Jemima’s Pewter
By Wilma Heckenlaible Spice

The year was 1760, and Jemima Devotion—daughter of the Reverend Mr. Ebenezer Devotion and Naomi Taylor Devotion—was getting married. She was about to marry the Reverend Mr. Adonijah Bidwell, pastor of the Congregational Church in Tyringham (now Monterey), Massachusetts.

Like any bride-to-be, she was collecting things she would need as a wife—in this particular case, as the wife of the town pastor, an important member of the community. As the daughter of a pastor, she well knew that she would need to entertain not only church members but also town officials and visiting dignitaries. She would need to demonstrate that she and her husband recognized the importance of their visitors.

Common tableware would not do. So among other things, Jemima chose some beautiful pewter ware, the best that could be had. It was made by Samuel Jefferys in the Holborn district of London, England, and was stamped with Jemima’s initials, “I D”. Brand-new, it was almost as shiny as silver. Jemima surely must have been proud to serve her guests with such fine tableware.

The year is 2020, almost 260 years since Jemima’s marriage. Where is Jemima’s beautiful pewter now? Most of it is scattered to the four winds. Jemima and Adonijah had two sons and two daughters, and one can assume that the pewter ware might have been divided amongst the children. We don’t know.

However, at least three pieces of that beautiful pewter ware came into the hands of Jemima’s younger daughter, Theodosia Bidwell Brewer, who took loving care of the porringer and its matching plate along with a 13-inch platter, all with the “I D” initials on them. In due time, those three pieces—alongside another larger platter which probably came from Jemima’s mother—were passed down the Brewer line to Jemima’s grandson Josiah, her great-grandson Fisk, her 2nd great-grandson William, her 3rd great-granddaughter Helen Brewer Heckenlaible, and to me, Jemima’s 4th great-granddaughter, way out in California.

Those four pieces are items I have admired since I was a child. But our family has agreed that that perhaps it is time for those pewter pieces to “come home,” back to the Bidwell House Museum in Massachusetts, where they first began their service so many years ago. So I have sent them back home. I think that Jemima would be pleased.

The Bidwell House Museum is so grateful for the gift of these pewter pieces, which will be prominently displayed during the 2020 season. Thank you Wilma!

The Bidwell House Museum has a Joyous 2019!

The house has been put to bed for the winter and the first floor artifacts put away as we begin the final phase of restoration and accessibility improvements that began in 2016. When the Museum opens back up in May visitors will find an improved restroom and a new floor in the carriage barn, increasing accessibility Museum for everyone who wishes to visit.

Due to the support of our many patrons, donors and program attendees, the Museum had an outstanding 2019 season! Visitors from as far as England and California toured the house and gardens, attended the ever popular history talk series and came out in record numbers to enjoy July’s Bidwell Country Fair. Music was plentiful this year starting with the wonderful Diane Taraz at our opening party, local favorite Lucky 5 at our Open-Mic Music Fest and Eric Martin and Diane Axelrod, whose lovely melodies charmed the guests at our summer party in August. The verdant gardens and hiking trails drew numerous visitors all summer long and well into the fall, even after the snow began in November.

In 2020 the Museum is so delighted to celebrate its 30th anniversary. Jack Hargis and David Brush had a
dream, and in 1990, through their generosity and decades of painstaking effort, that dream became a reality. The Bidwell House Museum opened its doors to share the story of Adonijah Bidwell and his family and through them, the story of life in the 18th century Berkshire Hills. Since its opening, the Museum has welcomed thousands of people, young and old, to the bucolic property and restored home, its remote forested setting a perfect backdrop to imagine life 300 years ago. The 30th anniversary is traditionally, the “Pearl” anniversary, which seems a fitting symbol to celebrate the 30th year of this “hidden gem” in the Monterey woods.

Thank you for your support and here is to 30 more years!

A Housatonic Heritage walk begins on a late September morning

Magnificent fall colors at the Museum in October

Beautiful cornucopia designed for the fall party by Paula Gimlette

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Our Mission

The Bidwell House Museum is a New England heritage site providing a personal encounter with history, early American home life, and the Berkshire landscape through its land, house and collection. The Museum is a non-profit educational institution for the benefit of the community and today’s audiences of all ages, dedicated to preservation, scholarship and enjoyment of the landmark site.
Object of the Month

In 2019 the Museum began a monthly series to highlight the treasures in the Museum collection on social media and through the e-newsletter. It has proven to be so popular that the series will continue in 2020. Here is a look at three of the most popular posts.

In January we shared a curious tin candlestick that was collected by the founders of the Museum, Jack Hargis and David Brush, in 1962. Simple candlesticks such as this one would have been common in Reverend Biwdwell’s household in the 1760s. The secret of the candlestick is in its storage container, hidden under the lid. The container holds a number of interesting artifacts, including: a metal oval, likely used for creating a spark when a flint was hit against it; thin pieces of birch bark, used as kindling for fires; soft pieces of leather, oilcloth, and cotton fabrics, perhaps used as wicks for oil burning lamps; and small stones used to create sparks to light the candle.

In May we showcased an interesting object located in the Master Bedroom called a food or “pap” warmer (semi-liquid food was also called “pap”). In France it was called a “veilleuse” or night light. It was meant to keep soup or tea warm on a bedside table if someone was bedridden or ill. There are four parts to the food warmer in the Bidwell House Collection: a hollow pedestal, a bowl, a cover with a candleholder on top, and a small burner cup to hold oil. It is made of earthenware with a tin-glaze in a blue floral pattern. These food warmers were introduced in England in the 18th century. The well-to-do Bidwell family would have known about this fashionable item, and perhaps even acquired it from Adonijah’s father who was a wealthy merchant in Connecticut.

The most popular post in this series was one we shared in June regarding the portrait of Mary Gray Bidwell (1764-1808), who was the second wife of Barnabas Bidwell (1763-1833), son of Adonijah Bidwell Sr. who built the Bidwell House around 1760. In a letter to her husband in late 1794 or early 1795, Pamela Dwight Sedgwick (Mary’s second cousin) was ecstatic her husband had employed a “limner” to provide family portraits. As she considered her husband’s proposition she noted that “Mrs. Grays likeness is taken and said to be a very good one.” This portrait was perhaps done to commemorate the marriage of Mary to Barnabas in 1793. The “limner” employed was from Connecticut, an artist named Joseph Steward. Limner is another name for a portrait artist. These men were usually itinerant tradesmen and made their living traveling from town to town and taking commissions from wealthy families who wished to capture their likenesses for eternity. You can see this portrait in the Parlor when you visit during the 2020 season!
Take A Look At Our 2019 Season

A Mama deer and her fawn nibble on the grass near the parking area in May.

The Lucky 5 plays at the Open-Mic Must Festival in late June.

The winners of the Bidwell Country Fair Pie Baking contest.

The Butler’s Rangers reenactors chat with a young visitor at the Bidwell Country Fair.

Intern Elisabeth Enoch and volunteer Cat Kowalski paint faces at the Bidwell Country Fair.

Brad Morse from Uncarved Block did a great hands-on timber framing demo during the Bidwell Country Fair.

Gardener Ruth Green leads a group from the Lenox Garden Club on a garden tour in July. In 2018 the LGC generously funded the garden beds around the new accessible entrance to the Museum.

Dennis Picard tells the story of Shays Rebellion during his July 13th History talk.
Board Member Delight Dodyk, Board President Rob Hoogs and Board Member Richard Greene enjoy the Woodstock themed summer party on August 3.

Former Bidwell Director Barbara Palmer, Board Member Linnea Grealish, Board Member Jane Johnson and guest Judy Stein enjoy the summer party before the rains began.

Late summer blooms in the glorious gardens.

Dale Abrams from Mass Audubon leads the walk “From Bedrock to Birds” on the Bidwell Property in September.

Summer Interns Trudy Fadding and Marya Makuc help check-in guests at the August 3 party.

Board Member and volunteer Richard Greene gets ready to work on the trails in September.

Summer party honoree John Demos gives an impassioned and eloquent speech on the importance of history.

Docent Dan Brown leads tours of the house for the Decorative Arts Trust in the early fall.
Welcome New Board Members!

In 2019 the Bidwell House Museum was delighted to add three new members to the Board of Trustees, Martin Schwartz, Jane Johnson and Elaine Lynch. The Museum is lucky to have a very engaged and enthusiastic Board and below, in their own words, each new Board Member will tell you a little bit about themselves:

Martin Schwartz
The Bidwell House is my neighbor and I have watched it grow to be an integral part of Monterey and wanted to be a part of their future. I had the opportunity to work in the business and not for profit worlds; having been Vice President for Engineering for United Parcel Service and the first Executive Director of the Anne Casey Foundation. Hopefully these experiences will be helpful to the growth of the Bidwell House.

Jane Johnson
I grew up in the Pioneer Valley with an appreciation for New England history, old homes and antiques. Visits to Historic Deerfield, Hancock Shaker Village and other historic properties inspired me to study American art and architecture at Mount Holyoke College and to pursue work in historic preservation and arts management. My husband and I have owned several antique homes and appreciate the challenges and pleasures of preserving history. I was delighted to discover the Bidwell House after buying a second home in Monterey and look forward to working with the board and Bidwell’s many friends to support this special place.

Elaine Lynch
My husband Dennis and I have been coming to Monterey since 2004. Now that we have retired and live here full time, we have both wished to become more involved with the community. I have gravitated to volunteering at our town’s Library, Community Center, and the Bidwell House Museum. I have enjoyed being a docent and a volunteer at the museum and as a former teacher, I so value the educational and historical significance of preserving the Bidwell House Museum. It’s important to share the history and beauty of the museum with our current and future generations. Becoming a member of the Board will help me contribute toward that goal.

High and College School Students: Museum Offers Internships

Thanks to several generous private donors, the Museum will offer stipended internships in the summer of 2020. To learn more and apply contact the Museum at bidwellhouse@gmail.com or check the website in the spring.

Application Deadline: May 1, 2020.
Film Shoot at the Museum

In October, independent filmmaker Dennis Donovan began work on a passion project, a short film titled “Rumors of War,” set in 18th century Massachusetts. In researching locations for the film he came across the Bidwell House Museum and thought it would be the perfect background for one of the scenes and so on October 6 he spent a half day filming in the field below the museum. We are hoping to screen the film when it is completed in 2020, but in the meantime you can see a still shot below with the Museum in the background.

Thank you 2019 Volunteers!

A heartfelt thank you to the numerous helpers who so generously volunteered their time throughout the year! From planning parties to reaching out to donors or helping at our many events, the Bidwell House Museum would not be able to do so many wonderful programs without these dedicated friends:

Steve Adams, Brian Andreoli, Diane Austin and Aaron Nurick, Maureen and Michael Banner, Maggie and Don Barkin, JoAnn Bell and Doug McTavish, John and Virginia Demos, Delight and Paul Dodyk, Walter and Mary Jo Engels, L. Chapin and Kevin Fish, Charles and Joy Flint, Greg and Paula Gimblette, Christine and Ron Goldfinger, Linnea and Peter Grealish, Ruth Green, Dr. Richard Greene, Sam Herrup, Ken and Mimi Heyman, Cory Hines, Rob and Cindy Hoogs, Jane Johnson, Nancy Jones and Gil Schrank, Frank and Julie Kern, Dennis and Elaine Lynch, Paula Leuchs Moats, Kathryn and Marc Roberts, Tom Ryan and Katherine Waiveris, Linda Saul-Sena and Mark Sena, Jane and Marty Schwartz, Steve Seiser, Elizabeth Fletcher Walden, Rick Wilcox and Joyce Butler.

*If we have forgotten anyone, don’t blame the museum, blame the fallible staff!