

FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE SKOWHEGAN HISTORY HOUSE

Part 2

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Submitted in support of the Skowhegan History House

In his 1853 letter from the gold fields of Australia to Levi Weston in Bloomfield, Joshua Bigelow expressed a desire to see his Bloomfield family again; however, he never returned to Bloomfield permanently, if at all. The optimism expressed in this letter concerning his prospects proved justified: He and his party struck gold at Nine Mile Creek soon after! Though long forgotten in Skowhegan, Joshua C. Bigelow remains rather prominent in Australian history with several accounts of his life and accomplishments appearing on Australian websites: (Note: This article retains the original orthography including punctuation.)

“A Stanley Pioneering family associated with the early history of All Saints Church of England, was Joshua Cushman Bigelow and his wife Margaret. Mr. Bigelow and Party were the discoverers of gold at Nine Mile Creek, the township later named Stanley. When gold was discovered further down the creek at Yackandandah, Joshua Bigelow removed to Yackandandah district. On 27th November, 1865 Joshua Cushman Bigelow, aged 29 years, a store keeper of Yackandandah, married Margaret Thompson, aged 20, maid, of Yackandandah. In 1856 Mr Bigelow was manager of the Homeward Bound mine at Hillsborough and for a number of years the Bigelow family resided at Hillsborough. About 1870 the Bigelow family came to settle in Stanley, and during their sojourn at Stanley Mr & Mrs Bigelow took a very active interest in the life of All Saints Church of England in Stanley. Several of the Bigelow family [of eleven children] were sent to Geelong Grammar School to finish their education. Mr Bigelow had extensive interests in many of the Goldmines at Yackandandah, Stanley and Bright during his lifetime. The lovely old family home of the Bigelow family in Stanley is still to be seen in the Stanley township.” (All Saints Church of England Stanley)

Not only can the Bigelow family home, named Bloomfield in honor of Joshua’s native Maine town, “be seen,” but it is now a popular bed and breakfast and is so advertised on <http://www.bloomfieldwalnutgrove.com.au>, where the interior and grounds may be viewed:

“The lovely old homestead of Bloomfield was built by Joshua Cushman Bigelow, an American a ‘forty-niner’ who with his party first discovered gold at Stanley. Before coming to live in Stanley with his wife, Margaret, Joshua was manager of the Homeward Bound Mine’ at Yackandandah. They lived at Hillsborough until their house was destroyed by fire. By this stage Bloomfield was completed and it was their home for the next 35 years. It is thought that the original house, built of handmade bricks with French doors opening onto a full return verandah was constructed in the 1860’s. Later, after marriage and a burgeoning family two more rooms were added around 1873 – a formal dining room and a sitting room. With their 12 foot 6 high ceilings and cedar fire surrounds they proclaimed Joshua Bigelow’s growing status in the district. Beyond the verandahs, which protect the house on 3 sides is an old established garden surrounded by a picket fence.”(Bloomfield Walnut Grove)

Thus over one hundred years later a letter at the Skowhegan History House directly connects to a “Bloomfield” more than half way across the globe! One wonders if any later Skowhegan traveler has stayed within its walls.

In his correspondence with Levi Weston, Joshua Bigelow mentions his partner, Benjamin Snow; Snow is also mentioned as “setting up stores in Beechworth and in Buckland with Bigelow in the 1850’s.” Benjamin was the son of Col. Daniel and his wife Abigail (Boutell) Snow of Bloomfield, later part of Skowhegan. The eldest of eight children, he was born on 29 February 1832. Several letters in the Skowhegan History house shed light on this local adventurer.

In a letter dated 14 June 1852 from San Francisco CA, Benjamin K. Snow wrote to his sister Mary in Bloomfield: *“It is Monday morning, the sun has far advanced on his daily circuit pouring down upon man and beast his healthful and beneficial rays, diffusing warmth to the earth and as it appears giving life to all the universe.....Such is the state of things while I am now within the walls of a narrow contracted bedroom writing. ... Here I am surrounded by a few of my companions. Thus we are spending this pleasant morning here amid the noise and tumult of this noted place*

on the Pacific Coast San Francisco. ... I arrived here on the morning of June 12th 1852, having left the mines at Shaws Flats on the 8th at which are some of the boys at the present time from Bloomfield. Most of the boys have been doing quite well for the past few months, but at present times are rather dull on account of the failure of the water, but before long the water will be in again so that times will be as lively as ever. ... It is at present very healthy, very seldom hearing of any one being unwell; for those diseases which are prevalent here in some parts of the year (viz) chills, fever and ague have on account of the fine weather long since taken their departure for other countries and climes, more congenial to their nature. “

Snow's letter goes on for three full pages relating the circumstances of his fellow Bloomfield miners, his own good health and spirits, his belief that he would never return to Maine *“unless to behold once more those places which are vivid in memory,”* that he thinks of those who are in Maine and he would *“like to see them very much, but doubtless years will elapse before this privilege (sic) will be granted.”*

Then Benjamin relates what must have been startling news to Mary and her family, especially after Benjamin's assurance of his success in the mines:

“I wish you not to be surprised or faint. Tomorrow I expect to leave Cal. for Australia, another land of gold on the Eastern Hemisphere. You may think this a rash imprudent step on my part and I know not but what it is, but time will tell. There are seven of us from Me. going this trip (viz) A. R. Brainard, Joshua Bigelow and his brother Charles, Herman Spaulding, Thomas Rankins and Frank Allen of Norridgewock. We go on the ship Orpheus of Boston. We expect our passage will be from 6 to 8 weeks on our journey. We shall touch the Sandwich and also at the Friendly Islands. Give my love to all the family and hoping that after an absence of a few years we shall behold each other. This gold dollar is for Sumner [his younger brother]. From your brother, Benj. K. Snow”

Apparently Benjamin was not faithful in apprising his family of his circumstances once he reached Australia. In a three-page letter dated 21 Nov 1859, his father, Col. Daniel Snow wrote:

“I now set myself down to write a few lines to let you know that we are all well though far from each other, eight years have passed and gone. ...

Mr. Nye was at my house ... It was a great satisfaction to see him and hear of Australia. He said he saw you a few days before he sailed and you were well. The first question I asked him was “When is he coming home” but the answer was “not at present.”

I think I shall go and see him before he starts back and have a chat with him. We have written to you a number of times and have not had any letters from you. We had a letter last June from you with a note against Albert Leighton in that letter I believe you thought you should close up your business and come home. We felt incouraged but in October Melangley had a letter from his partner saying you had gone into another branch of business so we have given up of you coming home at present.”

Colonel Snow goes on with family news including the fact that two of his other sons have removed to Minnesota and mentions a Solon man living near them. The letter continues:

“Now Benjamin I think you had better close up your business and come home. It would be very pleasant to us and all of your friends to have you come home. I have nobody with me at home but Sumner and he is small but smart the way he handles the steers ... and your mother often speaks of you coming home too Benjamin.

You must excuse all mistakes and I will close. From your affectionate Father & Mother. (Col.) Daniel Snow”

Interestingly, the 1860 Census for Bloomfield shows Benjamin K. Snow, age 32, as a member of his father's household. Perhaps his inclusion was wishful thinking on the part of his mother, for she wrote Benjamin on 22 Jan 1861: *“Dear Absent though not forgotten Son! —*

Your last three kind and most welcome letters have all been most gladly received by us. We were beginning to feel very anxious about you, not having a letter for you for a long time. We feared some misfortune might have befallen you. After reading in the paper almost a year ago an account of the flood out where you are, when many lost their lives, I made my mind up, if your life was spared and I ever wrote you again, to try and persuade you to leave that country and return home, if it in my power to do so, dear Benjamin. I have not much gold to offer you as you made up your mind you wanted when you went to that country. If I had how freely would I do it. But I do say if you have money enough to bring you home and to not let us know it, come home and share with the rest of the family.

Sumner says tell Brother Benjamin if he will come home he will divide his sheep with you, which is five in number. [Sumner was about twelve years old at that time.] I do not want you to think that any of us think you have no property out there for that is not the case. Still I fear you have had some hard luck for you did write in your sister Mary's letter that if you had made your bed of thorns, no one was to blame but yourself.

I do not wish to reflect upon the past still I believe now as I always have had your father thought as much of an education as I did you never would of left home.

Our family is all as well as usual. ... Grandmother is almost 86 and quite smart. She often yearns for you. Your father begins to grow old as well as myself. ... Please excuse these poorly written lines from your mother."

One wonders if Benjamin's mother, Abigail, kept her feelings regarding her son's education to herself or whether they might have been cause for dissension between her and Col. David. At any rate, Benjamin heeded neither his father's advice and veiled appeal to family duty nor his mother's plea to return home at that time.

Eleven years after his mother's letter, he married Harriet Thrower in New South Wales, Australia. Harriet was born in London, England, and the Skowhegan History House holds a transcript of Harriet's mother's account of the Throwers' voyage from England to Australia in 1851. Mary Thower details the hardships, illnesses and deaths, including that of her four-week old daughter, on the voyage and vividly describes the family's challenges and her observations of the foreign land including her account of the "canibals."

In 1873 Benjamin and Abigail's son was born in Australia, but the family must have returned to Maine by 1875, where their daughter Mary was born. Further evidence of an 1875 return is in the 1900 Census for Skowhegan, in which his son Robert indicates he was born in Australia but had been a U.S. citizen for twenty-five years. Benjamin's stay in Maine, however, was brief; five years later the 1880 Census for Smokey Hill, Kansas, lists Benjamin, a farmer, living there with his family. But his Kansas residence also appears to have been brief, for in 1882 his daughter Harriet was born in Maine as were his sons Lyman and Edward a few years later.

Thus, it would be twenty-five years after Benjamin wrote his sister Mary that he desired to see his family again but predicted that doubtless years would elapse before this privilege would be granted until he returned to Skowhegan. His mother, whose wish was thereby fulfilled, died in 1878, and his father in 1886. Benjamin died in 1899 and his wife in 1896 in Skowhegan, and they are interred in Southside Cemetery. Unlike his friend and partner Joshua Bigelow, who built his own "Bloomfield" in Australia, Benjamin K. Snow, for reasons now unknown, chose to return to Bloomfield, his home in Maine.

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Bloomfield retrieved from <http://www.bloomfieldwalnutgrove.com.au>

Snow, B. (14 June 1853) Letter to Mary Snow, Snow notebook, Skowhegan History House, Skowhegan, ME.

Snow, D. (21 Nov. 1859) Letter to Benjamin K. Snow, Snow notebook, Skowhegan History House, Skowhegan, ME.

Snow, A. (22 Jan 1861) Letter to Benjamin K. Snow, Snow notebook, Skowhegan History House, Skowhegan, ME.