

## Reading or Magnifying glass

c. 1784

Tortoise Shell, Glass

English

JJ.1958.103



This oval magnifying glass first belonged to John Jay, and later to his son William. The case is engraved on both sides, with one reading "John Jay, 1784" and "William Jay 1812" on the reverse.

The reading glass is attached to a hinged, tortoise shell case. Tortoise shell is a material that has been used since ancient Greece. The use, and trade of tortoise shell was banned in the 1970s after several species of tortoise were nearing extinction. The use of tortoise shell in decorative arts objects was made popular by French cabinetmaker Andre Charles Boulle (1642-1732). He made furniture for King Louis XIV, and perfected the use of tortoiseshell inlays with a metal backing. The glass folds into the case for protection.

A reading glass would likely have been used by Jay with some frequency throughout his career. Used for reading maps, printed materials, and fine print, Jay certainly would have had one. John likely acquired the magnifier while in London, in the early part of 1784, or while in Dover, as he was leaving Europe to return home following his diplomatic mission.

William Jay was 23 years old in 1812. Having suffered since the age of 19 from a condition that weakened his eyes, a reading glass would have been of great use to him. 1812 was also the year that William Jay married Augusta McVickar, and the glass may have served as a sentimental wedding gift from his father.

