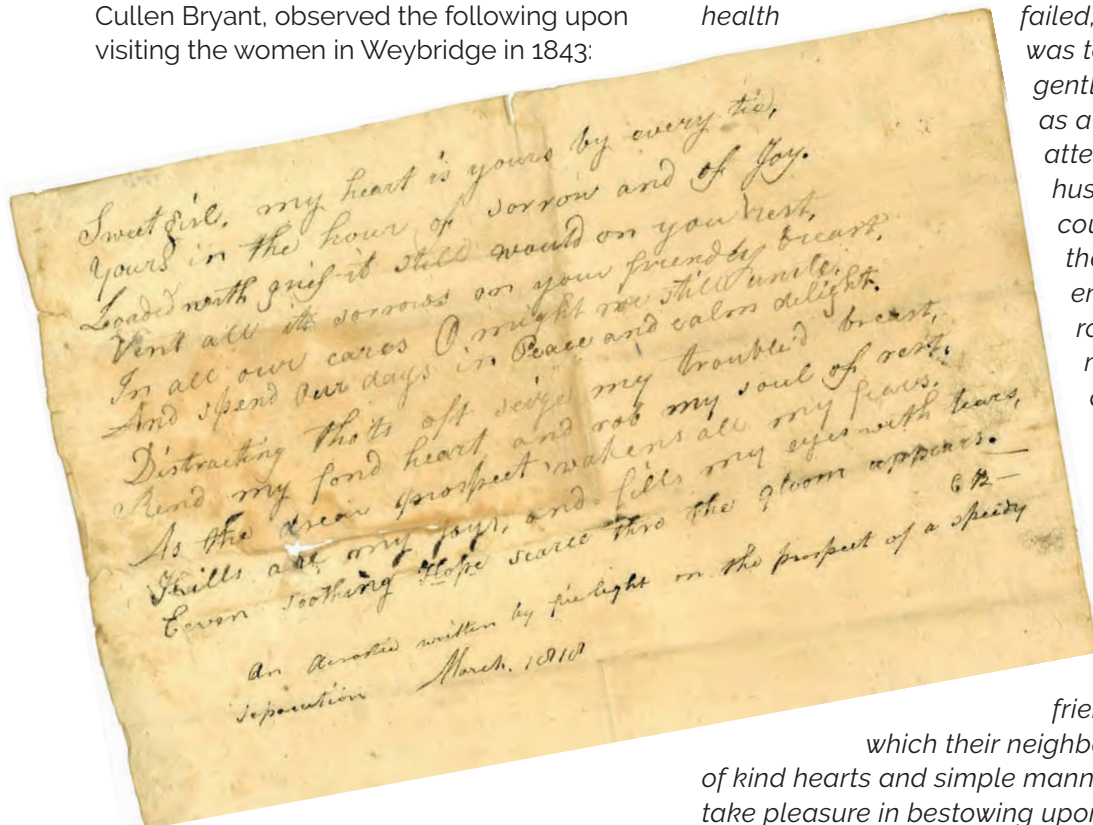


CONNECTING WITH THE PAST IN TODAY'S PRESENT

CHARITY BRYANT (1777-1851) AND SYLVIA DRAKE (1784-1868)

Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake met as young women in February 1807 in Weybridge. They spent the next 44 years in each other's company until Charity's death. Together they built their family house. They supported themselves, when most women were not self-relying, by running a well sought after tailoring business, cutting and hand stitching clothes for the local community. Both women were active participants in the local church and charities, and maintained broad social contacts with friends and members of their families. As a result, they were accepted as a respected couple by the Weybridge community. And in death as in life, Charity and Sylvia rest together like any married couple under one headstone in the Weybridge Hill Cemetery.

Charity's nephew, Romantic poet William Cullen Bryant, observed the following upon visiting the women in Weybridge in 1843:



...If I were permitted to draw aside the veil of private life, I would briefly give you the singular, and to me most interesting history of two maiden ladies who dwell in this valley. I would tell you how, in their youthful days, they took each other as companions for life, and how this union, no less sacred to them than the tie of marriage, has subsisted, in uninterrupted harmony, for forty years, during which they have shared each other's occupations and pleasures and works of charity while in health, and watched over each other tenderly in sickness; for sickness has made long and frequent visits to their dwelling. I could tell you how they slept on the same pillow and had a common purse, and adopted each other's relations and how one of them, more enterprising and spirited in her temper than the other, might be said to represent the male head of the family, and took upon herself their transactions with the world without,

until at length her health failed, and she was tended by her gentle companion, as a fond wife attends her invalid husband. I could tell you of their dwelling, encircled with roses, which now in the days of their broken health, bloom wild without their tendance, and I would speak of the

friendly attentions which their neighbors, people of kind hearts and simple manners, seem to take pleasure in bestowing upon them, but I



have already said more than I fear they will forgive.

The Sheldon Museum and its Research Center hold extensive documentation

relating to Bryant's and Drake's lives including voluminous correspondence, poetry, diaries, business records, material objects, and the only known visual representation of the two women — their double silhouette that is considered the earliest image of a same-sex couple in the U.S. In 2018-2019, the silhouette toured the country as part of the Smithsonian Museum's National Portrait Gallery exhibition, "Black Out Silhouettes, Then and Now."

The book, "Charity & Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America" (2014), was based largely on the Sheldon's collections.

Contributed by the Research Center Committee of the Henry Sheldon Museum. Does this remind you of other women long gone who chose to live differently than most in some way? We'd love to hear about them. Email info@henrysheldonmuseum.org with their stories.

