

*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 III

Welcome to the final 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 previous installments, we discussed the creation of the painting and how it came to be in our collection, and we'll finish with taking a look at the image of Mary herself.

We know a bit about Mary's life, particularly through her correspondence, including that with her husband Barnabas which we have discussed in previous installments of Bidwell Lore. In this portrait, we see a woman with a calm, resolute expression, a hint of a smile at the corner of her lips. Her dress is elegant without being overly showy, and her hair is carefully adorned. She sits in a simple Windsor-style chair in front of a neutral background. This lack of detail in the background allows us to focus solely on the sitter, without external elements indicating anything about her identity. The only thing that we see is the chair (which, coincidentally, is almost the same color as the paneling in the Front Hall here at the Bidwell House), which is simple and unobtrusive.

Her dress is elegant though a few years behind the height of fashion of the time: higher-waisted round dresses were beginning to take hold (think early Regency). There is a misconception that sitters were always dressed in their best, most fashionable attire: while we have no sense of what the rest of her wardrobe might have included, as this is the only image we have of her, sitters and painters were sometimes mindful of the mercurial nature of fashion, and would look for a look that could withstand the test of time. While we cannot see her skirt below the waist, nor the back of the dress, it seems to reflect the slightly earlier *robe à l'anglaise*, with a tightly fitted bodice tapering into a full skirt. The green and white knotted fringe under her neckline continues in some form on the skirt, visible under her right elbow: this could be trim along an open-front skirt.

A particularly striking element of the portrait is Mary's headwear. The large, elaborate hairstyles of the European courts (picture Marie Antoinette) were giving way to more natural styles, and elements of that would have also translated to America. Feathers in one's hair have gone through periods of appeal throughout the centuries, and in some traditions, three feathers indicated a married woman. This would be particularly appropriate, as the portrait is thought to have been painted around the time of her wedding. Other elements appear as well,

including a string of black pearls over her right temple, and a strip of lace along her left. If you look closely, you can see that while her hair is neatly curled and pinned at the top, at the back her hair is loose, visible over her right shoulder to her mid-back. Additional adornments include a gold and pearl earring (presumably one of a pair), and a closed white fan held in her right hand.

The Bidwell House Museum is incredibly lucky to have the portrait of Mary Gray Bidwell in our collection, along with that of her mother, Sarah Spring Gray. Many people, including visitors, staff, and board members, are drawn to the portrait of Mary: in the previous installment of our Collections Highlight series, we began focusing on the favorite objects of some of our board members here at BHM. Mary was pointed out by both Richard Greene and Richard Bidwell Wilcox, who authored several entries about Mary in Bidwell Lore, as a piece in our collection to which they are drawn. These portraits help to bring these specific women to life, to put a face to a name in a story, and help us to tell the story of the Bidwell family in the Berkshires.