

*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 II

Welcome to the second installment of our exploration of the portrait of Mary Gray Bidwell. If you have been following our Bidwell Lore series, you have come to know both Mary and her husband, Barnabas, and you can learn more about Mary and the entire Bidwell family here: <https://www.bidwellhousemuseum.org/blog/>. In the last installment, we discussed how the portrait came to be in our collection, and this week, we'll talk a little about the creation of the piece.

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 is in a private collection of a descendent in New Hampshire.

Joseph Steward, the artist of the portrait grouping, was born in Upton, Massachusetts, attended Dartmouth College, and then studied for the ministry in Connecticut. However, poor health prevented him from taking full command of the parish assigned to him, and he turned to his other pursuits, including painting, which he had been practicing since beginning his studies. He studied with John Trumbull (1756-1843), a Connecticut-born painter well known for his depictions of the Revolutionary War, and possibly with Ralph Earl (1751-1801), a portrait painter whose work influenced that of Steward, and who was in New Haven during the time Steward was studying for the ministry. Steward and his wife, Sarah Mosely Steward, and their children moved to Hartford in the 1790s, where he served as Deacon of the First Hartford Church and founded the Hartford Museum (no longer extant), the first museum in the city. Starting as a small collection and venue for him to advertise his services in one room in the State House, he later relocated to a larger building at the corner of Talcott and Main Streets to expand his eclectic collection of paintings, natural artifacts, curiosities, and more, of a type compared to Charles Willson Peale's Peale Museum in Philadelphia. He passed away at the age of 69, leaving his Museum and personal collection to his wife and two daughters.

Steward's style bears similarities to other itinerant portrait painters of the time, and, not having signed his paintings, attribution was not established for many of them until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The portrait of Mary Bidwell is one such painting: initially, it had been attributed to John Durand (active 1765-1782), a New York-based portrait painter about whose early life little is

known. The Herdeg's contacted museums and professionals knowledgeable about early American portraiture, and found there to be agreement on identifying it as a piece by Steward.

The Bidwell portraits had also at a time been attributed to John Brewster, Jr. (1766-1854), another itinerant painter working throughout New England, whose work, particularly early pieces, also shows the influence of Ralph Earl.

Another way in which the paintings have been traced to Steward is through the letters of Mary Gray Bidwell's second cousin on her mother's side, Pamela Dwight Sedgwick (1753-1807). Barnabas had previously studied law under Pamela's husband, Theodore Sedgwick (1746-1813). In late 1794/early 1795 she mentions the success of "Mrs. Gray's" - Sarah Spring Gray's - portrait, and discusses hiring Steward for her own family's portraits. A letter from just a few months later confirms the completion of the Sedgwick portraits.

Stay tuned next week, when we will take a closer look at the depiction of Mary herself.

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