

WILSON MUSEUM BULLETIN

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POLLY PERKINS

a very handsome young Lady



Mary, who was always known as Polly, was the last of John and Phebe Perkins ten children, she was born November 15, 1787, in the large house above the harbor. Castine, then, was an important and busy seaport, the British had been gone nearly four years and normal activities were resumed: ships again sailed abroad with lumber and salt cod, returning from Liverpool and Lisbon with salt and luxury items and from the Caribbean with rum, molasses and, sometimes, salt from Turks Island. Each spring fishing smacks from north of Boston came to load salt from the salt houses along the harbor before going to the Grand Banks for cod.

John Perkins was an enterprising and prosperous merchant, his captains knew Liverpool as well as Deer Isle and did business for him in St. Thomas, Lisbon, Boston and Halifax, his fishing smacks, each

summer, were found off Newfoundland. He and his family lived well and his daughters married well: Lydia, the eldest, married a Scots soldier during the British occupation, when the war ended they went, with other Loyalists, to St. Andrews, New Brunswick. Ruth married Samuel Whitney and moved to Lincolnville, Elizabeth married Major Stevens of Brooksville, Phebe, Sarah and Temperance lived in Castine.

It was probably when Lucy and Polly were the only daughters still living at home that their portraits were painted. They were surely painted at the same time by the same itinerant artist who arrived in town with his canvases painted and ready for quick likenesses. The pose, the dress, the scarf with its unusual tassels and the large loop earrings are all the same, the faces however show individuality and character, they are attractive young women, probably about twenty, there was only two years difference in their ages. The artist was somewhat gifted, the subtle colors in the scarf and chair are unexpected as is the vitality of the portraits.

A busy port with vessels, large and small, constantly arriving and leaving, coastwise travel was no problem and the Perkins' friends and relatives visited and received many visits. In June, 1802, Lydia's daughter, Jane, was with her grandparents in Castine and another daughter, Lucy, wrote from St. Andrews to say that she and her mother planned to visit *after haying*.

When Polly was eighteen she visited in Blue Hill and later heard from a friend, Nabby, who reported a compliment — *I heard two gentleman agree & say that they thought you was a very handsome young Lady indeed of a very genteal prelight Carrage* while others, Jon Ellis, Nathan Ellis and Mr. Upton appeared to agree.

A few months later a cousin, Miriam Plummer of Addison wrote, apparently believing that matters were settled between Polly and a Nathan Shaw of Ellsworth as she wrote *I am very much pleased to think that I shall have the pleasure of seeing you quit often after you git Settled with Mr shaw in union River* [Ellsworth]. That summer Miriam's mother and sister were visiting John and Phebe in Castine and, for a week Ruth



Polly's brass candleholder and copper lustre pitcher with scarlet waiter in the background.

Whitney was also there while Polly was again in Blue Hill seeing the Ellises. The following year, in August, Nathan Ellis wrote her *you will . . . oblige me . . . [by] letting me know the truth in respect to Mr. Shaw & Yourself, likewise what your determination is with respect to the Obligations we are under to each other . . .* In February Nathan Shaw wrote of spending *the last week with your Brother and Sister [Lucy] and Freinds at Adderson . . . nothing wanting to make it compleat but your presents . . .*

Both Robert and Lucy married in 1808, Robert to his cousin, Miriam Plummer and Lucy to Henry Whitney, Samuel's brother, so that Polly and Jane Russell were alone at the Perkins home, though Robert was often there. John Perkins had had a stroke which rendered his writing hand useless and Robert acted as his secretary.

At twenty-three, Polly was still unmarried and still courted. In June, 1810, Alexander Thompson wrote from St. Andrews, he was master of a brig sailing between England and New England and had hoped to get to Castine but, unable to on this trip, planned to *in the fall where I hope I shall finde some friends . . . I hope you will rite again before I go – we expect to sail in 8 or 9 weax so you must let me know how you all bee*

Frederick Spofford was also courting Polly, he had recently come from New Hampshire to join his brother, Pearl, a merchant and ship owner of Deer Isle. Polly, this time, must have been agreeable as, on September 3rd Frederick wrote Polly's father asking his permission to marry her. Robert Perkins answered

– Castine, Sept. 8th 1810

Dear Sir

Your Favour of 3d Inst was handed – me by Mr Noyes and its contents Noticed and agreeable to your wish the enclosed was handed to my Father. At which he informed me that the Object of your letter was to ask the Consent of himself with my Marm to the Marriage of my Sister Polly to which they say they have no Objection

Your Humble Servt

Robert Perkins

Polly at once was planning for her new home, her brother-in-law, Samuel Whitney had a long list when he started for Boston, and, no doubt, many directions as to what to choose. On November 2nd he wrote about his shopping and sent a list of purchases with prices. He bought a sideboard for \$60.00, a bedstead – \$18.00, dining table – \$12.00 and card table – \$14.00, some prices were given in shillings and pence, the twenty yards of carpeting at seven shillings six pence per yard cost \$25.00, an India rug was twenty-four shillings or \$4.00. Apparently Polly asked for a large rug as Samuel explained *the Carpet is in breadths instead of being whole, which is all the fashion and must be more convenient for you as you can now make it fit your room.* He bought *one sett chairs* at \$21.00 and *one sett* at \$14.00 but no arm chairs as *they are not fashionable & never made without being particularly spoke for . . .*

Samuel was concerned about the 2 *scarlet waiters*, one cost twenty-seven shillings and one thirteen shillings and six pence or \$4.50 and \$2.25 and which,

he wrote, *I fear will be rather small, after purchasing them I try'd to exchange them for larger but they were gone.* He also purchased tin kitchen ware, looking glasses which were expensive, \$60.00 for a pair, shovel and tongs, knives and forks. Everything was not for the house, however, he bought gloves, kid shoes, *work'd gound* material and trimmings and had the gown(s) made which cost four shillings and six pence or 75 cents — the material and trimming cost \$8.42. He also bought seven yards of lustring, a plain, heavy dress silk, at \$1.25 a yard. Some of the apparel may have been for Jane as Samuel mentioned *purchases for you and Jane.* The total bill amounted to \$333.25 to which he added \$10.00 commission for *one Gold Necklace for Ruthy.*

Frederick Spofford was in Boston at the same time that Samuel was, for, in the letter concerning Polly's purchases, he wrote *I have been in Company several times with your intended, Dind with him yesterday, & think him a verry promising likely young man, verry far exceeding your former gallants in every quality that is pleasing to a young lady of taste & society at large —*

On Christmas eve Frederick wrote Polly; — *My Dear Polly Good fortune gives me this opportunity of informing you of the pleasant passage I had from Castine. Three hours after saying to you & Jane Good Bye, brought me in safety to my peacefull dwelling, My Brother was verry particular in inquiring after his Sister (as he terms you) he also now earnestly requests me to present his best regards to her . . .*



Copper lustre mustard pot with one of six teaspoons engraved P.S.

The winter passed happily with some visits and more letters but, on March 21st Phebe Perkins died. She had only been ill a few hours and the family was shocked. Robert and Miriam, in a couple of weeks, moved into the family home and Polly wrote to Frederick to come for her *for after they come I shall never seal myself at home as long as I stay hear . . .* Polly and Frederick were married in mid-April.

On August 14 1811 Jane wrote — *Dear Girl An opportunity offers and with pleasure I embrace it write to the one with whom I cherish the fond hope of conversing with before many months, it seems as if it had been a year since you went from here . . . by the bearer of this I shall send the small articles which I have made for you and I Sincerely hope they will suit as I have done my best toward them, I yesterday had the plasure of hearing from you by Doct Mann which informed me of your good health, he likewise tole my Father that you looked as blumeing as the rose in June and that the house was like a pallace.*

Through good fortune and bad Polly lived on in Deer Isle. Some of her treasures stayed with her, then with her daughter and descendents, last winter her portrait returned to Castine, to the Wilson Museum. This summer it, and her card table, will be shown in the Museum, then, once more Polly Perkins' portrait will be in its original home, the John Perkins House.



Inlay on legs of Polly's card table cannot be seen in this photo.

Wilson Museum

Open May 27 - September 30. Tuesday - Sunday, 2:00 to 5:00.

Guided Tours of the John Perkins House Wednesday
and Sunday afternoons during July and August.

Demonstration at the Smith's Forge Wednesday and
Sunday afternoons during July and August.



Castine, Maine 04421

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