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George Bancroft Papers

at Cornell University

Microfilm Publication

George Bancroft Papers

at Cornell University

1811 - 1901

Herbert Finch, Editor

Collection of Regional History
and University Archives
John M. Olin Library
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This collection was organized and described for the use of scholars by the staff of the Collection of Regional History and University Archives before the microfilm publication program of the National Historical Publication Commission was announced. The results of this work may be seen in the *Report of the Curator and Archivist, 1950-1954, 1958-1962*; and in the unpublished guides and listings maintained as a part of the collection. Mrs. Edith M. Fox, Curator and Archivist, has graciously made all of this information available to me for this project. Her willingness for me to undertake the project and her encouragement during it are deeply appreciated. Dr. Stephen A. McCarthy, Director of Libraries, has also been interested in the venture and has given me valuable assistance and advice. Mr. Peter A. Curtiss of the Office of the Coordinator of Research has been the University's project representative and has smoothed the way over administrative bumps. Dr. Oliver W. Holmes and his staff at the Commission's offices have been so patient, understanding, and helpful that they have imparted a share of their personality to an otherwise impersonal governmental function. Miss Patricia Nan Chatfield worked as an arranger for the project in its beginning phases and was both careful and perceptive. The rest of my associates in the Collection of Regional History and University Archives have contributed to the project in many unsung but essential ways.

Herbert Finch
Associate Archivist

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

History of the Collection

George Bancroft, historian and diplomat, was the scion of an early New England family upon whom great advantages of education and opportunity were bestowed. He was educated at Phillips Exeter Academy, Harvard College, and the University of Göttingen. After unrewarding attempts for careers in the ministry and in education, he turned to the study and writing of history and became involved in the democratic ferment of the Jacksonian era. From the late 1820's until his health began to fail in the late 1880's he wrote and spoke continually on financial, political, and scholarly subjects. His most notable achievements were his ten volume *History of the United States*, his service as Secretary of the Navy and Acting Secretary of the Army under President Polk, his appointment as minister to Great Britain in 1846, and his work as minister to Berlin from 1867 to 1874.

The George Bancroft Papers presented in this film came to Cornell from

the estate of his grandson, Professor Wilder Dwight Bancroft. Professor Bancroft was the son of John Chandler Bancroft. He was professor of physical chemistry and was associated with Cornell for fifty-eight years. The papers came in groups. The first and largest selection, designated by our collection number 1262, was deposited here in 1953. A few notable autograph items from this group were presented as a gift in 1954. Six years later the second collection, number 2024, was placed here, and both sets were officially given to the University by the five heirs of Professor Bancroft. In the summer of 1965, additional Bancroft family papers containing some George Bancroft material were given to Cornell by the grandson of Professor Bancroft, Warner Bott Berry.

These three collections of approximately 3300 items were integrated so that the papers were filmed as a single unit in straight chronological order. Enclosures were filmed immediately after the letter in which they were sent. Undated items were dated as accurately as possible. In cases where the exact date could not be determined, the item was placed after the latest possible date. For instance, Bancroft had reviewed this correspondence and had supplied many dates and a few notes. If only the month and the year or the year could be established from these notations, the item was placed at the end of that month or that year. All dates supplied by the Collection of Regional History or the editor were placed in brackets. An undated series follows the last dated letter. Many of the letters exist in the form of drafts, fair copies, letter press copies, or carbons. These are not individually identified as copies, but are usually obvious. Parts of the collection had been poorly housed before coming to the University, and the marks of mice and exposure are evident. A few letters were mutilated, apparently by members of the family. Genealogical information and scrapbooks complete the film.

Some items from the original collections were not filmed. These include: some genealogical material, family letters which were not to or from George Bancroft or which did not offer any information about him, papers from the settlement of various estates in the family, and some photo albums. A good example of this material is a series of letters between John Chandler Bancroft and his fiancée, Louisa Denny. All of this material may be consulted at Cornell.

Nature and Contents of the Collection

Bancroft Chronology

- 1800, October 3—Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, the eighth of thirteen children of Aaron and Lucretia Chandler Bancroft.
- 1817—Graduated from Harvard.
- 1818-1822—Studied and traveled in Europe.
- 1822—Taught at Harvard and tried preaching.

- 1822-1830—Established Round Hill School at Northampton, Massachusetts, in partnership with Joseph Green Cogswell.
- 1823—Poems published.
- 1826, July 4—Oration at Springfield.
- 1827, March 1—Married Sarah Dwight.
- 1830-1840—Began the writing of *The History of the United States*.
The first three volumes were devoted to the era of colonization.
- 1834—First volume published.
- 1837—Second volume published.
- 1837, June—Wife Sarah died, leaving three children.
- 1837-1844—Collector of the Port of Boston.
- 1838, August—Married Mrs. Elizabeth Davis Bliss.
- 1840—Third volume published.
- 1844—Helped to nominate Polk and was defeated in race for the Massachusetts governorship.
- 1845, March-September, 1846—Secretary of the Navy and founded Naval Academy. Acting Secretary of War for a short time.
- 1846, October-September, 1849—Minister to Great Britain.
- 1849-1867—Established his residence in New York and devoted his time to the next six volumes of his history dealing with the Revolution. Volume nine sparked the "War of the Grandfathers."
- 1867-1874—Minister to Berlin.
- 1874—Returned to Washington and published tenth volume of his history.
- 1876—A revised edition in six volumes was issued as part of the nation's centennial.
- 1882—*History of the Formation of the Constitution of the United States*.
- 1883-1885—"Author's Last Revision" in six volumes.
- 1886—Wife Elizabeth died.
- 1889—*Martin Van Buren to the End of His Public Career*.
- 1891, January 17—Death from pneumonia.

Family Relationships

George Bancroft's parents were Aaron and Lucretia Chandler Bancroft. His father was a Congregational minister who became the first president of the American Unitarian Association. Both died in 1839. His brothers, John and Thomas, are represented in the collection by a few letters, but Charles and Henry are not.

Among his sisters, Eliza married John Davis, a Senator and Governor of Massachusetts; Jane married Donato Gherardi, an educator who became insane; Lucretia married Welcome Farnum; Sarah married John Blake; and Anne married Thomas Ingalls. Mary, Caroline, and Dorothy died unmarried.

In 1827, Bancroft married Sarah Dwight who gave birth to four children

before she died ten years later. Their first daughter, Sarah Dwight, died in 1832. Louisa Dwight died in 1850. John Chandler and George, Junior, lived to have families of their own. His second wife was Elizabeth Davis Bliss who was the sister of his brother-in-law, John Davis. She had two sons by her first marriage, Alexander and William Bliss. A daughter, Susan Jackson, was born to the Bancrofts, but she died in 1845.

Many of the letters in this collection are from the various members of the family listed above. They range from intimate family matters of courtship and marriage, birth and death, to Bancroft's reports of his experiences and acquaintances as he traveled at home and abroad. They reveal a warm, middle-class, New England family with high standards and wide interest in the intellectual, political, and social affairs of the day. Since Bancroft's interpretation of American history was so much in terms of his own experience, these letters also provide rich insight into his motivations, character, and personality.

Business and Professional Correspondence

Shortly after he married his first wife, Sarah Dwight, Bancroft became involved with her father and brothers in the family's business interests. A series of letters from 1831-1846 describe his stock holdings, his work for the Bank of Michigan, and other private banking ventures. Difficulties over the pay for his services and over his children's share of his wife's estate caused the partnership to dissolve. Correspondence with his brokers and with his sons documents his later financial affairs, especially the income from his writing.

Over two hundred letters and contracts with Little, Brown and Company present Bancroft in the role of an author beset by technicalities and financial considerations. They are an excellent case history of publication problems of the 1850's, '60's, and '70's and, as such, complement the Bancroft-Sparks correspondence for the 1820's edited by John Spencer Bassett. There are some rough notes for his books and notes from personal interviews with Louis Philippe and Bismarck. His professional career is accented by numerous letters from critics and admirers and by almost a hundred invitations to membership in honorary and literary societies. Aside from their personal interest, these certificates demonstrate the contemporary emergence of such societies in American letters.

Political and Diplomatic Correspondence

From the time of his Fourth of July oration in 1826, Bancroft was immersed in the political affairs of Massachusetts and the nation. His frequent visits to Washington helped him form a wide acquaintance there, and his correspondence is filled with pungent observations on every aspect of life in the capital. Espe-

cially good is the exchange between Senator Davis and himself. His career as Collector of the Port of Boston is documented in the collection, and his advent as a cabinet official under Polk marks him as a political figure of national importance. Letters to his wife tell of his early concern over Lincoln's ability and of his later admiration for him. The letters he exchanged with Charles Sumner during 1865-1866 are typical of the Civil War and Reconstruction correspondence. He corresponded with other prominent political figures, but he also kept in touch with local affairs and opinions.

His diplomatic appointments were to Great Britain in 1846 and then to Germany in 1867. His contacts on official, social, and intellectual levels were wide and rewarding. A series of letters to his wife in 1847 discusses French politics in detail as well as his reaction to French historians and philosophers. Numerous comments are made upon European politics, diplomatic protocol, and the Franco-Prussian War.

Other Collections of Bancroft Material

There are three other large collections of materials relating to George Bancroft. The Massachusetts Historical Society has fifty-four volumes and forty-seven boxes of papers. The Library of Congress has the Bancroft-Bliss Papers in one volume and thirty-seven boxes. The New York Public Library Bancroft Collection is primarily Bancroft's research materials in 415 volumes. A few repositories have some Bancroft items, and collections of papers of nineteenth-century figures frequently contain Bancroft letters. These may be found through Philip M. Hamer, editor, *A Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States*, 1961; or *The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*.

Publications Based on Bancroft Manuscripts

Bancroft's life and his contributions to various phases of American history have been treated in a number of articles and books. The two volumes by Mark Antony DeWolfe Howe entitled *The Life and Letters of George Bancroft* (New York, 1908) present many of the best letters of this and other collections. Russel B. Nye's *George Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel* (New York, 1945) is an excellent one volume biography with good bibliographic aids. He used some of the letters presented here, but apparently others were not available to him. Harry N. Scheiber used the Cornell holdings for his articles on Bancroft which have appeared in *Michigan History* (March, 1960), *Pennsylvania History* (January, 1963), *The New England Quarterly* (September, 1964), and *Business History Review* (forthcoming).

Reel Notes

Reel 1, 1811-1836

This reel consists primarily of family and business correspondence. Almost all of the correspondence with Bancroft's mother and father is here as well as the memoir written by his father in June, 1826. The memoir is pertinent because of the elder Bancroft's relations to the founding of the American Unitarian Association. A series of letters from his brother, John, while George was a student in Germany presents information about John's life as a sailor in the East India and China trade as well as George's student affairs. Several letters from his sisters tell of life in Massachusetts, and the family correspondence often contains references to Round Hill School.

Beginning in 1826, approximately three-fourths of the letters are between Bancroft and his wife, Sarah Dwight. They discuss personal and family matters as well as the Dwights' banking interests. Bancroft also exchanged letters with Edmund, Henry, and William Dwight on this subject beginning in 1828. Bancroft represented the family's affairs in Washington during 1831 and 1832. His letters to his wife not only contain much about the bank, but also make very interesting comments on the city's society, personalities, and events. The letters from his friend and brother-in-law, Senator John Davis, also contain vivid and perceptive observations about Washington and public figures such as Daniel Webster and Edward Everett.

Other items of interest include: Bancroft's diplomas from Harvard and Göttingen; a note from Lord Byron (signed Noel Byron), May 22, 1822; and the registration of the copyright for the first volume of his history, June 14, 1834.

Reel 2, 1837-1841

The correspondence on this reel continues the emphasis on family and banking affairs. There are numerous letters from Bancroft's sisters, Mary and Eliza, and an extensive series with his second wife, Elizabeth Davis Bliss. The banking business will be found in letters exchanged with the Dwights and in a few letters which were sent to Bancroft to keep him abreast of developments. He usually endorsed these and some are marked with crayon. B. D. Bliss, Benjamin Franklin Butler, Charles Cogswell, John Towbridge, and Levi Woodward also corresponded with him on business matters.

The John Davis correspondence continues to be of value because of his contemporary descriptions of the Washington scene. His letter of May 4, 1838, comments on John Caldwell Calhoun. Individual items of interest include: a letter from Charles Fallen asking for support and contributions to a quarterly anti-slavery magazine, October 23, 1837; a letter from Orestes Augustus Brownson of Chelsea discussing the establishment of the *Boston Quarterly Review*, November 10, 1837; a letter from William Hickling Prescott about publication

problems, April 15, 1838; comments from Harriet Martineau about his history, February 15, 1839; and a letter from Albert Gallatin asking about the sources of Bancroft's history, May 5, 1840.

Reel 3, 1842-1848

The first part of this reel documents the end of Bancroft's banking relationship with the Dwights and continues his extensive family correspondence. There are numerous receipts, accounts, and legal documents relating to the settlement of the estates of his sisters, Jane Gherardi and Mary. Reports of his sons' progress at boarding schools in America and France and their own letters to him provide material for a comparative study of education in the 1840's.

Of particular interest are the exchange of letters between Bancroft and his wife during the election campaign of 1844 and the series written while he was in Washington in 1845. With his appointment to London, September 9, 1846, the correspondence takes on an international character. Bancroft's letters to his wife from Paris in 1847 give vivid descriptions of the French political situation and lucid comments on French history and philosophy. There is an especially interesting letter from Macaulay, July 17, 1847, discussing British laws relating to France. Letters from Henry Clay, Roger Brooke Taney, Winfield Scott, Albert Gallatin, Guizot, and other prominent people are sprinkled through the latter part of the reel.

Bancroft continues to exchange long, informative letters with John Davis and with his publishers. There are also reports on his investments and his general financial situation including an inventory of his property at the end of 1848. Notice of his election to the Board of Overseers of Harvard, February 2, 1843; his oath as Secretary of the Navy, March 19, 1845; and several honorary certificates are included.

Reel 4, 1849-1855

The correspondence of this reel is about equally divided between family and business matters. Numerous letters from his sons relate their experience at school and college. Bancroft's letters to his wife are usually filled with excellent descriptions of his environment and affairs. The trip he made to Chicago in 1854 and his journey to Florida in 1855 are examples of this. His responsibility for the various family estates continues to be demonstrated by documents and correspondence.

The end of his diplomatic experience in Great Britain came in 1849. A series of letters to John Davis from February to July discusses with great candor the effect of the election of President Taylor on his mission. Bancroft received frequent letters from such notable people as Alexis de Tocqueville, February 12, 1849, June 19, 1849, January 15, 1850; Charles Dickens, May 15, 1849; Washington Irving, October 27, 1854; and William Makepeace Thackeray, November

18, 1853. Macaulay discusses his surprise at the favorable reception of his book in America, April 9, 1849; Prescott relates his experience with publishers, December 18, 1851; and George Grote comments on Bancroft's ideas and his own democratic sentiments, March 30, 1852.

The other large body of correspondence is with Little, Brown and Company over the handling of his books and with Richard Bentley, his English publisher. A document dated September 26, 1850, contains a complete summary of his contracts with Little, Brown and Company. His association with Bentley began in 1852.

Reel 5, 1856-1866

This reel consists almost entirely of correspondence between members of Bancroft's family. It presents the scholar engaged in research and writing, traveling, attending to family affairs, and observing the turmoil of the Civil War. There is an extensive correspondence with both sons. The tone of the letters is remarkably different, however. John was always an obedient son and was encouraged by his father to continue his studies in art. George could not manage his affairs to the satisfaction of his father, and a questionable marriage, a decision to live abroad, and financial irresponsibility caused Bancroft much grief.

He continued to travel widely and since Mrs. Bancroft did not enjoy being away from home, his letters to her were filled with excellent descriptions of people and places. On July 2, 1856, he visited James Buchanan at "Wheatland." In June, 1857, he took a trip west and, in the spring of 1858, he traveled over the interior South. His letters during 1861 are full of the war, and a series of them from Washington in December are especially interesting. He met President and Mrs. Lincoln and feared that Lincoln was too much under his wife's influence for the welfare of the country. This opinion mellowed and in February, 1864, Bancroft asked Lincoln for a copy of his address delivered at Gettysburg. He also gave the memorial address before Congress on February 12, 1866.

Letters of interest from acquaintances include five from Washington Irving, 1856 to 1858, and ten exchanged with Charles Sumner, 1865 to 1866.

Reel 6, 1867-1876

This reel spans the years of Bancroft's diplomatic ministry to Berlin and some of his most vigorous publishing activity. In a series of letters to his nephew's wife, Frederica Davis, the historian comments upon European politics, diplomatic affairs, and the Franco-Prussian War, 1868-1871. He also continued to write informative letters to his wife whose delicate health prevented her from participating in many of Bancroft's activities. Letters to his sisters, his sons, and other members of his family indicate the diplomatic demands made upon Bancroft and the broad scope of his contacts. Correspondence with Little, Brown and Company is most heavy in 1874.

The film described in this pamphlet may be borrowed on Interlibrary Loan or purchased at the rate of ten dollars (10.00) per reel. Extra copies of the pamphlet may be obtained for fifty cents (.50).

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