Questions to think about:

1. Based on what you have learned in *Through Women's Eyes* and/or *First Generations* about women in colonial America in the 1600s and 1700s, how representative is Abigail Abbot Bailey of women in England’s American colonies during this period?

2. Given the laws and customs of the era, did Abigail Abbot Bailey act as assertively as she could in dealing with her husband’s transgressions?

3. What role did religion play in Bailey’s life, and how did it influence the way she responded to her domestic situation?

4. What similarities or differences do you see between the situation of the Bailey family and current examples of domestic violence and abuse?

Excerpt from the Memoirs of Abigail Abbot Bailey

Memoirs of Mrs. Abigail Bailey, originally published in 1815, is the first American autobiography detailing family violence and abuse. Abigail Abbot Bailey (1746–1815), a profoundly religious woman after her conversion to Christianity at the age of eighteen, claimed that “God gave me a heart to resolve never to be obstinate, or disobedient to my husband; but to be always kind, obedient, and obliging in all things not contrary to the word of God.” However, her marriage to Asa Bailey, which lasted twenty-six years and included the birth of seventeen children, continuously and severely tested this belief. Within a month of the wedding, Asa began physically abusing Abigail so that at times she feared “that he wanted to kill” her. Then within three years he had committed adultery with a servant. A few years later he attempted to rape another servant girl but was repulsed and brought into court, only to be released for lack of evidence. After Asa committed incest with their sixteen-year-old daughter, Abigail finally began a painful effort to end the marriage. Seeking to avoid the attendant division of property, Asa persuaded Abigail to accompany him to upstate New York, where he abandoned her far from her family, church friends, and their children. She made a tortuous journey alone back to their home in New Hampshire. Then her brothers accompanied her to a justice of the peace, enabling her to have Asa arrested and forcing him into a property settlement and an uncontested “bill of divorce.”

Bailey based her Memoirs in part on the diaries she kept throughout much of her marriage, writings largely given over to religious devotions and musings. The minister who edited the manuscript recommended it to “the intelligent reader” who would find “strikingly exhibited” there “the dreadful depravity of fallen man; the abomination of intrigue and deceit; the horrid cruelty, of which man is capable; the hardness of the way of transgressors; . . . and the wisdom of God in turning headlong the devices of the crafty.” The modern reader will note as well how difficult it was for a woman of the late eighteenth century to achieve any control over a dreadful situation. As Ann Taves, a modern scholar of the Memoirs, writes: “Given the difficulty of obtaining a divorce in practice, if not in theory, in late-eighteenth-century New Hampshire, it is perhaps more surprising that Abigail extricated herself from her marriage at all than that it took her four and a half years to do so.”

Excerpt and introduction as printed in Robert D. Marcus *et al., America Firsthand*, Vol. 1, 8th edn (Boston 2010), pp. 50–57.)
I Abigail Bailey (daughter of Deacon James Abbot of Newbury, Coos, who moved thither from Concord, N.H. A.D. 1763) do now undertake to record some of the dealings of the allwise God with me, in events, which I am sure I ought solemnly to remember, as long as I live.

I shall first, in few words, record the merciful dealings of my heavenly Father, in casting my lot, not only under the gospel, but in a family, where I was ever treated with the greatest kindness by my tender parents; and particularly with the most religious attention from my very pious mother; and where I was ever treated with the greatest tenderness by my brothers and sisters. I can truly say, it was seldom that an angry word was ever spoken in my father's family — by parents, brothers, or sisters — against me, from my infancy, and during my continuance in my father's house. So that I passed the morning of my days in peace and contentment.

I was married to Asa Bailey, just after having entered the 22nd year of my age. I now left my dear parents; — hoping to find in my husband a true hearted and constant friend. My desires and hopes were, that we might live together in peace and friendship; seeking each other's true happiness till death. I did earnestly look to God for his blessing upon this solemn undertaking; — sensible, that "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it." As, while I lived with my parents, I esteemed it my happiness to be in subjection to them; so now I thought it must be a still greater benefit to be under the aid of a judicious companion, who would rule well his own house. . . .

Relative to my new companion, though I had found no evidence that he was a subject of true religion; yet I did hope and expect, from my acquaintance with him, that he would wish for good regulations in his family, and would have its external order accord with the word of God. But I met with sore disappointment, — I soon found that my new friend was naturally of a hard, uneven, rash temper; and was capable of being very unreasonable. My conviction of this was indeed grievous, and caused me many a sorrowful hour. For such were my feelings and habits, that I knew not how to endure a hard word, or a frowning look from any one; much less from a companion. I now began to learn, with trembling, that it was the sovereign pleasure of the allwise God to try me with afflictions in that relation, from which I had hoped to receive the greatest of my earthly comforts. I had placed my highest worldly happiness in the love, tenderness, and peace of relatives and friends. But before one month, from my marriage day, had passed, I learned that I must expect hard and cruel treatment in my new habituation, and from my new friend. . . .

I think God gave me a heart to resolve never to be obstinate, or disobedient to my husband; but to be always kind, obedient, and obliging in all things not contrary to the word of God. I thought if Mr. B. were sometimes unreasonable, I would be reasonable, and would rather suffer wrong than do wrong. And as I hoped Mr. B. would kindly overlook my infirmities and failings, with which I was conscious I should abound; so I felt a forgiving spirit towards him. Many times his treatment would grieve my heart. But I never was suffered to my knowledge, to return any wickedness in my conduct towards him; nor ever to indulge a revengeful feeling or ill will. For some years I thought his repeated instances of hard treatment of me arose, — not from any settled ill will, or real want of kind affection toward me; — but from the usual depravity of the human heart; and from a want of self-government. I still confided in him, as my real friend, and loved him with increasing affection. . . .

[Her husband is on two occasions unfaithful with servants. He repents both times, but her confidence in him has been eroded.]

Now, alas! Must begin the sad detail of events, the most distressing; and which awfully verified my most fearful apprehensions; and convinced me, that all my trials of life hitherto, were as nothing. . . .

[Her husband concocts a pretext to go away for a lengthy period with a teenage daughter.]

But alas! Words fail to set forth the things which followed! All this pretended plan was but a specious cover to infernal designs. . . .

I have already related that Mr. B. said he would take one of our sons, and one daughter, to wait on him in his distant tour, before he would take all the family. After he had talked of this for a few days, he said he had altered his plan; he would leave his son, and take only his daughter: he would hire what men's help he needed: his daughter must go and cook for him. He now commenced a new series of conduct in relation to this daughter, whom he selected to go with him, in order (as he pretended) to render himself pleasing and familiar to her; so that she might be willing to go with him, and feel happy: for though, as a father, he had a right to command her to go, yet (he said) he would so conduct toward her, as to make her cheerful and well pleased to go with him. A great part of the time he now spent in the room where she was spinning; and seemed shy of me, and of the rest of the family. He seemed to have forgotten his age, his honor, and all decency, as well as all virtue. He would spend his time with this daughter, in telling idle stories, and foolish riddles, and singing songs to her, and sometimes before the small children, when they were in that room. He
thus pursued a course of conduct, which had the most direct tendency to corrupt young and tender minds, and lead them the greatest distance from every serious subject. He would try to make his daughter tell stories with him; wishing to make her free and sociable, and to erase from her mind all that fear and reserve, which he had ever taught his children to feel toward him. He had ever been sovereign, severe and hard with his children, and they stood in the greatest fear of him. His whole conduct, toward this daughter especially, was now changed, and became most disagreeable.

For a considerable time I was wholly at a loss what to think of his conduct, or what his wish or intentions could be. Had such conduct appeared toward any young woman beside his own young daughter, I should have had no question what he intended: but as it now was, I was loath to indulge the least suspicion of base design. His daily conduct forced a conviction upon my alarmed and tortured mind, that his designs were the most vile. All his tender affections were withdrawn from the wife of his youth, the mother of his children. My room was deserted, and left lonely. His care for the rest of his family seemed abandoned, as well as all his attention to his large circle of worldly business. Every thing must lie neglected, while this one daughter engrossed all his attention.

Though all the conduct of Mr. B. from day to day, seemed to demonstrate to my apprehension, that he was determined, and was continually plotting, to ruin this poor young daughter, yet it was so intolerably crossing to every feeling of my soul to admit such a thought, that I strove with all my might to banish it from my mind, and to disbelieve the possibility of such a thing. . . . And such were my infirmities, weakness and fears, (my circumstances being very difficult) that I did not dare to hint any thing of my fears to him, or to any creature. This may to some appear strange; but with me it was then a reality. I labored to divert his mind from his follies, and to turn his attention to things of the greatest importance. But I had the mortification to find that my endeavors were unsuccessful.

I soon perceived that his strange conduct toward this daughter was to her very disagreeable. And she shewed as much unwillingness to be in the room with him, as she dared. I often saw her cheeks bedewed with tears, on account of his new and astonishing behaviour. But as his will had ever been the law of the family, she saw no way to deliver herself from her cruel father. Such were her fears of him, that she did not dare to talk with me, or any other person, upon her situation: for he was exceedingly jealous of my conversing with her, and cautioning her. If I ever dropped words, which I hoped would put her upon her guard, or inquired the cause of her troubles, or what business her father had so much with her; if I was ever so cautious, he would find it out, and be very angry. He watched her and me most narrowly; and by his subtle questions with her, he would find out what I had said, during his absence. He would make her think I had informed him what I had said, and then would be very angry with me; so that at times I feared for my life. I queried with myself which way I could turn. How could I caution a young daughter in such a case? My thoughts flew to God for relief, that the Father of mercies would protect a poor helpless creature marked out for a prey; and turn the heart of a cruel father from every wicked purpose. . . .

The black cloud, rising like a storm of hail, had rolled on, and had gathered over my head. I clearly saw that Mr. B. entertained the most vile intentions relative to his own daughter. Whatever difficulty attended the obtaining of legal proof, yet no remaining doubt existed in my mind, relative to the existence of his wickedness: and I had no doubt remaining of the violence, which he had used; and that hence arose his rage against her. It must have drawn tears of anguish from the eyes of the hardest mortals, to see the barbarous corrections, which he, from time to time, inflicted on this poor young creature; and for no just cause. Sometimes he corrected her with a rod; and sometimes with a beach stick, large enough for the driving of a team; and with such sternness and anger sparkling in his eyes, that his visage seemed to resemble an infernal; declaring, that if she attempted to run from him again, she should never want but one correction more; for he would whip her to death! This his conduct could be for no common disobedience; for she had ever been most obedient to him in all lawful commands. It seemed as though the poor girl must now be destroyed under his furious hand. She was abashed, and could look no one in the face. . . .

None can describe the anguish of my heart on the beholding of such scenes. How pitiﬁable must be the case of a poor young female, to be subjected to such barbarous treatment by her own father; so that she knew of no way of redress!

It may appear surprising that such wickedness was not checked by legal restraints. But great difﬁculties attend in such a case. While I was fully convinced of the wickedness, yet I knew not that I could make legal proof. I could not prevail upon this daughter to make known to me her troubles; or to testify against the author of them. Fear, shame, youthful inexperience, and the terrible peculiarities of her case, all conspired to close her mouth against affording me, or any one, proper information. My soul was moved with pity for her wretched case; and yet I cannot say I did not feel a degree of resentment; that she would not, as she ought, expose the wickedness of her father, that she might be relieved from him, and he brought to due punishment. But no doubt his intrigues, insinuations, commands, threats, and parental inﬂuence, led her to feel that it was in vain for her to seek redress.

My circumstances, and peculiar bodily infirmities [pregnancy], at that time, were such as to entitle a woman to the tenderest affection and sympathies of a companion. On this account, and as Mr. B. was exceeding stern, and angry with me for entertaining hard thoughts of him, I felt unable to do any thing more for the relief of my poor daughter. My hope in God was my only support. And I did abundantly and earnestly commit my cause to him. I felt conﬁdent that he would, in his own time, and as his inﬁnite wisdom should determine, grant relief. . . .

. . . I took an opportunity with Mr. B. alone to have solemn conversation. My health being now restored, I thought it high time, and had determined, to adopt a new mode of treatment with Mr. B. I calmly introduced the subject, and told him, plainly and solemnly, all my views of his wicked conduct, in which he had long lived with his daughter. He fell into a passion, was high, and seemed to imagine, he could at once frighten me out of my object. But I was carried equally above fear, and above temper. Of this I soon convinced him, I let him know, that the business I now had taken in hand was of too serious a nature, and
too interesting, to be thus disposed of, or dismissed with a few angry words. I
told him I should no longer be turned off in this manner; but should pursue my
object with firmness, and with whatever wisdom and ability God might give me;
and that God would plead my cause, and prosper my present undertaking, as he
should see best. I reminded Mr. B. of my long and unusually distressing illness;
how he had treated me in it; how wicked and cruel he had been to the wife of
his youth; how unable I had been to check him in that awful wickedness, which
I knew he had pursued; that all my inexpressible griefs and solemn entreaties
had been by him trampled under foot.

I therefore had not known what to do better than to wait on God as I had
done, to afford me strength and opportunity to introduce the means of his ef-
ficent control. This time I told him had arrived. And now, if God spared my
life, (I told Mr. B.) he should find a new leaf turned over;—and that I would
not suffer him to go on any longer as he had done. I would now soon adopt
measures to put a stop to his abominable wickedness and cruelties. For this
could and ought to be done. And if I did it not, I should be a partaker of his
sins, and should aid in bringing down the curse of God upon our family.

By this time Mr. B. had become silent. He appeared struck with some de-
gree of fear. He, by and by, asked me what I intended or expected to do, to
bring about such a revolution as I had intimated? whether I knew what an awful
crime I had laid to his charge? which he said could not be proved. He wished to
know whether I had considered how difficult it would be for me to do any such
thing against him? as I was under his legal control; and he could overrule all my
plans as he pleased. I told him, I well knew I had been placed under his lawful
government and authority, and likewise under his care and protection. And
most delightful it would have been to me, to have been able quietly and safely
to remain there as long as I lived. Glady would I have remained a kind faithful,
obedient wife to him, as I had ever been. But I told Mr. B. he knew he had vio-
lated his marriage covenant; and hence had forfeited all legal and just right and
authority over me; and I should convince him that I well knew it. I told him I
was not in any passion. I acted on principle, and from long and mature consid-
eration. And though it had ever been my greatest care and pleasure (among my
earthly comforts) to obey and please him; yet by his most wicked and cruel con-
duct, he had compelled me to undertake this most undesirable business—of
stopping him in his mad career; and that I now felt strength, courage and zeal
to pursue my resolution. And if my life was spared, he would find that I should
bring something to pass, and probably more than he now apprehended.

As to what I could prove against him I told Mr. B. he knew not how much
evidence I had of his unnatural crimes, of which I had accused him, and of which
he knew he was guilty. I asked him why he should not expect that I should institute
a process against him, for that most horrid conduct, which he had long allowed
himself to pursue, and with the most indecent and astounding boldness?
I told him I well knew that he was naturally a man of sense; and that his
conscience now fully approved of my conduct.

Mr. B. seeing me thus bold and determinate, soon changed his countenance
and conduct. He appeared panic-struck; and he soon became mild, sociable and

pleasant. He now made an attempt, with all his usual subtlety, and flatteries to
induce me to relinquish my design. He pretended to deny the charge of incest.
But I told him I had no confidence in his denial of it; it was therefore in vain!
Upon this he said, he really did not blame, or think hard of me, for believing
him guilty of this sin. He said, he knew he had behaved foolishly; and had given
me full reason to be jealous of him; and he repeated that he did not at all think
hard of me for entertaining the views which I had of him. He then took the
Bible, and said, he would lay his hand on it, and sworn that he was not guilty of
the crime laid to his charge. Knowing what I did, I was surprised and disgusted
at this impious attempt. I stepped towards him, and in a resolute and solemn
manner begged of him to forbear! assuring him, that such an oath could not
undo or alter real facts, of which he was conscious. And this proceeding, I as-
sumed him, would be so far from giving me any satisfaction, that it would greatly
increase the distress of my soul for him in his wickedness. Upon this he forbore,
and laid his Bible aside.

Mr. B. now said, he was very sorry he had given me so much reason to
think such things of him; and that he had so far destroyed my confidence in him
as a man of truth. He then begged of me to forgive all that was past; and he
promised that he would ever be kind and faithful to me in future, and never
more give me reason to complain of him for any such conduct. I told him, if I
had but evidence of his real reformation, I could readily forgive him as a fellow
creature, and could plead with God to forgive him. But as to my living with him
in the most tender relation any longer, after such horrid crimes, I did not see
that I could, or ought to do it! He then anxiously made some remarks upon the
consequences of my refusing to remain his wife, and seeking a separation from
him. These he seemed unable to endure. I remarked, that I well knew it was no
small thing for a husband and wife to part, and their family of children to be bro-
ken up; that such a separation could not be rendered expedient or lawful, with-
out great sin indeed: and that I would not be the cause of it, and of breaking up
our family, for all the world. But, said I, you have done all in your power to bring
about such a separation, and to ruin and destroy our family. And I meet it as my
duty now to do all in my power to save them from further destruction...

But God, in his infinite wisdom, did not see fit that my peculiar trials
should end thus. A long and most insupportable series of afflictions still awaited
me, to be occasioned by this most pernicious of men.

I again clearly perceived that the same wicked passions, as before, were in
operation in Mr. B.'s heart. Alas, ‘Can the Ethiopian change his skin?’ Upon
a certain sabbath, I went to meeting. Mr. B. did not go. Before I reached home
at night, I met with evidence, which convinced me, that the same horrid conduct
had on this holy day been repeated in my family! I rode up to the door. Mr. B.
stood waiting for me. He seemed very kind, and was coming to take me ten-
derly from my horse. I leaped from my saddle, before he had opportunity to
reach me. My heart was disgusted at the proffer of his deceitful help. I said
nothing upon the dreadful subject this day. Some broken stories of the children
corroborated the information I had received. But Mr. B. probably pleased him-
self with the idea that all was concealed, and he was safe.

HIST 150

Dr. Schaffer
The next day, I took him alone, and told him of what he had again been guilty, even after all his vows, and fair promises of fidelity. He started, and seemed very angry, that I should think such a thing [of] him. I told him I charged him only with facts; and hence I was not worthy of his censure! He asked how I knew any such thing? I replied, that the thing was true; and he knew it! And I felt myself under no obligations to inform him how I came by the knowledge of it. . . .

I told him he had truly been a wonder to me[,] I had looked upon him with astonishment. He was naturally, I added, a man of sense; he was a man of much knowledge;—had acquired property; and had been a man of considerable note. And that he should thus degrade and ruin himself, soul and body, and destroy a large promising family, as he had done, it was indeed most astonishing! I reminded him that he had been much in good company; and many gentlemen had honored him with their friendly attention. I asked, if any sum of money would induce him to be willing that those gentlemen should know that of him, which I knew? And, that though he seemed to be too willing to throw himself away, as though he were of no worth, I assured him, I did yet set something more by myself, than to be viewed as capable of conniving at such detestable conduct.

Mr. B. replied, that if I had made up my mind no longer to live with him, I need not be at any trouble to obtain a legal separation. For he would depart to some distant country, where I should be troubled with him no more. I remarked, that when Abraham's wife was dead, he wished, however well he had loved her, to have her now buried out of his sight. And, though I could by no means compare him to the pious Sarah; yet, if true virtue and friendship in my husband were dead, I did truly wish him to be removed from my sight. And that true virtue and friendship were indeed dead in him, I thought I had the most melancholy and incontestable evidence.

Our unhappy daughter now became eighteen years of age, and thus legally free from her father. She immediately left us, and returned no more. As she was going, I had solemn conversation with her relative to her father's conduct. She gave me to understand that it had been most abominable. But I could not induce her to consent to become an evidence against him. I plead with her the honor and safety of our family; the safety of her young sisters; and her own duty; but she appeared overwhelmed with shame and grief; and nothing effectual could yet be done.

I hence saw, that in relation to commencing a legal process, God's time seemed not yet to have arrived. I must still wait and look to him to open the path of my duty.