

LYDIA STILES FOSTER (1806-87), c. 1838
Eliza Goodridge (1798-1882)
watercolor on ivory
3 11/16 x 2 3/4 (9.3663 x 6.9850)
Bequest of Dwight Foster Dunn, 1937
Weis 55
Hewes Number: 49

Ex. Coll.: sitter, to her daughter Mary Stiles Foster Dunn (b. 1830), to her son the donor.

Lydia Stiles (cats. #109, 110) married Alfred Dwight Foster (1800-52) on February 14, 1828. Foster studied law with his future wife's brother-in-law and began his legal career in Brookfield, Massachusetts, but moved his practice to Worcester in 1828, and abandoned it two years later. 'From that time to his death, ...he was almost constantly employed in service of public trust and responsibility.'¹ Throughout her life, Lydia Stiles Foster involved herself in the promotion of her husband's interests as well as those of their three children (cats. #51, 52, 53). She described her busy domestic life in a letter to her husband in 1833, 'I have very little leisure and scarcely a moment to myself free from some interruption or other. Dwight [her eldest child] will not stay in the chamber unless I am there and he is as full of mischief as you can imagine.'²

She was an active member of the Union Congregational Church and was an avid gardener. 'Mrs. Foster was a woman of high character, and was regarded with great respect by all who knew her.... Her love for flowers was very great and so was her success in cultivating them.... Many a passer-by on Chestnut or Cedar street, for the past three summers, must have seen the little carriage wheeled about the garden paths and have heard her voice directing about some favorite plant or flower.'³ One of the daughters is arranging a vase of flowers in the children's portrait.

Foster supported her husband's interest in the American Antiquarian Society and, after his death, donated several volumes of bound newspapers, government documents, and annuals to the Society.⁴

This is one of several miniatures of the family painted by Eliza Goodridge. Although Goodridge was eight years older than Foster, they had grown up together in Templeton, Massachusetts, and remained friends for many years. Goodridge painted her friend's likeness at about the same time as the remarkable likeness of the Fosters' children (cat. #53) in which the whole family may be

seen. These two small images offer abundant details of the domestic setting for the family's life at home. The mantelpiece, the Argand lamp, a sewing box, and paneled door, unusual for miniatures of the period, provide a glimpse of the Fosters' parlor, while three other pieces of furniture and the staircase may be seen in the portrait of the children. Goodridge began to incorporate such meticulously filled backgrounds in her portraits in the late 1830s and her two likenesses of Lydia Stiles Foster's sister, Mary, also feature such household possessions, all carefully rendered in miniature (cats. #89, 112).

It is likely that Foster helped Goodridge secure commissions in Worcester, as Goodridge usually stayed in her home during visits to the city in the 1830s and 1840s. The artist used the Fosters' parlor for her sittings, sometimes to the dismay of the lady of the house, who wrote to her sister in 1838: 'Miss Goodridge is still with us and has just dispatched the miniatures of Col. Dey and his wife of Webster, to my great joy, as I was tired of having them come to sit.'⁵

¹ Alfred Dwight Foster served Worcester as a selectman, a member of the school committee, and a representative to the General Court. Among the 'literary and benevolent institutions' he served were Leicester Academy, Amherst College, the Massachusetts Board of Education, the State Lunatic Hospital, and the School of Reform eventually established in Westborough. Samuel M. Burnside (1783-1850), with whom Foster had studied law, first nominated him for American Antiquarian Society membership in 1825. Foster initially declined, but accepted election in 1831, after he had become a Worcester resident and became an active member. He served on the publications committee, as treasurer, 1843-46, and on the Council from 1846 to 1852. For further biographical information, see Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (October 1852): 8-11. Foster's correspondence, business papers, and journals are among the Foster Family Papers, 1740-1884, American Antiquarian Society Manuscript Collection.

² Lydia Stiles Foster to Alfred Dwight Foster, February 1833, Foster Family Papers.

³ Worcester Daily Spy, (August 5, 1887).

⁴ Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (October 1863):21; and (April 1868):32.

⁵ Lydia Stiles Foster to Mary Stiles Newcomb, March 21, 1838, Foster Family Papers.