

Plainfield Library has it in writing: A letter from John Quincy Adams

Richard Khavkine By Richard Khavkine

Email the author

on August 02, 2013 at 7:00 AM, updated August 02, 2013 at 7:36 AM

PLAINFIELD — In historical and political terms, John Quincy Adams' connection to New Jersey is tenuous at best.

He lost the New Jersey vote in 1824, but won the presidency. Four years later, he carried the Garden State but lost to Andrew Jackson.

Nevertheless, the country's sixth president has a permanent presence in Plainfield.

Among the thousands of archived artifacts neatly catalogued in a bright, temperature-controlled room in the basement of that city's modernist Park Avenue library is a single-page letter Adams wrote on 28 July 1838.

By way of 26 fluid lines, Adams graciously declines an invitation to address a Massachusetts group about to commemorate the anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Great Britain's colonies.

The summer heat and "a multiplicity" of invitations to attend the meetings of other political and literary societies "have imposed upon me the necessity of pleading the privilege of my years and declining them all," he wrote in neatly penned black script on simple white paper

Although seven years removed from the presidency, Adams was still in office, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives — and a fierce champion of abolition.

"I rejoice that the defense of the cause of human freedom is falling into younger and more vigorous hands," he wrote Edmund Quincy, a Boston writer and editor then in his late 20s who had invited the former president.

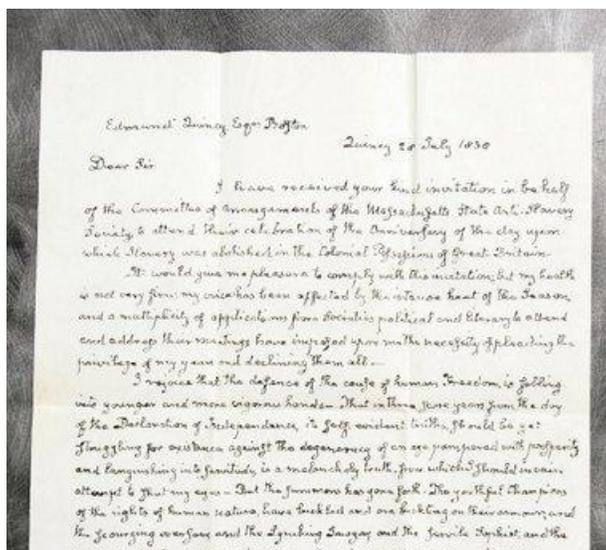
The letter probably was given to a Plainfield resident, Aaron M. Powell, by Quincy, a likely professional acquaintance, said Sarah Hull, the head archivist of the library's local history department.

Powell, the editor of "The Philanthropist," a New York City publication and organ of the American Purity League, an "anti-vice" organization with Quaker affiliations, then gave it to Emma L. Adams, Plainfield's "efficient librarian" at the time, who also likely had some Quaker sensibilities in a city with no shortage of them, Hull and library archivist Jeff Wassen said.



Sarah Hull, head archivist at the Plainfield Library's local history department, with an 1838 letter written by John Quincy Adams.

Ed Murray/The Star-Ledger



The letter has been in the library's archives since around 1900.

"He recognized the importance of it at the time and knew she was a notable librarian and that it would be in good care in her hands," Hull said of Emma L. Adams.

Emma L. Adams, who would go on to have some success advocating for prison libraries, also might have been related to John Quincy, Hull said.

Hull and Jane Thoner, the library's genealogist, are researching that possibility. Although the letter has been in the library archives for more than a century, it most recently surfaced a few weeks ago when Wassen, who had known of its existence since about 2005, showed it to Hull, who came to the library in 2008.

Hull, who admits to being "more excited to research Emma," said that aside

An 1838 letter written by then U.S. Rep. John Quincy Adams, in the Plainfield Library archives, in which he declines an invitation to address a Massachusetts abolitionist group but gives strong encouragement to its sender to carry the cause forward.

Ed Murray/The Star-Ledger

from its historical importance, the letter also reflects a refined and elegant way of expression that's gone the way of, well, letter writing.

"He couldn't speak at a cause that was very dear to him and he probably very much regretted that," she said. "It 's a poetic letter. It's pretty amazing. No one writes like that anymore."

Notwithstanding the letter's literary flourishes, Adams' unbridled passion against slavery's injustices comes through.

"Every abolitionist in the nation wanted him to come speak at their meetings," historian Harlow Giles Unger said.

"He was a champion of abolition in Congress, so much so that the Southerners tried to shut him up," said Unger, the author of "John Quincy Adams" as well as biographies of George Washington, James Monroe and Lafayette. "[Anti-slavery] was a huge movement in the North, and he was the first champion of emancipation in Congress. He was fighting for emancipation before Abraham Lincoln could even pronounce the word." Adams concludes the letter in part by saying that "it is among the consolations of my last days" that he can encourage Quincy "to be steadfast and immovable" in the pursuit of abolition.

"I live in the Faith and Hope of the progressive advancement of Christian Liberty, and expect to abide by the same in death," he wrote.

Adams would live another 10 years, long enough for his Congressional tenure to overlap for 10 months with that of a certain congressman from Illinois, who would become the nation's 16th president.

Staff writer Tom Wright-Piersanti contributed to this report.

MORE UNION COUNTY NEWS

FOLLOW THE STAR-LEDGER: TWITTER |
FACEBOOK