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Female Ancestor Number: 213

Name: Warren, Mercy (Otis)

Dates: (14 Sep 1728 - 19 Oct 1814)

Colonial Society: MA

Date added to ROA: February 14, 2025

Service: Published Author: poet and playwright

Authority: Moses, Montrose J., ed., Representative Plays by American Dramatists, E.P. Dutton & Co., 1918, pp. 211-217.

Biography:

Mercy was the third child of Colonel James Otis (1702–1778) and Mary (Allyne) Otis (1702–1774). The family of 13 children grew up in Barnstable, Massachusetts. Her mother descended from *Mayflower* passenger Edward Doty and her father was a farmer and attorney, and a judge for the Barnstable County Court of Common Pleas. He also served in the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1745 and was an outspoken opponent of British rule and the appointed colonial governor at the time, Thomas Hutchinson.

It is easy to see that the Otis children were "raised in the midst of revolutionary ideals". While having no formal education herself Mercy studied with the Reverend Jonathan Russell while he tutored her brothers. Her father fully supported her education, an extremely unconventional view for the 18th century. Mercy's brother James attended Harvard College and became a noted patriot and lawyer. The surviving correspondence between brother and sister suggests that James encouraged Mercy's academic and literary efforts, treating her as an intellectual equal and confidante.

Mercy married James Warren on November 14, 1754 settling in Plymouth where James inherited his father's position as sheriff. From their correspondence, it appears their marriage was one of mutual love and admiration. They had five sons together, James, Winslow, Charles, Henry, and George. James had a distinguished political career including as a member of The Massachusetts House of Representatives, speaker of the House and president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress. And for a time, he also served as paymaster to George Washington's army during the American Revolutionary War.

It is easy to see why their home was a meeting place for local politics and political debates including revolutionaries like the Sons of Liberty. Mercy was drawn into the intrigue of political activism and hosted protest meetings in her home. These meetings laid the foundation for the Committees of



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Correspondence. Warren wrote, "Perhaps no single step contributed so much to cement the union of the colonies, and the final acquisition of independence, as the establishment of committees of correspondence." Another quote of hers "Every domestic enjoyment depends on the unimpaired possession of civil and religious liberty" exemplifies the depth of her devotion to the cause of liberty. Mercy became her husband's chief correspondent and sounding board.

The Otis family's political activism connected them with other revolutionaries throughout the country and Mercy regularly advised and corresponded with political leaders including George Washington, Abigail and John Adams, Samuel Adams, Hannah Winthrop, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson and other prominent patriots. John Adams became her literary mentor before the Revolution, a relationship that continued until their deaths.

Her first published satire in 1772 "*The Adulator*" was published anonymously in the *Massachusetts Spy* newspaper. Two additional plays continued to criticize British colonial leaders, *Defeat* (1773) and *The Group* (1775.) Mercy's career did not end with the American Revolution, as she continued to publish plays, poems, and histories. Mercy's patriotic writings were extremely influential and inspired others to become Patriots in support of the rebellion. She was congratulated by numerous prominent men of the age, including George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, who remarked, "In the career of dramatic composition at least, female genius in the United States has outstripped the male".

Mercy died on October 19, 1814, at the age of 86, six years after her husband died in 1808. She is buried at Burial Hill, Plymouth, Massachusetts.

The importance of Mercy Otis Warren in American Revolutionary history is supported by honors bestowed upon her after her death. The SS *Mercy Warren*, a World War II Liberty ship launched in 1943, was named in her honor. In 2002, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls, New York. She is remembered on the Boston Women's Heritage Trail.