

*"A tender tribute to this marriage-in-all-but-law."
—Salin*



Charity & Sylvia

A SAME-SEX MARRIAGE IN EARLY AMERICA



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12

Their Own Dwelling

1809

ON JANUARY 1, 1809, Charity and Sylvia awoke together for the first time in their own house.¹ The day before, they had moved into a new twelve-by-twelve-foot structure built just for themselves.² The single room, which doubled as their living space and tailor shop, had plastered walls, a stove for cooking and warming the air, a single bedstead, a cutting table, and a couple of chairs. Despite its tiny dimensions, the crowded house seemed like a “mansion” to the women and their friends.³ The structure’s significance far outsized its square footage. By building a home together, Charity and Sylvia laid the physical foundation to spend the rest of their lives together and symbolically announced the permanence of their union to all their neighbors and family in Weybridge.

Settlers who moved to a frontier village like Weybridge placed enormous significance on property ownership. Only a desperate thirst for land would drive them from the refined, long-settled communities of southern New England to the rough-hewn northwest. The Drakes, for example, left behind a dense network of relations, long-established churches, and well-stocked merchants when they migrated from Easton to Vermont. They made the move because it permitted Sylvia’s brothers, who had been left landless by the economic disorder of the Revolutionary era, to establish themselves as property owners. A man could not call himself a man unless he possessed a competency, or independent source of living, that preserved him from an effeminizing dependence on others. But acquiring farms in Weybridge and neighboring Bristol restored the Drakes’ name and social position at a high cost to their comfort.⁴

The close association between land and masculinity made it very difficult for women to become property owners. Denied the appointments to land commissions granted their brothers and fathers, without landed inheritances or

the wage-earning capacity to accumulate enough capital to buy land, women depended on men to provide them homes. This structural bias made it almost impossible for women to live on their own, although it was a dream of many female friends to set up a home together.⁵ The biblical story of Naomi and Ruth modeled this desire for the Protestant culture of early America. “Where thou lodgest, I will lodge . . . where thou diest, will I die,” Ruth pledged to Naomi, in words that held special resonance to generations of women friends.⁶ Seldom could women follow their example.

In Charity and Sylvia’s case, a fortuitous set of circumstances allowed them to prove the exception by entering into an unusual arrangement with the village’s one female landowner, Sarah Hagar. The year that Charity arrived in Weybridge, Hagar, who was a neighbor of Sylvia’s sister Polly, was deeded property from her father, Luther Martin, to hold in trust for her sons.⁷ Martin probably designed this unusual transmission in order to keep the property out of the hands of Sarah’s husband, Benjamin Hagar, a cobbler and merchant who had problems managing money. Martin acted wisely: a little more than a decade later Benjamin Hagar died from yellow fever while on a business venture in Surinam.⁸ His wife’s possession of the Martin property in trust for her sons protected it from her husband’s creditors.

Sarah Hagar’s unlucky choice of husbands proved Charity and Sylvia’s good fortune when, in 1808, she leased the couple a quarter-acre of land, probably exchanging lifelong residence rights in exchange for a set fee. No deed for this original transaction survives to clarify the exact terms. It is possible that the women kept the matter private out of concern that the town fathers would not approve of women engaging in land deals. Later tax records listed Charity and Sylvia as “owners” of their quarter-acre parcel, rather than “occupants” (or renters).⁹ But a deed dating to 1837 describes the women as possessing only the buildings on the property, rather than having “right, title, claim, or demand” to the land itself.¹⁰ Whatever its exact terms, the anomalous arrangement worked well for all three women. Sarah Hagar supplemented her husband’s inconsistent support without having to leave the farm that she needed to support herself and

her six children. Meanwhile, living on the property of a woman landowner freed Charity and Sylvia from the rumors of sexual misbehavior that might attach to single women living on a man's property.¹¹ Neither Charity nor Sylvia would be mistaken for an adulterer's mistress.

Living on a woman's property could not protect Charity and Sylvia from rumors of another variety of illicit sexuality, however. The rare households established by pairs of women in early America risked raising community concerns about lesbianism. For example, a pair of Philadelphia women were arrested in 1792 on a charge of "cohabiting," a term typically applied against unmarried opposite-sex couples who set up homes together. The authorities apparently suspected the women of having a sexual relationship.¹² Visitors to Charity and Sylvia's home, viewing the single bedstead in their one-room house, had to confront the same sexual potential within the women's relationship.¹³ Although bed-sharing was common on the nineteenth-century frontier, medical and moral authorities expressed concerns about the sexual dangers of the practice, warning that bed-sharing might lead to the "fondling of young persons of the same sex" and train youth in the habits of sodomy.¹⁴ By building a home together and sharing the same bed, Charity and Sylvia created strong cause for concern in Weybridge. To maintain their domestic arrangement, the women would have to counter potential anxieties about their lesbianism.

Some female couples before Charity and Sylvia had found acceptance in their communities by projecting a Christian reputation and contributing to the public welfare. Hannah Catherall and Rebecca Jones, who lived together in Philadelphia from the 1760s to the 1780s, gained the respect of the town's Quaker elders despite their reputation as "yoke fellows," a common metaphor for spouses. The women's piety and good works protected them from questions about their sexuality.¹⁵ Alternatively, the Ladies of Llangollen, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, relied on their elite social class to maintain the open secret of their sexuality. Satirical accounts of the women's mannish appearance suggest that people considered them to be lesbians, but their gentility allowed the women's reputation to weather these suspicions.¹⁶ The same held true for the mannish

Anne Lister and her partner Ann Walker, who lived together in Yorkshire. Suspicions about Lister's sexuality in particular were quashed by her aristocratic social power.¹⁷ Charity's evident masculinity made her and Sylvia's unusual household equally vulnerable to sexual suspicion, but she possessed neither the "money nor the elite status that insulated Butler, Ponsonby, Lister, and Walker from assault. Instead, Charity and Sylvia, like Catherall and Jones, would have to build reputations for piety and good works to secure communal toleration. It took time to acquire this social capital, and at the outset of their lives together many in the community treated the new house with suspicion.

Adding to the challenge, the house proved too inviting to other women in the community who were looking for female intimacy. Soon after Charity and Sylvia took possession of the structure they invited a visit from the minister's nineteen-year-old-sister, Mary Hovey, who was working as a schoolteacher nearby. The visit seemed designed to demonstrate the respectability of the household, but it had unexpected consequences. Mary became enamored with not only the house but one of its inhabitants. In a thank-you letter sent soon after the visit, Mary gushed about the women's delightful home and confessed that her mind kept traveling back to their door: "O my dear girls, how often do my roving thoughts visit you in your little habitation." Mary understood that the women's shared home signaled their inseparability; on that account, she wrote, "you will not take it amiss that I addressed you both in one letter."¹⁸ But in the months that followed, the young teacher began directing increasing attention toward Charity alone.

Mary's first letter initiated a flurry of pages to follow. Of the seventeen letters (at a minimum) that she sent to the house before the end of the year, only four of the most brief came addressed to Sylvia. Two more arrived addressed to both women, a common practice for married correspondents.¹⁹ The rest bore Charity's name alone. Mary's letters to Charity showed all the hallmarks of the romantic correspondence that Charity had received in her twenties. Mary filled her letters with praise for Charity's "refined" taste, "noble mind," and the "propriety, ease, and elegance" of her writing.²⁰ She humbled herself before

“such a person” as her new friend.²¹ She differentiated the “real friendship” they shared from the false friendships between most women.²² She gave the impression of being thoroughly taken with her new friend.

Charity may have courted Mary’s affections at first, as she had courted other women teachers in the past, but when Sylvia expressed reservations about the friendship by treating Mary with coldness, Charity changed course.²³ First she sought to reassure Sylvia of her commitment to their union. At the end of July, after receiving a solicitous letter from Mary, Charity composed a romantic poem for Sylvia that pledged her lifelong fidelity: “For Heaven my witness can prove / That from thee I ne’er wish to part; / That as ever I sincerely love, / And own thee, the friend of my heart.”²⁴ Mary’s attentions had not changed her feelings, Charity promised; she loved Sylvia as truly “as ever.” But Charity’s reassurances could not resolve the problem of Mary’s increasingly fervent letters. The final straw came in August, when Mary seems to have sent Charity a romantic token: a little paper heart inscribed to her friend with her initials and Charity’s framed inside delicately inked loops, and on the rear side more hearts set within leafy and fruiting vines.²⁵

Mary Hovey may not have known how her gesture took part in a tradition of landscape imagery that women used to express their desires for other women, but Charity recognized the heart’s meaning. She had once given a very similar object to Lydia Richards. The heart compelled a firm response. Rather than bring Charity closer, the token forced Charity to sever her intimacy with Mary by rejecting the gift. Although Charity’s words are lost, Mary’s apology for overstepping the boundaries of their relationship survives. “If my dear, I have given you any occasion of offence, or have been the cause of one disagreeable feeling I, in a most serious and humble manner ask your forgiveness,” Mary wrote with a heavy heart. Once she had “been so happy as to call [Charity] my FRIEND.” Mary did not realize how this name, inscribed on the valentine, would overstep the limits of their acquaintance. “I vainly tho’t [the name] without offence—But alas! I fear I have been too hasty, not feeling my inferiority to yourself, I have been too presuming, I have flattered myself too much happiness

to have it granted me—but my dearest! (friend I had almost said) I hope you will put the most charitable constructions on what is pass'd and forgive.”²⁶ Mary’s attempts at intimacy had been repelled at the cottage gates.²⁷ This aborted relationship was Charity’s last romantic friendship. She never again entered into such a heated correspondence with another woman.

There was only room for one soul besides Charity beneath the fruited vine, and that was Sylvia. In the prophetic imagery of Micah and Isaiah, the vine and fig tree represent household happiness.²⁸ The women frequently called upon this imagery in representing their household together. Sylvia referred to their house as “our own vine.”²⁹ They planted vining roses around the house as a symbol of their love, and one of the women worked the symbol into the braided hair framing the twinned silhouettes cut for them by a traveling portrait artist (see the frontispiece).³⁰

Charity’s relations best appreciated the house’s symbolic function as a representation of Charity and Sylvia’s commitment. Soon after moving in, the women sent news of the house back to the Bryant family. Charity’s close cousin Vesta, who had been abandoned by her disreputable husband and forced to live in her younger brother’s home, celebrated news of the house. She wrote to Charity that “your new method of living with your agreeable companion must I am confident add greatly to your happiness.” Without a home to call her own, Vesta recognized her cousin’s good fortune. She imagined it was “a great satisfaction to a thinking mind to retire into some peaceful and sequestered spot from the busy scenes of life and there enjoy the pleasures of reflection.” Vesta also felt sympathy for Sarah Hagar as the fellow victim of a poor marriage choice, writing to Charity that “the description which you give of your Landlady is truly elegant; Oh! how does Virtue shine even in the most distress’d circumstances.”³¹ To a woman like Vesta, who had experienced the worst aspects of traditional marriage, having been abused and abandoned by an alcoholic husband, it appeared that Charity and Sylvia’s unusual living situation had a lot to recommend it.

Both Sylvia and Charity wrote to Anna Kingman to tell her about the house, and Charity's sister wrote back to each in kind. Acknowledging Sylvia's role as the goodwife within the household, Anna congratulated Sylvia on the "little dwelling which you have so prettily described." It would fall to Sylvia to keep the home clean and pleasing to the eye.³² A surging tide of domestic ideology sweeping North America in the early 1800s stressed the need for even frontier farmwives to keep attractive homes.³³ To fulfill this mandate, Sylvia not only busied her days with washing, sweeping, cleaning, and keeping general order in the little house, she hung pictures on the walls.³⁴ By contrast, in her letter to Charity, Anna applauded the house as a "neat little cell." This turn of phrase cast her sister in the role of a holy woman rather than a wife, and implied that the new house served a higher spiritual purpose, uniting the women in service to God.³⁵ The fact that Anna knew of the more earthy dimensions to the women's relationship (she once closed a letter to Charity with the instructions "do kiss Sylvia, for me once," suggesting that Charity kissed Sylvia quite often for herself) reveals how she endeavored to cast her youngest sister's iconoclasms in the most acceptable light.³⁶

Peter Bryant acknowledged the announcement of his sister's new home in his typical laughing way. "I am ... very glad to hear that you have derived benefit from plastering," he wrote to Charity in March 1809, making a medical pun that suited his profession. Despite his gentle teasing, Peter recognized the magnitude of Charity's accomplishment in constructing a space to spend her future with Sylvia. "I hope, however necessary it may be found to plaster, or even to white wash, [it] will sustain the rude shocks of time and the elements for many years yet to come!"³⁷ The house's sturdiness represented the solidity of the women's connection.

Peter's good wishes, as close to a benediction of her marriage as Charity could hope to receive from her jocular older brother, bore out. The following year, when spring greened the vines that grew around their house, Charity and Sylvia enjoyed the annual rebirth, finally reassured that it did not herald a looming separation as they so feared in years past. Spring had lost its cruel sting. In a pair

of twinned poems from March 1810, Charity heralded the change of seasons as presaging the women's long future together. "May the beautiful season so lately commenc'd / Pass unclouded by disorder and strife," Charity addressed Sylvia in the first poem. "And may we be gratefull for favor dispens'd / thus may we pass our whole life." The flowering of spring, Charity wrote with great optimism, symbolized the bright outlooks for their future. When troubles did intrude upon their lives, Charity promised in the second poem, then "O might we still unite / And spend our days in Peace and calm of delight."³⁸ With a common dwelling to shelter them, any difficulties the women encountered could be resolved together.

In conventional marriages, the husband's ownership of the marital house represented his place at the head of the family. In contrast, Charity and Sylvia always emphasized their joint ownership of the cottage. They used the expression "our own dwelling," or a variation on these words, as their most common term to describe the house.³⁹ These three words captured the essence of the matter: Charity and Sylvia had a home together that they could call their own. The act of joint possession made the house beloved to the women. Sometimes the women referred with affection to its diminutive size. Acknowledging the small dimensions of the house only emphasized the magnitude of their accomplishment in building a home together. Charity wrote to her brother of the great satisfaction she took in hosting relatives and friends "at our own little dwelling."⁴⁰ The house might have been just a "mite," in the words of more than one guest, but as in the parable of the poor widow from the Gospel of Mark, who by throwing her "mite" into the temple treasury made a contribution of all that she had (Mark 12:41–44), the symbolic significance of Charity and Sylvia's hospitality exceeded their material offerings.⁴¹

Gradually, over the years, as Charity and Sylvia earned money through their tailoring business, they built onto the original structure to make it more hospitable. In 1812 they built a second small room, presumably a separate chamber for sleeping, as well as closets and a clothespress, or wardrobe, for storing their work. Before that time, the women's spare clothing probably hung on pegs attached to the walls. The 1812 expansion began the process of

separating the public and private aspects of the house, creating spaces suitable for guests where the question of Charity and Sylvia's sexual relationship would not intrude so blatantly.

Soon after the expansion, Sylvia wrote to implore her mother to make an extended visit to the house. The Drake family's reception of the women's new home had been more frosty than the Bryants', who had been relieved of the burden of policing the women's sexuality by the imposition of such a great distance. Sylvia's mother and several of her brothers felt no such relief, and their response to the house's symbolic representation of the women's commitment was consequently less approving. Sylvia, who as the youngest daughter had grown up very close to her mother, hoped that the expansion of the house could help heal the breach. "Do visit here my dear Mother as soon as the roads are settled," Sylvia wrote to Mary in April 1813. "If your life + health + ours should be spar'd, I shall see you but a few times more according to our former practice of visiting if we should both live these twenty years."⁴²

At first, Mary resisted her youngest daughter's invitations. The following Christmas, a holiday traditionally spent with family, Sylvia wrote to her mother bemoaning that it had been more than a year since they had seen each other. Charity and Sylvia had built yet another room onto the house that year, and they now had sufficient space for long-term visitors. Charity's friend Lydia was staying for the winter. Sylvia hoped Mary would soon take similar advantage of their hospitality. She accepted blame for the long separation between her mother and herself, acknowledging that she led a "wicked and abandoned life." But still she begged her mother's acceptance for the new household she had established. Assuring Mary of Charity's "strongest affection to you," Sylvia implored "May you my dear Mother let her share with me your parental love she well deserves it she is everything I could wish."⁴³ Finally, in the early spring of 1815, Mary came for a short call at her daughter's "little dwelling." Afterward, Sylvia thanked her mother for the visit, which "endears this little spot to me." Mary's stay marked a new acceptance within the Drake family of the permanency of Charity and Sylvia's union.⁴⁴

Over the next several years, the women continued to expand the house. They filled in the space between the main house and the woodhouse, adding another functional room. In 1819, ten years after first moving into the twelve-by-twelve-foot structure, Charity and Sylvia finally had “a large chamber bedroom” built, as well as a cistern room for water storage and bathing. The previous sleeping space could now be repurposed as a separate dining room, making it easier to entertain large parties.⁴⁵ Sylvia and Charity began to host holiday meals, cooking turkeys to share with family and friends.⁴⁶ After a decade, the women’s household was achieving integration within the family circle.

On December 21, 1821, Charity and Sylvia hosted a grand Christmas dinner to welcome Sylvia’s mother Mary, aged seventy-nine, who had arrived the day before to spend the winter with her youngest daughter. The gathering was so large that the women had to move the stove to make room for all the guests before Sylvia began cooking a turkey large enough to feed the family.⁴⁷ Polly and Asaph Hayward came, along with sister Rhoda and her husband, Chauncey Ellsworth, and numerous nieces and nephews. One of the women’s apprentices, whom they regarded almost as daughters, also joined the gathering, along with a friend. The meal represented a social triumph for Sylvia. She seemed to have secured her mother’s acceptance for her household, but after the dinner ended and the guests went home, she discovered that the tensions between them lingered.

Too often during that first long visit, mother and daughter passed their evenings in front of the fire in uncomfortable silence. Sylvia could not find the path back to her mother’s good graces. By accepting her youngest daughter’s invitation to spend the winter in her home, Mary had ceded her toleration to Sylvia’s unusual household, but still she withheld her approval. Several chilly months later, after Mary had left to rejoin her sons in Bristol, Sylvia wrote morosely in her diary, “All nature looks dreary, And silent.” The view outside represented the feelings in her heart. The long-dreamt-of reunion with her mother had not brought the restoration of affections Sylvia so passionately desired. “Has my mother been gone so soon,” Sylvia questioned in her diary.

“Alas! I dream, our life is nothing more.”⁴⁸ Their lives, Sylvia feared, would slip away without a true reconciliation.

Sylvia found it impossible to broach the reserve between herself and her mother because she could not speak forthrightly about its source. Her mother had avoided the house because of the union it symbolized, and to speak honestly about her sexual concerns would make it less, not more, possible for Mary to spend time there as a guest. Sylvia faced an impossible task clearing the air without naming the source of the trouble. She tried, nonetheless, sending a letter to Bristol shortly after Mary’s departure begging forgiveness for their long silent evenings. “My Mother, I have not anything to write, which I might not have said, When you was pleasd to bless me with your presence,” Sylvia wrote. “But as I neglected to say anything which I ought to have said, + am incapable of writing that which I wish to convey and on this account, the great object for which we meet, + [illeg.] in the same world has + I fear ever will remain unaccomplished.”⁴⁹ Even in a moment of great candor, Sylvia could not name the “mute sin” that silenced her mother and herself. She felt crippled by the sense that “on this account,” she would never be saved, but terror of the after-world could not move her tongue to speak the problem to her mother and lose any future hope for reconciliation. The open secret of her sexuality had to remain silenced.

Despite the tensions between them, the next spring Mary came for a second extended stay. Her visit coincided with a thorough renovation that filled the house with enough noise and activity to cover any long silences. Charity and Sylvia had a cellar dug. They built new chambers over the shop-room for the apprentices to live in. They refinished the rough board exterior with clapboard, shingles, and bricks. They installed glass windows and interior doors between the rooms.⁵⁰ After living in a construction site for over a month, Sylvia complained that the house was “an heap of confusion.”⁵¹ Working frantically at her sewing to pay for the ongoing construction, Sylvia muttered over the “continued scene of dirt + confusion” that surrounded her.⁵² In the third week of May, Sylvia began painting the house herself, starting with the chamber, then proceeding to the

kitchen, the buttery, the working room, and even the clothespress.⁵³ She put the finishing touches on the house on May 24. Charity whitewashed.⁵⁴ The construction was complete. Although the house remained a cottage, Charity and Sylvia had finally achieved a standard of refinement that matched their respectable station in life.

Many prominent residents of Weybridge either helped with the renovations or came to check on their progress. It took seven men to raise the roof and four to frame the house.⁵⁵ Local doctor Zenas Shaw helped to dig the cellar.⁵⁶ The respectfully titled “Captain Wales” made the “pavements” (possibly the exterior path).⁵⁷ Asaph Hayward stoned the cellar and did brick work.⁵⁸ Members of the Lathrop, Wilson, Marshall, Ayers, Foster, Kellogg, Sturdivant, and Brewster families all participated in the renovations.⁵⁹ Nephews Edwin and Azel Hayward, and Isaac and Lauren Drake worked on the house as well. Charity and Sylvia paid some of the workers in clothing and others with cash, but the overwhelming community involvement in the renovations suggests that many helped primarily out of respect. As the renovations reached their conclusion, Sylvia and Charity hosted visits from many estimable local women as well as their husbands.⁶⁰

After the renovations were completed, Sarah Hagar’s sons came to inspect the improvements to the property. Although Charity and Sylvia leased the property from Sarah, since she held it in trust the approval of her three oldest sons was essential to the women’s comfort. Charity and Sylvia had a long acquaintance with the men, who were still boys when the women first moved to the property. The oldest, Benjamin, had attended Middlebury College and studied medicine; the second, Luther, was a successful storekeeper; the third, Jonathan, was also a merchant, and a man of faith.⁶¹ Sharing Charity and Sylvia’s middle-class principles of frugality, piety, and learning, the Hagar brothers respected the women and felt grateful to Charity and Sylvia for taking care of their increasingly enfeebled mother. After Jonathan and his wife came for a visit, Sylvia recorded with relief that Jonathan “assures us of his friendship.”⁶² Sarah’s younger son Henry, born after Luther Martin deeded her the property, also came to inspect.

He had no say in the property's disposition, but his feelings still had consequence. Sylvia reported that she served him a drink and he left on good terms.⁶³

Some of Sylvia's relations, however, still did not share the community's general enthusiasm. Her brother Asaph Drake, who had once been a great friend to Charity and Sylvia, came to the new house on May 15, 1823, to pay the women interest on a debt he owed to them, but Sylvia noted ruefully that he "refuse[d] to eat" at their table.⁶⁴ This slight crushed Sylvia's feelings, leading her to bitter recriminations. The next morning, Sylvia wrote Asaph a letter retracting "what I said the other day in the warmth of my wicked feelings" and begging him to forgive anything she had done "to make you shun my society."⁶⁵ That night she could not sleep from anxiety that the letter, meant as an apology, would offend her beloved brother. She wished that she could claw the words back. When Asaph wrote back the next day, assuring Sylvia of his continued love, his sister felt even more wretched. "Writing in half broken sentences," with "eyes bathed in tears," she expressed her regrets for making "mole hills into mountains." Her reaction to Asaph's perceived slight had been overblown. She confessed to having a "jealous disposition" and a "corrupt + depravd heart" that could not tolerate a slight. But Sylvia did not take the blame for the misunderstanding entirely on herself. She also attributed her over-sensitivity to the rejection she had suffered from her brothers Isaac and Oliver. "They have said they did not wish to come here because there was no man for them to visit," she explained to Asaph. So when he had hurried away from her house the day before, she suspected that he had joined their boycott.⁶⁶

Unfortunately, Sylvia may have been more correct than Asaph could admit. Four years later, he continued to be an infrequent visitor at the women's house. His absence became the source of "so much suffering" and "affliction" to Sylvia, that it was "more bitter than words can tell or language can express." One Sunday in October 1827, when Sylvia left the house to attend meeting, Charity picked up her pen to try and set things right. She took the blame on herself for driving Asaph away. If "the dwelling of your sister has become almost forsaken by you," she observed, the cause must be in "some imperfection which you have (by

acquaintance) discover'd in me." She begged Asaph to resume his visits to their home, reminding him of the hospitality she had once found at his door. When Charity first arrived in Weybridge, she met "a friendly welcome at your hospitable dwelling." She was a "stranger in a strange Land," and Asaph had taken her in like the Midianites had accepted Moses after he fled Egypt. Then, like Moses, Charity had married into her host's family. Because of "the connection which has since take place between your sister and myself" Charity wrote, using a common nineteenth-century synonym for marriage, she had come to consider Asaph in a "fraternal relation" as a brother. Little could she imagine that one day he would "shun this dwelling And keep far from its inmates in your affections, and forget that they are related to you, either by the bonds of Nature or Friendship."⁶⁷ Now she sought to remind him of that bond and of his duty to his sisters. She begged him to renew his visits to their home.

The claims of kinship had great power in rural New England. The Drakes, always a close-knit family, would not abandon Sylvia altogether. Their youngest sister's choice to spend her life in "connection" with another woman discomfited her mother and her brothers, a feeling they expressed by avoiding visits to her house. But on the rare occasions that Sylvia and Charity spoke out against this mistreatment, the family compromised its embargo to preserve family amity. Sylvia recorded these encounters with enthusiasm—for example, "Brother Solomon + wife + Miriam comes. Quite overjoyd to have a Brother + sister come to make us a visit."⁶⁸ On another occasion, Sylvia recorded a large family gathering at her table, "three of my Brothers + their wives call + stay about 2 hours. Brother Isaac + wife Br Oliver wife + Brother Asaphs wife stay to tea + sister Hayward."⁶⁹ But many years passed between the sporadic visits. An 1835 visit from Solomon, who lived in the neighboring town of Bristol, produced the reflection that "6 years has elapsd since he made me a visit all was laid willingly aside to entertain so strange a guest."⁷⁰ Even Asaph, who visited his sister the most frequently, could be cold in his affections. A note of relief pervaded Sylvia's diary when she recorded that during a visit to Asaph's house he "appears like a Br indeed."⁷¹ Their friendly reception could never be taken for granted.

The absence of a man in Sylvia's house did not trouble her sister Polly as it did their brothers. Polly, who lived close by, paid weekly visits to her little sister despite her own obligations caring for a large family at home. "Sister Hd here," Sylvia recorded in her diary again and again over the years. Polly often stayed for tea or a meal. On several occasions she spent the night. She came to help out with sewing or housework, to mix a batch of currant wine, dip candles, or to cook a meal. Around the table, the sisters mulled over the sermons they heard at the meetinghouse.⁷² In the sex-segregated culture of early New England, a wife like Polly Hayward could feel at ease in the feminine space of Charity and Sylvia's cottage. Sylvia felt grateful for Polly's constancy of affection over the years. "My Sister. Ah! much has she done," Sylvia reflected in her diary in June 1821, before leaving on a trip for Massachusetts.⁷³ She owed a debt of gratitude to the sister who not only introduced her to Charity, but also gave her blessing to their household.

Polly's frequent transit back and forth from Sylvia's door beat a path for her husband to follow as well. Asaph Hayward remained resolutely friendly to both Sylvia and Charity throughout the years, visiting their house with his wife and children or on his own.⁷⁴ To Asaph Hayward, the women's lack of a man at home gave more reason to visit, not less, as he took it upon himself to help with conventionally male household chores. He sharpened their axes. He set up their bedstead. He repaired things around the house, fixing the sink, building a shelf in the woodhouse, cutting wood chips for the stove. He hooped barrels for their use. He brought the women fresh fish from Otter Creek. He butchered their hog. The women repaid him with occasional gifts of clothes, sewed free of charge. But the relationship was not strictly mercenary. Sylvia noted that Asaph Hayward called on occasion just to take tea with herself and her companion. Familial affection motivated Asaph's attentions as much as material reward.⁷⁵

Over time, the tensions between Sylvia and her mother abated. Mary Drake lived to the very old age of eighty-seven, requiring years of care from her children, many of whom faced troubles in their own lives. Brother Isaac, for example, who died a bankrupt, was unable to house his mother and could only

make promises to pay Asaph Drake to cover his share of their mother's support at some future point.⁷⁶ In the final eight years of her life, Mary spent more than thirty-six months living with Charity and Sylvia at their expense, joining her daughter and her companion in sewing, cooking, and common prayer.⁷⁷ Throughout this time, she continued to feel troubled by her daughter's sexual connection to another woman. After an extended visit in 1824, Sylvia admitted in a letter that she had frequently left her mother alone because the air in the room was too thick to breathe. Sylvia never felt able to discuss the situation openly, confessing "such were my feelings, such the guilt + magnitude of my own crimes, that I was unable to open the doors of my lips to you when you were here last, as it respected your own feelings on this momentous subject." But Sylvia assured her "best of Mothers" that she loved her and was trying her best to follow God's righteous path.⁷⁸

All things considered, Sylvia felt proud that she and Charity had established a comfortable house where her mother could reside. "How thankfull I ought to be for having a Mother so long spar'd and for the means to make her as comfortable as we do," she reflected in her diary.⁷⁹ Whatever her mother might think of the relationship, Sylvia proved more useful to the aging woman by binding herself to Charity, who helped her to build a comfortable home, than she would have been had she remained single and dependent on her family's support.

Notes

Chapter 12

1. Account of her Travels by Charity Bryant, April 9, 1844. BDP; SDD, April 13, 1822.
2. Charity describes the dimensions in Charity Bryant to Sarah Snell Bryant, June 8, 1833. BBFP.
3. Many people, including Sylvia, used this word for the house. SDD, July 19, 1823; Mary Hovey to Sylvia Drake, September 5, 1809; Lydia Richards to Charity Bryant, December 20, 1812; Clarissa Hovey to Sylvia Drake and Charity Bryant, undated. BDP.
4. Lombard, Making Manhood.
5. Moore, Sister Arts.
6. Donoghue, Inseparable, 61.
7. Luther Martin to Sarah Hagar, 1808. WLR, Book 3:502. Weybridge acquired one other female landowner at this time; Bill Solomon to Sarah Parmale. WLR, Book 3:63.
8. SDD, March 19, 1821.
9. WTR, 1842–1866.
10. WLR, Book 7:59.
11. Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake to Sarah Hagar, November 1837. WLR, Book 7:59. Bryant also specifies in her 1844 record that the house she and Sylvia occupied on December 31, 1808, was the same they lived in for the rest of their lives together; Account of her Travels by Charity Bryant, April 9, 1844. BDP.

12. Lyons, "Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture," 148.

13. The sexual implications of bed-sharing has been a topic of debate in nineteenth-century American history, in large part because of its role in the question of Abraham Lincoln's sexuality. Biographer C. A. Tripp, who argued for Lincoln's homosexuality, pointed to the four years he shared a bed with his beloved friend Joshua Speed. Tripp's critics reject the sexual salience of bed-sharing. See C. A. Tripp, *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Free Press, 2005); Richard Brookhiser, "Was Lincoln Gay?," *New York Times*, January 9, 2005.

14. Samuel Bayard Woodward, *Hints for the Young in Relation to the Health of Body and Mind* (Boston: George W. Light, 1840), 32. Another doctor warned that "children as they approach adolescence should never be permitted to sleep together," because the privacy and physical intimacy of the bed were likely to result in mutual masturbation; Seth Pancoast, *The Ladies' Medical Guide: A Complete Instructor and Counsellor* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Bros., 1875), 590. Also D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 126.

15. Wulf, *Not All Wives*, 47, 113. Wulf turns up evidence of several lesbian-like households in eighteenth-century Philadelphia, including one kept by two Irish merchant women, Ruth Webb and Mary Taggart (145).

16. Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 9–15.

17. Jill Liddington, "Anne Lister of Shibden Hall, Halifax (1791–1840): Her Diaries and the Historians," *History Workshop* 35, no. 1 (1993): 45–77.

18. Mary Hovey to Charity Bryant, February 1809. BDP.

19. Good, "Friendly Relations."

20. Mary Hovey to Charity Bryant, July 1809; Mary Hovey to Charity Bryant, July 14, 1809; Mary Hovey to Charity Bryant, August 2, 1809; Mary Hovey to Charity Bryant, August 2, 1809. BDP.

21. Mary Hovey to Charity Bryant, July 1809. BDP.

22. Mary Hovey to Charity Bryant, July 14, 1809; Mary Hovey to Charity Bryant, August 4, 1809. BDP.

23. Mary Hovey to Sylvia Drake, August 2, 1809. BDP.

24. "Charity Bryant, to Miss Sylvia Drake, July 29, 1809." BDP.

25. The scrap is undated, but Mary's letter of apology, dated August 22, 1809, seems to make reference to the love token. BDP.

26. Mary Hovey to Charity Bryant, August 22, 1809. BDP.

27. Letters from Mary Hovey continued through 1811. She married Dr. Jabez Spicer, a doctor and minister, around this time, and the pair later moved to the Midwest.

28. Micah 4:4; Isaiah 36:16.

29. SDD, December 7, 1821.

30. The roses are mentioned in William Cullen Bryant, *Letters of a Traveller*, 136.

31. Vesta Guild to Charity Bryant, January 13, 1810. Vesta wrote the letter in response to a May 1809 letter from Charity. BDP.

32. Anna Kingman to Sylvia Drake, May 8, 1809. BDP.

33. Richard Lyman Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

34. Sylvia records her constant housekeeping duties in SDD, 1821–1823 and 1835–1836. Lydia Richards to Charity Bryant, April 14, 1811, refers to the fact that her "profile" hung in the house. BDP.

35. Anna Kingman to Charity Bryant, May 8, 1809. BDP.

36. Anna Kingman to Charity Bryant, October 1808. BDP.

37. Peter Bryant to Charity Bryant, March 6, 1809. HBFP.

38. Charity Bryant, “Untitled [Amen, I can verily say],” March 1810. Charity repeats her wish to remain united to Sylvia in “Acrostic Written by Firelight on the Prospect of a Speedy Separation,” March 1810. BDP.

39. For example, SDD, December 29, 1821; Charity Bryant, “This Little Spot of Ground” (1847). BDP.

40. Charity Bryant to Peter Bryant, August 31, 1814. HBFP. See also Sylvia’s affectionate reference to the small house as a “cottage most dear,” SDD, February 28, 1823.

41. SDD, April 28, 1823; May 16, 1823.

42. Sylvia Drake to Mary Drake, April 4, 1813. DFP.

43. Sylvia Drake to Mary Drake, December 25, 1814. DFP.

44. Sylvia Drake to Mary Drake, March 19, 1815. DFP.

45. The complete list of rooms and construction dates is from “Buildings of C Bryant & S Drake.” DFP.

46. For example, SDD, January 5, 1821; February 1, 1821; January 28, 1822.

47. SDD, December 21, 1821; “Record of Mary Drake’s visits in the 1820s.” DFP.

48. SDD, April 4, 1822.

49. Sylvia Drake to Mary Drake, April 14, 1822. DFP.

50. Sylvia records progress on the 1823 renovations in SDD, April 1–May 24, 1823.

51. SDD, May 9, 1823.

52. SDD, May 13, 1823.

53. SDD, May 23, 1823.

54. SDD, May 24, 1823.

55. SDD, April 4, 1823.

56. SDD, March 31, 1823; April 1, 1823; May 8, 1823; May 10, 1823.
57. SDD, April 15, 1823; April 16, 1823.
58. SDD, April 7, 1823; April 8, 1823.
59. SDD, April 1, 1823; April 2, 1823; April 3, 1823; April 8, 1823; April 16, 1823; April 21, 1823.
60. SDD, April 26, 1823; April 27, 1823; April 28, 1823.
61. Elias Child, *Genealogy of the Child, Childs, and Childe Families* (Utica, N.Y.: Curtis & Childs, 1881), 561–62.
62. SDD, April 28, 1823.
63. SDD, April 24, 1823.
64. SDD, May 15, 1823.
65. SDD, May 16, 1823; Sylvia Drake to Asaph Drake [May 15, 1823]. DFP.
66. Sylvia Drake to Asaph Drake, May 16, 1823. DFP. The letter bears the date May 16, 1823, but in Sylvia's diary she records receiving Asaph's letter and writing her reply on May 17. SDD, May 17, 1823.
67. Charity Bryant to Asaph Drake, October 14, 1827. DFP.
68. SDD, March 20, 1823.
69. SDD, February 19, 1823. Oliver and his wife also visited on October 1, 1823.
70. SDD, September 3, 1835.
71. SDD, September 5, 1835.
72. For example, SDD, February 13, 1821; May 11, 1821; September 23, 1821; February 6, 1822; April 28, 1822; May 2, 1822; July 29, 1822; October 2, 1822; January 16, 1823.
73. SDD, June 18, 1821.

74. For example, SDD, March 24, 1821; April 6, 1821; July 29, 1821; September 6, 1822; March 17, 1823; February 14, 1835.

75. SDD, August 8, 1821; April 20, 1822; August 2, 1822; December 20, 1822; June 17, 1823; November 7, 1823; December 13, 1823; January 1, 1835; January 17, 1835; March 28, 1835; May 16, 1835; June 11, 1835.

76. Asaph Drake and Isaac Drake contract, June 22, 1827. DFP.

77. Record of Mary Drake's visits. DFP. SDD, January 15, 1821; January 21, 1821; January 27, 1821; February 25, 1821.

78. Sylvia Drake to Mary Drake, August 8, 1824. DFP.

79. SDD, March 8, 1821.