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# Sally Rogers

## The Celebrated Paintress

by Anne Digan Lanning, Vice President for Museum Affairs

Sometimes when an object enters the collection you just know that it has the potential to tell a fascinating story. Such is the case with two watercolor drawings acquired by Historic Deerfield in 2006. At first glance you might think that these watercolors, “Drawn by Sally Rogers,” were created during the early 19th century as part of a young girl’s education at an academy. A little digging reveals a very different story. A narrative in April 1806 from the press of the *Political Observatory* in Walpole, New Hampshire, titled *A Real Object of Charity* describes the “surprisingly curious, beautiful, and astonishing life” of a little girl born without the use of her hands and feet. That girl was Sally Rogers of Lempster, New Hampshire, and what follows is her fascinating story.

The author of *A Real Object of Charity* wrote that exposing the particulars of Sally’s life was “not barely proper but necessary” and that it was a “duty highly incumbent, that something of this kind should be undertaken.” Sally’s father, James Rogers, was described as a “poor but respectable” man who had a large family to provide for. The narrative suggests that the family waited with hope that a relative would come forward with financial assistance for Sally, who while “very industrious,” had no other means of support. When no relative came forward and Sally grew older, James Rogers and the author recognized that an “appeal to the soft emotions of the soul” for public charity was necessary in order to save Sally from destitution.

The narrative was sold through the offices of the *Political Observatory*, by her father, and by post riders. As the story of Sally’s “imperfect body” spread across the countryside, so too did the news of her extraordinary manner of painting using her mouth. The publication included several drawings and in doing so, introduced an audience of potential consumers to the talents of this self-taught artist. Anyone who doubted the veracity of the story was instructed to visit the Rogers family



in Lempster. The downside in sharing Sally’s story with a wider public is that it presented her as a spectacle, particularly when enumerating her other skills: the ability to drink tea, mouth-write, knit, sew and hold scissors in her mouth to cut paper or cloth.

Just two months after the publication of the narrative, Sally traveled to Boston to start a new phase of her life as an itinerant painter and show woman. The “curious and the benevolent” residents of Boston were about to meet an astonishing nineteen year-old girl who was “equal perhaps to the best painter or seamstress in the state (New Hampshire), with or without hands.” Daniel Bowen’s Columbian Museum on Milk Street became her first public performance venue. Bowen’s museum opened in 1795 and featured his collection of paintings, wax figures, and natural history specimens. William Bentley, a scholar and Unitarian minister in Salem, Massachusetts, visited the museum in 1800 and recorded the following assessment in his diary: “The fine paintings, such as are not commonly seen in America, & the few specimens in natural history attracted my eyes & my heart. The whole is lessened by the want of arrangement, by the monstrous figures, & the absurd appearance of the whole in one view. Still it is a wonderful beginning in our Country.”<sup>1</sup>

Museums first appeared in this country in the decades following the Revolution. In Europe, art was seen as indulgent and museums were exclusive places for the wealthy and aristocratic. Historian Gordon Wood, in *Empire of Liberty*, states “at the same time the social purpose of art was transformed, the patronage of art expanded from the court and a few great noblemen to embrace the entire educated public.”<sup>22</sup> Charles Willson Peale’s museum in Philadelphia, considered one of the earliest in this country when it opened in 1786, was to be accessible to a broad audience. Peale’s motivation reflected the ideology of the New Republic, and strongly advocated that museum collections could help advance the goal of educating the citizenry.

It has been suggested that Daniel Bowen’s motivations were more entrepreneurial than educational. As a showman, he “turned others’ financial straits into opportunities for himself.”<sup>23</sup> He likely saw a financial opportunity with Sally Rogers. She had artistic skill but more significantly, the curious nature of her physical disability and the manner of her painting had the potential to attract large crowds. Bowen charged 50 cents admission to his museum plus an additional 25 cents for a separate ticket to see the “astonishing” female artist, Sally Rogers.

The *Columbian Centinel* published a notice that Sally Rogers has “consented to perform” for the public every day from 10:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., except on Saturday evening and on Sunday. The performance was offered in two-hour sessions



three times a day; a grueling schedule, but consistent with other types of performances of that time. Visitors watched Sally “paint, mix colors, thread a needle, cut paper or cloth with scissors held in her mouth.” A newspaper correspondent who attended one of her performances informed his readers that Sally chose to paint a passion-flower, “a difficult plant for copy,” and that “the ease and expedition with which she mixed the paints, and laid them on, and the superior manner in which she traced it throughout, with all its proper coloring, shades, &c, was truly wonderful.”

As an artist, Sally needed to have a range of supplies in order to work, including: paper, pens, pencils, brushes, and an assortment of colors. By the end of the 18th century, “small, hard cakes of soluble color” were readily available. Artists “dipped a cake in water and rubbed it onto a suitable receptacle, such as an oyster shell or porcelain saucer”<sup>24</sup> to achieve the desired shade of color. It is unknown whether Sally Rogers had a paint box to contain all her colors and tools for drawing and painting. While the business arrangements with Daniel Bowen are unknown, clearly some of the money Sally earned from the sale of her drawings and paintings, went toward purchasing additional supplies as needed or even upgrading the quality of her tools.



OPPOSITE PAGE: Watercolor executed by itinerant artist Sally Rogers without the use of hands or feet. Hall and Kate Peterson Fund for Paintings, Prints, Drawings and Photographs. 2006.14.1

LEFT: *The Artist in His Museum*, by Charles Willson Peale (1822). Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Gift of Mrs. Sarah Harrison (The Joseph Harrison Jr. Collection).

ABOVE: Mahogany paint box, William Reeves and John Inwood of London, c. 1803. This elegant box has individual compartments for 18 cakes of assorted watercolors. Paper, a pen knife for shaving off flakes of color, and brushes of various sizes were stored in the drawer below. Sally Rogers may have owned a box similar to this. 1968.122



ABOVE: Detail, *United States of America* by Edward Pattison (Richmond, England, 1804). Sally Rogers toured much of the eastern seaboard, traveling from New Hampshire to Charleston, SC, in 1807. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

RIGHT: This c. 1815 hand-bill advertised Martha Ann Honeywell's performance in Bristol, England. The notice identified Miss Honeywell, a disabled artist, as "The American Wonder," and pointed out that she was no relation to Sarah Beffin, a contemporary English artist who painted with her mouth. Historic Deerfield Library.

To be seen at No. 4, St. James's Church Yard, Bristol.

Never Exhibited here before.

**MISS HONEYWELL,**  
(No Relation to Miss BEFFIN)

The American WONDER,  
*Who has been Exhibited to most of the Nobility in London,*

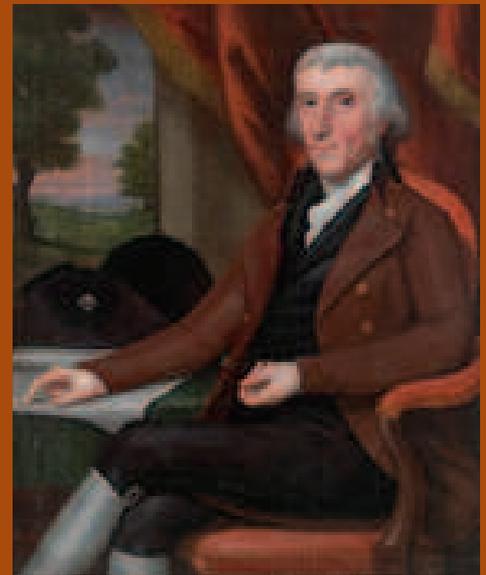
**BORN without HANDS, ARMS, OR LEGS.**

**T**HIS Lady, a Native of New York, in North America, works Embroidery and Net, very fine Silk Purses, cuts Wash Papers, with initials or pieces for trimming according to any design that may be given; writes, draws, threads Needles and ties the knot, and is capable of doing any kind of Needle-Work never attempted by any other Lady, the whole of which she performs with her mouth, in the presence of the company.—As a proof of there being nothing unpleasant in her countenance, her portrait is exhibited at the door; likewise a specimen of her work.

This young Lady rose superior to every obstacle which nature has placed in her way. Possessed of uncommon talents, her industry has not suffered them to lie dormant. Those acquirements she now possesses have been attained by her own natural vigour of mind, without any scholastic education; and whilst contemplating these united qualifications, all must acknowledge her

**A PHENOMENON.**

Her countenance animated, and extremely pleasing, must banish those painful sensations which arise from extreme sensibility, dreading to behold what might shock them; her cheerfulness and unparalleled ingenuity, unites sympathy with astonishment; indeed her countenance is a living lesson of the greatest Philosophy that can possibly be attained, namely, possessing feeling, and yet being happy under the heaviest calamities and deprivations, perfectly resigned to her most peculiar lot, and thankful to the Supreme Being for the Blessings she possesses; and to the formation of her mind, nature has amply made amends for the deficiency of limbs.



TO THE  
*Benevolent and Curious.*

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**T**HE public are respectfully informed, that a more singular and surprising instance of the wonderful productions of nature, was perhaps never more apparently demonstrated, than in the case of

*A Young Lady,*

Who will arrive in this town on the 25th instant and will tarry four or five days at Mr. Pomroy's Inn.

NATURE has deprived this *Young Lady* of the use of hands and feet; but the amends made in the exercise of her other faculties are astonishing to the beholders, and must lead them to admire the infinite wisdom and goodness of Providence.

*Without the use of hands or feet, this unfortunate young Lady has taught herself to perform several kinds of employment with the assistance of her Mouth only, which she has condescended to perform in public. She will paint elegant flowers and landscapes, mix colors, write, thread a needle, cut paper or cloth, with the scissors held in her mouth, &c.*

She is about 20 years of age, was born of poor but respectable parents, in Lempster, N. H. where they now live. Her features are regular, handsome and expressive of a great degree of sensibility, and her countenance exhibits the smile of affability, resignation and good nature. She solicits the charity of the humane and benevolent.

**HOURS OF EXHIBITION.**

Every day and evening, from 9 to 12 o'clock in the morning—from 2 to 5, in the afternoon—and from 6 to 9 in the evening.—Price of admittance 25 cents, Children half price.

TOP: Portrait of tavern keeper Asahel Pomeroy (1749-1833) by Ralph Earl, 1799. Courtesy of the Forbes Library, Northampton, MA.

ABOVE: Advertisement of Feb. 18, 1807, in the *Hampshire Gazette* announcing Sally Rogers' appearance at Pomeroy's Tavern. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

**Painting Tour** ⇨ It is possible that Daniel Bowen helped Sally develop plans for an ambitious painting tour that would take her from New Hampshire to Charleston, South Carolina. Bowen's influence and connections with Edward Savage, the noted painter and engraver in New York City, and his friend Charles Willson Peale in Philadelphia, may have secured her exhibition venues in those important cities.

During the period of the New Republic, the country built post roads, turnpikes, and canals to facilitate the movement of people and goods; by 1810, a network of roads measuring 1,655 miles ran from Maine to the Georgia border with Florida.<sup>5</sup> Sally's 1,000-mile journey started from Walpole, New Hampshire, where the stage left weekly for points south. At this time long distance travel was both exciting and arduous. Passengers experienced the physical effects of poor road conditions as their coach bounced over miles of uneven thoroughfare. Mary Pomeroy Shepherd of Northampton, Massachusetts, noted in her journal that the "road from Walpole, to Greenfield [passed] thro such a Country, as would make one really tremble, in fear of broken Limbs."<sup>6</sup> Sally Rogers had the comfort and watchful eye of a brother and sister on her journey. Presumably, her sister assisted with personal care while her brother tended to the business side of the tour.

En route to New York City, Sally Rogers made two stops along the way: Northampton and Hartford. A week before her arrival in Northampton, a notice in the *Hampshire Gazette* announced that she would appear at Asahel Pomeroy's Inn where the public could see her "paint elegant flowers and landscapes" and "perform several other kinds of employment" during her four to five-day stay. Northampton was probably viewed as a desirable venue to seek support; the town had a population of close to 10,000, and Asahel Pomeroy, owner of the public house where she stayed, was a prominent and influential member of the community.

Once Sally reached New York City, Edward Savage, the painter and engraver, set her up in his museum at No. 166 Greenwich Street. A notice in the *New York Commercial Advertiser* alerting the public to her arrival, described her "unique mode of painting" and the cost of admission—25 cents. Savage told the public that he "pledged his reputation as an artist," and that "he has seen her drawing, specimens of design, taste, and execution, which astonished him, and will bear minute criticism." While in New York, a shift occurs in how Sally is presented to the public. Newspaper notices place greater emphasis on her artistic ability, no longer appealing to the public exclusively for benevolence, her work is placed on view at David Longworth's Shakespeare Gallery, and she becomes known as Sarah Rogers.

When Sarah Rogers finished her commitment in New York City, her tour continued south stopping at a number of urban centers, including Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, DC, Alexandria and Norfolk, Virginia, and Charleston, South

Carolina. In both Charleston and Norfolk, she performed with Martha Ann Honeywell, who, like Sally, was born "imperfect in form" leaving her without hands and only three toes on one foot. The women were about the same age, both being born in the late 1780s, although Martha Ann started performing much earlier than did Sarah. Martha Ann traveled up and down the east coast embroidering flowers on a frame, cutting gentleman's watch papers with their initials, threading a needle and tying knots. It is of interest to note that the public sometimes confused one for the other. While visiting Georgetown, in the District of Columbia, Sarah was compelled to assert in a notice placed in the *Washington Federalist* that "her performance is altogether different from Miss Honeywell's."

**Spectators** ⇨ Sarah Rogers worked a demanding schedule to accommodate the wide range of spectators curious to see the female artist who held the tools for drawing and painting with her mouth. For some individuals, the prospect of viewing a person deprived of the use of all her limbs, caused anxiety. According to sociologist Erving Goffman, "if disabled individuals wish to be tolerated, they find that it becomes incumbent upon them to perform in a manner that puts the nondisabled person at ease."<sup>7</sup> Newspaper notices attempted to assuage public concern by revealing "no one has yet ever left her room without bestowing the highest encomiums on her pleasant appearance, her manners, cheerfulness, and disposition." Likewise, when Martha Ann Honeywell performed in Bristol, England, a handbill promoting her exhibition informed the public, "As a proof of there being nothing unpleasant in her countenance, her portrait is exhibited at the door; likewise a specimen of her work."

Sometimes it took a change in venue to attract a more select audience. Sarah Rogers secured a "genteel" private room near the entrance to her Exhibition Room to appeal to the "ladies of the first circles" knowing that "a private situation was more pleasant than a public one." Sometimes, it was the admission fee that kept people away. In Boston, ticket prices were lowered from "a desire to gratify every class of citizen."

**Range of work** ⇨ Newspaper notices provide clues to the range of subject matter depicted in Sarah Rogers' watercolors and drawings. It seems that she favored birds, flowers, and landscapes. More than likely she used print sources for inspiration. The author of *A Real Object of Charity* commented on Sarah's "watchful observations" in "examining the original and comparing hers with it." She had an inventory of work for sale, including "large flowers fit for framing," and a "few Ladies Ridicules [i.e., reticules], elegantly painted on silk." The public could also commission work from Sarah, as we learned when she returned to the Columbian Museum after a visit to



LEFT: Mount Sidney, the Seat of Genl. John Barker, by William Birch. From: *The Country Seats of the United States of North America* (Philadelphia, 1809). Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

her parents in New Hampshire, so she could “complete the Drawings she has engaged.”

The two watercolor drawings in the collection at Historic Deerfield are similar in size, measuring about 10.75 by 7.5 inches. One depicts a flowering thistle with flying insects circling above; the other features a bird perched on a branch with a dragonfly in the upper right corner. These examples are consistent with period observations of her work in that they show an “exact and perfect steadiness in using pen, pencil, or brush” and they have “delicate touches in shading.” Both are signed “Drawn by Sally Rogers.” The signature helps to date these pieces; starting in May 1807, she began using the name Sarah.

Her oeuvre included at least one painting of a private house. In 1813, Sarah Rogers’ view of Mount Sidney, the seat of John Barker, Esq., was included in the Third Annual Exhibition of the Columbia Society of Artists and the Pennsylvania Academy. Rogers seemingly had access to William Birch’s *The Country Seats of the United States*, published in 1809, in which Barker’s home was one of only 18 estates depicted. Barker was Mayor of Philadelphia while Sarah was in the city, so it is possible he attended one of her performances and commissioned the work.

**Recognition** ✦ It was in Philadelphia that Sarah’s work received formal recognition. Charles Willson Peale and a number of other artists, worked to establish an institution for artists to exhibit their work. In 1810, The Society of Artists of the United States was organized, and the following year they held their first annual exhibition. The exhibition catalog listed entry number 340 as, “Landscape, painted by holding the brush in the mouth, Miss Sarah Rogers.” It is quite remarkable that works by Sarah Rogers from Lempster, New Hampshire, were included in this exhibition, along with drawings by well-known architects, Benjamin Latrobe and

Robert Mills. Her former employer, Daniel Bowen, may have had a hand in it. Bowen, a friend of Charles Willson Peale, moved to Philadelphia in 1810, and may have advocated on her behalf.

In promoting Sarah Rogers, newspaper notices asserted that people of “rank and information” visited her performances. This is true in the case of William Hamilton of Woodlands, whose 600-acre estate in West Philadelphia perched high above the Schuylkill River was considered one of the

finest examples of neoclassical architecture and landscape design in America. Hamilton acquired a drawing of flowers by Rogers and donated the work to Peale’s Philadelphia Museum.<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that both Sarah Rogers and Martha Ann Honeywell donated examples of their work to Peale’s Museum.

Sarah Rogers died in Philadelphia at the young age of 23. In her short seven-year career as an itinerant artist and show woman, she captured the attention and respect of many. The same newspapers that alerted the public to her “displays of genius” now carried the news of her death. Today, only a few known works by Sarah Rogers survive, and her remarkable story has slowly faded into obscurity. November 2013 marks the 200th anniversary of her death, so it is possible that as we learn more about her life, additional paintings and drawings will be attributed to Sarah Rogers and add to her deserving reputation.

#### ENDNOTES:

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1. Entry dated February 12, 1800. William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D.* Vol. 2 (Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1962), 330.
2. Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty, A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 550.
3. Peter Benes, “A few monstrous great snakes’: Daniel Bowen and the Columbian Museum, 1789-1816.” In: *New England Collectors and Collections*. The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings (Boston, 2004), 23.
4. Barker, Elizabeth E. “Watercolor Painting in Britain, 1750-1850.” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (October 2004). New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art [www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/bwtr/hd\\_bwtr.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/bwtr/hd_bwtr.htm)
5. Wood, 481.
6. Journal of Mary Pomeroy Shepherd, 1803-1809, Historic Northampton, Northampton, Mass.
7. Michael M. Chemers, *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show* (New York, Palgrave, MacMillan, 2008), 20.
8. David Brigham, *Public Culture in the Early Republic: Peale’s Museum and Its Audience* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 134.