</sup>Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 9.

ment. A mob of pro-slavery men attacked their home in White Pigeon when the father was away preaching or lecturing. The men tore down the white picket fence and demanded the release of a fugitive slave. The children huddled in one room, and their mother comforted them with ". . . Don't fear for we are in the right."<sup>8</sup> She dispersed the attackers while the fugitive remained hidden in a secret cistern kept for this purpose. As an agent for the underground railroad, her mother had many opportunities to demonstrate that women could not be submissive if they also held firm convictions.

The family left White Pigeon because the church congregation disagreed with the Newburys' anti-slavery views. When the family moved to Jackson, Michigan and then to Cleveland, Ohio, Adams' formal education began. In Cleveland her teacher, Dr. E. E. White, had a profound effect on her.<sup>9</sup> On one occasion she had a small part to play in a meeting and felt unable to speak before an audience. White said to her, "I will go with you but a pupil of mine must try to do what ought to be done at the right time."<sup>10</sup> He led her to the platform, and after she finished speaking, he said "I thank you for trying and succeeding." Many years later at a woman suffrage meeting in Omaha, Nebraska, she met a woman who also had been White's student. She wrote her children of the coincidence, recounted probably her first public speaking experience, and credited her former teacher with developing her courage.

Adams continued her education after the family moved to Dubuque, Iowa where the Newburys permanently settled in 1853. Because of her parents' commitment to education for both sexes, they sent her in 1856 to Troy Female Seminary in Troy, New York. The seminary was the first endowed institution for women that bore some resemblance to higher educa-

<sup>8</sup>Mary Newbury Adams, a personal account, MS 10, 2-5.

<sup>9</sup>White was a leading influence in Ohio schools. He was president of Purdue University from 1876-1883, and president of a number of national education groups including the National Association of School Superintendents, the National Education Association, and the National Council of Education. He has been credited with writing the bill for establishing a national department of education. See *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936) 20:99.

<sup>10</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to her children, October 27, 1898, MS 10, 2-1.

tion.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, her brother Sam was attending Union College in nearby Schenectady, New York.

In 1854 Austin Adams, her future husband, also came to Iowa from the East. A graduate of Dartmouth College and a lawyer who had attended Harvard Law School, he had lost his money in worthless railroad stocks and decided to make a fresh start in Dubuque by practicing law and teaching for a short time with Mary Mann, a sister of Horace Mann. Almost immediately he became involved in civic and political affairs; he helped establish a public library and a public school system. (At one point the library was located in his law office.) Like the Newburys, he supported women's education. When he became chief justice of the Iowa Supreme Court, he admitted women to practice for the first time. As a lecturer in the law school at the University of Iowa, he welcomed women students to his classes. He served in the Iowa Supreme Court from 1875 to 1887.<sup>12</sup>

During his first year in Dubuque he met Mary Newbury, and in 1856 they agreed to be married, but not until she had completed her year at the seminary. In one of the many love letters that flowed between them while she was in Troy, he explained why he was willing to wait: "It requires some sacrifice of feeling on my part to spare you so long but I think you are laying the foundation for a happier life."<sup>13</sup> She, in turn, believed that her education was preparing her for the role she would play as the wife of an attorney with political aspirations. His interest in her education had a much broader basis, as another letter to her indicates:

Whatever pertains to the honor and prosperity of this country and especially to the great question of human rights is certainly in some sense woman's matter as much man's. And such knowledge is worth more as an accomplishment than some ladies think.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Saul D. Feldman, *Escape from the Doll's House* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1974), 23.

<sup>12</sup>Mary Newbury Adams, "Austin Adams," *The Iowa Historical Record*, 7:2, April 1891, 49-70, MS 10, 4-1.

<sup>13</sup>Letter from Austin Adams to Mary Newbury, February 22, 1857, MS 10, 2-6.

<sup>14</sup>Letter from Austin Adams to Mary Newbury, October 21, 1856, MS 2-6.

He did not hesitate to comment on her need to improve her writing skills, but he chided her with gentleness. Noticing the errors in one of her letters, he wrote, "They do so break the charm."<sup>15</sup> Nothing in her later correspondence demonstrates that she made any attempt to learn to spell and to master punctuation or sentence structure. Rules, no matter how routine, were not part of her personality. One of her children recalled that she was the least methodical of all women. Her love of complete freedom was so total that few people could control her. She admired system, accuracy, and self-control in others, but ". . . she delighted in teasing her systematic friends by breaking all their rules and regulations that she happened to know about."<sup>16</sup>

She bristled at the confinement and restrictions that were placed upon her at the seminary. She expressed her rebellion in her letters to her brother Sam. This correspondence reveals her as an emerging feminist, conscious of the greater constraints placed upon women students than upon men students:

I really wish Union was in Troy or rather that I could be in Union. I imagined you at midnight coming from the 'cave.' What [would] you fellows do if you were obliged to be in the college wall four months without going out except to string out—to walk with a teacher every tenth one and once in four weeks to have permission 'to go to city' for an hour. Can't lie down in study hours without *permission* etc., etc. Wouldn't it Narrow your mind? I tell you Sam I have reverence for a smart woman for it is a wonder that they make out as well as they do. I sometimes for the sake of privilege have a mind to put on the coat and vest and go ahead and then of course I hush up and keep plodding on.<sup>17</sup>

She also questioned the ability of her teachers and objected to the amount of copy work that was required.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Letter from Austin Adams to Mary Newbury, December 2, 1856, MS 10, 2-6.

<sup>16</sup>An account of Mary Newbury Adams written by one of her children, possibly Annabel Adams Goan. This is the only account in the collection that contains a description of Adams' physical appearance: "Mother was handsom(e) with a smooth clear pink and white complexion, perfect white teeth (that had never required a dentist), a mobile face, large dark eyes and hair and small dimpled hands. . . ." MS 10, 4-4.

<sup>17</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury to Samuel Sergeant Newbury, September 25, 1856, MS 10, 1-3.

<sup>18</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury to Samuel Sergeant Newbury, April 6, 1857, MS 10, 1-3.

Her complaints, however, were laced with gratitude that she was getting an education denied to most women. At the same time, she yearned for change: "But I do not mean to complain of the Seminary for I think that is as good as any *Female fixing*. I tell you Sam I wish I had character enough in me to be able to make the race of 1900 more comfortable than those of 1856."<sup>19</sup> Clearly, she was beginning to think about what she could do to reform a system that placed so many restrictions on what she called her "race."

While her brother Sam was stumping the state for James Buchanan, she could not buy special food for a birthday celebration in her room. (Seminary regulations permitted a monthly shopping trip.) She asked him to bring her a roast chicken or a turkey, a welcome change from the seminary fare of bread and molasses with gingerbread on Sunday. Later she discovered she could not have a party because her room was too close to a hall where the music teachers had planned a program for that evening. She described her disappointment in the context of women's unequal status:

So let it slide—I will have some fruit in my room that I can buy here. There is no rise of *womans trying to do anything*. There is a rule either in society or law books that put her down immediately. So as I belong to that class of *Humane* beings I must with the rest of my race step one side and let the *young lords of creation* pass on and enjoy themselves.<sup>20</sup>

The Adams were married on September 8, 1857, after Mary graduated from the seminary. The following year, a child was born, the first of five children who were born in a seven-year period from June 6, 1858 to July 21, 1865. Four of them survived. Motherhood became a spur to her education, as revealed by one of the many letters she wrote to her sister, Frances Elizabeth Newbury Bagley, who lived in Detroit:

Since Annabel's birth I feel a great desire to gain knowledge and truth on all subjects, not only for my own improvement but that I

<sup>19</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury to Samuel Sergeant Newbury, September 25, 1856, MS 10, 1-3.

<sup>20</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury to Samuel Sergeant Newbury, dated Sunday (prior to Adams' birthday on October 17, 1856), MS 10, 1-3.

may guide and direct . . . her future studies and perhaps prevent her from being oppressed with prejudices and superstitions.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike her sister, whose husband's substantial affluence permitted her more leisure, Adams had to squeeze her studies in between household and family obligations. Despite hinderances and limitations, she began a study of religion and civilization, an interest that extended over her lifetime.<sup>22</sup> Reading was generally considered unsettling, dangerous, and destructive for the nineteenth century woman. Nevertheless, Adams continued her pursuit of knowledge, justifying it as an extension of her role as a mother.

She carried her intellectual impropriety one step further by inviting Ralph Waldo Emerson and Bronson Alcott to Dubuque and entertaining them in her home. Prior to both visits she was tormented with self doubts, a sign of her lack of assurance in a sphere of activity deemed inappropriate for a Victorian lady. She confessed her torment to her sister Frances as she prepared for Alcott's visit in November, 1870: "Somehow I am marked 'unsuccessful.' I can start the thing but Austin then must run the machine—If I nurse his children he certainly needs to tend my projects or else they die as surely as fate."<sup>23</sup> The following year her feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt returned before Emerson's visit. To her sister she wrote, "I have to swing full sail without a mark in sight to do anything worthy."<sup>24</sup>

Both men returned the invitations, and Adams flaunted convention by traveling to Concord, Massachusetts in 1872, with substantial encouragement from her husband.<sup>25</sup> He con-

<sup>21</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to Frances Newbury Bagley, September 16, 1860, MS 10, 1-4.

<sup>22</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to Frances Newbury Bagley, February 2, 1861, MS 10, 1-4. Mary and Austin Adams left the Presbyterian Church in 1858 because of a religious difference with the minister who believed in the literal interpretation of the Bible. Referring to the minister's belief in the transubstantiation of the bread and wine in the communion service, she protested, "Eat our God. We are not descended from cannibals." Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to the Honorable B. H. Harrison, December 30, 1900, MS 10, 2-1. Her rejection of the Protestant Church in no way deterred her from continuing an intensive study of the Bible.

<sup>23</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to Frances Newbury Bagley, November 27, 1870, MS 10, 1-4.

<sup>24</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to Frances Newbury Bagley, December 7, 1871, MS 10, 1-5.

<sup>25</sup>Letter from Austin Adams to Mary Newbury Adams, May 9, 1872, MS 10, 2-6. While she was in Concord, it is conceivable that she started a cairn of stones at Walden Pond, in memory of

sidered it an opportunity for his wife. "Cultivate the friendship of men," he advised her. Obviously proud of his wife, he wrote her, "Of course none but the best women can get at such men and between such men and women a considerable degree of freedom seems to be justifiable." While she was in New England, he took full charge of the children. Married people, he contended, needed some of the freedom of those who were not married because to most people married life is a sort of prison, especially for the women.<sup>26</sup>

The comparative freedom which Adams experienced may have made her more aware of women's need for economic independence. A few days before her son's twenty-first birthday, she responded to a criticism he had made about a doctor's wife:

How would that Dr. feel if his wife was working out her plans as she was educated to and he had to do all the work that presented itself to do but with no chance of any wages or any success—only his board and clothes and so much as his wife thought due him for his work. You see without any knowledge of how much ones work is worth all the zest is taken out of life. One feels like a slave.<sup>27</sup>

In further correspondence with her son she discussed the personal effect of unpaid and unrecognized housework. She suggested that if he were tempted to despise women he should exchange places with them for a few years to see how his spirits and energy would be dimmed by the lack of monetary remuneration. Following this discussion, she proposed that her son make a present of five shares of stock to his sister Annabel who did some of the housework. In turn, Adams would convince her husband to give her some stock which would provide a monthly income. Such an arrangement would redress the injustice of the father's giving the shares to the sons but not to

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Thoreau. Her daughter, Annabel Adams Goan claimed she remembered her mother writing about the monument. However, the only evidence of this in the collection is a copy of a letter from one of her husband's law partners crediting her with the project. Copy of a letter from B. W. Lacy to Mary Newbury Adams, June 24, 1876, MS 10, 2-3.

<sup>26</sup>Letter from Austin Adams to Mary Newbury Adams, June 16, 1872, MS 10, 2-6.

<sup>27</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to Jerry Eugene Adams, December 8, 1881, MS 10, 1-6.

the women in the family.<sup>28</sup> Apparently, Austin Adams' sense of equity did not include women's financial status within the family.

In 1868 Adams devised a new method for continuing her education by helping to organize a local conversation club. Meetings were held in the homes of the members, an arrangement that allowed women with small children to participate.<sup>29</sup> Adams did not know that groups such as the one in Dubuque were springing up in communities throughout the country. That year two of the most well-known organizations were started, the New England Women's Club in Boston and Sorosis in New York City. The initial purpose was mutual education on a wide range of subjects, but an important by-product was the assertiveness that developed among the participants. Women who were unaccustomed to the sound of their own voices gained the courage to speak before audiences and to express their ideas in public. Like current feminist consciousness-raising groups that have developed action projects, the clubs rapidly moved from their original intent to local affairs such as the establishment of public libraries and kindergartens. For the first time women were organized to exert their influence in community life. Adams characterized what emerged as "nurseries of power." By the 1890s when local organizations had united into federations and national associations, their activities included the development of the settlement-house movement and consumer groups with a broad range of social concerns. The preliminary stage was being set for the inevitable enfranchisement of women.<sup>30</sup>

One of the first national organizations to be formed was the Association for the Advancement of Women, founded in

<sup>28</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to Jerry Eugene Adams, undated, but possibly written before Christmas 1881, MS 10, 1-6.

<sup>29</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to Jennie C. Croly, founder of Sorosis. Quoted by Croly in *The History of the Woman's Club Movement in America* (New York: Henry G. Allen & Co., 1898), 451-454.

<sup>30</sup>Mary I. Wood, *The History of the General Federation of Women's Clubs* (Norwood, Mass.: Norwood Press, 1912), 29; William L. O'Neill, ed., *The Woman Movement: Feminism in the United States and England* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 48; Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, p. 181.

1873 by Maria Mitchell, a moderate feminist and an astronomer who was the first woman to be elected to the American Academy of Science. The organization established a communications network among the local groups—an important prerequisite for the maintenance and growth of a social movement.<sup>31</sup> Discussions at the annual meetings or congresses focused on the contributions that women were making in the professions and in public life—a direct challenge to the Victorian standards for true womanhood. For the challengers of conventionality, the personal effects must have been substantial. Recognizing the association as a vehicle for change, Adams became one of the twenty vice presidents in 1875. For nearly a quarter of a century, she was an active participant, contributing numerous papers to the congresses and corresponding with many local clubs that were forming. By her own estimate, her letters between 1870-1880 could fill several volumes.<sup>32</sup>

Through the Association for the Advancement of Women, Adams associated with some of the most prominent women of her day. They included Julia Ward Howe, composer of the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*; Caroline Severance, a principal founder of the New England Woman's Club, one of the most powerful educational and political reform groups in Boston; and Ednah Dow Littlehale Cheney, an equal rights leader in the drive that gave women the right to vote in school board elections in Massachusetts in 1879. Adams' influence and contacts were so substantial that Susan B. Anthony called upon her in 1887 to help form the National Council of Women, an organization for unifying the numerous national women's groups.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup>Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and Its Relation to the Policy Process* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1975), 64-67.

<sup>32</sup>Unfortunately, these letters are missing from the collection. In a letter to this researcher, Louise Noun stated that after the Victoria Woodhull-free-love blow-up in 1872, suffragists destroyed their correspondence. Possibly, this embarrassing linkage between suffrage and an advocate of "free love" may explain why Adams did not preserve this material. Letter from Louise Noun, September 22, 1975.

<sup>33</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to Frances Newbury Bagley, undated, MS 10, 1-6.

In 1867 Adams launched her speaking career. The thread running through nearly every one of her talks was the strength and contributions of women. Women, she contended, needed to know more about their history, a history which had been denied them. "Our daughters," she wrote to her sister Frances, "must begin to know what women have done in the world. Historians have usually ignored them."<sup>34</sup> A knowledge of what women in the past had accomplished would encourage succeeding generations to develop their separate identities and work for the removal of barriers to equality. By asserting that in the past some women had become independent, achieving individuals, Adams was questioning the societal norms about woman's place. Her stress on women's history is significant in light of the current feminist movement's concern with what women have done in the past. According to Elizabeth Janeway, the historical perspective is essential if women are to see themselves "as participants with a stake in the present and a valid grasp on the future."<sup>35</sup> Adams recognized this function of history for the nineteenth century women's movement.

She may have been the first woman in the century to speak at a college commencement. In 1868 she accepted an invitation to address the graduating class at Lombard College in Galesburg, Illinois because she believed that women deserved a place on the platform in the churches, courthouses, and colleges. She conceived of herself as a role model for the women students who would be encouraged to use their training and to speak in public.

In 1869 she was invited by a literary society of young women at Grinnell College to speak at their college commencement, but she was not allowed to deliver her address because she was a woman. The faculty wrote a letter to a trustee of the college, a Dubuque minister, who delivered the refusal to her husband, not to her. The letter explained that "the Faculty and Trustees of the College are not yet prepared to

<sup>34</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to Frances Newbury Bagley, November 17, 1878, MS 10, 1-5.

<sup>35</sup>Elizabeth Janeway, *From Myth to Morning: Women Awakening* (New York: William Morrow Company, Inc., 1974), 17.

allow a woman to occupy the college platform at Commencement."<sup>36</sup> The humiliation must have bothered Adams; she did not mention it to her chief confidante, her sister Frances.

The rebuff infuriated her husband. He exposed the affair in the press. A letter to the editor of a Chicago periodical, the *New Covenant*, August 14, 1869, reveals his indignation:

. . . The fact is, that no person can be allowed to deliver a literary address before a literary society of young ladies in Iowa College, unless such person is of the male gender. Such is the unanimous and magnanimous decision of the Faculty. If I mistake not, this is a decision that the friends of woman's education in Iowa, will take notice of.

The Grinnell incident did not discourage Mary Newbury Adams from accepting other invitations. A letter from her agent offers a clue to her popularity in Iowa:

I thought it would be not much out of your way to Osage—That you could go to C on the 4 and then by R.R. the next day to O.S. that you would loose no time and that it would be a comparative saving in your expenses. . . . They want you to come to Western College (some 8 or 9 miles south of Cedar Rapids) on Jan. 7. Can you go?

Can you lecture at Chas. City on Nov. 4 or 6th?<sup>37</sup>

In 1869 the *Dubuque Times* hired Adams to cover a woman suffrage meeting at Galena, Illinois presided over by Martha Brinkerhoff, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony. Several days after the meeting Adams reported to her sister Frances that she was delighted with Stanton and Brinkerhoff and that she was becoming more receptive to the woman suffrage cause: ". . . I believe if I had not been reporting I wd. have taken the stage and given them some arguments against woman suffrage—But I must acknowledge my pail full of arguments is getting emptied and the pail for arguments for is filling up."<sup>38</sup> Significantly, she did not mention Anthony,

<sup>36</sup>Austin Adams, Letter to the editor of the *New Covenant*, August 14, 1869, 3, MS 10, 4-1.

Mary N. Adams used this letter verbatim when she wrote an article about her husband for *The Iowa Historical Record*.

<sup>37</sup>Letter from W. H. Curtis to Mary Newbury Adams, October 28, 1895, MS 10, 2-5.

<sup>38</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to Frances Newbury Bagley, March 5, 1869, MS 10,

the woman who was most clearly identified with the suffrage question.

If Adams had spoken against the cause, undoubtedly she would have insisted that the equal rights advocates had misplaced their emphasis on the single issue of the vote. She would have argued for education through women's clubs as the key to attaining power. Her position on the primacy of education was shared by many other pioneers who directed their efforts toward the expansion of educational opportunities, rather than suffrage.<sup>39</sup> As late as 1877 she expressed this argument to Amelia Bloomer, an equal rights leader who had associated with Anthony and Stanton in New York State and had moved to Council Bluffs, Iowa. Adams had misgivings about suffrage, she wrote Bloomer. Her chief concern was that illiterate women voters would become tools of the clergy.<sup>40</sup>

Regardless of her reservations about the suffrage issue strategy, Adams and the Dubuque women who accompanied her to the Galena convention subsequently formed the Northern Iowa Suffrage Association, the first organization of its kind in Iowa composed entirely of women. The group expected to expand beyond Dubuque, but the optimism proved unwarranted. During 1869 only two organizations were formed—in Monticello and Algona. Nevertheless, Adams fulfilled her responsibilities as corresponding secretary for the association by writing other Iowa women who were interested in suffrage work. (It took fifty years of effort by the suffragists to overcome the indifference of Iowa women and to bring about state legislative approval of the national suffrage amendment to the U.S. Constitution.)

Adams' conversion to suffrage was gradual. By 1892 she was writing to her sister Frances that if women were to accomplish anything, or to think, they must have full citizenship with the ballot.<sup>41</sup> In 1895 at the eightieth birthday celebration

<sup>39</sup>Mabel Newcomer, *A Century of Higher Education for American Women* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1959), 18.

<sup>40</sup>Louise Noun, *Strong-Minded Women* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1969), 263.

<sup>41</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to Frances Newbury Bagley, August 4, 1892, MS 10, 2-1.

for Stanton held at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, Adams acknowledged her deep admiration for Anthony. In a speech which Adams prepared for the event she said, "We breathe freer for our century has Susan B. Anthony who fearlessly broke from traditions which strangle ambition and has heroically taken the initiatory steps for women." With a new perspective, she also described the Galena convention:

. . . They came through storms to Galena, Illinois to hold a convention—the first I had attended. With tenderness, with earnest thought to the *small* but appreciative audience they brought to latent minds *light* from *history* and called upon us to awake to the needs of today and our duty as women to take our place among the sovereign minds in our government as legitimate members and factors in social life. All days have been holier from that day.<sup>42</sup>

The celebration was sponsored by the National Council of Women, a coalition of sixteen national women's organizations, formed to make a unified attack on discrimination against women in the state, the church, and the home. Adams was a member of the council's cabinet, and she had encouraged several national groups of which she was a member to affiliate with the council. Between 3,000 and 6,000 women attended the birthday party to pay homage to Stanton, the equal rights pioneers, the suffrage leaders, and a half dozen men, "Our Knights," who had advocated equality for women.<sup>43</sup> Adams' selection as the speaker to eulogize Anthony, Stanton's closest associate, was a definite indication of the respect this Iowa woman had earned in the suffrage movement.

Adams also took part in another event that brought women together from many parts of the country, the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. Anthony was determined that women would not be ignored as they had been in Philadelphia during the centennial celebration of 1876. She circulated a petition among Washington, D.C. women whose husbands were Supreme Court justices, members of the

<sup>42</sup>A speech by Mary Newbury Adams, undated, MS 10, 3-6.

<sup>43</sup>Program of the Elizabeth Cady Stanton birthday celebration, November 12, 1895, MS 10, 4-3.

cabinet and Congress, and army and navy officers. The signers petitioned Congress to include women as managers of the exposition.<sup>44</sup> As a result, a Board of Lady Managers was established with Mrs. Potter Palmer, a socially prominent Chicago woman, as the chairman. One of the eight board members was Adams' sister, Frances Newbury Bagley, a Detroit civic leader and the wife of a former Michigan governor of considerable wealth. Possibly, for these reasons she was selected as a lady manager, and her more radical views on equal rights were ignored.

Under the board's direction, a woman's building was constructed, and its extensive facilities included an assembly room where women could present papers on many subjects. Women's clubs had exhibits; for the first time it was "possible to see the work which other clubs were undertaking and many clubwomen went back to their home clubs with a new determination to attempt better and more ambitious work than before."<sup>45</sup> The building became a place where women's groups could hold national meetings, ideas could be shared, and the activists could become acquainted. Although some of the board members criticized Palmer for taking the credit, 'the Mrs. Astor of the Middle West' saw to it that the exhibits "illuminated women's emergence as a social and economic force and created sympathy for the handicaps under which they still labored."<sup>46</sup>

Adams recognized the importance of the exposition, and she wrote to Frances requesting a position so she could "stir up the ladies." She proposed a series of programs on the relationship between government and American and European history. She received a coveted appointment as vice chairman of the Women's Committee on Literary Congresses; in addition, she was responsible for a two-day session of the Woman's Branch Section of Historical Literature. She also spoke on *Historical Precedents* at the three-day meeting of the National

<sup>44</sup>Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper, eds., *The History of Woman Suffrage* (Indianapolis, Indiana: The Hollenbeck Press, 1902), 4:233.

<sup>45</sup>Wood, *History of the General Federation of Women's Clubs*, 56.

<sup>46</sup>James et al., *Notable American Women*, 3:9.

American Woman Suffrage Association, sharing the platform with such luminaries as Stanton, May Eliza Wright Sewall, president of the National Council of Women, and Leonora M. Barry-Lake, a labor organizer of women for the Knights of Labor. Adams considered her part in the exposition an opportunity of a lifetime. She wrote Frances, "You and I will not live long after the Exposition, but I want to live through it."<sup>47</sup>

She lived eight years after the fair, traveling extensively, speaking at national meetings, writing, and working on the family genealogy. At the very end she enjoyed her grandchildren who played outside her bedroom window in a specially-constructed playhouse built so she could see them. She died of cancer in February, 1901 in Dubuque. At her funeral the minister, Mary A. Safford, took special notice of her Bible which had been a gift from her father in 1848. The minister noted that on the inside cover Adams had made a list of the important women in the Old and New Testaments. In her Bible in the Book of Esther, Adams wrote, "Courage to open a new way." Unknowingly, she had described herself.

Adams realized that she could only be a forerunner, laying the groundwork for a new generation of women, who, she hoped, would bring about the fuller participation of women in all aspects of American life. She knew she was out of step with the times, but she disregarded the Victorian standards of propriety by her public speaking and her efforts to organize women into a force for change. During a period when women's rights were not considered a serious issue, she helped to keep the ideas alive. Thus she contributed to the gradual public acceptance of women's right to vote, a right which the suffragists believed was a fundamental step in improving the status of women. Yearning for a day when "woman is enabled to take her suitable place in civilization," she worked toward attaining a goal that still has not been realized.

<sup>47</sup>Letter from Mary Newbury Adams to Frances Newbury Bagley, September 26, 1892, MS 10, 2-1.

*Editor's Note: In 1893 Mary Newbury Adams responded to a request from Charles Aldrich, curator of the Historical Department of Iowa, to supply information on the many women's clubs formed in Iowa in the 1880s which she had supported, endorsed, and in some cases helped organize. She subsequently gave the department a collection of letters, charters, programs, and other documents pertaining to state and local women's organizations of the eighties and nineties. This collection is now repositied in the manuscript section of the Iowa State Historical Department, Division of Historical Museum and Archives.*

*Below is Adams' letter to Martha C. Callanan, a charter member of the Des Moines Women's Club, and leader of the suffragist movement in Iowa (from 1876 to 1880 she was president of the Iowa Woman Suffrage Association).*

Dubuque Iowa  
Dec. 15, 1893  
Cosmos Era 893

Mrs. Martha C. Callanan

Dear Madam, Your letter with the request of Hon. Charles Aldrich is received. In reply would say that as this Republic has incorporated the educational and philanthropic institutions with the States, and as these subjects belong peticularly [sic] to woman, she must follow her work with a legal position in the State and Nation. There is a womanhood as well as manhood in Iowa that must have a legitimate membership, to secure the orderly legal expression of the wishes of all the people. For this I have labored and studied since 1868. I remain very sincerely your coworker.

Mary Newbury Adams

*In 1884 Adams began collecting records from several women's clubs in Iowa. In the course of this work she determined that "there are a large number of women studying the same subjects, yet are strangers to one another." She therefore called for the women in the state to "form an Iowa Association for Mental Culture." She outlined her ideas on the importance*

*of women as educators in a letter to the women of Iowa, dated October, 1884.*

The home keepers must solve the question how best to [organize for systematic study and education] in our parlors and club rooms. We are a part of the bureau of State Education by our duties as Mothers. As Mothers and as teachers we are important factors in the civilization of the State. To act wisely we need knowledge to be gained by study. We need to know how to work together and gain exchange of thought, mutual help, information, without wide travel or leaving our State or our town . . .

It is thought that here in our State are the conditions to form an Association educational to the members and in its methods of organizing in unison with our form of government and a method needed in all the states to supplement our school system and tend to the firm establishment of continued education in the homes. The nucleus of the People's University is in our Republic. It is desired that each club in the State send a delegate to co-operate with the undersigned in forming the Association.

*In another letter to the women of Iowa (1884), Adams wrote:*

The object of Iowa women forming an Association for intellectual, social and moral culture is to inform rather than to reform society. . . . While not neglecting the exacting daily duties we desire correct information of what has been the history of civilization with other people and ancient times. In the study of the human race we want to be able to learn how they attempted to adjust governments, arts and religions to control and elevate people. Women are complimentarily called Queens of Society. Women need then to study the history of social life, past and present. . . . This Woman's Association is to inform not reform; it is for gathering knowledge to train the reason, to enlarge and enlighten by study of literature of power to quicken our sympathies and prepare us to more efficiently work in any way our taste, judgment and conscience may lead us.

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