

Plainfield library archivists dig up personal letter from John Quincy

Adams

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Plainfield Public Library head archivist Sarah Hull takes a look at a letter by sixth U.S. President John Quincy Adams. The letter is part of the library's historic archives.

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Plainfield Public Library head archivist Sarah Hull takes a look at a letter by sixth U.S. President John Quincy Adams. The letter is part of the library's historic archives. / Mark Spivey/staff photo

PLAINFIELD — In case you were wondering, our sixth president really knew how to write a nice rejection letter.

Taking up precisely a full page with neat, handwritten script, John Quincy Adams politely and eloquently declined an invitation to attend a Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society event in the late 1830s, citing his flagging health during a sweltering heat wave. No one might have ever known it, if not for Plainfield Public Library archivist Jeff Wassen — who said he knew the letter was part of the library's huge collection of historic archives, but forgot about it to some degree before recently rediscovering it.

"It's in very good condition," the library's head archivist, Sarah Hull, explained, donning a pair of blue rubber gloves to handle the letter. "It looks brand new."

But more questions than answers remain about the letter's origins and lifespan. It was addressed to an Edmund Quincy, a Boston-based attorney who ostensibly invited the former president to the anti-slavery event nearly a decade after his only term as president ended, but precisely how the two were related isn't clear, Hull explained.

It seems likely that Quincy was the lecturer and author referenced in a synopsis of what are known as the Quincy Family Papers, an index of which appears on the Massachusetts Historical Society website. He would have been about 30 at the time of the invitation's writing, and the index refers to him as a "leader" of a local abolitionist movement who exchanged correspondence with John Quincy Adams no fewer than four times from 1838 through 1842.

The letter probably reached Central Jersey sometime during the latter half of the 19th century, as Hull said that former Plainfield Public Library head librarian Emma L. Adams was the "Miss Adams" referenced on the front of the envelope containing it. Dated 1899, the envelope is stamped with the title of *The Philanthropist*, a defunct, New York City-based quarterly magazine at which Emma Adams was known to volunteer.

How the envelope and the letter within made it into the library's archives isn't clear, but it very well may have been bequeathed.

"We don't know, and I don't want to say for sure," Hull said. "It's so frustrating."

The letter surely would have had greater historical value had it been written during John Quincy Adams' term as president from 1825 into 1829, Wassen explained. But it's still something special.

"Have we even thought about what it's worth?" he asked Hull.

The event to which the former president was invited was a commemoration of the anniversary of the day slavery was abolished across the British empire just four years earlier: Aug. 1, 1834. After declining, Adams, who was 71 at the time and in the middle of a 17-year term as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, which ended with his death at 80, expressed satisfaction in his letter that the institution of slavery was starting to be more bitterly opposed here.

"I rejoice that the defense of the cause of human freedom is falling into younger and more vigorous hands," he wrote. "You have a glorious though arduous career before you, and it is among the consolations of my last days, that I am able to cheer you in the pursuit and exhort you to be steadfast and immoveable in it."

Adams, who is recalled by historians as one of the most effective secretaries of state in American history, also was one of the most vocal and prominent opponents of slavery anywhere during the decades leading up to the Civil War — the U.S. Capitol Historical Society notes that a political rival, Henry Wise, once labeled him "the acutest, the astutest, the archest enemy of Southern slavery that ever existed." Three years after writing the letter that today is kept in the library's archives, he famously became involved in the case of the Amistad slave ship, successfully arguing before the U.S. Supreme Court that a group of enslaved Africans who overthrew their captors off the coast of Cuba and later were captured near Long Island should be permitted to return to their homes in Africa — a saga recounted in a 1997 Steven Spielberg film starring Anthony Hopkins as Adams in an Academy Award-nominated performance.

Adams started his political career as a diplomat, serving in the Netherlands and Russia, according to his official White House biography, and as secretary of state under James Monroe he was instrumental in obtaining from Spain the concession of modern-day Florida. As president he made headlines by suggesting that the federal government should establish a national network of highways and canals, and by urging that the U.S. strive to become a global leader in the development of the arts and sciences.

Adams, the son of second president and founding father John Adams, lost his bid for re-election to political rival Andrew Jackson but arguably earned more acclaim as a congressman than he ever did as president. He collapsed on the floor of the House in 1848, having suffered a stroke, and died two days later — he was buried in Quincy, Mass., the town named after his great-grandfather.