

Up-and-Comers

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A Most Distinguished Citizen: Union College’s John Bigelow Papers

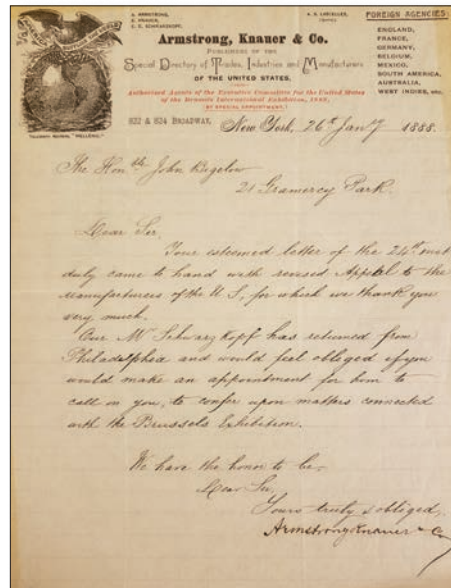
By Amanda Greenwood, Project Archivist, Union College

In December of 2021, I graduated with an MSIS in archives and records administration from the University at Albany, New York. Before graduating, I was offered a project archivist position at Union College in Schenectady. I happily accepted the position, not only for the experience of working at a university as prestigious as Union, but because of my interest in the content of the collection I would be in charge of processing: the John Bigelow Papers. As one of Union’s most requested collections, the John Bigelow Papers consist of biographical and professional papers, scrapbooks, journals, a library exceeding 4,000 books, and approximately 22,000 letters of correspondence. These letters of correspondence are what attracts researchers of various disciplines around the world to Schaffer Library’s Department of Special Collections and Archives, and the digitization requests can be time-consuming and voluminous when a researcher asks for 200 letters, at multiple pages each, to be scanned. This prompted the library to apply for a National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) grant; in 2021, the National Archives awarded Union an NHPRC grant to support the digitization of the correspondence in the collection. Thus, my position was created to support the digitization project, and I am amazed every day by the historic treasures I am finding as I process the collection.

John Bigelow (November 25, 1817–December 19, 1911) lived a dynamic, exhilarating life during a time in history where there was rapid social and industrial change. He was an American author, diplomat, lawyer, and distinguished man of letters who was involved in significant historical events such as discouraging France from building ships for the Confederacy during the Civil War and helping to expose the political corruption of Tammany Hall’s William “Boss” Tweed in New York City. A browsing of his collection reveals that his acquaintances, business associates, and friends represented a “roll call of the leaders of his time”¹ with these leaders steering literary, political, and social movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



John Bigelow, date unknown. Courtesy of Union College Schaffer Library.



A letter regarding an exhibition from the 1888 Brussels International Exposition, 1888. Courtesy of Union College Schaffer Library.

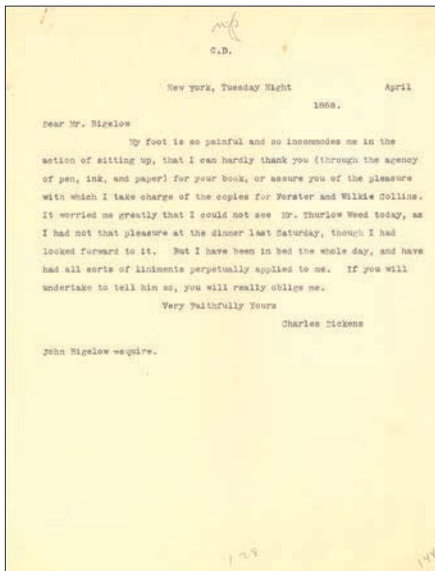
Born in the upstate New York town of Malden-on-Hudson to Asa and Lucy Isham Bigelow, Bigelow studied at Washington College in Hartford, Connecticut, and then at Union College, where he graduated as a member of the class of 1835. From 1835 to 1837, he studied law in New York City, first at Dey and Bonney, and then at Robert and Theodore Sedgwick. During this time, he first made

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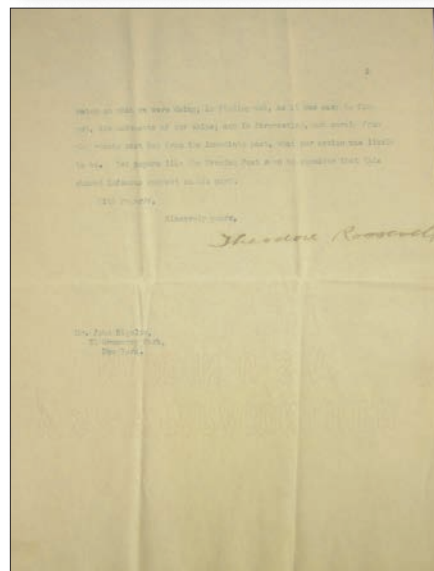
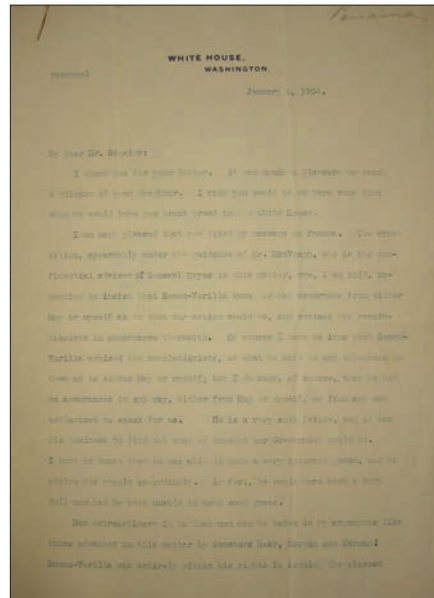
the acquaintance of poet Fitz-Green Halleck, politician Samuel J. Tilden, and poet and journalist William Cullen Bryant, with whom Bigelow would become co-owner and co-editor of the *New York Evening Post*. Admitted to the New York City Bar in 1838, Bigelow moved from practicing law to writing and editing for the next 10 years, contributing to *The Plebeian*, the *New York Review*, and the *Democratic Review*. From 1845 to 1856, Bigelow's experiences led to myriad accomplishments, such as becoming the inspector at Sing-Sing Prison, visiting Jamaica and Haiti, helping to create the Republican Party, and publishing the biography of John C. Frémont. Bigelow's first trip to Europe in 1858 allowed him to further entrench himself in artistic and literary circles upon meeting William Thackeray, William Hargreaves, Charles Dickens, and Anthony Trollope, among others.



Letter from Charles Dickens, 1868.
Courtesy of Union College Schaffer Library.

From 1860 to 1861, Bigelow supported the nomination of Abraham Lincoln by the Republican Party and was appointed by Lincoln to be the consul-general at Paris. Seven years later, he edited and published his edition of the Benjamin Franklin autobiography. From 1870 to 1900, Bigelow was involved in New York State politics as he was elected secretary of the state of New York, he bolstered Samuel J. Tilden's presidential candidacy, and he was appointed the commissioner of the US Section 5 at the Brussels Exposition of 1888. After Tilden's death in 1886, Bigelow was elected president of the board of trustees for the Tilden Trust, and he was steadfast in helping to make Tilden's dream to create a public library in New

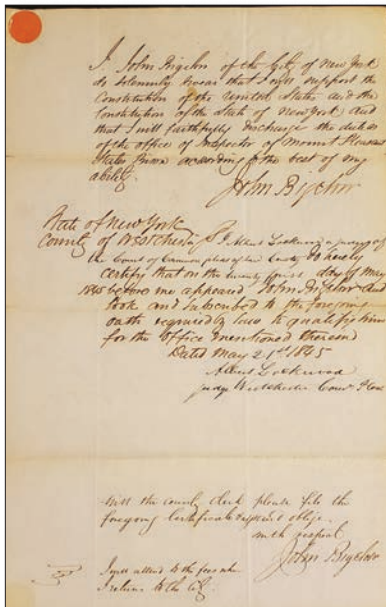
York City a reality. Because of his unwavering loyalty to Tilden's vision, Bigelow became the first president of the New York Free Public Library. Bigelow also played an important role in supporting Philippe-Jean Bunau-Varilla in constructing the Panama Canal, a role that then US president Theodore Roosevelt was thankful for. Bigelow died at the age of 95 on December 19 in 1911.



Personal letter from President Theodore Roosevelt, 1904.
Courtesy of Union College Schaffer Library.

At Union College, John Bigelow's incredible life comes alive through the items in his collection. The John Bigelow Papers is Union's best-kept secret, a secret that is not kept by choice, but rather because historically significant materials in the collection continue to be unearthed as the

collection is processed. The collection, the extent of which is approximately 80 linear feet, was gifted to the college in 1958 on behalf of the Bigelow family. It includes around 22,000 letters from prominent cultural and political titans, including Andrew Carnegie, Charles Dickens, John Jay, J. P. Morgan, Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and Thurlow Weed. The letters detail Bigelow's activities as the US consul to France during the Civil War, the founding of the Panama Canal, and Lincoln's assassination. A portion of the collection focuses on Bigelow's professional involvement in the creation of eminent institutions in New York City like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the New York Public Library.



*John Bigelow's Sing Sing Prison Inspector Oath, 1845.
Courtesy of Union College Schaffer Library.*

The diaries of his wife, Jane Tunis Poultney Bigelow, are unique pieces of the collection. Just as respected and loved as her husband, Jane was an important figure in the New York literary and social scene. Her diaries offer a fascinating look into the Bigelow family as she details their life and travels. Some especially delightful tidbits are entries wherein she writes about Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde when they stayed with the family during their trips to New York City. The Bigelows also had a remarkable library of over 4,000 books that can be found in the collection. The rare books cover various topics, such as religion, biography, fiction, and history and politics. In addition to those items, over 20 scrapbooks, various journals kept by other family members, drawings, photographs, and an assortment of John Bigelow's writings are also found in the collection.



One section out of many holding the rare books that make up the Bigelow family library in Union College Schaffer Library's Department of Special Collections and Archives

Throughout his life, Bigelow championed democracy in his professional and personal lives, and evidence of this can be seen throughout his collection. Bigelow biographer Margaret Clapp wrote that upon his death, his character was remembered far more than his accomplishments;² it is evident from the correspondence created during his lifetime, and the testimonials about Bigelow after his death, that those words are accurate. Because of the NHPRC grant to digitize the correspondence series of the collection, researchers will soon be able to gain access to these documents, enriching scholarship in a variety of disciplines.



L. John Bigelow, 1911. Courtesy of Union College Schaffer Library.

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NOTE

1. Margaret Clapp, *First Forgotten Citizen: John Bigelow* (Greenwood Press, 1968), vii.
2. Ibid.

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