

*Portrait of Mary Gray Bidwell (1764-1808 by Joseph Steward (1753-1822), c. 1793.*  
Oil on Canvas. Gift of John and Judy Herdeg. Acc# 2014.001.

## Part I

If you have been following our Bidwell Lore series, you have come to know Mary Gray Bidwell. If you are not familiar with the series, you can check it out here to learn more about Mary and the entire Bidwell family: <https://www.bidwellhousemuseum.org/blog/>. Her image has appeared in several of the entries, written by Bidwell descendent Richard Bidwell Wilcox, and you might have seen the portrait up close when visiting the Museum. In discussing Mary's image in relation to her letters, Wilcox says, "It was a pilgrimage to the Bidwell House Museum where I sat with Mary Gray Bidwell and I thought how wonderfully the artist had captured her essence.... Drawn to the painting and reminded of the adage 'the eyes are the windows to the soul,' I drank in a woman who begged to tell her own story." Mary herself is a fascinating character, and her portrait itself has a story as well. This is part one of a three part series in which we will explore this painting.

The portrait, painted by itinerant painter Joseph Steward (1753-1822), was completed about 1793, the year in which Mary Gray Bidwell (1764-1808) and Barnabas Bidwell (1763-1833) were married. Her portrait does not stand alone: we have a portrait of her mother, Sarah Spring Gray (1737-1809), in our collection, and a portrait of her husband Barnabas was last known to be in a private collection.

This particular painting came to us in 2014 from John and Judy Herdeg, avid collectors of early American work and friends of the Museum. They first saw the painting in 1986 at the booth of a dealer who, rather coincidentally, later became a board member at the Bidwell House Museum: Sam Herrup. After some thought and consideration, they purchased the piece from Herrup a few months later. The Herdegs spent an amount of time researching the painting, and determined the correct artist after several other theories. Herrup was able to acquire early cabinet cards depicting all three of the paintings, with the identity of the sitters clearly written on the reverse.

The portrait of her mother, Sarah Spring Gray, was donated two decades earlier in 1990 by Bidwell descendent Ann Cochrane, and had actually previously been thought to be of Mary herself. This was later disproven due to the age of the sitter: Mary died at the age of 44, and the portrait of Sarah depicts someone of a slightly more advanced age. The early photos of the paintings also noted the identity of the sitters.

The set of cabinet cards depicting the three paintings – Mary, Sarah, and Barnabas – are also in our collection, acquired by the donors from Herrup, the dealer from whom they also bought the painting. Mary’s and Sarah’s are marked as being taken by the Wheeler studio, while Barnabas is by Nowell, both of Pittsfield, MA, sometime in the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century. We know that Sarah’s portrait was passed down through the Bidwell family, though less is known about the history of the paintings of Mary and Barnabas. Perhaps this set of cards implies that they were all in the possession of a Bidwell descendent at this point in time. One thing that can be seen in this image is a difference in surface texture as reflected by the light – it is thought that the painting underwent a cleaning and restoration in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Also around this time, though prior to the photographs, was a change in shape: the painting had originally been painted on a rectangular canvas, and was cut down to the oval shape we see today.

In the next installment, we will look at the painter, Joseph Steward, and the creation of the portrait.

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Heslip, Colleen Cowles, *Between the Rivers: Itinerant Painters from Connecticut to the Hudson*. Willamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1990. 34-35.

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Extensive notes provided by John and Judy Herdeg.