

# Passport to the Past

*by Kendra Strubhart, Heritage Interpreter*

The U.S. passport is a document with a history as old as the United States itself.

American consular officials issued the country's first passports to citizens of the 13 colonies during the War of Independence. Designed by Benjamin Franklin, the one-sided documents were reminiscent of French passports and featured printed descriptions of the passport holders. In 1789, 13 years after the United States gained its independence, the State Department began issuing passports to citizens traveling abroad. These early passports were valid for three to six months.

In the years leading up to World War I, the U.S. passport took a new form, an 11-by-17 diploma with a large State Department seal engraved prominently at the top. On the left side was a description of the passport holder and his or her signature. On the right in ornate script were the passport holder's name and any additional information, such as "accompanied by his wife."

It was not uncommon for a man's passport to include his wife, children, servants or other females under his protection. His application would have included their names and ages and how they were related, and one passport would have covered the whole group. Likewise, when children traveled abroad solely with their mother, their names and ages were included on her application. By the latter part of the 19th century, passports for women and their children were becoming more common as more women applied for passports in their own names. In fact by 1923, more than 40 percent of applicants were women.

Before the 1940s, with the exception of times of war, the government generally did not require passports for international travel, but the practice of applying for passports was increasingly common. Between 1877 and 1909 the government issued 369,844; between 1912 and 1925 the number grew dramatically to 1,184,085. Today, the applications are archived with the National Archives and Records Administration and the State Department, which makes them valuable research resources, especially as we work to discover more about the Peabody family.

In April 1896 May Henderson Peabody, the first wife of Francis Stuyvesant Peabody, applied for a passport for herself and her two children, Stuyvesant and May. According to the document, she was 5 feet 7 inches tall and had black hair and gray eyes, information that earlier research was unable to uncover, partly because color photography was not common during that era. But other details on the form, details that researchers initially overlooked, proved to be the most compelling.

(Edition of July, 1888.)

(FORM FOR NATIVE CITIZEN.)

No. 9511

Issued 4/16 APR 16 1896

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

State of Georgia  
 COUNTY OF Thomas ss.

I, May H. Peabody, a NATIVE AND LOYAL CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES, do hereby apply to the Department of State at Washington for a passport for myself ~~and wife~~, and my minor children as follows: Stuyvesant my son, born at Chicago, Illinois on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of August 1888, and May H. Peabody, born at Evanton, Illinois, on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of April, 1891.

In support of the above application, I do solemnly swear that I was born at Whitesboro, in the State of New York, on or about the 19<sup>th</sup> day of April, 1865; that my father was a native citizen of the United States; that I am domiciled in the United States, my permanent residence being at the city of Chicago, in the State of Illinois, where I follow the occupation of no business occupation, that I am about to go abroad temporarily; and that I intend to return to the United States within one year with the purpose of residing and performing the duties of citizenship therein, and that I am the wife of Francis S. Peabody, who is a native citizen of the United States.

Further, I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion: SO HELP ME GOD.

Sworn to before me this 10 day of April, 1896, at Thomasville, Ga.  
[Signature] Notary Public.

DESCRIPTION OF APPLICANT.  
 Age, 30 years. Mouth, Medium Size  
 Stature, 5 feet, 7 inches, Eng. Chin, Square  
 Forehead, low Hair, Black  
 Eyes, grey Complexion, fair  
 Nose, Straight medium size Face, round

IDENTIFICATION.  
Thomasville, Ga., April 10, 1896.  
 I hereby certify that I know the above-named May H. Peabody personally, and know her to be a native-born citizen of the United States, and that the facts stated in the affidavit are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

[Signature] Thomasville, Ga.  
 [Signature] "u"

Applicant desires passport sent to following address:  
May H. Peabody,  
Thomasville  
Georgia.

Mrs. Peabody submitted her application in Thomasville, Ga. At first, researchers were unable to speculate why she and her children would have been in Georgia, but piecing the information together with the discovery of Mayhaw, a property in Georgia that her family owned, lead them to conclude that she and her children were likely visiting relatives at the time.

Passport applications have revealed details about other members of the family as well, such as Francis Stuyvesant Peabody and his second wife, Mary. In February 1919 the couple was in Palm Beach, Fla. Based on their passport applications, it appears they decided to go on a last-minute vacation to Cuba with two other couples, Mr. and Mrs. Herman H. Hettler and Mr. and Mrs. Frederick H. Bartlett. In a letter to the assistant Secretary of State that preceded the couples' applications, Peabody wrote, "If it is not imposing upon you too much I would esteem it a personal favor, if you could expedite the issuance of these pass-ports, as we are very

anxious to leave on next Tuesday for Havana for a three or four day visit there." The letter explained that all members of the party were U.S. citizens but that none had birth certificates, although it's unclear if they didn't possess birth certificates or simply couldn't access to them in Florida.

Because little is known about Mary Peabody, the application was especially valuable. Previous research provided conflicting information regarding where and when she was born, but the application stated she was born in Galesburg, Ill., in October 1879. As an official document, it likely contains the most accurate information to date. Her date of birth is especially interesting because it shows she was 20 years younger than her husband, a fact that had also been debated.

The couple's applications provided another welcomed resource: photographs, which applicants had to submit starting in 1914. Although the quality is poor, the 95-year-old images show Mr. Peabody in a suit jacket and bow tie and his wife in a lace-collared top and dark hat, which unfortunately casts a shadow over her face.



U.S. passports have a fascinating history and are wonderful resources for research. The hope is that more great stories relating to the Peabody family are yet to come.