



**FEBRUARY 2026**

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**A Newsletter for the volunteers & friends of the Stephenson House**



## Valentine's Day in Early 19th-Century America: Affection on Paper

In early nineteenth-century America, Valentine's Day was not yet the commercial holiday familiar today. It was a modest, largely handwritten observance shaped by literacy, courtship customs, and the material limits of the period. Americans marked February 14 through letters, poems, and small handmade tokens that reflected both inherited European traditions and evolving ideas about romantic attachment.

### Cultural Roots and Courtship

Valentine's Day entered American culture through English custom, where the date had long been associated with romantic pairing. By 1800, Americans, particularly in towns and cities, recognized Valentine's Day as an occasion for expressing affection, though there was no standardized form of celebration. Practices varied by region, age, and social class.

Courtship during this period balanced restraint with growing emotional expressiveness. While marriage remained closely tied to family expectations, religion, and economic stability, romantic affection was increasingly

accepted as a legitimate foundation for marriage. Valentine exchanges offered a socially sanctioned opportunity for sentiment, especially among young people.



### Handwritten Valentines and Letter Writing

The most common Valentine in early nineteenth-century America was a handwritten message rather than a printed card. These were typically written on plain or lightly decorated paper and often included verse. Many poems followed familiar rhyming patterns and were copied or adapted from popular British and American poetry collections, almanacs, or commonplace books.

Rising literacy rates made letter writing an important social skill, particularly among the middle classes. A well-

*(Continued on page 6)*

## Greetings from the New Co-Presidents

If you've been following our Tiktok or Facebook account, you might have seen videos with the sound, "I have no idea what I'm doing, but I know I'm doing it really really well."

That pretty much sums up how Stacey and I feel about our online presence in making videos for the Stephenson House. With RoxAnn and her daughter Gillen's leadership, our social media accounts have brought the Stephenson House new audiences near and far. As I write this, we have more than 36,000 followers on Facebook, and 120,000 followers on TikTok. We are all aghast – and sincerely grateful! – that our silly videos have brought that much attention to our humble abode. Every one of those likes, comments and shares on our social media accounts brings in a little bit of money to support the house.

In this new year, we want to turn that attention into a more solid foundation of support. More on that another time.

But first, some introductions of the new co-presidents.

Stacey Lipe is a native of Edwardsville and a recently retired teacher. In addition to the Stephenson House, she volunteers at the local Overnight Warming Location, Willoughby Farms in Collinsville and with the League of Women Voters.

I am Peggy Emling, a history teacher of 28 years in Edwardsville. I love to travel as much as I can because I believe it's a valuable way to learn. For more than a decade I have helped organize the annual trip to our nation's capital for 150 middle schoolers, and one of my favorite places to visit every year is Thomas Jefferson's home, Monticello.

Our commitment to education, civic duty and local history brought both of us to Stephenson House. In our work as co-presidents of the board, we will continue to bring our House to new audiences and to create new avenues of funding.

We ended 2025 with a welcome renewal of interest in the House, and we're geared up for an exciting 2026!

Sincerely,

Peggy Emling, co-president



*The 2026 Co-Presidents of the Friends of Col. Benjamin Stephenson House, Stacey Lipe (back) and Peggy Emling (front).*

## Trivia Through the Decades: A CLUE-Inspired Night

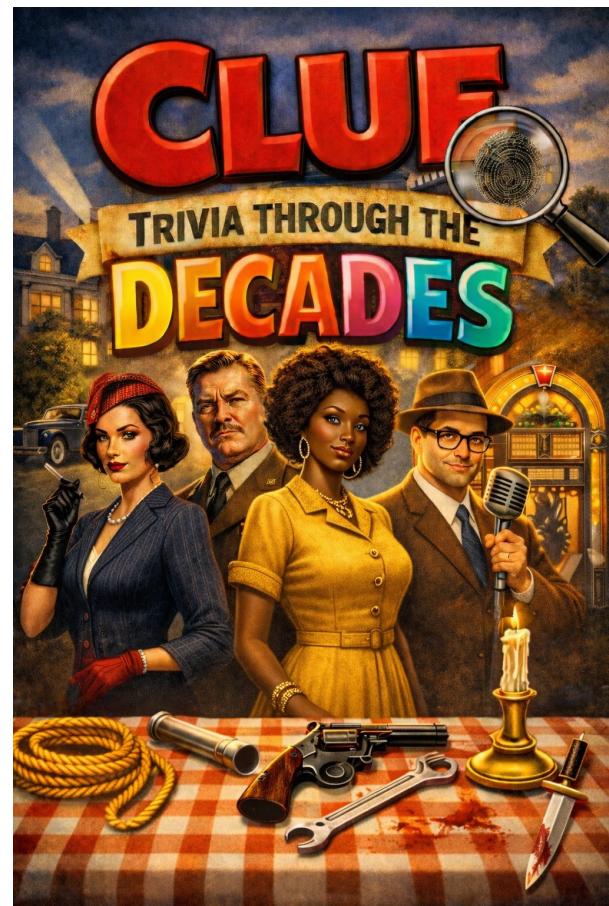
The 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House invites you to join Professor Plum, Col. Mustard and friends for a murder-mystery themed trivia night set in the 1940s sponsored by Benjamin Edwards Investments, John Morrissey Financial Advisor: 618-685-2813.

On Saturday, April 25 bring your smartest friends to the Edwardsville Moose Lodge (7371 Marine Rd.) to battle other teams as our quizmasters test your knowledge of Trivia Through the Decades.

Doors open at 6 p.m. for snacks and refreshments. Trivia begins at 7 p.m. The night will include cash prizes for 1st and 2nd place, a costume contest and free soda, water and beer (while it lasts).

The event benefits the Col. 1820 Benjamin Stephenson House, a hands-on living history museum bustling with activities that bring to life the early history of Illinois and tells the story of the family and the region in entertaining and engaging ways.

To reserve your table or more information visit:  
<https://stephensonhouse.org/trivia-thru-decades>



## An Afternoon Chat with Dolley Madison

Enjoy an intimate and delightful afternoon with one of America's most fascinating First Ladies. Join us as Dolley Madison herself comes to life in this engaging, conversational program, full of stories, personality, and behind-the-scenes glimpses of early American history.

Our special guest is Barb Kay, a happily retired high school history teacher who has spent nearly 30 years portraying famous women from history. Born and raised in St. Louis and now living in Columbia, Illinois, Barb brings warmth, humor,



and deep knowledge to her portrayals. She likes to say she's still teaching history, just without having to grade papers.

This is not a lecture, but a relaxed "afternoon chat" in a small-group setting, with time to listen, learn, and enjoy the company. Light refreshments will be served.

- **Sunday, February 22**
- **1:00 PM**
- **Free (reservations required)**
- **Limited to 15 attendees**

*Come enjoy history brought vividly to life, up close, personal, and unforgettable.*

## A Most Curious Invitation: The Jewels Ball Debuts June 20

Dearest readers,

It appears Edwardsville is about to experience a most delightful upheaval. Whispers have reached this author's ears of an event so extravagant, so thoroughly enchanting, that even the most stoic of townsfolk are dusting off their gloves and practicing their curtsies.

On Saturday, June 20, 2026, the 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House, in partnership with the St. Louis Historical Sewing Society, will host the very first Jewels Ball — an evening affair where history, fantasy, and fashion collide in the most delicious way.

The venue? The LeClaire Room at Lewis & Clark College, a space with enough architectural charm to make even Lady Danbury approve. The entertainment? Live music, period dancing led by the incomparable Dance Mistress Deborah Hyland, and a regal appearance by Queen Charlotte herself (or rather, a most convincing incarnation thereof).

But do not mistake this for a stiff reenactment. The Jewels Ball is designed for all, from seasoned historians to those simply enchanted by the Bridgerton aesthetic. No perfection required, only enthusiasm. Whether your gown is stitched by hand or sourced from Amazon, you'll be welcomed with open arms.

And while the gowns may sparkle and the tailcoats impress, the true gem of the evening lies in its purpose: every ticket supports the preservation and educational programming of the 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House, ensuring that Edwardsville's past remains vibrantly present.



### Details for the Discerning Guest:

- Tickets: [givebutter.com/TheJewelsBall](http://givebutter.com/TheJewelsBall)  
Secure your place before the Queen's court fills.
- Accommodations: A block of rooms awaits at the Holiday Inn Express & Suites, for those traveling from distant estates.
- Community: Join the Jewels Ball Facebook Group for costume inspiration, updates, and pre-ball banter.

So, gentle reader, the question remains:

Will you attend in silk or scandal? In velvet or virtue?

One thing is certain, this author will be watching.

Yours in gossip and glamour,

*Lady Whistledown*

*(or someone very much like her)*

# A Note From the Director

We have a busy and exciting season ahead, and I'm delighted to share two events that bring both fun and essential support to the museum.

This year's Trivia Night will be decorated in a 1940s CLUE-inspired theme. While the questions themselves won't be CLUE-based, they will span history, pop culture, music, literature, and more, covering the 1920s through the present. It's shaping up to be a lively and clever evening, and we'd love your help spreading the word. Tickets are available now at [www.stephensonhouse.org](http://www.stephensonhouse.org).

Our Jewels Ball will be Bridgerton-inspired, making it a perfect gift for any Jane Austen or Bridgerton fan in your life. A ticket makes a wonderful Valentine's Day surprise, a thoughtful Mother's Day gift, or even a delightfully unexpected addition to an Easter basket. If you're looking to give an experience rather than a thing, this one is sure to impress. For tickets visit <https://givebutter.com/TheJewelsBall>

Both events support the museum in meaningful ways; not only through ticket sales, but also through the incredible visibility they bring. Many of you have already helped us grow our online presence by sharing our videos, and we recently saw a remarkable spike in Facebook followers. That growth directly supports the

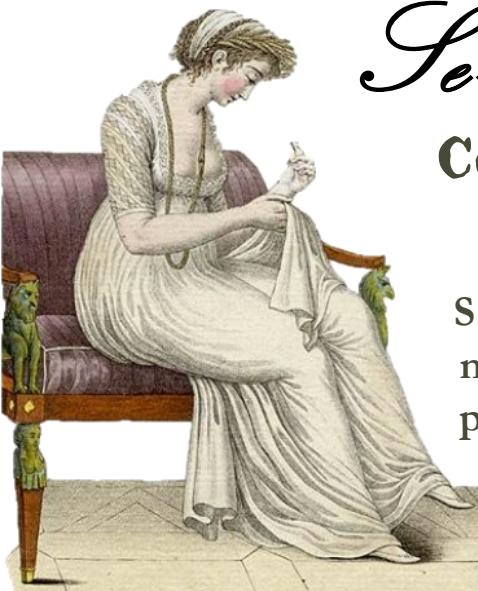
museum through new revenue and helps introduce thousands of new friends to our mission. If you enjoy what we do, please continue to share our posts, invite others to follow us, and help keep that momentum going.

There are also opportunities to support these events as a sponsor. Trivia Night sponsorship levels can be found on our website, and Jewels Ball sponsorship information is available through our Givebutter page. Sponsorships are a wonderful way to champion the museum.

And finally, as we look ahead to a busy year, we are in need of additional volunteers, especially interpreters and gift shop docents. If you've ever considered joining our volunteer family, now is a wonderful time. Your time and enthusiasm make all the difference in keeping the house thriving.

As always, thank you for your generosity and your commitment to keeping history vibrant and fun. We hope to see you at Trivia Night, the Jewels Ball, or both!

*RoxAnn*



## *Sewing Saturday* Come sew with us February 14.

Join us for a relaxing day of sewing on Saturday, February 14 from 11 am—3 pm. This month we're working on unfinished wardrobe projects. We'll provide the fabric and pattern; you bring a sewing kit (or use what we have). Please let the director know if you plan to help.



(Continued from page 1)

composed Valentine was a social resume in disguise; it demonstrated education, refinement, and a carefully measured emotional sensitivity. Anonymous Valentines were also common, allowing expressions of interest that remained within accepted boundaries of propriety.

Surviving examples reveal a range of tones. While many were earnest, others were playful or gently teasing. These "mock" or humorous verses allowed suitors to test the waters without the risk of total vulnerability. For instance, a young man might pen a lighthearted jab at a lady's many suitors:

*"The rose is red, the violets blue, But your admirers are not a few; Since they are many, and I am one, I'll wait in the shade 'til they are done."*



### Puzzle Purses: Folded Messages of Courtship

Among the most distinctive forms of early American Valentines were puzzle purses, also known as folded love puzzles. These were made from a single square sheet of paper folded into a geometric form that concealed a message inside. To read it, the recipient had to unfold the paper in stages, often guided by brief verses written on the outer folds.

Puzzle purses were not exclusive to Valentine's Day, but they were well suited to courtship. Their use reflects a culture in which effort and skill carried social meaning. The careful folding required time, patience, and dexterity, qualities admired in a prospective partner. To receive a puzzle purse was to know that someone had spent hours in quiet contemplation of you, navigating the geometry of a single sheet of paper.

Several surviving American examples explicitly reference Valentine's Day. One early nineteenth-

century puzzle purse includes the instruction:

"This paper of many folds you see, Pray take the pains to open me."

Another concludes at its center with a simple declaration:

"When this you see remember me."

### Cut-Paper and Early Decorative Valentines

Some early nineteenth-century Valentines were enhanced with hand-cut paper decoration, sometimes described today as "webbed" designs. Precision is necessary here. While cut-paper techniques existed in America at this time, they differed significantly from the elaborate machine-made lace Valentines of the mid-nineteenth century.



*Antique Cut paper Scherenschnitte Valentine 19th cent, Available at [Montaine-Antiques](https://www.montaine-antiques.com/pictures/se-pa-cut-paper-scherenschnitte-valentine-19th-cent), Florissant, MO*  
<https://www.montaine-antiques.com/pictures/se-pa-cut-paper-scherenschnitte-valentine-19th-cent>

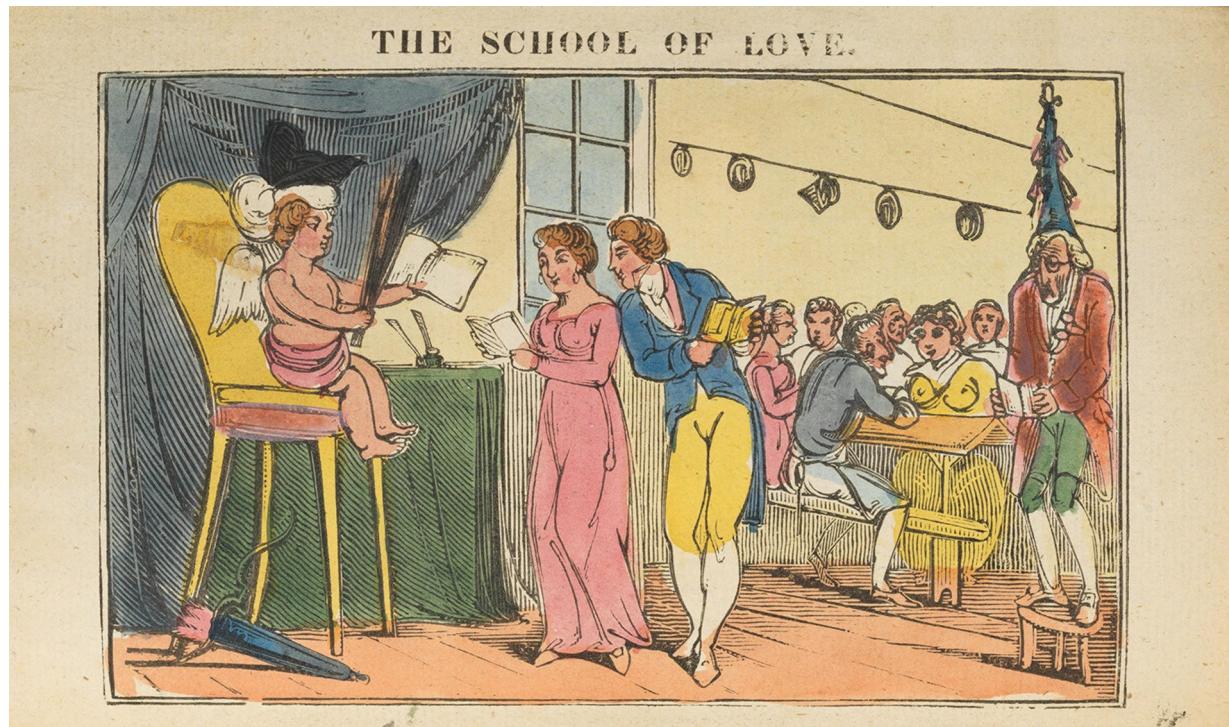
Early cut-paper decoration was usually simple: pierced borders, small symmetrical motifs, or carefully trimmed edges. These techniques drew on European paper traditions, including English cut work and German *Scherenschnitte*. Because this intricate work required hours of focused labor, these tokens were rare. In a world before mass production, effort was the primary currency of affection.

### Community Customs and Youth Participation

Valentine's Day was not limited to romantic couples. In some communities, young people participated in supervised Valentine lotteries. In these parlor games, participants drew names from a hat to assign symbolic "Valentines" for the evening. It was a structured way to lower the social stakes of courtship; being "chosen" by the luck of the draw allowed for flirtation under the safety of a game.

Children and adolescents also exchanged simple messages or tokens of friendship. American

(Buttons, Continued on page 7)



George Cruikshank, *The School of Love; or, Original and Comic Valentine Writer*, 1814. Hand-colored wood engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (1981.1136.40).

(Continued from page 6)

newspapers from the early nineteenth century occasionally mention Valentine gatherings, indicating that the holiday had a modest but recognized place in the social calendar.

### On the Eve of Commercialization

By the 1830s, changes in printing technology and postal systems began to reshape Valentine's Day. Lower postage costs and improved mail delivery made it easier to send messages over distance, laying the groundwork for the commercial Valentine trade that would emerge more fully in the 1840s.

In the early nineteenth century itself, however, Valentine's Day remained personal and restrained. Whether written as a folded puzzle, edged with careful cuts, or simply penned in neat script, a Valentine was valued less for ornament than for intention. It was a moment to put feeling into words—quietly, deliberately, and by hand.

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# News & Needs

## ***Thank you...***

- ...to everyone who came to Sewing Saturday last month and helped work on clothes for the museum's wardrobe.

## ***Needs...***

- If you haven't renewed your Friends of the Stephenson House membership yet, now is the perfect time to do so. Your continued support keeps our programs thriving and our history alive for the community.
- We're currently seeking volunteers to help during weekend hours and assist with group tours. If you've been thinking about getting involved, now is a wonderful time to join us.

- If you have any Volunteer Training binders, house clothing pieces, or sewing patterns checked out, please return them at your earliest convenience. These materials help us prepare new volunteers and keep our programs running smoothly. Thank you for taking a moment to bring them back.

## ***Wanted...***

- **Spring, Summer, Fall 2026 Internship Alert!** Make history come alive at the 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House! We have three internships available:
  1. Videographer – Film stories & events
  2. Social Media – Share history with style
  3. Admin – Learn museum & nonprofit ops**Apply now:** <https://stephensonhouse.org/internships-%26-volunteers-1>

## Upcoming Events, Tours & Activities

- February 1, Playing the Past, 12-3 pm, 12+/- Girl Scouts
- February 8, Jewels Ball Committee Meeting, 3 pm
- February 14, Sewing Saturday, 11 am-3 pm
- February 15, Trivia Night Committee Meeting, 3 pm
- February 22, An Afternoon Chat with Dolley Madison, 1 pm
- February 26, Board of Directors Meeting, 5 pm



Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat

1 Playing the Past 12 pm	2	3	4	5	6	7
8 Jewels Ball Committee Meeting 3 pm	9	10	11	12	13	14 Sewing Saturday 11 am
15 Trivia Night Committee Meeting 3 pm	16	17	18	19	20	21
22 Afternoon Chat w/ Dolley Madison 1 pm	23	24	25	26 Board Meeting 5 pm	27	28

# Be Our Friend...

*Renew your membership or become a new Friend.  
Fill out and mail the following information to us.*

**YES! I want to help.** Enclosed is my contribution:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State & ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Amount Enclosed: \_\_\_\_\_ Membership Level: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please send me information about volunteering at Stephenson House.*

*Checks should be made payable to the:*

## Friends of the Col. Benjamin Stephenson House

Payments may also be made in our online store:

[www.stephensonhouse.org](http://www.stephensonhouse.org)

**\*Memberships are from January to December.** Benefits of membership are extended to an individual and his/her immediate family. We accept cash, check or credit card donations. Memberships are extended for monetary donations only. The Friends of Col. Benjamin Stephenson House is a 501c3 not-for-profit organization FIN 37-1395804

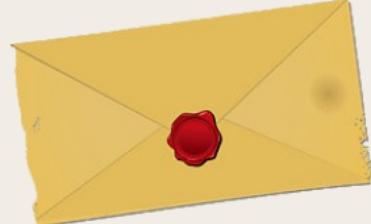


**Send your membership to the**

## Friends of the Col. Benjamin Stephenson House

**P.O. Box 754**

**Edwardsville, IL 62025**



## Membership Levels

**Friend of Ben & Lucy**  
\$30

**Stephenson Family Friend**  
\$60

**Landmark Friend**  
\$125

**Heritage Friend**  
\$275

**Living History Friend**  
\$600

**Founding Friend**  
\$1,000 or more

## Our Board of Directors & Staff

Peggy Emling, *Co-President*

Stacey Lipe, *Co-President*

Rachel Hill, *Treasurer*

Leslie Wood, *Secretary*

Elizabeth Edwards

Sean Goding

Andrea Miracle

Robert 'Buddy' Paulett

Jaclyn Wallace

Leslie Wood

RoxAnn Raisner, *Site Director*

Phil Stack, *Bookkeeper*



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