

John and Judith Sargent Murray

By Bonnie Hurd Smith

Author of *From Gloucester to Philadelphia in 1790: Observations, anecdotes, and thoughts from the 18th-century letters of Judith Sargent Murray*

Introduction

In Russell Miller's opening paragraph in *The Larger Hope* about John Murray's 1770 arrival in America he writes, "Little did he realize that he was to be the instrument by which a new and unique religious body was to be created, denominated Universalism, which was to challenge the grim Calvinism inherited from sixteenth-century Europe. Neither was he aware that the denomination which he would eventually help to found in America was to offer the hope of a spiritual democracy for a new nation."

And what of democracy for women – spiritual and political? The historian Susan Branson calls Judith Sargent Murray "the most important female essayist of the New Republic." While John was preaching, traveling, organizing, and generally spreading the "good news" of Universalism, as taught to him by James Rely, Judith was publishing essays, plays, and a three-volume book (*The Gleaner*, 1798) to spread the "good news" of female equality, improving female education, and the "new era in female history" that young women were forging.

These two extraordinary people first met in 1774, when Judith's father, Winthrop Sargent, invited John to preach in Gloucester to a small group of "adherents" to Universalism. At the time, Judith was a 23-year-old married woman. John was 33, a widower, and an itinerant preacher from England who had been traveling

throughout the colonies since 1770. After meeting the Gloucester Universalists, who were well organized and committed to Universalism, John decided to make the seaport town his home. While the bulk of John Murray's personal letters do not survive, Judith's letters reveal the pivotal importance of their initial meeting. Her first letter to him, written on November 14, 1774, sets the stage for what was to come:

My Dear Sir

If I am not mistaken in the character of the person I have the pleasure to address, it will be most agreeable to him, that I should lay aside all that awe, and reverence, which his unquestionable superiority demands, and approach him with the freedom of a sister, conversing with a brother whom she entirely esteems — I am not much accustomed to writing letters, especially to your sex, but if there be neither male nor female in the Emmanuel you promulgate, we may surely, and with the strictest propriety, mingle souls upon paper — I acknowledge a high sense of obligation to you, Sir, I have been instructed by your scriptural investigations, and I have a grateful heart — Your revered friend, Mr Relly, had taught me by his writings, the rudiments of the redeeming plan; but you have enlarged my views, expanded my ideas, dissipated my doubts, and led me to anticipate, and with sublime, and solemn pleasure, the coming of the resurrection... I have to request — if your leisure will allow, that you would honour me by a line and I pray you to believe me with all sentiments of esteem your most obedient &c &c.

Judith Sargent and John Murray became devoted to each other -- as pastor and congregant, and as friends for 14 years, then as husband and wife for 27 years. They respected and supported each other as equals. They each had transformational work to do in the world. As Judith once wrote to her parents, they knew they were "in their path of duty."

The Murrays and Great Events in American History

Freedom of religion in America

In 1786, when the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court granted the Gloucester Universalists an exemption from paying taxes to the established church (First Parish), as Russell Miller writes, “this was the first instance in which the courts had extended exemption to any Protestant (Christian) denomination or sect regardless of whether or not it was incorporated. Thus the state constitutional guarantees for such religious bodies were successfully tested by the Universalists for the first time, and [John] Murray was found to have met the specifications for a public teacher of ‘piety, religion, and morality.’” Later that year, John faced challenges to his legal ability to perform the marriage ceremony. In 1788, the Supreme Judicial Court once again found in his favor.

In other words, John was a central actor in the first legal ruling for freedom of religion in America. Judith played a role as well. She was suspended from First Parish for nonattendance and signed her name to the Gloucester Universalists’ Articles of Association. This was a gutsy, public act for an eighteenth-century woman.

Establishment of Universalism in America

Historians now agree that John Murray can rightfully be called the “Father of Organized American Universalism.” Through his unwearied travels throughout the colonies, and then in the new American nation, he preached, advised, encouraged, and helped organize dozens of Universalist societies. In Gloucester, he served as pastor of the first Universalist meeting house in America (dedicated Christmas Day 1780). His 1812 book *Letters and Sketches of Sermons* provided literary leadership. His

autobiography, published after his death, served as a source of inspiration for Universalist ministers for generations – and it still does.

Judith Sargent Murray's 1782 Universalist catechism is considered the earliest writing by an American Universalist woman. Written in a question-and-answer format for children, it neatly explained and taught Rellian Universalism to the next generation. She also put forth Universalist ideas through her published essays, especially in her "Repository" series written for the *Massachusetts Magazine*. She used her personal influence with friends, family, and new acquaintances to engage them in Universalism. She truly served not just as a "minister's wife" but as what we would call a lay minister, particularly when she counseled people who were dying or whose loved ones had "gone before."

Women's rights movement

In a private letter, Abigail Adams asked John Adams and his colleagues in Philadelphia who were drafting America's founding documents to "remember the ladies." They did not, and thus sparked generations worth of work by women and men to secure equal rights for women. Judith Sargent Murray's 1790 essay "On the Equality of the Sexes," published in the *Massachusetts Magazine* is considered the first public claim for female equality in America. She continued her essay in 1798 with four additional essays published in her book, *The Gleaner*, describing women's accomplishments throughout history. Other *Gleaner* essays challenged the nation to improve female education, allow women more options to earn and manage their money, and generally participate as full citizens under the law. Judith's magazine essays and *The Gleaner* were read in America and England. Her readers included George Washington, John Adams, Mercy Otis Warren, and countless other political leaders, educators, and influential

citizens. The next generation of women reformers in Boston incorporated words from *The Gleaner* into their work to end the injustice of slavery. When Alice Rossi included “On the Equality of the Sexes” in her 1974 book *The Feminist Papers*, she was the first person to acknowledge Judith’s role in the women’s rights movement.

As a Universalist minister, John Murray believed in equality. He was proud of and respected his wife, which he displayed in the public prints in 1786 when he defended Judith’s authorship of her plays. He set a fine example for other men to follow. Judith once counseled a niece, “Marriage is the highest state of friendship ... Equality should be the motto of wedded life ... although [many] years have passed by ... I have not yet found reason to retract my opinion [--] nay years have rather established my sentiments.” Her marriage to John was undeniably one of equality.

Female education

In 1802, Judith Saunders (a cousin of Judith Sargent Murray’s) and Clementine Beach asked Judith to use her influence and connections to help them establish a female academy in Dorchester, Massachusetts. By then, Judith was well known for her clearly articulated position on the subject, and she obliged. She found suitable property, placed advertisements, recruited students, and visited the Female Academy at Dorchester. It is unclear how many other educators used Judith’s essays to support their own efforts, but her convincing rhetoric was an integral part of the national conversation about female abilities and education.

The development of an American literature

In 1785 and 1786, when Judith became the first American, male or female, to have a play produced in Boston, American literary efforts of any kind were considered inferior to those from Europe.

She broke new ground. In 1798, Judith became the first woman in America to self-publish a book – *The Gleaner*, a collection of essays and her two plays. This was considered an act of patriotism – showing the world, especially Europe, that Americans were capable of writing and publishing quality literature. She opened doors for the upcoming generation of writers.

Henry Sherburne, a young author from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, wrote in the introduction to his 1800 book *The Oriental Philanthropist*, “Happy talents, Constantia, are confessedly thine! How sweetly pleads thy pen in virtue’s sacred cause! With sentiments ennobling, pathetic and sublime, winning each selfish heart to charity and love! Columbia’s sons and daughters, whose virtues are her glory, shall never cease to bless thee! Future ages shall gratefully own thy worth.”

The same year, Sally Sayward Barrell Keating Wood of York, Maine, wrote in her book, *Julia, and the Illuminated Baron*, “I have seldom met with a woman who converses more sensibly or with more propriety upon every subject, than Mrs. Murray; she has lately published the *Gleaner*, a periodical work, in three volumes, that does great honor both to her head and heart; this production is not half so much praised and encouraged as it ought to be, and I believe that a little mean envy prevents its being admired according to its merits, and am persuaded that thirty years hence, when the admirable author sleeps in dust, when her heart has ceased to vibrate at the praise of virtue, or recoil at the idea of vice, the *Gleaner* will be universally read and admired, as the works of our Addison, and will be a very able competitor to the spectator.”

Even though it wasn’t until the next century when authors like Mark Twain and Herman Melville published their work and a distinctly American literature emerged, Judith Sargent Murray’s *Gleaner* was an early contribution to American literary history.

An Appreciation of John and Judith Sargent Murray

By Bonnie Hurd Smith

Those of us who study history can point to certain individuals who truly, without exaggeration, changed the world for the better. John Murray and Judith Sargent Murray were two such people. I respect their courage, their sense of duty, and what they were able to accomplish despite real obstacles. I love their intellects, their humor, and their deep compassion for others. I adore their relationship, which is truly one of the great love stories in American history.

It is one of the great honors of my life to “know” these two extraordinary leaders, and to tell their stories through my talks, Unitarian Universalist services, and writing. They both did what we are all supposed to do: They determined their life purpose, and fulfilled it. Each time I share their stories in person, people approach me afterward, often with tears in their eyes, and thank me for the gift I have given them – the gift of John Murray and Judith Sargent Murray. They have certainly been a gift to me, and to every generation that followed them.