

Forgotten History: Charity & Sylvia

Same-sex marriage became legal in the United States in 2015. That did not mean, however, that there were not LGBTQ+ people who did not consider themselves married, even if the law didn't accept them. For example, Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake were two women who lived at the beginning of the 19th century as a married couple. Here is their story:

In 1807 Charity moved from Massachusetts to the tiny town of Weybridge, in western Vermont, and began her sewing business. She met Sylvia, who was the sister of a friend. Within a few months, Charity had rented a room of her own, hired the younger woman as her apprentice and urged her to move in as soon as possible.

Right after Sylvia moved in with Charity, she agreed to be Charity's help-meet. Help-meet was a common phrase used in early America to mean wife. A wife, especially a farmer's wife, worked with her husband to run the farm or family business. Throughout their lives, although they shared the profits from their tailoring business, Charity always served as head of the household. Her name came first in public documents, such as tax records and census records. She handled the money and took the leading role in all of their business. Sylvia performed the wifely work of cooking and keeping house.



Silhouettes of Sylvia Drake and Charity Bryant of Weybridge, Vermont, (c. 1805-1815) is possibly the first depiction of a same sex couple. Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History.

Most marriages in early America were agreed on without a marriage ceremony or any kind of license. Because Sylvia agreed to be Charity's companion, they considered themselves married. However, although their community eventually accepted their marriage, Charity and Sylvia were considered single by the law. In some ways this was disappointing for them. For example, Sylvia wanted to take Charity's last name, Bryant, but she was unable to because theirs was not a legal marriage. However, in some ways, this was beneficial: during this time, after marriage women did not have the right to own their own property, keep their own wages, or sign a contract.

In 1808, the couple built a single-roomed house and tailoring shop. Charity ordered a ring. They took the first of several trips back to Massachusetts, where Charity introduced her friends and family to Sylvia. At first, it was hard for Sylvia and Charity to let family and friends know about their relationship. Women were still expected to get married to men, and the Church believed their relationship was a sin. However, later on, as their families accepted their marriage, many of the family gatherings were held at their house.

In other towns that Charity had lived in before, she was forced to leave when people found out about her relationships with women. In Weybridge, where they were known as Aunt Charity and Aunt Sylvia, it was different. One reason that the town accepted Charity and Sylvia's marriage was because of their contributions to the small community. In fact, Sylvia and Charity's business was so successful that families wanted their daughters to work for them. A job in Charity and Sylvia's sewing shop meant that their daughters would be trained as seamstresses, a trade that could allow a woman to earn money for the rest of her life.



In the 44 years they spent together, they never spent a night apart until Charity passed away in 1851. When Sylvia died 17 years later, her family made sure that she was buried next to Charity and that they shared a single gravestone.

I. Examining social structures:

Traditional gender roles are the *roles* (like an actor takes on a role) that people take based on their assigned gender. For example, in our society, a woman is expected to care more about housework and children than a man. These so-called “traditional” roles are what we see in older movie and books, and are usually the default (though many couples try to change this) in heterosexual relationships. However, just because two people of the same gender are in a relationship doesn’t mean they don’t adhere to some more traditional divisions of labor and interest. **Reading Charity and Sylvia’s story, identify in what ways they upheld traditional roles and in what ways they challenged them.**

Upheld Traditional Gender Roles	Challenged Traditional Gender Roles
Sylvia agreed to be Charity’s help-meet	Both were nurturing (both were “aunt” to the community)

II. Continuity and change:

Charity and Sylvia were a couple more than 200 years ago. We tend to think about history as being very different from our lives, but that is not always true. **In what ways are their lives similar to a modern couple and in what ways are their lives different?** Keep in mind that ‘modern’ lives are very different as well, depending on where someone lives and who they are, so you can base your comparison on what you think life would be like for Sylvia and Charity in your city.

Different from Modern Times	Similar to Modern Times
Married women couldn’t buy a house or own land	Rings symbolize love and marriage

III. Expressing Your Opinion:

Choose from the following four statements and write a short paragraph explaining your thinking, using the evidence you found in the text.

- A. Sylvia and Charity upheld traditional gender roles in their relationship
- B. Sylvia and Charity did not uphold traditional gender roles in their relationship
- C. Sylvia and Charity led a life together that was very similar to one they might lead in 2022
- D. Sylvia and Charity led a life together that was very different to one they might lead in 2022

In my opinion, Sylvia and Charity _____

[argument]. Firstly, _____

_____ [evidence 1].

Secondly, _____

_____ [evidence 2].

Thirdly, _____

_____ [evidence 3].

NOTE: This lesson is based on a [series of lessons](#) created by Jennifer Brouhard and Jeannie Kohl for the Oakland Unified School District. Their lessons were based on a book by Rachel Hope Cleves called [Charity and Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage in Early America](#) (Oxford University Press, 2014). It was supplemented by information from [NYHistory.org](#) and [themarginalian.org](#).

Possible Answers:

Upheld Traditional Gender Roles	Challenged Traditional Gender Roles
Sylvia helped Charity as a help-meet Charity made all the business decisions Sylvia cooked and kept house Charity bought a ring for Sylvia Sylvia wanted to take Charity's name Held family gatherings at their home	Each married a woman Had equal equity in their business Bought a house and owned land Sylvia didn't take Charity's name Moved in together right away, before "marriage" Both were nurturing (both were "aunt" to the community)

Different from Modern Times	Similar to Modern Times
Charity was forced to leave town because she was a lesbian Married women couldn't buy a house or own land Seamstress was a lucrative job Didn't need a ceremony or license to get married (regardless of gender) Two women couldn't legally marry	Rings to symbolize love and marriage Spent time with friends and family Some religions still think of homosexuality as a sin, and some families are less accepting The default is still that women will marry men, and want to be married