



The Sedgwicks in Love: Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage in the Early Republic

Timothy Kenslea

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On a spring day in 1774, in western Massachusetts' Berkshire County, Pamela Dwight and Theodore Sedgwick were married. Theodore--destined to become one of the Federalist party's leaders in the U.S. Congress in the 1790s and later an influential judge on Massachusetts' highest court--was almost twenty-eight, and three years a widower. Pamela, not quite twenty-one, was marrying Theodore Sedgwick over the clearly stated objections of her widowed mother. In the course of her thirty-three-year marriage to Theodore, Pamela gave birth to ten children, seven of whom--four sons and three daughters--survived to adulthood. All but one of them would marry. The courtships, engagements, and marriages of the sons and daughters of Theodore and Pamela are the subject of this book.

Kenslea's richly researched account of Sedgwicks in and out of love comprises three parts. In Part 1, he examines Theodore and Pamela's marriage, characterized by Theodore's long absences and Pamela's depression and mental illness. He also looks at the courtships and marriages of their three oldest children, Eliza, Frances, and Theodore. These complex sets of relationships illuminate, among other things, the changing perceptions of the parental role in matchmaking, the vulnerability of wives abused by husbands, and the tenuous financial situation of widows in the early republic.

In Part 2, Kenslea turns to the Boston-based courtships of Harry and Robert Sedgwick, when the brothers courted "the friendlies," a group of young women who taught them some important lessons, including the difficulties of navigating the subtle rules of social etiquette among the Boston elite. Harry met his future wife Jane among the friendlies. At the end of 1816, the two began a seven-month engagement, during which they were separated but kept up a voluminous correspondence. Part 3 highlights this correspondence, which shows a young couple envisioning for themselves a relationship of equals, despite the legal and cultural impediments of the day.

Kenslea's epilogue considers Catharine Maria Sedgwick, the youngest sister and the best-known member of this generation of Sedgwicks. Catharine's reflections on her single state, both published and private, enrich this history of the married Sedgwicks by offering an early nineteenth-century alternative to the marriage plot.



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