

*Additions to*  
The Letters of Abijah Bigelow

IN Volume Forty, Part Two (October 1930) of this publication there appeared a series of letters written from Washington between 1810 and 1815 by Congressman Abijah Bigelow of the old Worcester North District. All addressed to Bigelow's wife, Hannah, these letters are considered to be one of the best sources of information about the events leading up to the War of 1812, and the effects of that war. Among other things they contain one of the best contemporary descriptions of the burning of Washington in 1814. Congressman Bigelow's nearness to the events that he describes gives them a vitality that no tome on political history can ever match. The letters of Abijah Bigelow that have been published are in the collections of the American Antiquarian Society. They were edited by the late Clarence Brigham, who prefaced them with a brief but excellent biographical sketch of Bigelow. Therefore further biography here would be merely repetitious. The following letters are an addition to those already published and are now privately owned. As in Mr. Brigham's article, the headings and signatures are omitted, as all begin 'Dear Hannah,' and end 'I am most affectionately, your faithful husband, Abijah Bigelow.' Extensive family, health, financial, and other matters have also been omitted, leaving only those parts of the letters that pertain to politics and other important events.

N. David Scotti

Washington City

March 16, 1812

The terrible plot which little Jemmy has conjured up for the election in Massachusetts has been all the conversation here for the week past. Many important facts respecting it have been already discovered, and in the end, I am convinced, it will prove to be a mean, dirty, contemptible maneuver, and one for which Madison, Munroe, and others ought to be eternally dispised. That Henry corresponded with Crague is very probable, but the insinuation which is meant to be conveyed against the Federalists is totally unfounded, and is such a measure as is worthy of its authors. The Federalists here are very indignant, and treat it with contempt, and many of the Democrats regret that the President should have communicated it in the manner, and at the time he did.

That he gave Henry 50,000. for it, is well ascertained, that Henry came from Europe in company with a Frenchman who calls himself a Count, is well ascertained, that this Count has been connected with Henry, is well ascertained, and also that they came from Boston, here with letters from Gerry. If Gerry is reelected in consequence of this dirty maneuver, the consequences may be War, Taxes, and Lord knows what.

I am much engaged in endeavoring to learn more about it, and shall soon write more upon the subject. As I wrote in a letter to Mr. Smith, of Leominster, I am tired of this temporising, tantalizing, demoralizing, corrupting, system and am far from thinking that a War would not be preferable to a continuance of such a state of things.

The conduct of the Federal members has been such this session as even to extort praise from their Political opponents, and poor Madison was so fearful that their conduct would give the people time to reflect upon his measures, and render him unpopular, unless he could again stir up their passions that he has resorted to this trick in order to make the people mad enough to take the bitter pills of taxes, restriction, and per-

haps, war, which he is preparing for them, as fast as he can bring them into his plans. . . . We live in strange times, but our greatest concern should be to do our duty, and trust the issue to him who overrules all things according to his will and pleasure.

Washington City

June 26, 1812

To give you a history of the strange, the wonderful, the unaccountable, the foolish, the mad proceedings of Congress, the present session would be a task requiring much labor, as well as an accurate knowledge, not only of the characters of the present members of Congress, but also a knowledge of the men who have been actors in the great political drama for some years past, and of the course, of their proceedings since the commencement of the Federal Government under Washington. This I shall not attempt, but will endeavor to give you a short sketch of the motives by which, in my opinion, we have been brought into our present situation, The President, and those who are in the secrets of the Cabinet did not, in my opinion, intend war should be declared this Session. The first, and great object with Madison, was to secure his reelection, and to do this he must conform his own course to that of the public sentiments, or rather to that which he deemed to be the public sentiments. In this, I hope he has been deceived, and in this way—those whom he has conversed with from different parts of the country, not members of Congress, are generally those Office-hunters who were desirous of a war, and therefore interested in representing the sentiments of the people in accordance with their own. As it respects the Members those from New York and others in favor of DeWitt Clinton, pushed him up to it, or rather took him at his word, voted for the Army etc. The Western Members, viz. those from Kentucky,

Tennessee, etc. who were really for war, it is said, expressly told him they would not support him, unless he adhered to his war system. His particular friends in the house had said so much against Great Britain, talked so much about patriotism, and the spirit of the Nation, that they could not flinch, and in this way war has been declared.

A few words now as to the motives which have governed many in wishing for it. The people of Georgia and South Carolina expect to obtain Florida by it, which they want for various reasons, perhaps the principal, that of aggrandizing themselves by speculations etc. The Kentuckians, Tennesseians and Western People want that they may make use of the United States Armies to drive off the Indians, and possess themselves of their lands, as well as be secure from their depredations. Others are in hopes to destroy commerce entirely, that manufactures may be encouraged, and others, and these the worst of all, that confusion, disorder, plunder and confiscation may ensue, that they may rise upon the ruins of the country.

These are hasty conjectures, but I fear too true, and I trust that all good people will unite in putting down the war as soon as they can, in a peaceable and Constitutional manner.

I will now give you a little history of the proceedings of this day, which has been, in my opinion, extremely disgraceful to the house.

Mr. Bacon reported a bill for laying on the direct and internal taxes. The majority, afraid to lay them on this session for fear it might injure the reelection of Mr. Madison, resorted to the expedient of postponing them until the next Session, at the same time declaring their determination then to put them on, and swearing that they were not afraid of any effect they would have upon the people, but foresooth, because, they had been eight months in Session, were tired of Legislation, and wished to go home. So the taxes are put off, to come after Madison's election is secured, with double vengeance. A motion was then made to print the bills, and here again the majority declared

positively they were not afraid of the people seeing them, but mercy on us, these wonderfully economical men who have completely exhausted the Treasury by their folly and extravagance are afraid of a little expense. Yes, the same men who ordered 5,000 copies of papers respecting British Seamen, 5,000 copies of Henry's disclosures, besides giving 50,000. dollars for them, who also ordered 5,000 copies of the War Message, and the Manifesto to the house to be printed, are afraid of a little expense, and so they refuse to print the bills. We have had some secret business, not much better but this I am not at liberty to publish. . . . I expect Congress will rise the last of next week, or the beginning of the week after at farthest.

New York City

October 26, 1812

I arrived here this morning about sunrise, after a rather fatiguing ride through the night. This I should not have done, but for fear I should otherwise be delayed perhaps two days which is very unpleasant. I feel however, very well except the fatigue, and that not so great as I expected. . . . Our troops, as you have heard, have had a very severe engagement with the British at Niagara. The particulars have not reached here officially, but there is no doubt, from all accounts, that the Americans, although they fought well, have suffered most severely, of 1600 who crossed the river, as it is stated here and believed, but 400 have returned. The remainder are killed, wounded, and taken prisoners. It is stated that General Brock was not in the action, but another officer of the same name.

The members of Congress are flocking on., the War-Hawks looking rather sober at the ill-success of the attack on Canada, and pretend to dis-believe the correctness of the accounts of the Rinsaliar's defeat, etc.

Washington

December 30, 1814

I embrace a few liesure moments to write you a short letter, knowing that nothing I can write can be more satisfactory than that my health continues tollerably good. In consequence of the death of Mr. Brent, one of the Senators from Virginia, the House have done little business yesterday or this day. The last accounts from New Orleans speak as though that place was safe, and I am much inclined to believe that it should not be taken. There will be peace in Spring, an event which I much desire, but do not make any calculations upon it, nor do I advise others too.

For some weeks past I have not written you so much as I could have wished. Congress never had so many long sessions and so little respite from business since I have been a member. The only liesure time for three weeks has been yesterday, and this day, which has afforded me a little opportunity to attend to some business which I have been obliged to neglect.

Washington

January 19, 1815

Having, yesterday, remained steadily in the House of Representatives from Eleven until about Five o'clock, and it being, today, quite rainy, I have determined to stay at my room. I do this more cheerfully, as we yesterday, did a good days work and I do not expect anything very important will be before the house this day. The subject yesterday was the Bank, again. This bill has assumed as many shapes as ever did a Cameleon., and has excited a very great interest, as you may judge from the uncommonly great number of votes, and the great equality, in point of numbers, on each side. Twice the house voted against having a bank, once by the casting vote of the Speaker. The question was then reconsidered and nearly all the Feder-

alists united with a number of the Democrats, and agreed upon the plan of a Bank which they would support. The bill from the Senate, which had been once rejected, was then referred to a select Committee, who changed it in many of its most important features, by reducing the amount of Capital, changing the nature of the Stock which was to form the Capital, and striking out the section which gave the President power to authorize them to refuse to pay specie for their bills when demanded. These amendments were agreed to by the house, the bill was sent back to the Senate for them to concur in our amendments, which they refused and sent it back to the House, in hopes the House would give up their amendments, and agree to the bill as the Senate, or rather a small majority of the Senate, wished to have it. This the House yesterday refused by a majority, as to one of the amendments, of eight, and as to another, of four only, the Federalists, all except two, voting in the majority. The bill has now gone back to the Senate, and it is for them to say whether they will have the Bank upon our plan, which I think they will agree to. The most important report in circulation here is that New Orleans is captured by the British. I fear there is too much reason to believe it. A few days more and we shall know the truth of the report. It will be a sad blow to the Western people, as it will cut off their market, and their communication with the Atlantic. Although they deserve punishment for their rashness, this will be more severe than I could have wished, and will I apprehend, if true, retard a peace. But as I have before said, I mean not to fret myself because of evil doers or to mourn unreasonably at what I can not avoid. The distress of the people for money, must I apprehend, be increasing, and the taxes imposed this Session will be severely felt. How the people will bear them, I dare hardly conjecture. I can but hope, at present no violent measures will be resorted to prevent their collection.

I grow more and more impatient to have the Session close, that I may return again to my own family, to taste the sweets

of domestic life, which are so much more congenial to my feelings than the mode of life I lead here. I do not however regret having had an opportunity to know something of the political world, but, for the present, feel satisfied with what I have seen, and shall very cheerfully become a private citizen, and attend to the duties which I owe to my family. To render them happy is the greatest happiness I can have in this world.



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