An Entrance for All

One of the many goals of the multi-year restoration project at the Bidwell House was to make the Museum accessible to a wider audience.

As part of “Phase 3” of the project, while the Museum was closed for the season, local contractors Roger Tryon of Tryon Stoneworks and Henry Kirchodfer Construction put their skills to work to re-grade the lawn in front of the Museum in order to create a sloped path up to a newly constructed bridge leading to the porch.

This walkway is surrounded by a beautiful stone wall that matches the 18th century style of the house and it provides another option for getting to the front door, allowing access to visitors who may have had difficulty climbing the old porch stairs. Alongside these new stone walls, the Museum will also be starting a new series of garden beds, planted with heritage shrubs and flowers that would have been right at home in Adonijah’s day. Stop by this summer to see the completed work!

Exciting Programs Planned for the 2018 Season!

While the Bidwell House slumbered beneath 40 inches of snow in March, the museum staff were hard at work planning a fun and enlightening 2018 season.

Up first is the opening celebration on May 27 with a concert by beloved local musician Diane Taraz. House tours will begin on Memorial Day. The History Talks series is back and we have booked a wonderful group of speakers: Professor John Demos, Professor Kevin Sweeney, Bidwell descendant Russell Taylor and Stockbridge-Munsee Tribal Elder Judy Putnam-Hartley.

The Bidwell Country Fair (formerly Township #1 Day) will be fun for the whole family on July 7th and on July 8th join the Museum for the first annual Open-Mic Fest. Whether you like to perform or just enjoy hearing music, it should be a fun evening for all! On July 14th don’t miss the one-woman play “A Revolution of Her Own!” the story of Revolutionary War veteran Deborah Sampson. This will be the first time the play has been performed locally. The Museum’s enchanting garden party fundraiser will be held at the Art School on August 4 and will be honoring neighbors Jill Horner and Yo-Yo Ma. Look for an invitation in your mailbox soon. For the full schedule of events, check out the museum website, bidwellhousemuseum.org. We can’t wait to see you this season!
A Message From the President

Koolamalsi...We hope you are well.

This is the traditional greeting of members of the Mohican tribe and other Algonquin nations.

Why is this relevant to the Bidwell House Museum? Well, for centuries...millennia...before the European colonization of the Berkshires and the rest of New England, this was the sacred homeland of the Native Americans, and this chapter of early American history is one the Museum is beginning to tell.

Rob Hoogs leading a nature walk, fall 2017

We have been working with the Stockbridge-Munsee Community of the Mohican Tribe to create a Native American Interpretive Woodland Trail that tells the story of their long and successful habitation in this area and how their tribe continues to flourish and cherish this, their homeland. We are also collaborating with the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area and Trustees of the Reservations (Mission House and Monument Mountain) to develop more. Those programs are in addition to the museum’s outstanding historic lectures, nature hikes, demonstrations. You can also buy tickets on the website: bidwellhousemuseum.org

Rob Hoogs, President of the Board of Trustees

Thanks to the Lenox Garden Club!

The Bidwell House Museum is very happy to report that they have received a $12,000 grant from the Lenox Garden Club for the creation of four new garden beds around the updated Museum entrance and walkway. These beds will be planted with native species that will allow visitors to see the types of plants that would have existed in the time of Adonijah Bidwell. Funding from the grant also allows the Museum to include educational signage about the native plants and create a brochure for visitors. Please stop by the Museum this summer to see this beautiful new section of the garden. Thank you Lenox Garden Club!

BIDWELL HOUSE
MUSEUM SUMMER
GARDEN PARTY

Fundraiser—August 4, 4-7 pm

Join friends and neighbors at the former Art School, now home of Jane and Marty Schwartz, for our annual Summer Garden party. This year the Museum is honoring neighbors Jill Horner and Yo-Yo Ma. There will be hors d’oeuvres, drinks, dancing and an art show silent auction featuring the works of local artisans.

For more information or tickets, contact the museum at:
413-528-6888
or bidwellhouse@gmail.com

You can also buy tickets on the website: bidwellhousemuseum.org

We hope to see you there!

—Rob Hoogs, President of the Board of Trustees

The Story of Marshall Spring Bidwell

by Rick Wilcox

Marshall Spring Bidwell, lawyer and politician, was born 16 February 1799 at Stockbridge, Massachusetts, the son of Barnabas and Mary Gray Bidwell. On September 1st 1818 he married Clara Wilcox of Bath, near Kingston, Upper Canada. Of their six children only three survived to adulthood, Mary Sabra and Clara Emily, both of whom remained unmarried, and their brother Marshall Spring Bidwell, a druggist, who married a cousin, Alice Cecelia Bidwell, daughter of John Devotion Bidwell of Monterey. Marshall Spring’s father, Barnabas Bidwell, who had been a state senator, attorney general of Massachusetts, a member of Congress, and an ardent Jeffersonian, living in Federalist New England, was forced to leave his home state in 1810 after he had been accused by his political enemies of malversation of funds as Treasurer of Berkshire County. The family settled in Upper Canada at Bath just before the War of 1812. Marshall was educated in the local schools and at home by his father who provided the foundation for his career in law. Marshall Spring, at 17, studied law with Daniel Washburn and Daniel Hagerman, barristers and attorneys-at-law in Kingston and in 1821 he was called to the bar.

Marshall Spring Bidwell and his father became the center of the ongoing struggle in Upper Canada in the early 1820s in connection with the “alien question” as to whether Americans who had come into the colony in the previous quarter century must undergo a complicated naturalization procedure before they could enjoy political and civil rights as British subjects.

In 1821 the House of Assembly voted to expel Barnabas from the seat he had won a few weeks earlier, on the grounds that the charges earlier made against him in Massachusetts rendered him unfit to hold his seat. In the general elections of 1824 Marshall was elected and took his seat, despite a ruling by the British law officers that he as well as his father was not qualified for membership. Bidwell, still in his mid-twenties, not long after his election to office, took a leadership role in the assembly. In the elections of 1828 the Upper Canadian Reformers strengthened their majority in the assembly and proceeded to elect Bidwell speaker. The Reformers were routed in the 1836 elections, and among those not returned was Bidwell. Bidwell wrote, “twelve years hard labor have exhausted my hopes, my strength... and I was unwilling to incur expense or trouble.” When Bidwell left Upper Canada in 1837 he was admitted to practice by both the state Supreme Court and the Court of Chancery of New York, and after moving to New York City he was taken into partnership in George W. Strong’s law firm. After Strong’s death Bidwell worked in partnership with Strong’s son, George Templeton Strong, later joined by the latter’s cousin, Charles Edward. The firm of Strong, Bidwell and Strong became one of the most prominent in NYC, and Bidwell was recognized for his expertise of the law of real estate. George Templeton Strong was quoted, “We all leaned on him, too much for our own good. Instead of studying up a question, I usually went to Bidwell and received from him an off-hand abstract of all the cases bearing on it and all the considerations on either side. He loved law as a pure science.” G. T. Strong also noted at Bidwell’s death that it was “strange that this family, after so many years in New York, should have formed no positive friendships or alliances, especially considering poor, dear old Bidwell’s warm-heartedness, geniality and strong social instincts... I suppose poor Bidwell’s Puritanical convictions led him to look on ‘call’, tea parties, and all the little two-penny machinery of ‘social’ life as of the nature of evil, in spite of his own natural impulses.”

Bidwell lectured at the Columbia Law School, and in 1858 Yale University conferred on him the degree of Doctor of Laws. Bidwell was Presbyterian and a temperance advocate, and in his New York years a supporter of the American Bible Society. Marshall Spring Bidwell died 24 Oct. 1872 in New York City, N.Y. and was buried with his wife in the Bidwell family plot in the Stockbridge Town Cemetery.
Today, American drama is a world-class art and industry; “Broadway” is a common response to the word “theater,” while American playwriting has flourished through 20th-century titans like Tennessee Williams and contemporary luminaries like Lynn Nottage. Not counted among these names is Barnabas Bidwell, second son of the Bidwell House’s Adonijah Bidwell, who authored the five-act tragedy “The Mercenary Match.” While “The Mercenary Match” isn’t quite Williams material—Barnabas admits “The characters which [I unfold] to view / Are not sublime, although [I think] them true”—a deeper reason for its cultural ephemeralness lies in the shunned and nascent state of American drama. In 1785, when Barnabas published the “Match,” Americans largely shared inexperience and derogation toward theatrical performance because plays were often inaccessible in America.

From the start, America’s theatrical tradition was weaker than that of its colonial rulers. While Native Americans and the Spanish both engaged in theatrical performances prior to English arrival, no evidence suggests cultural influence in this regard. While the theatrical tradition of modern America has an American ancestor, that ancestor is thoroughly that of the English colonies—the first recorded theatrical production in English America was the infamous 1665 performance of “The Bear and the Cub,” written by William Davenant and performed by the author, Cornelius Waterkin and Philip Howard. “The Bear and the Cub” is partly notable for its—play’s being but three, the chosen staging area a tavern and the intent of the enterprise apparently not a monetary value. This is emblematic of early American theater. Productions not performed for profit evaded the monetary value. This is emblematic of early American theater. Productions not performed for profit evaded the imposition of a national ban; it was impossible to discourage and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all... exhibitions of plays, shows and other expensive diversions and entertainments.”

While the ban met with opposition—George Washington authorized the production of Joseph Addison’s Cato at Valley Forge, and attempts to pass reinforcements of the ban were met with resistance in Congress—there was minimal contest from professional productions until the 1790s. This, then, is the climate Barnabas Bidwell entered when he penned and produced “The Mercenary Match,” a tale of love and deceit in the newborn nation—characters include the noble congress-member Mr. Worthy, newly-appointed ambassador Mr. Jenson and the “intriguing gallant” Major Shapely who seeks Jenson’s post for his own. 1785 Yale was an environment receptive to a young student’s amatory enterprises; according to one of the first historians of American theater and professional playwrights, William Dunlap; the “very pleasant and laugh-provoking tragedy [was] played by the students of Yale College under the auspices of the late Rev. Ezra Styles, D.D., president.” A student production in the aftermath of the war escaped popular scrutiny at the moment. But the play entered the public eye in a vastly different context, the theater-friendly early 1800s, when Barnabas’ political opponents’ sought mud-slinging through literary criticism. An anonymous review sarcastically compared weak moments of “The Mercenary Match” to Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Shakespeare before concluding: “Ye sons of tragic genius, great and small, / Our Barna Bidwell fairly beats you all.” The review did not prevent Barnabas Bidwell from resounding victory in his election for the U.S. House of Representatives, which probably indicates that the quality of a candidate’s collegiate play was not foremost in any voter’s mind. Looking back in 1832, Dunlap’s “Mystic Mutton” admitted that “only two passages are remembered. The first, ‘Night follows day, and day succeeds to night,’ has never been contradicted. The second, ‘Sure never was the like’ heard of before in Boston, ‘though not so measured and harmonious, was thrown upon the applause.’ Dunlap may have agreed with the anonymous reviewer, but unlike the former’s political bent, Dunlap’s critique stemmed from the perspective of a theatrical historian; later writing on the “Match,” like Oral Sumner Coad’s “An Old American College Play” in 1922, follows this trend in placing the drama as “our first example of [the bourgeois tragedy] that had already gained wide currency in Europe,” viewing the play from a critical perspective.

So “The Mercenary Match” has often been read through a colonial lens. But its context, down to the federal–American infringement of the plot and the sarcastic 1805 review, are indicative of the multifaceted, and often controversial, roles that theater took in early America. Reading Barnabas Bidwell’s collegiate work today, available online at the Evans Early American Imprint Collection, can thus be a window into a Broadway-less past where college was the most respected outlet for drama. This window illustrates that the script, playwright and production have all been political since the inception of the United States, and that most Americans’ apparent freedom of speech and congregation have not always been so available.

A Study of Colonial Eyewear By Talia Pott, 2017 Summer Intern Among Adonijah Bidwell’s death inventory is listed a pair of corrective lenses. In the Bidwell House Museum collection, we find a pair. As with most of the items at the museum, the glasses were likely not belonging to Adonijah Bidwell, but they are similar to the kind worn at the time.

Eyeglasses were becoming increasingly popular and accessible during the 18th century, though they had been available in Europe for some time already. The Italians are credited with inventing corrective lenses in about 1286. Fifteen years later, there were already lens-making guilds set up governed by the Italian state. The first painting of lenses was made in 1532, showing a cardinal with glasses. Many other paintings were to follow, so we can confirm that their use was increasing during that time. Some historians assume the invention of the printing press, the increase in the literacy rate, and then, later, the availability of daily newspapers all contributed to the need for glasses among a larger percentage of the population.

In the aughts of the eighteenth century, Isaac Newton started to experiment with lenses in microscopes, which started a huge boom in the economy of lenses. It was suddenly the fashion of the wealthy to own a pair of spectacles, but as the century progressed, it became more affordable for everyday people to purchase them. With this boom during the century, it made it easier for people to get glasses.

In the eighteenth century, during the time that the Bidwell House was being built, someone was working on an improvement for the popular technology. This person puzzled that if he could place both a myopic lens (for nearsightedness) and a presbyopic lens (for reading magnification) in the same frame, he could create a pair of glasses that could work for those that needed both kinds. We often give credit to Benjamin Franklin for this discovery, but there is some controversy (although we do know that Franklin needed bifocals). Prior to this historic invention, there was no way for a person that had both myopia and presbyopia to have just one pair of glasses.

The production of corrective lenses in the eighteenth century was very different from modern manufacturing techniques. Lenses were ground and polished using lathes or wheels, borrowing techniques that had been developed in earlier centuries for the making of lenses for telescopes and microscopes.

Around 1752, James Ayscough invented the first tinted lenses. These lenses were tinted to reduce glare, and they became popular across Europe. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson liked the idea, and ensured that it spread to America because popular belief held that sunlight was damaging to the eyes.

The first American eyeglass shop opened in Philadelphia in 1779, fifteen years after Rev. Adonijah Bidwell died at the age of 68. That means that he had to have had his glasses imported. But how were they prescribed? Prior to the 18th century, individuals would rummage through a basket of different lenses and through trial and error, determine what was the best fit for their vision needs, but there is little data on how they would have been prescribed during the 18th century.

Glasses have been produced for over eight centuries, with each century bringing new innovations. Adonijah Bidwell’s simple spectacles were likely considered a remarkable technology of the 18th century, but in our own century, we now have some of the best technology for vision correction available, such as contact lenses, and laser surgery to correct vision without glasses. What might Rev. Bidwell think if he could see some of the wonders of today’s optical achievements?
When learning the history of the Bidwell House and of Adonijah Bidwell, a fair amount of attention is given to his children and grandchildren, including some of their educational achievements. Although we have multiple records of the Reverend and his son’s schooling history in college, we have a very shaky grasp of what the schooling was like for them at a young age. Around the mid-1600’s to the mid-1800’s, public schooling was virtually nonexistent for children. Even in well-educated and politically forward cities such as Boston, the basic skills of reading and writing were taught at home. At 1642, a law was passed in the colony of Massachusetts that commanded that children must be “taught to read and write”. Fearing that a majority of parents were ignoring this law, another was passed the year 1647, establishing the use of public schools. But these public schools were not as public as they are now. Although women often did not receive secondary schooling, children of both genders and all ages were permitted to attend local schools, often only before the planting and harvesting seasons, and possibly during the winter. But as “books were relatively expensive”, the average household would provide their children with education sources primarily from themselves and the Bible. Although women often did not receive secondary schooling, they were expected to be literate in order to teach their own children. Being the sons and daughters of the township’s Reverend and his son’s schooling history in college, we have a very shaky grasp of what the schooling was like for them at a young age.

**Exploring the Early Stages of Education**

by Elisabeth Enoch, 2017 Summer Intern

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