



Fig. 1. Sarah Wyman Whitman, drawing by Helen Bigelow Merriman. Whitman's friend Merriman created this drawing as a study for her posthumous portrait of the artist, which now hangs in the stairwell of the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Courtesy Schlesinger Library and SPNEA Library and Archives.

Betty S. Smith

Inside SPNEA

Sarah de St. Prix Wyman Whitman

In its museum collection and the Sarah Orne Jewett House, SPNEA preserves the art of one of the most successful women painters in Boston in the late 1800s.

Contrary to the legend created by writer John Jay Chapman, Sarah Wyman Whitman (fig. 1) was not “an unknown lady from some savage town,—Baltimore, perhaps,—who had appeared in Boston”¹ and who became within a few short years “a center of social influence.”² Sarah Whitman (1842–1904) arrived in Boston in 1868, a newlywed of two years, married to Nova Scotia-born wool merchant Henry Whitman. She had been born in Lowell but, in the aftermath of a bank scandal involving her father William Wyman, had lived from infancy through early childhood in Baltimore. She returned to Lowell in 1853 when she was

eleven years old. Baltimore, however, was the ‘home’ that Sarah Whitman preferred to claim and reinforced her Wyman ties by returning there regularly for family visits and major holidays. Hardly “an unknown lady,” Sarah Whitman entered into Boston society with wholly favorable social credentials. She could trace her ancestry to a notable French family the de St. Prys³ and to distinguished New England families—the Treats of Connecticut, the Paines, Cabots, and Lowells of Massachusetts⁴—and through the Baltimore Wymans could claim kinship to the Byrds of Virginia.⁵ From the beginning there were people who helped her, discerning, sympathetic and informed people whom she

drew around her in a close circle of friendship. Friendship, art, and patronage were to become seamlessly intertwined with her determination to become a professional artist.

Whitman came to the serious study of art somewhat late. At age twenty-six, in 1868, she entered the Boston studio of William Morris Hunt, who had recently begun to welcome women as students. There she received the major part of her professional training during three winter seasons, 1868–71,⁶ and studied drawing and “artistic anatomy” with Hunt’s friend and colleague William Rimmer.⁷ For several years she participated with some small successes in art exhibitions in Boston. Critics compared her paintings of flowers favorably with similar works by John La Farge. In the summer of 1875 she resumed her studies with a tour of Italy and France.⁸ Whitman returned to France the summer of 1877⁹ and again late in 1878 or early 1879¹⁰ to study with Hunt’s former master Thomas Couture. Sarah Whitman’s work with Couture marked the end of her formal studio training. Although she revisited Europe numerous times she did not again seek out other teachers.¹¹ From this foundation Sarah Whitman determined to live “the life of an artist in the thick of conventional adjustments & demands,”¹² reaching beyond traditional expectations by pursuing a professional art career unprecedented for married women of wealth and social position and working well outside of conventional boundaries that limited women

artists to painting portraits and still lifes. More to the point, she would compete with men for public commissions.

Sarah Whitman was most actively encouraged to dream of becoming a serious artist by William Morris Hunt, who considered her one of his most gifted pupils. As one of Hunt’s most ardent disciples, Whitman had the advantage of reaching teachers of real stature. Hunt introduced her to Couture, who influenced her at a crucial point in her plans for a career. He also led her to his former student and friend John La Farge,¹³ who opened up the possibilities of working in the field of design, especially in stained glass, and brought her to the attention of an old family friend Charles Eliot Norton, revered at Harvard “as a teacher and prophet, as a scholar . . . a sage,”¹⁴ who was spreading the gospel of the English Arts and Crafts movement to this side of the Atlantic (fig. 2). Whitman’s role in the Boston Arts and Crafts movement, her dedication to the belief that art and life were inseparable, gave philosophic direction to her prolific career.

With her unassailable background and personal wealth Whitman was able to do as she chose. The marriage, for her part, was unhappy and, fortunately, childless,¹⁵ so she sought and found her freedom in pursuing a professional career in art. As a member of the National Academy of Design (1877) and the Society of American Artists (1880), Sarah Whitman had established a reputation as a serious artist and by 1881 was listed as one of the

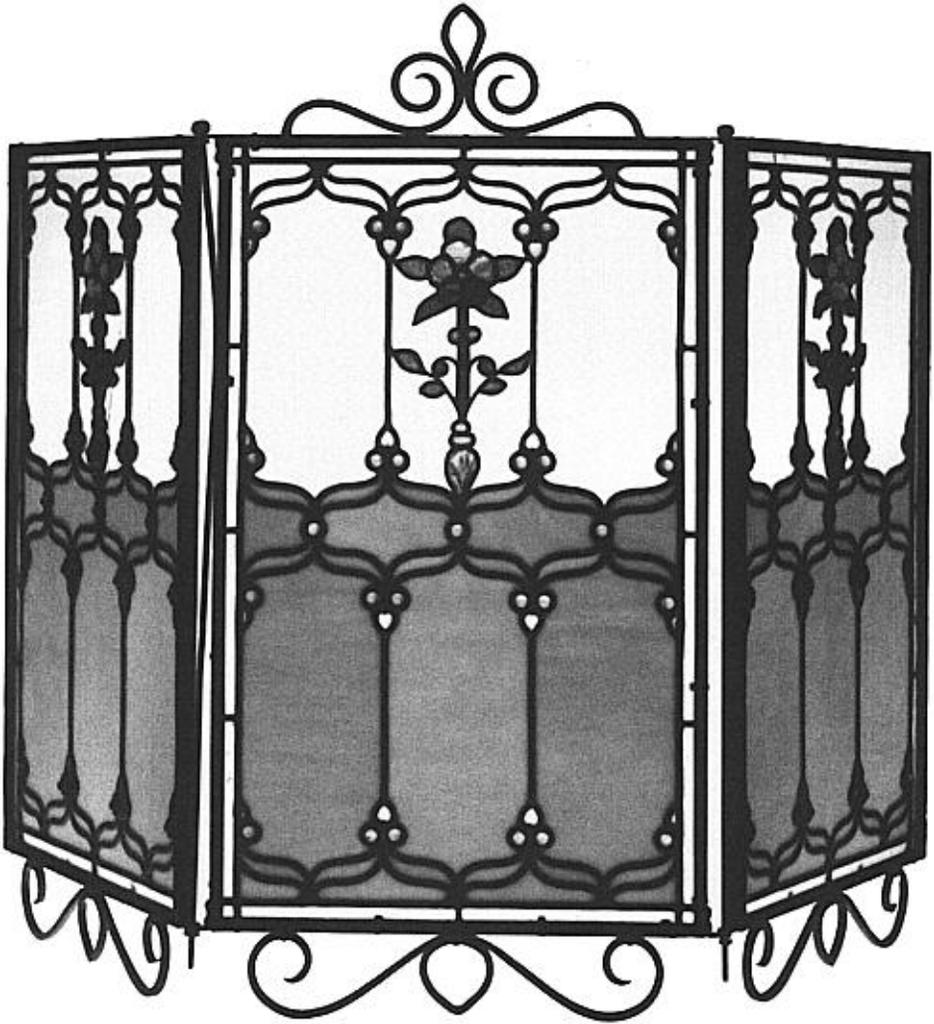


Fig. 2. *Whitman created this stained glass firescreen as a present to Richard Norton (1872–1918) and Elizabeth White on the occasion of their marriage in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on June 16, 1896. Norton was the son of Whitman’s friend and mentor, Professor Charles Eliot Norton. The designs were based on earlier works by Whitman: the floral motif first appeared on a stained glass panel (about 1894), a gift for the artist’s friend and neighbor Fannie Mason (gift to the Boston Athenaeum from Miss Sally Fairchild in 1949), and the leaded tracery was adapted from the Sarah Orne Jewett Memorial Window (about 1894) at Berwick Academy. Photograph by David Bohl. Courtesy SPNEA Library and Archives; gift of Susan Norton, daughter of Richard and Elizabeth Norton.*

most successful women painters in Boston (fig. 3).¹⁶ Beginning in 1882 Whitman had several solo exhibitions of paintings and sketches at Doll and Richards, Boston's premier gallery, and the St. Botolph Club. In early winter of 1892, first in Boston at Doll and Richards and then in New York at Avery Gallery, Whitman's oil paintings, pastels, sketches, and watercolors were exhibited together with examples of her book cover designs and stained glass. Despite a hectic schedule she had works exhibited almost yearly at the National Academy of Design and the Society of American Artists. Whitman won an Honorable Mention in the Paris Expositions of 1880 and 1895 and received a Bronze Medal in the Pan-American Exposition of 1901 in Buffalo.

By the late 1880s Whitman was fully established as a valued and sought-after member of Boston society. A gifted hostess, she maintained a busy social life that moved with the seasons from winters at 77 Mount Vernon Street to summers at "the Old Place" in Beverly Farms on the North Shore, and year-round at her studio, the Lily Glass Works, at 174 Boylston Street. Whitman derived tremendous pleasure from being with people, close friends, writers and artists, social leaders, and the fledgling generation of young men and women whose company she particularly cherished. She was an energetic campaigner for Radcliffe College and for improved educational opportunities for women and for children in the public schools. Her philanthropies were many,

and she gave both time and money to causes in Boston and in the South.¹⁷

At this same time, the late 1880s, Sarah Whitman's position as an important artist was enhanced by her successes as a designer. She had designed the stained glass windows and the interiors for three important churches.¹⁸ Most important she had begun what was to be a lengthy professional career as premier book cover designer for Houghton Mifflin and Company (figs. 4 and 5). Living on Beacon Hill had provided her with access to a lively literary scene leading to friendships with a majority of the leading authors of the day for whom, in the course of time, she designed book covers. Her circle of friends, a vital and interesting group of women, was centered at 148 Charles Street, the home of Annie Adams Fields, widow of publisher James T. Fields, and her devoted companion, noted Maine author Sarah Orne Jewett. There gathered the writers Adeline Train Whitney, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps; the poets Louise Chandler Moulton, Celia Thaxter, and Sarah Chauncey Woolsey; the painter Rose Lamb and the artist-writer Helen B. Merriman; educators Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, founder and future president of Radcliffe College, and Mary Garrett, founder and major benefactor of Bryn Mawr College. Welcomed into this circle of women were men—poets James Russell Lowell, writer and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes, novelist and critic William Dean Howells, and writers

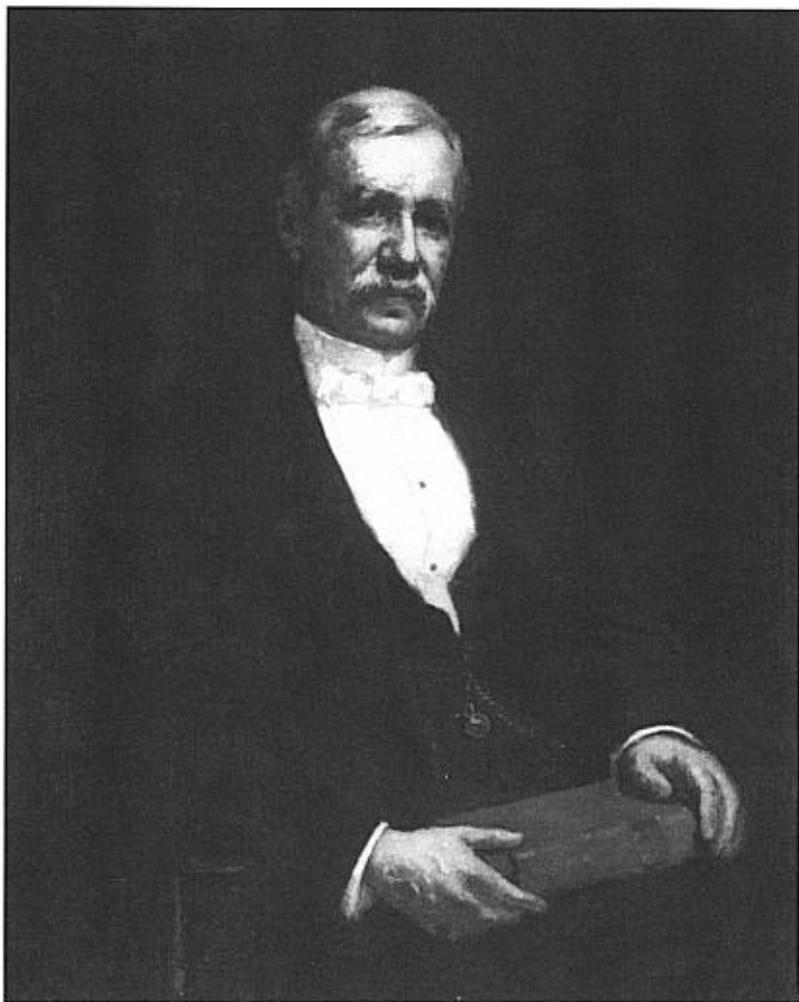


Fig. 3. Portrait of Robert Codman, oil on canvas, signed and dated 1883 by Sarah Wyman Whitman. Robert Codman (1823–1901) was the son of the Reverend John Codman of Dorchester, grandson of the Hon. John Codman of Lincoln and father of Robert Codman, Bishop of Maine. He was related to those who built the Grange, the Codman house in Lincoln, now an SPNEA historic house. Courtesy SPNEA; gift of Mark Samuels Lasner, Washington, D.C.

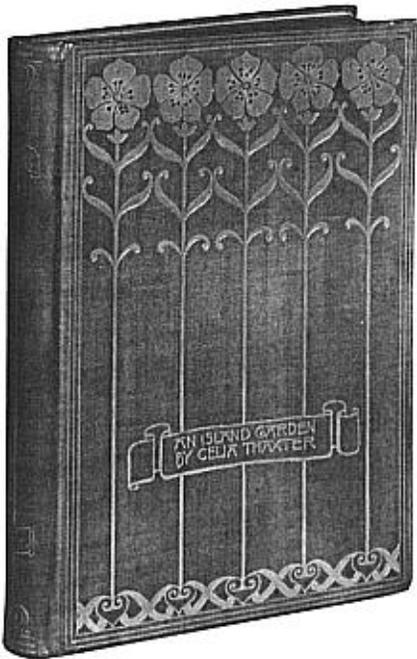
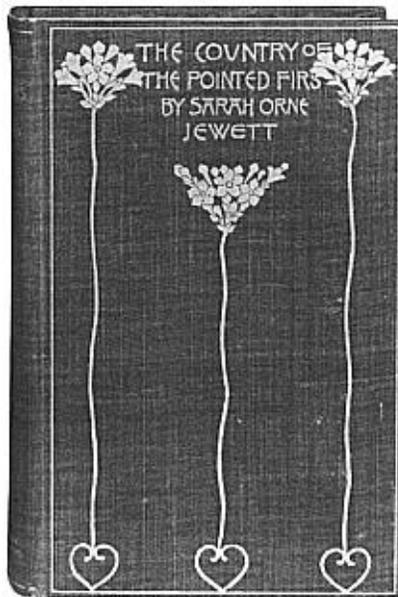
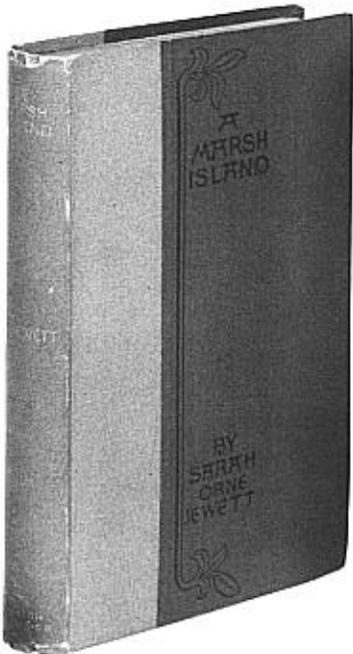


Fig. 4. Sarah Whitman designed a variety of book covers for Sarah Orne Jewett and often asked the author's opinion about a proposed design. A Marsh Island (1885) was one of the first covers the artist designed for her friend; Country Of The Pointed Firs (1896) shows Jewett's favorite mayflower as the design motif together with Whitman's hearts. For Celia Thaxter, another devoted member of the Fields-Jewett circle, Whitman designed the cover for An Island Garden (1894), illustrated by Childe Hassam. The design was signed with the familiar "SW" trademark of hearts. One of the most expensive publications of the time, An Island Garden was underwritten by Mary S. Hemenway, a close friend with whom Whitman had edited a book of daily devotions, Helps by the Way, in 1886. This volume is also in the Jewett home in South Berwick. Courtesy SPNEA Library and Archives.



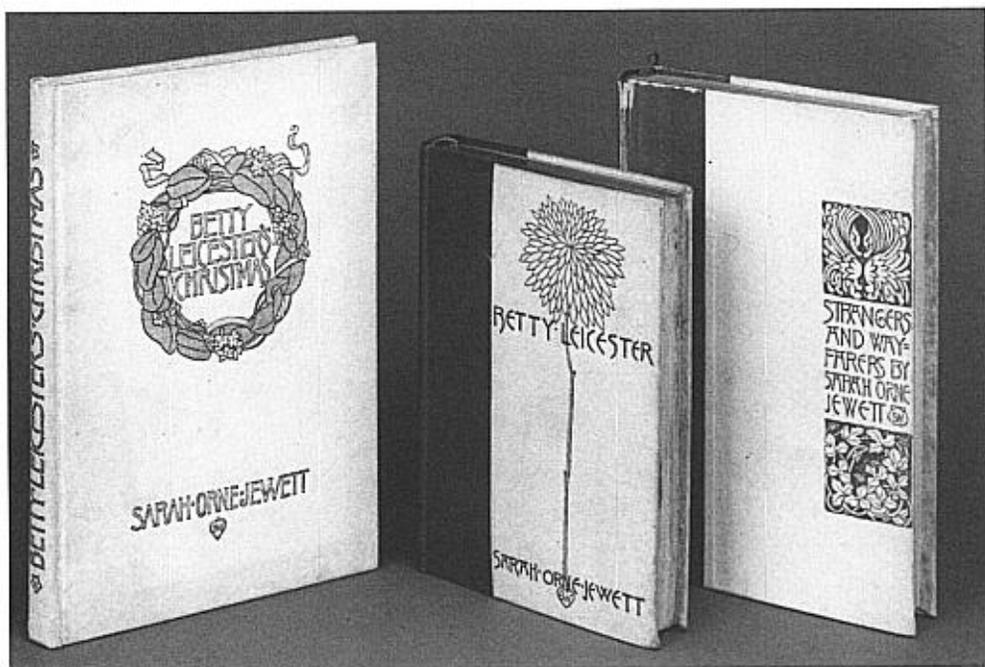


Fig. 5. Sarah Orne Jewett dedicated *Strangers And Wayfarers* (1890) to Whitman; it was signed "SW" in a scallop shell design on the front cover. *Betty Leicester* (1893), signed "SW" in a heart and bound in colors of red and white, was Jewett's favorite cover. *Betty Leicester's Christmas* (1899) was one of the most youthful of Whitman's designs and was signed with "SW" in a heart. All of these volumes are in the Jewetts' South Berwick home. Courtesy SPNEA Library and Archives.

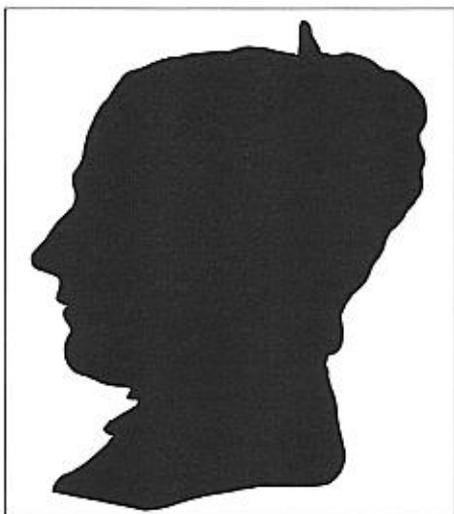
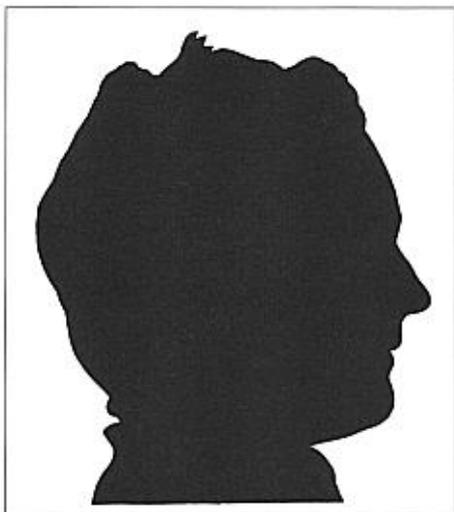
Thomas Bailey Aldrich and Charles Dudley Warner. Many of the men and women were near neighbors of Whitman's on Mt. Vernon Street, so these close associations had a practical consequence on her work. Ultimately she designed book covers for virtually all of them. Many of her very best cover designs were for Sarah Orne Jewett who, after Annie Fields, prized Sarah Whitman's friendship most dearly. In 1890 Sarah Orne Jewett dedicated *Strangers and Wayfarers* to Whitman.

Thanks to the efforts of SPNEA it is in South Berwick, Maine, that this story of a friendship between the two Sarahs is well preserved. At 5 Portland Street in South Berwick stands the Georgian home of the Jewett family that in later years

Sarah and her sister Mary Rice shared (fig. 6). Whitman, who enjoyed the peace of the countryside and the company of the sisters, was a frequent guest. In the house are reminders of her presence in her work. Two silhouettes of Sarah and Mary Jewett hang in the upper hallway (figs. 7 and 8). There is the Yellow Flag Iris Window,¹⁹ a stained glass panel that hangs in the window brightening the beautiful half-landing at the turn of the graceful center staircase (fig 9). In Jewett's small bedroom-study, just off the upper hall, hang two small pictures, *Ipswich Marshes* (1887; fig. 10), a pastel with wash, and *Landscape, Cortina* (1895?), an oil painting (fig. 11).²⁰ A collection of books written by Sarah Orne Jewett, many with cover designs by Sarah Whitman, is in a glass-

Fig. 6. Sarah Orne Jewett House, 5 Portland Street, South Berwick, Maine. Jewett spent most of her life in this Georgian home and shared it in later years with her sister Mary Rice. The view from her desk in the second-floor hall provided Jewett with the images and characters for her books. The Jewett House is an SPNEA historic house museum. Photograph by David Bohl. Courtesy SPNEA Library and Archives.





Figs. 7 & 8. *Silhouettes of Sarah Orne Jewett (top) and her sister Mary Rice (bottom) that hang in the second-floor hall of the Jewett House, not far from Jewett's writing desk. According to Harriet Prescott Spofford in her Little Book of Friends (1916), the silhouettes were "made by Mrs. Whitman," and the silhouette of Sarah was "a perfect replica even to the turning of an eyelash."* Courtesy SPNEA Library and Archives.

fronted bookcase in the downstairs sitting room. Also in South Berwick is another SPNEA property, the handsome Hamilton House of about 1785, overlooking the Salmon Falls River, purchased and restored in the late nineteenth century by Bostonians Mrs. Emily Tyson and her stepdaughter Elise. It is said that at the suggestion of Miss Jewett, a friend and neighbor, the Tysons turned to Sarah Whitman for assistance in the interior decoration, which resulted in a charming mix of country furnishings, antiques, and painted murals. Hamilton House became the setting for Sarah Orne Jewett's book *The Tory Lover* (1901).

Also in South Berwick is Maine's oldest school, Berwick Academy, where Sarah Orne Jewett attended school during the Civil War years, 1861-65. In 1891 a combined new academy building and the only public library in town was to be built, and leadership responsibility for the project, the construction of the Fogg Memorial building,²¹ fell to Jewett. She turned to her friend Sarah Whitman to design the entire interior of the building and the stained glass windows in the library, now the faculty library (fig. 12). Only a few touches remain of the interior designs. Of special interest to Jewett was the creation of a Civil War Memorial Window for the Main Room (fig. 13), honoring, as the inscription reads, the "many soldiers and sailors pupils of this school who fought for their country." A special gift from Sarah Orne Jewett,²² it is unquestionably one of the most elegant, graceful, light-

filled windows Whitman ever designed.²³ Free of the grave melancholy associated with the usual memorial windows, it is a fresh and shining reminder to all future academy students of the challenge and sacrifice made by those who came before them. For the windows in the library, one hundred in all,²⁴ Whitman celebrated the full range of Arts and Crafts influences—Gothic Revival and Italian Renaissance, bits and pieces of classical work, contemporary, chunky glass jewels, heraldic roundels with printers' devices, repeated decorative elements unifying the arched curve of the outer walls with the large, rectangular, high-ceilinged room.

Whitman designed eight more book covers, among her finest, for Jewett (all to be found in the Portland Street sitting room), but there was one last stained glass commission. Sarah Jewett wanted a memorial honoring her father, Dr. Herman Theodore Jewett, an 1834 Bowdoin College graduate. The commission may have been made in summer of 1901 before Jewett was awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters degree, the first ever awarded to a woman by an American male college. An arrangement of six lancet-shaped windows held in a Gothic window arch was installed on the southwest wall of Memorial Hall (now Pickard Theatre) in 1903.²⁵

This devoted and supportive friendship ended in June of 1904 with the death of Sarah Whitman. It was a severe blow to Sarah Jewett, whose own health was in a fragile state. Four months

later, however, she was strong enough to write a very firm letter to her publishers Houghton Mifflin, directing that the press restore the "the old binding" to *Betty Leicester* (1890), "the scarlet and white—for it is an ugly little book at present . . . very far from the beauty of Mrs. Whitman's charming design."²⁶ In the summer of 1905 she was able to assist another close friend, Mary Frances Parkman, in preparing a volume of Sarah Whitman's letters. In a letter to Mrs. Parkman as the book project was underway, Jewett wrote, "I have felt her at my elbow so often in reading these proofs . . . I cannot keep myself from thinking how beautiful she made them, each was like one of her own sketches. She brought all her Art to letter writing . . . She would say we must make them stand as well as we can."²⁷ These letters have stood the test of time, reassembling the fragments of the past, of a friendship between two gifted, extraordinary women, and they provide a glimpse of a nearly forgotten, very gifted artist who had been a great favorite in nineteenth-century Boston arts and society. ❀

Betty S. Smith has been researching Sarah Wyman Whitman since the late 1980s. She has advanced degrees from New York University Institute of Fine Arts and Harvard Graduate School of Education. She has worked for a number of years as a professional researcher.



Fig. 9. *The stained glass floral panel, Yellow Flag Iris, hangs in the large window above the stair landing. Made as a gift for the Jewett sisters from the artist, the panel's simple frame echoes the rounded arch of the window and the iris; done in rich yellows and greens against a deep purple background, it suggests the influence of a Japanese woodblock print. Photograph by David Bohl. Courtesy SPNEA Library and Archives.*



Fig. 10. Ipswich Marshes, 1887, pastel with wash, a gift of the artist to her friend, hangs in Jewett's bedroom. Courtesy SPNEA Library and Archives.



Fig. 11. *Sarah Whitman's small oil painting Landscape at Cortina (1895?), was also a gift to Sarah Jewett and Mary Rice. Both it and Ipswich Marshes were loaned to the memorial exhibition held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in late spring 1906. Courtesy SPNEA Library and Archives.*



Fig. 12. *The William Hayes Fogg Memorial Library, Berwick Academy, South Berwick, Maine, about 1894. The one hundred stained glass windows in the library, once used by academy students, are rich in color, design, and associations. There are names of famous authors—Shakespeare, Cervantes, Dante, and Montaigne—and roundels with printers' trademarks such as Printer of St. Albans, William Caxton, Aldus Manutius, and the Elzevir family. The windows reveal a mix of design influences, French Medieval and Italian Renaissance, very much in the Arts and Crafts tradition of the day. It was a very contemporary approach to design on the part of the artist, who was anxious to provide just the right setting for students to study. The pattern on the clear glass windows was based upon a design found in a thirteenth-century French church, Semeur-en-Auxois. Whitman used this design for the cover of Thomas Bailey Aldrich, *Story of a Bad Boy* (1894). Courtesy Old Berwick Historical Society.*

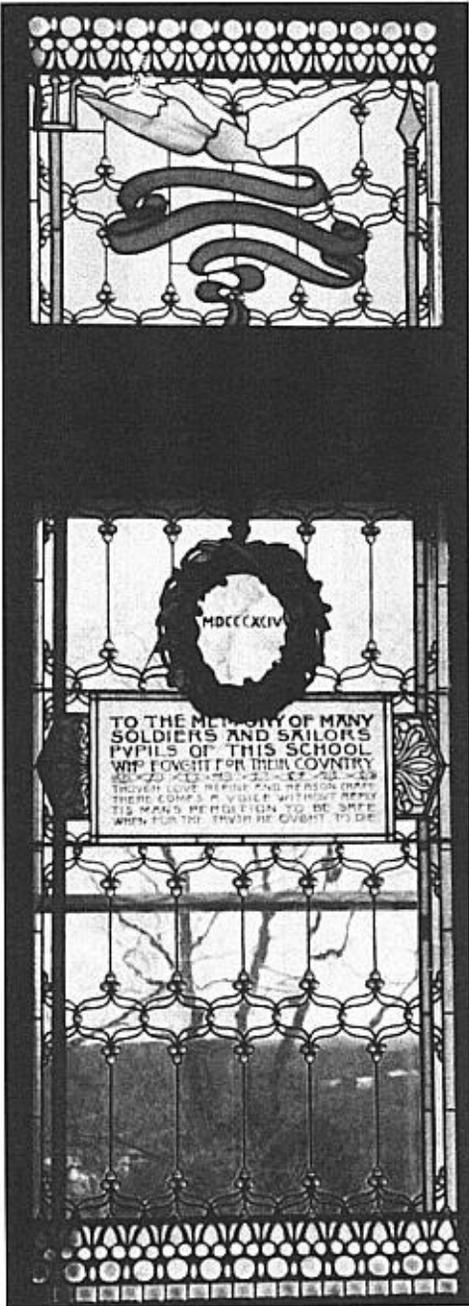


Fig. 13. *The Civil War Memorial Window, Fogg Memorial Library, Berwick Academy. Jewett wrote to Whitman, following the dedication ceremony of the Fogg Building, that she felt both happy and lonesome looking at the window as she realized that the warfare was over. Jewett thought of the window as her gift and personal message to future generations of students. The inscription is excerpted from the poem "Sacrifice" by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Courtesy Berwick Academy.*

NOTES

1. John Jay Chapman, *Memories And Milestones* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Co., 1915), 103.
2. Chapman, *Memories and Milestones*, 103.
3. Bennette Merlino De St. Prys was a close friend of LaFayette and joined him during the American Revolutionary War. The name was evidently Americanized and changed at some point from de St. Prys to de St. Prix. It was only after her husband's death in 1901 that Whitman added "de St. P." to her signature on personal letters.
4. Mary Caroline Crawford, *Famous Families of Massachusetts* (Boston: Little, Brown Co., 1930), 2:3–25; *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 25 (1871): 75 n. 2; 22 (1868): 60; 2 (1848): 225.
5. Betty Ann S. Howard, *The History of the Mary Byrd Wyman Memorial Association* (Baltimore, 1967), 8–9. The cultural values of Samuel Gerrish and Mary Byrd Wyman clearly influenced the philanthropic lifestyle cultivated by Sarah Whitman.
6. Martha J. Hoppin, "Women Artists in Boston, 1870–1900: The Pupils of William Morris Hunt," *American Art Journal* 12 (Winter 1981): 19.
7. "Daniel Chester French," Dewitt-McClellan-Lockman Interviews and Biographical Sketches, Reel 503, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. On entering Rimmer's studio on Bromfield Street in 1870, French recalled seeing "Mrs. Sarah Whitman . . . his distinguished pupil . . . among other students . . . mostly girls." Whitman never acknowledged Rimmer as her teacher. Only Hunt and Couture were ever fully acknowledged in her writings.
8. Hoppin, "Women Artists in Boston," 28.
9. Elizabeth Boott to members of the Hunt class, June 8, 1877, Duveneck Papers, Reel 1097, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
10. Albert Boime, *Thomas Couture and the Eclectic Vision* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 557.
11. Between 1875 and 1902, Whitman's first and last visits to Europe, there were eight crossings. Travel time was a matter of several weeks or months usually devoted to visiting with friends and sightseeing.
12. Sarah Wyman Whitman to Samuel Gray Ward, June 4, 1891 (5 letters, 1890–91), Houghton Library, Harvard University.
13. Whitman was probably a member of the unofficial cadre of decorators given the task of painting and ornamenting the walls and ceilings of Trinity Church between August 1876 and January 1877. See H. Barbara Weinberg, "John La Farge: Pioneer of the American Mural Movement," in *John La Farge* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), 165.
14. Van Wyck Brooks, *New England: Indian Summer 1865–1915* (New York: E. P. Dutton Co., 1940), 250.
15. William James commented to his brother Henry, "Better for her, surely, to have left him, to have gone her way . . . not to have been faithful . . . perpetually exemplary and . . . exasperated." Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers, eds., *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 198.
16. William C. Brownell, "The Younger Painters

- of America," *Scribner's Monthly*, July 1881, 329–32.
17. Sarah Whitman supported Berea College in Kentucky, the first coeducational college to admit both black and white students, and Booker T. Washington's efforts to establish Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. In her will Sarah Whitman left Tuskegee Institute fifty thousand dollars and Berea two thousand dollars.
 18. Central Church (now United Congregational Church), Worcester, Mass. (1884–85); Christ Church, Andover, Mass. (1886–87); and St. Andrews Church, Boston (1887–88). The commission for the Central Church probably came through a recommendation by John La Farge to Helen B. Merriman, pastor Daniel B. Merriman's wife, a long-time friend from the days at Hunt's studio. The commission for Christ Church very likely came through the recommendation of Whitman's close friend Dr. Phillips Brooks of Trinity Church, whose family had close ties to Andover. When St. Andrews Church, Boston (1887–88), the mission church in the care of Trinity Church, needed a new building, Brooks vigorously promoted it, and Sarah Whitman was again the choice to do the stained glass windows and the interior decoration.
 19. The Iris Flag window was newly restored with SPNEA funding by the William Cummings Studio, North Adams, Mass., and reinstalled in the Jewett house in September 1995.
 20. The two works were included in a memorial exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in May 1906. The exhibition included oil paintings and pastels loaned by the many friends of Sarah Whitman in honor of her life and work.
 21. William Hayes Fogg, a wealthy international trader, had been born in Berwick. His family had originally donated the land for the academy. His name is familiar through bequests made to Harvard University, but under terms of Elizabeth's will a bequest of fifty thousand dollars made possible a new and imposing building completed in 1894. George C. Clough, Boston City Architect and a native Mainer, was the architect.
 22. Jewett left a bequest of one thousand dollars to the general fund of the academy to ensure its proper care.
 23. Newly restored by the Neely Restoration Studio, restorers of architectural stained glass, in Falmouth, Maine, in 1995.
 24. The windows were all restored by the Neely Studio and reinstalled in 1998. Fund-raising efforts were spearheaded by Wendy Persig of South Berwick, the mother of a student, a member of the Board of Overseers, and a member of the Building and Grounds Committee. And it should also be noted that Ursula Wright, director of SPNEA's Portsmouth, New Hampshire, office, has been an enthusiastic supporter of the stained glass project and a participant in meetings and campus activities.
 25. Two of the lancet-shaped windows containing the memorial tribute to Dr. Jewett were removed at some unknown date and are now in the entrance hall to Pickard Theater, the former Memorial Hall. The remaining sections of the window, fully restored, will be reinstalled on the southeast side of the building after current renovations and additions to the building have been completed.

26. Richard Carey, ed., *Letters Of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Waterville, Maine: Colby College, 1967), 160.

27. Annie Fields, ed., *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1911), 204-5.