



# The Bidwell House Museum

Newsletter

Spring 2013

*The Bidwell House Museum is a New England heritage landmark that uses the history of its land, house, and collections to re-imagine, re-create, restore, and research colonial and early American life in Western Massachusetts.*

## Celebrate History at the Museum this Summer



*The 2013 Tyringham Garden Tour, "Water, Walls and Wonderful Gardens," includes the Bidwell grounds, on Saturday, June 29. Visit the Bidwell gardens or take the tour of all seven special places! Tickets for the tour will be sold in advance by the Hop Brook Community Club, 413-243-1717, or contact the museum.*

Renowned scholars and authors will bring their stories to the Bidwell history talk series this summer. UMass Anthropology Professor Eric Johnson will talk about the people who lived in these Berkshire hills four thousand years ago. John Demos, Samuel Knight Professor of History Emeritus, Yale University, will tell us about the English settlers' encounters with the native people, which involved trade, bloodshed, and slavery. Author Glendyne Werglund will present her book *Sisters in the Faith: Shaker Women and Equality of the Sexes*, and Allegra di Bonaventura, assistant dean at the Yale Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, is returning to present *For Adam's Sake: A Family Saga in Colonial New England*, about the lives of two clans entwined by slavery.

On Saturday of Labor Day weekend, the Bidwell House is pleased to welcome Simon Winchester, author of the best-selling *Krakatoa* and *The Professor and the Madman*, for a special preview talk of his upcoming book *The Men Who United the States*.

In addition, please mark your calendar for two big events: Township No. 1 Day will bring music, crafts demonstrations, baking contests and family activities to the Bidwell grounds on Saturday, July 6 from 1 to 4:30 p.m. This free

community celebration of the history of Monterey and Tyringham is sponsored in part by a grant from the Monterey Cultural Council. All are invited to participate.

The Garden Party Gala, season highlight and most important fundraiser for the museum, will celebrate music this year. All friends of the museum are invited on Saturday, August 4, to Fiddletop, the beautiful Monterey hilltop estate that was the former home of legendary conductor Eugene Ormandy, and of the concert violinist Zino Francescatti.

A garden tour, stone-wall building and nature walks round out a busy and exciting summer at the Bidwell House.

### A Civil War Sampler



Acclaimed singer Diane Taraz is returning by popular demand to perform at the opening reception of the museum on Sunday, May 26. In the year of the movie *Lincoln* and renewed interest in the "War between the States," Diane is performing her "Civil War Sampler." The program focuses on songs from the mid-1800s, tracing the effects of the war on people of both sexes, all races and walks of life, in both North and South, as they struggled through a dark yet inspiring time. Diane tells the stories of the songs and accompanies herself on guitar and lap dulcimer. All members and friends of the museum are invited to this special afternoon.

## A Bidwell Family Reunion



*Bidwell descendants Marie Leuchs with her daughter Ellen and family Diane, Romy and Jamie Curtis visiting the museum*

The Bidwell Family Association's reunion this year will be held September 5th to 9th at the Bidwell House Museum and the Red Lion Inn in Stockbridge, MA. Most Bidwells in America are descendants of John Bidwell (1620 -1687), a founder of Hartford, CT. The Reverend Adonijah Bidwell was one of his great-grandsons. The association is open to all Bidwells by birth, marriage, adoption and descent. They have held annual reunions since the mid-1970s—coast-to-coast, in Canada and in England. The museum looks forward to welcoming all the Bidwell and Brewer cousins at their family homestead.

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## Remembering Sunday Afternoons with Ronald Myers

The Bidwell House Museum recognizes Dr. Ronald E. Myers (1933-2012), of Sandisfield, MA, a longtime docent of the Museum, for his outstanding volunteer citizenship and community activism. Ronald passed away last November. He is survived by his wife of 41 years, Roberta, and seven children.

According to his November 16, 2012, Berkshire Eagle obituary, Dr. Myers was a devoted husband, father and grandfather who had eclectic interests plus the capacity to speak and listen to almost anyone: "He baled hay, raised sheep, repaired tractors, sang in community choruses, saved both houses and teeth, and collected clocks."

A graduate of Tufts University, Ronald Myers practiced general dentistry for 17 years in Plainfield, NJ, before moving his family to Sandisfield, MA, in 1963 and opening a practice in Lee. Dr. Myers was very active in Sandisfield,

a town he loved, as a founding member of the Sandisfield Board of Health, and on various town committees including the Finance Committee and the Historical Commission. He was a member and former president of the Lee and Otis/Sandisfield Kiwanis clubs, active in the Sandisfield Historical Society and Taxpayer's Association, as well as an early president of the Sandisfield Arts Center.



Ronald is fondly remembered by the Bidwell House Museum, where he volunteered for many years as a docent. Members, staff, and trustees may recall seeing Ronald stationed on the front bench awaiting a tour on Sunday afternoons, joined by Roberta. Ronald would lead visitors on a site walk outdoors, continue inside with the downstairs parlors, and Roberta would finish with the upstairs chambers and garret.

*Continued on Page 3*

## Bidwell Collection Enriched by Work of Itinerant Painter



Visitors to the Bidwell House this spring and summer may notice a new arrival in the little gallery of portraits lining its walls. The subject, painted in around the year 1800, is an anonymous New England woman in a dark dress with high-waist bow and bonnet. She looks out from the canvas with quiet intensity, as if to cross the centuries with her gaze.

The portrait is unsigned, but for stylistic reasons its creator can be confidently identified as William Jennys. Little is known about his origins, but he was born probably in the mid-1770s—and probably in Connecticut. His father, Richard Jennys, was also a painter and, presumably, William's teacher. Starting in the 1790s the two of them toured the New England countryside, working both separately and together to limn its residents. In fairly short order, William's talent outstripped his father's; indeed, in the view of art historians, William ranks among the most accomplished American portraitists of his time. For the most part, he framed his subjects in oval spandrels, and depicted them from the waist up. Invariably, his work shows strength, boldness, and deep psychological insight; he aimed for a "warts-and-all" realism, (And not just warts—bulbous noses, protruding ears, and birthmarks as well!) Viewed from the present, this aspect seems atypical. But he did not lack for commissions; over 100 of his portraits survive today. Moreover, the social position of his subjects traced a rising curve as the years went along; his later work includes portraits of mayors and other important public officials. Had he continued, he might well have been painting presidents by the end.

But there's the rub; he did not continue. The last of his known portraits was done in 1807, when he was no more than 35. He lived into his 80s, and had several other occupations—innkeeper, hard goods merchant, florist, and so on. But he never again picked up his brush; thus his painting career seems strangely truncated. Why such a fine talent should have been so abruptly abandoned remains a mystery. (Is his father's death, also in 1807, some kind of clue?)

Jennys portraits are included in many major museums—and now in the Bidwell House as well. So tip your hat to this unknown lady as you pass by. All right, Mona Lisa she isn't. But she's an utterly convincing representative of her time, someone the Bidwells might well have invited to tea. (And who knows? Perhaps they did.) —John Demos, Trustee

### Remembering Ronald Myers

*Continued from Page 2*

"He was a very unusual fellow," Roberta described her late husband during a telephone interview, "—a real history buff."

Ronald's interest in the Bidwell House Museum may have stemmed from his own historic preservation project, which he began in the 1960s, around the same time Jack Hargis and David Brush were starting at the old manse on 100 Art School Road. "When he moved to the Berkshires, he bought a very run-down historic house in Sandisfield, and lovingly restored it, integrating faithfully designed additions and outbuildings as well," Roberta explained.

The Myers' restoration project was later included in a local history book by Ron Bernard called Sandisfield Then and Now. According to Bernard, the ca. 1849 John Stewart House was once installed with "a grand staircase as well as fluted moldings around the doors and windows, fancier trimmings than most country places had then." During the long depression of the 1870s it started to fall from its former glory. By 1875 John Stewart had gone bankrupt and the property subsequently went up for public auction.

By the time Ronald bought it, the house was no more than a "few windows, a leaking roof and no electricity, indoor plumbing and septic" he recalled. With the help of Roberta and their combined family of seven children, the Myers repaired and constructed barns and outbuildings on both sides of the road, recreating a bucolic, small farm atmosphere. "Ronald's extensive knowledge of local history and of colonial homes and lifeways was a gift to the museum and to all visitors lucky enough to have enjoyed a tour of the Bidwell House with him," notes Barbara Palmer. "He was a great friend of the museum."

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# YOUNG HISTORY SCHOLAR SECTION

## Museum Offers Young History Scholar Internships

Nine local high school students – Charlotte Cahillane, Emily Halford, Katherine Lister, Gaby Makuc, Joseph Makuc, Justin Makuc, Taylor Neil, Shelby Sebring, Sophie Weil-Roth – joined the museum staff last summer as interns.

Students participating in this program spend two weeks at the museum: in week one, the intern learns about the Bidwell family and colonial Berkshire history, the house, the property and the collection, and how docents give tours; in week two, each intern chooses a history topic to research and begins to give tours of the museum as a junior docent.

The 2013 season marks the eighth year of the internship program. Thanks to sponsorship by the Monterey and Lenox Cultural Councils, as well as private sponsors and

museum friends, the museum offers a \$200 stipend to each intern who successfully completes the internship.

High school students with an interest in history, particularly local Berkshire colonial history, are invited to apply to become a Museum Studies Intern this summer. The application deadline is April 30. The application can be found on the museum's website at [www.bidwellhouse-museum.org](http://www.bidwellhouse-museum.org).

The museum is also seeking a college intern. Last summer Siobhanne Pope, a sophomore at Furman University, and Raynor Sebring, a freshman at Roanoke College, held 8-week internships at the Bidwell House.

Following are research articles written by 2012 high school summer interns.

## The Secret Closet

by Sophie Weil-Roth

How many different things can you store in a closet? What kinds of things did people store during the 18th century?

In the dining room of the Bidwell House, there is a closet that carries a smaller closet within it (see picture). Inside the storage area, there is a diminutive door that opens up to another storage place that is very dark and very small. The outer closet is 74 inches tall and measures 45 by 39 inches. The tallest part of the inner closet is 60 inches and the floor area is 68.5 by 41 inches. Some say that this closet was used only for protecting leftover meats or pies that needed to be cooled, but why might one disguise it so well? There are rumors that this covert closet might have been used for the Underground Railroad later on, but that doesn't explain what it could have been used for during the time of the 1750s, when Adonijah Bidwell lived in the house.

It is said that Rev. Bidwell may have used the outer closet in his dining hall to store his large book collection. We know he owned a lot of books from his death inventory. This

collection of books translates from his many years of education at Yale University in Connecticut. Many docents say that the covert closet may have been used to hide little goodies from the children, and to keep meat cool and fresh for the next day if there were leftovers.

There are many reasons why Rev. Bidwell might have used the secret closet for purposes other than baked goods and meats. For example, it is said that Rev. Bidwell, regard-

less of all the King George pictures displayed around the Museum, was indeed a patriot. He could have hidden documents, sermons or just plots that he had that were too patriotic for society to see.

Another purpose might have been to store things more precious. Tea, sugar, chocolate, and silk are very common today, but back in the 18th century, these things were very hard to find, they were expensive and treasured.

In the Parlor of the Bidwell House, there is a small box that is always locked and contains raw tea inside of it. This is because tea was very scarce and expensive to get in the 1700s. Other items, such as chocolate, sugar, and alcohol, were also very expensive, and had to be imported from far away places. Since Adonijah Bidwell Sr. had many guests as a minister,



*A view of the closet within a closet at the Bidwell House*

## The Secret Closet

*Continued from Page 5*

perhaps he liked to make sure that his precious goods were stored away from the public.

Finally, another reason why Rev. Bidwell may have used this storage space for purposes other than his wife's cooking, is because most people in the 18th century would either dry or salt their meats for preservation, or keep them down in the cellar where it was cooler than the rest of the house. The cloaked closet was just as warm as the rest of the house during the summer, so a smarter place to store one's food would have been in the cellar, where the temperature was and still is significantly cooler.

The important thing about this closet is not what we can clearly figure out about it, but what kinds of questions come up when we think about what could have been gathered in it. The only thing we can convey from this secret closet is that it was used to store something, but what, or who?

## The Bidwell Cherry Tree

*by Taylor Neil*



While on my internship, I was informed that one of the arborists who worked on the property was amazed at the enormity of a cherry tree. He stated that he had never seen such a large tree of this kind. Last year while in school, I took an earth science class where I spent many hours studying how to measure a tree's height and estimate its age. I happily took on the job to determine how large the cherry tree really is, and where it stands based on other trees of its kind.

First off, one can identify a black cherry tree based on its dark scaly bark and its yellowish-white cylindrical pendulums. Next, one might consider its height: the average height of a mature black cherry tree is about 50 to 80 feet tall. According to the American

Forests' National Big Tree Program, the largest black cherry tree reported is in Tazewell, Virginia, with a height of 95 feet, a circumference of 224 inches, and a crown spread of 76 feet.

The large black cherry tree at the Bidwell House is located on the trail to the parking area. It has a height of about 60 feet, a circumference of about 36 inches, and a crown spread of about 15

to 20 feet, and is roughly 100 to 120 years old. This tree happens to fall right in the norm for its type. Although it may not be the largest tree or the oldest, I still had a lot of fun studying it, and it adds a lot of character to the grounds.

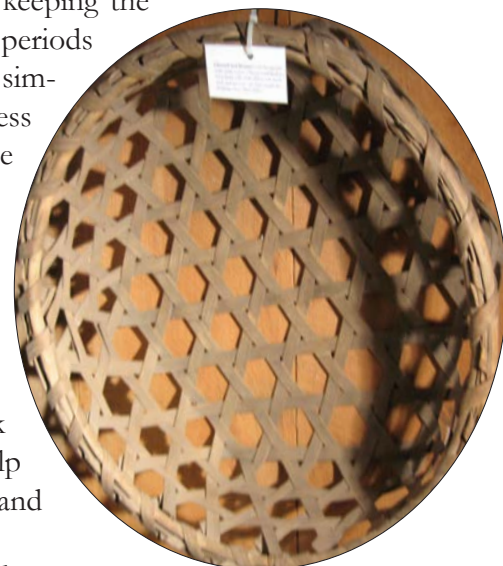
## Dairy Farming

*by Charlotte Cabillane*

When people today think of dairy operations, images of large-scale productions and machinery pop into their heads, but it wasn't always like this. Two hundred years ago there were no giant, electrically-powered machines to do all the work; it was done by farmhands and simple tools. This is a trip back to the 1790s when dairy farms were privately owned and dairies functioned without heavy machinery.

During the late 1700s through the 1800s, the Bidwell House was a dairy farm. Dairy farms had a slightly different definition in the late 1700s because they didn't primarily produce milk, mostly cheese and butter. The people had no way of keeping the milk cold for long periods of time, so it was simpler to produce less perishable items. The women would do most of the dairy work. If they were a rich enough family, like the Bidwells, they could hire dairy maids to milk the cows and help out with the cheese and butter-making.

The Bidwells had two cow barns and over 100 acres for grazing, so they could have had many cows. Cows were milked into buckets, which were then brought into the house. Butter could be made by putting the milk into a pancheon, or shallow dish. The cream would rise to the top of the milk over the course of half a day, and then the woman of the house, or the girls who helped her, skimmed the cream off the top. After a suitable amount of cream was collected, it would be put in the butter churn. The Museum owns a barrel churn which could be cranked to separate the yellow fat from the buttermilk. Mrs. Bidwell would take the clumps of fat from the churn after about an hour and knead them into shape to be stored. The Bidwell family used the downstairs portion of the 1790s wing for a buttery to store butter as well as make it. Butter-making took almost all day even if the butter being made was only for one family. The dairy farm industry began in the early 1800s and the Bidwell family was part of this trend.



*Cheese drainer*

Cheese-making was a very complicated craft. In fact, up until 1840 in many parts of the US, cheese-making was considered a type of witchcraft. There was a lot of mystery involved in good cheese-making.

Cheese, like butter, begins with milk. Once the milk has been collected, it is put into a pot with some rennet, (or lining of a calf's stomach). Then it is heated up gradually until, after about an hour or two, the curd is formed. This fresh curd is placed into a cheese drainer that was lined with a clean cloth, and the curd stays there until most of the whey has dripped off. In the Bidwell House there is one such drainer. After the draining, some families would mix a little butter in for flavor, put the mixture into a mold and turn it on a wooden press for almost two hours. More whey would drip out as the mixture is pressed, and the cloth would need to be changed frequently. Mrs. Bidwell, her daughters, or one of her helpers would then wrap the fresh cheese once more in a dry cloth, let it sit for a day and a half, then wash it and put it in the basement or dairy barn to age.

This is only a small glimpse into the world of 1790s dairy farming, but it is much different from the dairy business today. At the Bidwell House, as an intern, there was so much to learn and soak up that I am glad to have learned such a large amount about this one aspect of life.



*The Bidwell butter churn*



*The rotisserie, toaster and standing broiler below the crane*

shortest amount of baking time ending up in the front. This way they don't need to reach over any items to get out the ones that are done baking. This process is long and difficult, so each house only baked about once a week.

Because they only baked once a week, the bread was cold for the rest of the week. To deal with this matter they used a toaster that is set up near the fire. Most toasters are rather simple, but they are very effective. To toast bread, they put slices in between the two sides of the toaster. Then they could use the swivel handle to turn the bread around to get both sides crisped equally. The toaster at the Bidwell House is plain, but some toasters from the time period even had designs that would toast into the bread.

A rotisserie is also another way to cook from the colonial era. Rotisseries were used to cook fowl such as turkey and chicken. To cook the bird, the cook put it on the spit and placed it beside the fire. The tin helped effectively reflect heat onto the bird. To cook the bird evenly, the cook would turn the spit. The rotisserie at the Bidwell has five positions that the spit can be locked into.

A standing broiler was commonly used to cook meat in the colonial era. Simply, the cook hangs a piece of meat on the hook and then closes the sides. While the meat is cooking, the V-shaped sides corral the fat into the pan at the bottom. This fat can be used for making candles and soap. This tool is very efficient, and it demonstrates one of the early forms of recycling.

Another tool that was helpful during the colonial era is the crane. A crane is a rack that swings out, to hang cooking tools, including teakettles, above the fire. Before the crane there was a rack that attached to both sides of the fire place. This rack could not swing out; many women wearing long skirts had their clothes catch on fire while they were leaning in to put something on the rack. The crane saved many people from getting burnt, and it is a very clever invention.

During the colonial era everything had a use, and many things had multiple uses; cooking tools are not an exception. These are only some of the tools that made colonial cooking advanced and efficient.

## Colonial Cooking Tools

*by Justin Makuc*

Many people think that the cooking during the colonial era was very primitive, but it is exactly the opposite. The cooking tools during the colonial time period were very advanced and efficient. The Bidwell House Museum has many examples of these tools, including a bee hive oven, a toaster, a rotisserie, a standing broiler, and a crane.

A bee hive oven is an oven that is shaped like a bee hive. Most houses only had one beehive oven, but the Bidwell House has two; this is probably because the Bidwells baked for many guests and for people in the town. To heat up the oven, the cook starts a small fire in the oven. After about one hour the cook removes the coals from the oven. The bricks in the oven stay hot enough to bake for a long time. Then the cook puts the items that take the longest to bake in the back and puts in the rest of the items in order of baking time, with the items with the

# The Bidwell House Museum

P.O. Box 537, Monterey, MA 01245

413-528-6888 [bidwellhouse@gmail.com](mailto:bidwellhouse@gmail.com)

[www.bidwellhousemuseum.org](http://www.bidwellhousemuseum.org)



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❖ Learn about **colonial gardening!** Join the Garden Angels, the volunteer group led by Ruth Green, certified horticulturist, who tend the museum gardens. For more information, call the museum at 413-528-6888.

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