



“AM I NOT MYSELF A WOMAN?”

The First Generations of Jay Women at Bedford

Teapot

JJ.1977.62

This very old silver teapot was made for Sarah Livingston Jay's grandmother, Catherina Van Brugh Livingston, by Peter Van Dyck, a New York silversmith. It was made sometime between 1710 and 1725. Mrs. Livingston died in 1756, the same year Sarah was born, and Sarah was named Sarah Van Brugh Livingston in her honor. The teapot was inherited by Sarah through her parents, and she, in turn, bequeathed it to her daughter Maria Jay Banyer. Maria was not survived by her children, and she left it to a nephew. For the first four generations of family ownership, however, it was passed down through a matrilineal course.



Sarah Livingston Jay, writing to her sisters on March 4, 1780

"Where is the country...where Justice is so impartially administered, industry encouraged, health and Smiling plenty so bounteous to all as in our much favored Country? And are not those blessings of them resulting from, or matured by freedom, worth contending for?

But whither, my pen, are you hurrying me? What have I do to with politicks? Am I not myself a woman, & writing to Ladies? Come then, ye fashions to my assistance!"

Miniature portrait of Sarah Livingston Jay

JJ.1981.10

This pretty portrait of Sarah Jay is based on the pastel of her and her two youngest children by James Sharples, which hangs in John and Sarah Jay's bedroom upstairs. The miniature was painted on ivory by J. Calistri, and descended through the Jay family.



*"Unto the woman
[God] said...thy
desire shall be to thy
husband, and he
shall rule over thee."*

Genesis
3:16

At the close of the American Revolution, the province of women was very different from that of men, and from that of women today. Women could not hold elected office or vote, and they had very limited property rights. The Biblical command that husband shall rule over wife was widely accepted by both sexes. Scientists believed that women were biologically weaker and more delicate than men. Sarah Jay's father, William Livingston, wrote an essay, *Our Grandmothers*, in which he praised earlier generations of American women for being content to find "happiness in their chimney corners."

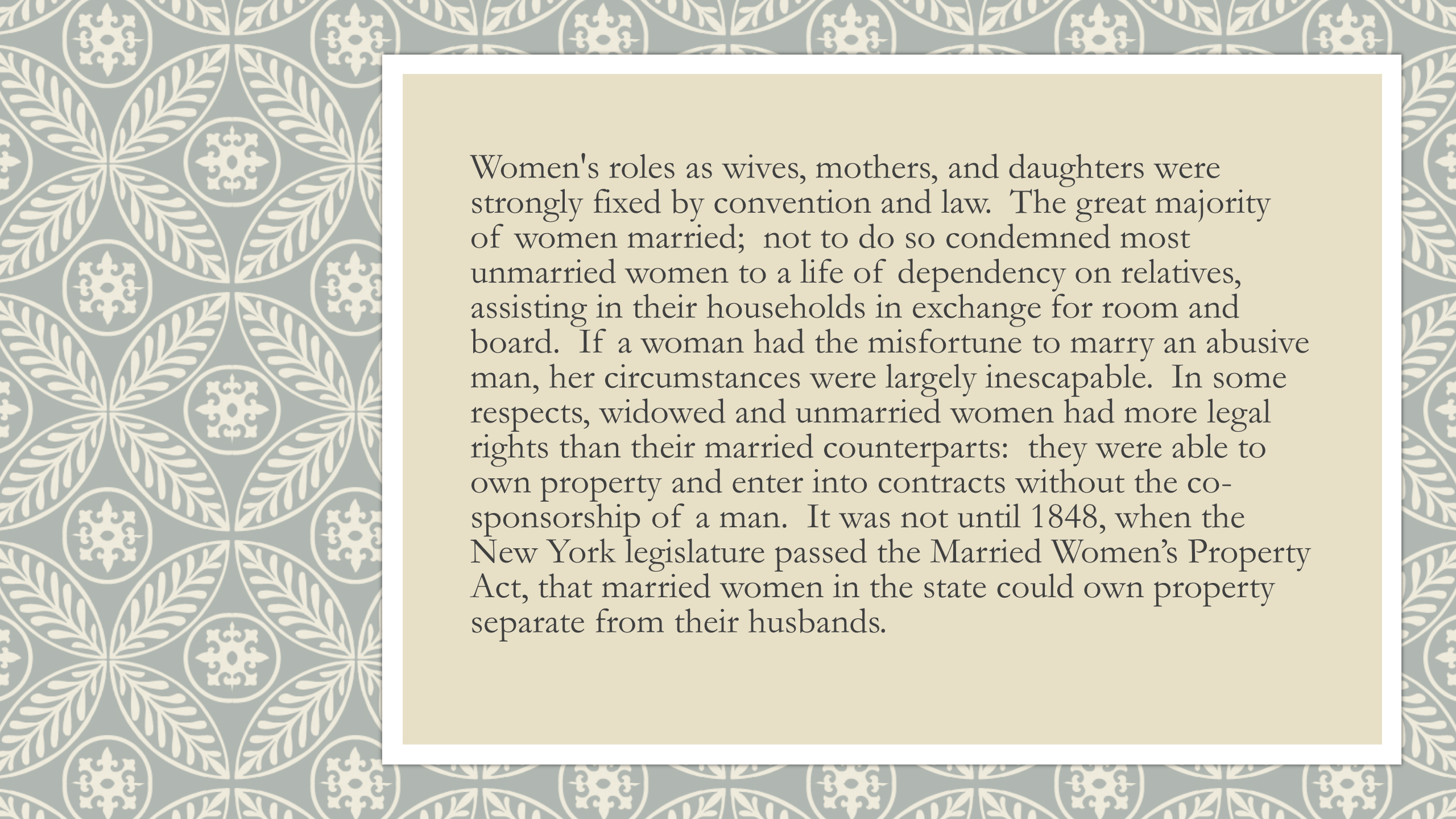
But as America progressed through the nineteenth century, women's roles and opportunities evolved. This exhibit is the first of two which will attempt to trace that evolution in this particular family, with its specific personalities, privileges, and experiences.

FAMILY LIFE

"Oh Mamma I never fully comprehended the affection of Parents for their children till I became a Mother..."

Sarah Livingston Jay to her mother,

August 28, 1780



Women's roles as wives, mothers, and daughters were strongly fixed by convention and law. The great majority of women married; not to do so condemned most unmarried women to a life of dependency on relatives, assisting in their households in exchange for room and board. If a woman had the misfortune to marry an abusive man, her circumstances were largely inescapable. In some respects, widowed and unmarried women had more legal rights than their married counterparts: they were able to own property and enter into contracts without the co-sponsorship of a man. It was not until 1848, when the New York legislature passed the Married Women's Property Act, that married women in the state could own property separate from their husbands.



Sarah Livingston's marriage to John Jay was a happy one; the two were devoted to each other and suffered little unhappiness as a couple. Their daughter Maria also married well, to a young man from a prominent Albany family. Their daughter Nancy never married and seems to have expressed no regrets over that. The Jays' youngest daughter, Sarah Louisa, also never married.



Engraving of Maria Jay JJ.1982.69

This portrait of Maria Jay is the only known image of her. It was engraved in 1798, when she was sixteen years old. The artist, Charles B. Julien Févret de Saint-Mémin, used a mechanical drawing device to produce a highly accurate rendering of her features.

Miniature portrait of Ann Jay JJ.1970.9

This miniature portrait of Ann Jay, who was called Nancy, was painted in 1801, when she was eighteen. Her father was then finishing his last term as governor of New York, and the Jays were preparing to leave Albany. An Albany artist, Gideon Fairman, painted the portrait. Like the portrait of her mother on the left, it was painted in watercolor on ivory.



With marriage, frequently came children. In 1800, the average woman had seven children. Sarah bore six, one of whom died at the age of three and a half weeks. Maria had two children, who both died when very young. Her sister-in-law, Augusta, had eight children, two of whom died when less than a year old. Infant mortality was high then; one in four children died in infancy. Women themselves ran a significant risk of death during childbirth, which usually took place at home. Raising children involved not only making sure their basic needs were met, but also developing their character, attending to their religious training, and teaching them the life skills, and often the job skills, they would need to know to get along as adults.





Bust of Augusta McVickar Jay

Augusta Jay was in her late fifties to mid-sixties when this bust was carved. The identity of the artist is unknown. During these years, Augusta and her husband William had a New York City residence as well as the Bedford farm, and it is likely a plaster model for the bust was made in the city. The usual practice of the time was for an American sculptor to send his plaster version to Italy, where a marble copy would be made to order by Italian stone carvers. It is likely that is how this bust was made.

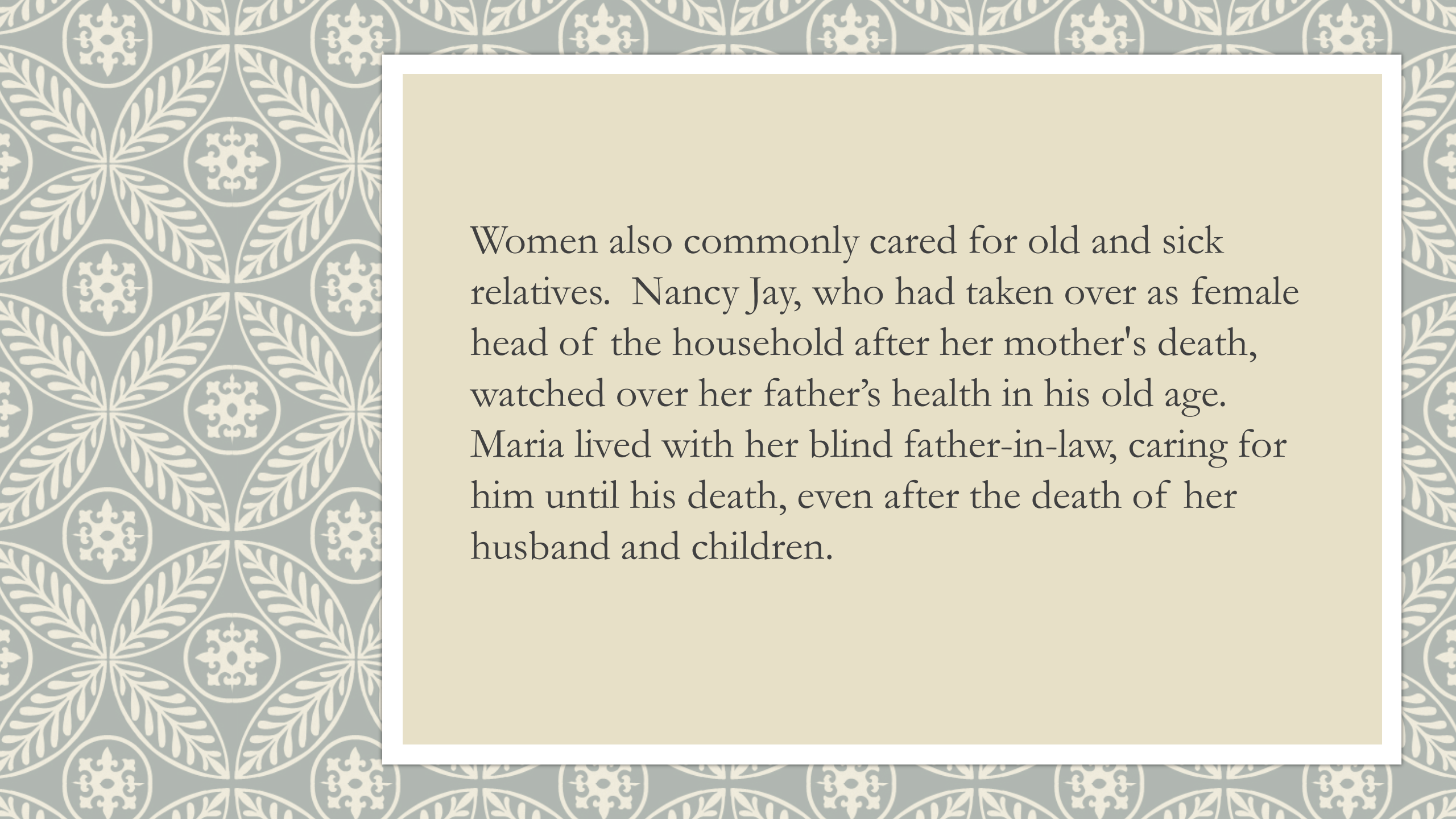
The cold impression the finished bust gives is belied by Augusta's devotion to her children and her husband. She was a quiet, very reserved woman whose main interests were her family and her Christian faith.



Highchair

JJ.1961.44

This highchair, dating from the 1820s to the 1840s, is original to the Jay property. It is painted in the style of a "fancy chair," and would have been pulled up to a dining table, from which the baby would be spoon-fed. During this period, highchairs were not equipped with trays. The baby was protected from falling by binding him or her to the chair back with a sash.



Women also commonly cared for old and sick relatives. Nancy Jay, who had taken over as female head of the household after her mother's death, watched over her father's health in his old age. Maria lived with her blind father-in-law, caring for him until his death, even after the death of her husband and children.

DAILY LIFE

“...dear Nancy...her example I hope will not be lost upon me, I do sincerely desire like her to do my duty & be useful to others.”

Sarah Louisa Jay, writing to her father

March 7, 1816

Involvement in the production of clothing and other textiles was nearly universal among American women during this period. All women learned to sew. Women of the lower classes learned to spin cotton, wool, and linen fiber into thread and weave it into cloth. This slow and extremely laborious process was necessary because of the cost, and sometimes the unavailability, of finished fabric. These women might also hire their sewing services out as a means of supplementing their household income. Women of the upper classes didn't need to sew their own clothing, but they did learn as many as twenty-five types of fancy needlework, including how to produce elegant decorative embroidery in silk and wool.

This work table has screens that slid up to shield the user's face from strong firelight when she was sewing during the evening. Pictured is one of two tables original to the house, and believed to have been purchased for Maria and Nancy. They date from the 1790s, when the sisters were in their early teens.

The tables could also be used for letter writing. The Jay women did a great deal of that, keeping family and friends up to date about the life of the house and the farm, whom they saw in church, whom they visited with, health matters, their brother's children's development, and frequently, their personal thoughts about philosophical and religious matters.





Thimble and case

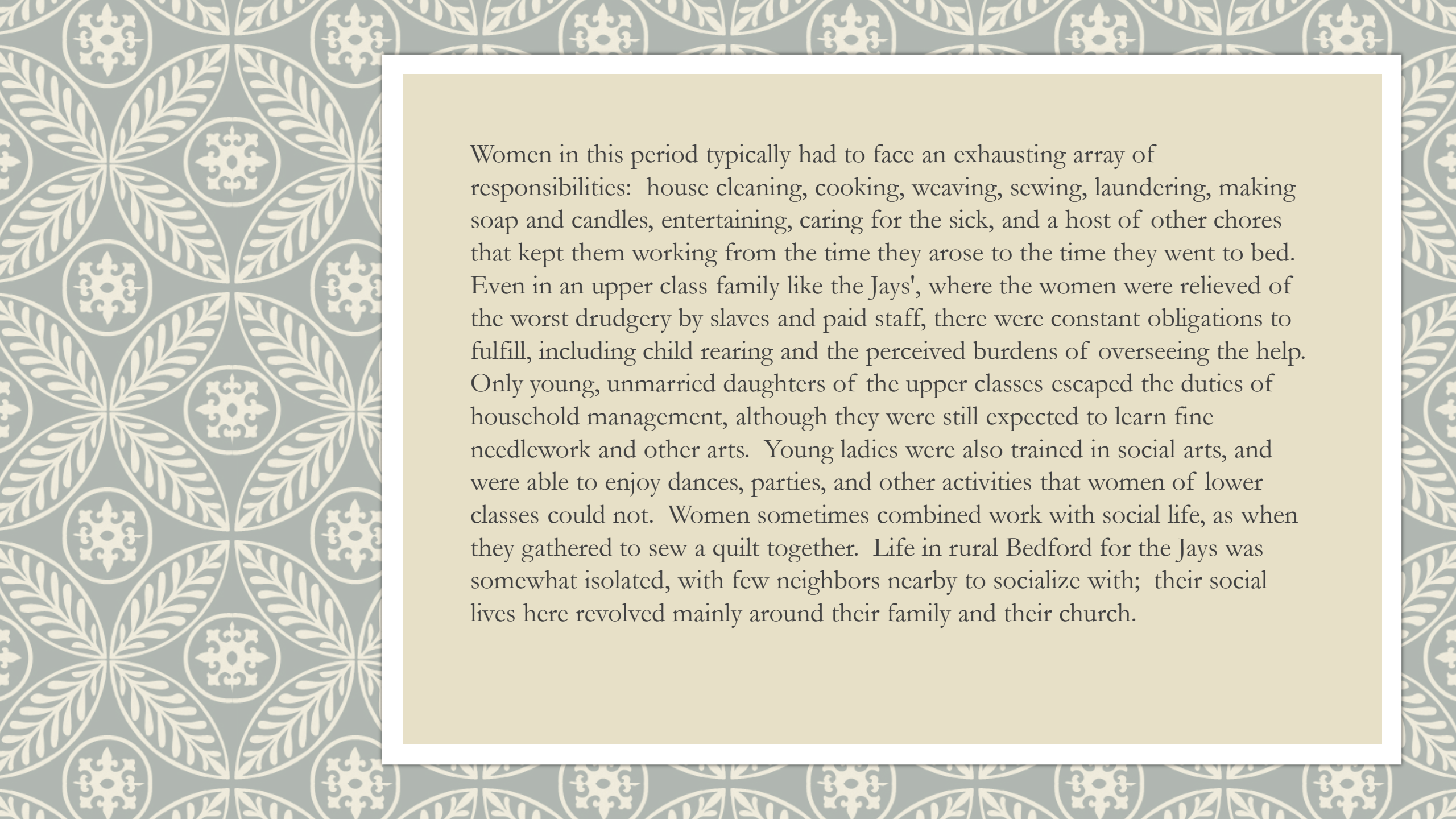
WH.1990.124

This small thimble and case are carved of ivory, and decorated with black and gold paint. The cover of the urn-shaped case is threaded to fit into the body. High-style sewing tools like this were made for ladies, who used them when executing fine needlework.



Piano-shaped sewing/music box JJ.1958.38

This fanciful object, made of fine cabinet woods, mother-of-pearl, ivory, and other materials, was both a music box and a sewing set. Made in the 1820s, it held a wind-up music mechanism (the hole for the winding key is visible on the left). Above the mechanism compartment was a sectioned, velvet-lined tray for a scissors, a sewing needle case, and other small implements, which are now mostly lost. The music box is original to the Jay house.



Women in this period typically had to face an exhausting array of responsibilities: house cleaning, cooking, weaving, sewing, laundering, making soap and candles, entertaining, caring for the sick, and a host of other chores that kept them working from the time they arose to the time they went to bed. Even in an upper class family like the Jays', where the women were relieved of the worst drudgery by slaves and paid staff, there were constant obligations to fulfill, including child rearing and the perceived burdens of overseeing the help. Only young, unmarried daughters of the upper classes escaped the duties of household management, although they were still expected to learn fine needlework and other arts. Young ladies were also trained in social arts, and were able to enjoy dances, parties, and other activities that women of lower classes could not. Women sometimes combined work with social life, as when they gathered to sew a quilt together. Life in rural Bedford for the Jays was somewhat isolated, with few neighbors nearby to socialize with; their social lives here revolved mainly around their family and their church.



Sovereign purse

JJ.1958.107

This silk coin purse closes with a silver clasp engraved "Miss Jay." It is believed to date from the 1830s, and may have belonged to Ann Jay or one of the daughters of William and Augusta Jay.



Slippers

JJ.1983.104.1-.2

These delicate silk slippers were made for daytime wear in the house; boots would have been necessary for outdoor wear, whether in the country or the city. The slippers date from the 1830s to the 1850s.

Maria Jay Banyer's flower book

JJ.2018.259

Maria Jay Banyer had a nearly scientific interest in gardening, and she collected, pressed, and mounted botanical specimens in this scrapbook. She expended a substantial amount of time doing this, and the book is a fascinating record of her activity. Because the dried specimens are now nearly two hundred years old, they are much too fragile to be exposed for long periods of time. The adjacent photographs depict some of the pages inside.



EDUCATION

*"I am not anxious that you should be what is called a
"learned Lady" but it would mortify me to have any of my
children classed with the ignorant and illiterate."*

John Jay to his daughter, Sarah Louisa, January 18, 1808

The term "learned Lady" was widely considered to be an insult for most of the eighteenth century. It had signified a woman who turned her back on her "proper" role: living her life in the service of her family. This point of view began to change as America developed as a nation, and the moral and practical value of women's education came to be recognized.

As a child in an upper class family, Sarah Livingston Jay had been educated at home in reading, writing, literature, history, and other subjects, gaining a benefit the great majority of girls of her generation didn't have. Illiteracy was widespread among women of the lower classes, and almost universal among slaves. In 1750, approximately 60% of American women were illiterate.

But in the last years of the eighteenth century, a movement grew to educate girls to a standard similar to that of boys. Private academies were begun for the daughters of affluent families, where, in addition to traditionally "feminine" subjects like needlework, art, and music, girls were taught writing, geography, mathematics, and astronomy. This was believed to prepare girls to be better wives and mothers: education was thought to increase their sense of morality, their capacity to be intelligent companions for their husbands, and their wisdom for raising children.



Pin cushion JJ.1968.15

The tiny cross-stitching on this small silk pin cushion was done by John and Sarah Jay's youngest daughter, Sarah Louisa Jay, in 1798, when she was only seven years old. Inscribed with the date, her initials, and her age, it reveals at what an early age upper class girls began to learn to read, write, and execute embroidery.

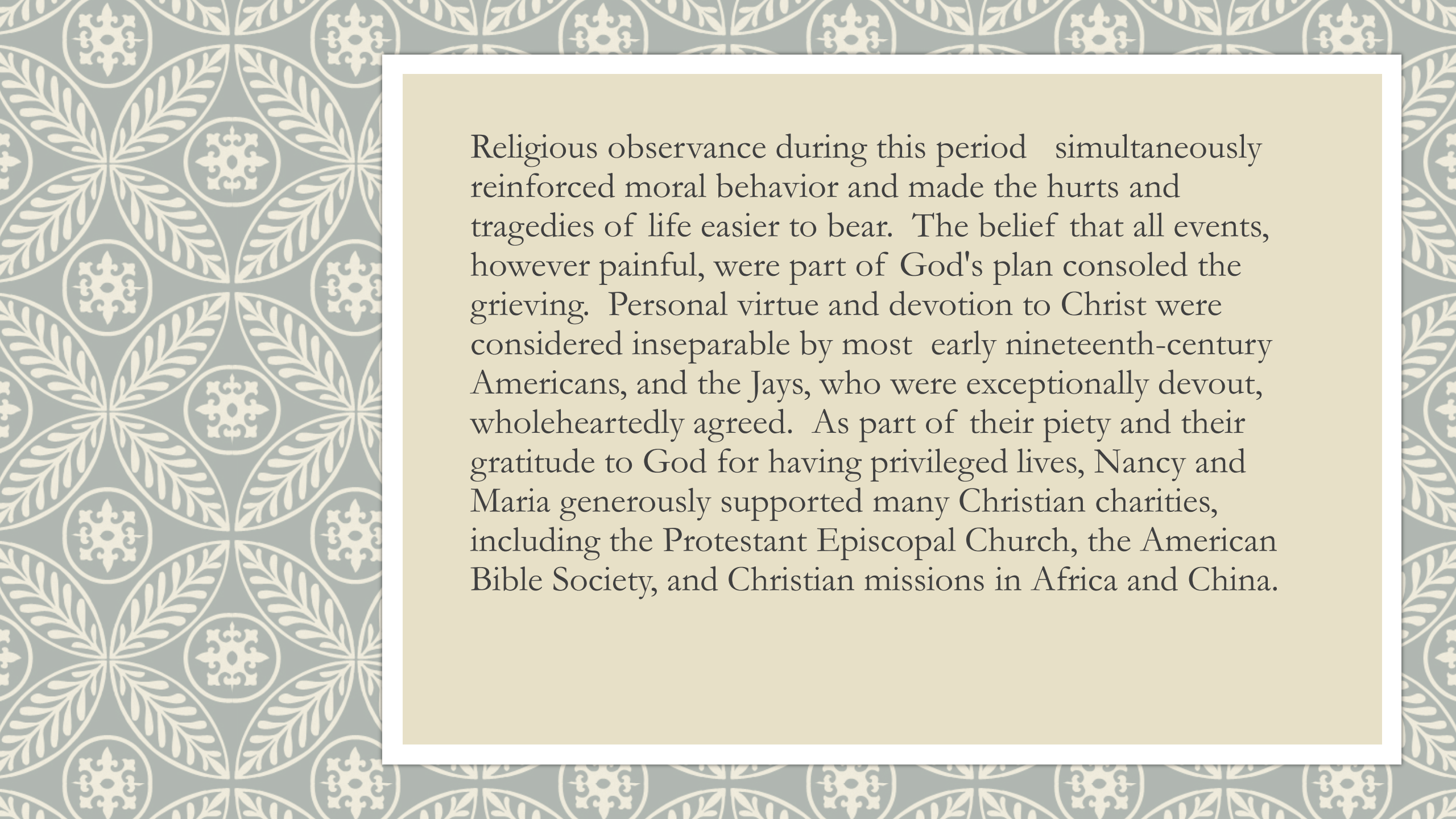


Sarah sent her eldest daughter, Maria, to the Moravian Seminary for Young Ladies in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, when the girl was twelve years old. Maria later wrote that she hoped "when I return again to my beloved parents that they may not be disappointed in my improvements." The Jays were pleased enough that they later sent Nancy to the school as well. Sarah Louisa attended Mr. Andrew's school in Albany. Higher education for women was not to begin until 1837, when Oberlin College became the first college to admit female students.

EDUCATION

"Prayer—for discretion, for inclination, opportunity, and means...to know the path of duty...to animate friends and Christians, and regard all as united by the bonds of love...our chief aim to love, to serve, and to glorify our God and Saviour..."

Nancy Jay, from an undated personal paper she titled, "Private Resolutions"



Religious observance during this period simultaneously reinforced moral behavior and made the hurts and tragedies of life easier to bear. The belief that all events, however painful, were part of God's plan consoled the grieving. Personal virtue and devotion to Christ were considered inseparable by most early nineteenth-century Americans, and the Jays, who were exceptionally devout, wholeheartedly agreed. As part of their piety and their gratitude to God for having privileged lives, Nancy and Maria generously supported many Christian charities, including the Protestant Episcopal Church, the American Bible Society, and Christian missions in Africa and China.