North of the Columbia—Now and Always: The Pioneer Bigelow Family

by Karen L. Johnson

"...Human life is like a river...it rolls on in one unceasing flow, there being no place where it can be said to stop and begin again. And like a river flowing on, widening, deepening, gathering strength from a thousand sources...so should our life be, so should we increase in knowledge from the cradle to the grave, gathering experience, and from experience wisdom, enriching our understanding from the streams of ancient learning..."

So wrote Daniel Richardson Bigelow in 1848. True to his observation, his own life gathered strength from other sources, deepened, and flowed west to the Pacific shores. There he met and married Ann Elizabeth White, and from their marriage came one of Washington Territory's oldest and most influential families. Ever committed to civic duty, and very forward-thinking for their time, the Bigelows advocated woman suffrage, public education, temperance, equal rights, freedoms, and tolerance for all races. They established a substantial place in Washington history. Today, their heritage lives on, enriching our continuing river of life.

Daniel and Ann Elizabeth Bigelow, ca. 1854. *Courtesy Bigelow House Preservation Association.*

Daniel Richardson Bigelow's Story

Daniel was born on March 24, 1824, in Jefferson County, New York. He received a solid education, studying at Union College in Schenectady, New York, and graduating with a law degree from Harvard University. During his student years at Harvard, he attended many public lectures on important social issues of the day. These heady lectures may have helped form some of Daniel's opinions that became so significant in his years in Washington Territory.

As a fledgling attorney, Daniel settled in Dodgeville, Wisconsin, where in 1849 he received his very first remuneration for legal services: a whopping 45 cents. He was also initiated into the Order of the Sons of Temperance, a fraternal order dedicated to abolishing alcoholic drinks. But after 16 months in Wisconsin, he decided to head west to the Pacific Ocean.

Daniel's trek across the continent was fairly uneventful, and his wagon train made good time. After reaching Portland, where he found an abundance of lawyers already in residence, he concluded to travel north to Puget Sound.

Selling his wagon and oxen, he stowed his belongings aboard the schooner *Exact* and endured a nauseating voyage up the coast and into the calmer waters of the Sound. The end of Daniel's trip was the tiny town of Olympia, which numbered less than 200 settlers, and was later described by newcomers as "nothing but mud and stumps." After being admitted to the bar, and establishing a law office and residence in town (on the east side of present Capital Way between 4th and 5th), Daniel claimed "Things look favorable for the Country and for myself."

For some time, Puget Sound residents had been discussing the creation of a new territory: splitting off "Northern Oregon" (north of the formidable barrier of the Columbia River) into its own political unit. In 1852, Daniel was the principal speaker at the town's Fourth of July celebration. Although it did not specifically refer to a separate territory, Daniel's speech was later published in the first issue of *The Columbian*, where it was widely read. The newspaper editor used Daniel's oration as a springboard for advocating a new territory, a goal that was achieved in 1853. Hence some historians credit Daniel as "the father of Washington Territory."

Over the next few years, Daniel continued his law practice, and also held many public offices: County treasurer, clerk pro tem for the County Commissioners, delegate to assist in writing the Oregon Territory Constitution, code commissioner assigned to revise the Oregon codes, director to help form a public school in Olympia, Thurston County councilman in the first Washington Territory legislature, and first Thurston County auditor and prosecuting attorney.

Daniel also introduced a bill requesting a public vote on adopting the Maine Liquor Law (temperance), defended the legislature's decision to allow persons of mixed Indian and white ancestry to vote in Washington Territory, and presented a petition asking the Legislative Assembly to memorialize Congress to grant George Bush, a free mulatto, title to the land he homesteaded near Tumwater.

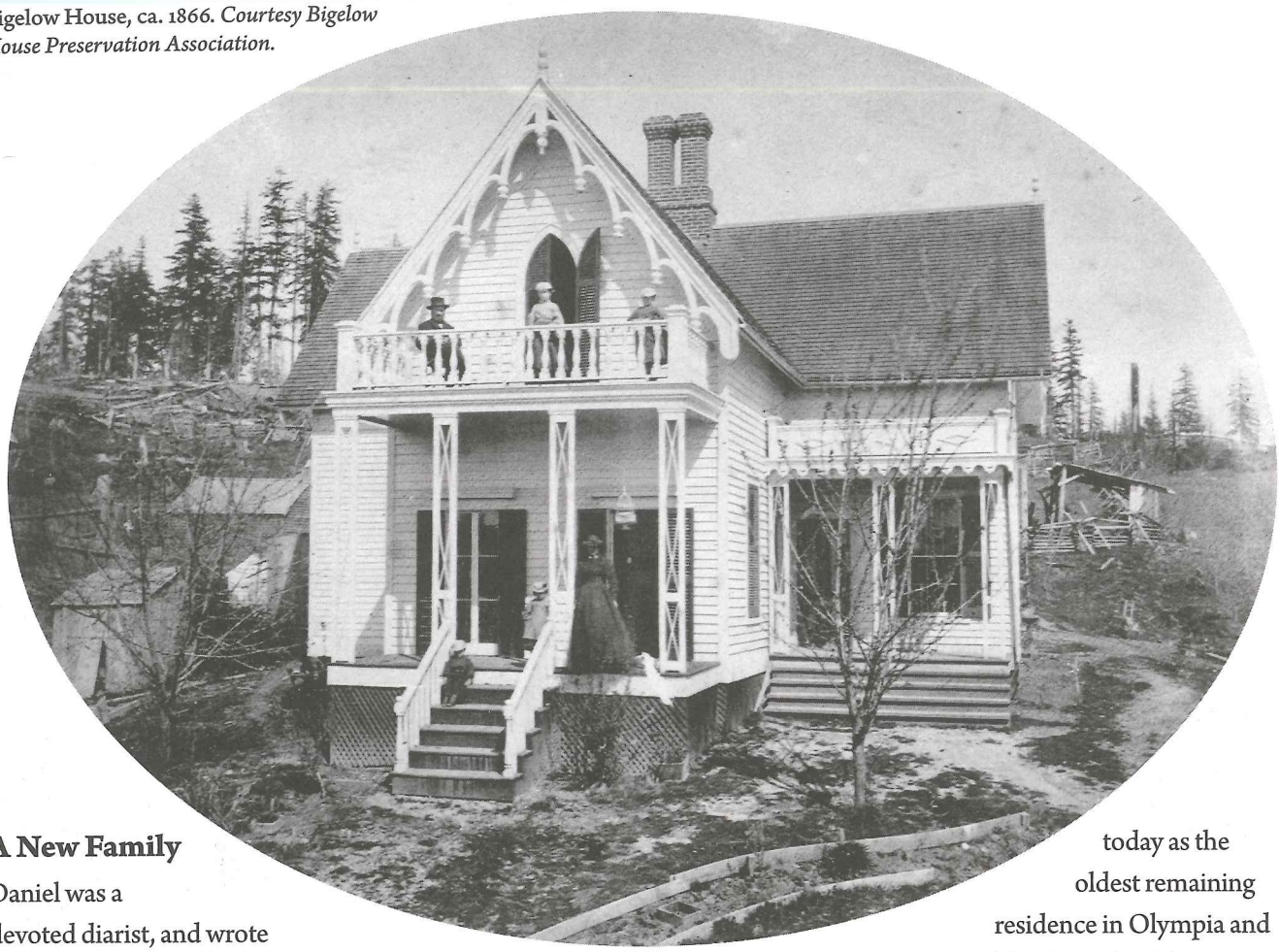
In addition to his civic responsibilities, Daniel attended to more personal matters. He staked out a 160-acre land claim on the east side of Budd Inlet, and during the summer of 1853, while he was in Salem codifying laws, Daniel wrote to William W. Miller seeking information on marriageable women in the Olympia area.

Ann Elizabeth White's Story

Ann Elizabeth White was born November 2, 1836 in Springfield, Illinois. In 1850, her father William White left the family home in Grant County, Wisconsin and headed west for a change in climate and a hoped-for improvement in health. Finding that he liked the new country, White wrote to his wife and children and asked them to join him in Oregon Territory. So in March, 1851, Margaret White and her five children packed their belongings, including a few rawhide-seated chairs, a large Boston rocker, and a round metal box containing precious spices. They teamed up with a covered wagon train, and set out on the long trail west. Ann Elizabeth was the oldest of the five children, and at the age of 14, was responsible for one yoke of oxen and a great many other things on the trek.

The family encountered some hardships on the trail, but mother and children were eventually safely reunited with Mr. White. They lived near Portland for several months, then moved to the Chehalis River valley, where they were flooded out. They finally settled on a high-and-dry donation land claim about twelve miles southeast of Olympia.

In 1853, at the age of 16, Ann Elizabeth was hired as a schoolteacher—one of, if not the first in Thurston County. Her classroom was a spare bedroom in the cabin owned by William and Rhoda Packwood on the banks of the Nisqually River; her ten students consisted of the children from the Packwood, Shaser, and McAllister families. Among her teaching tools were various books and a small wood-handled bell used to call her students in for class where she "taught the three Rs with no frills."



Bigelow House, ca. 1866. *Courtesy Bigelow House Preservation Association.*

A New Family

Daniel was a devoted diarist, and wrote at length on many subjects. But his diary entry for June 18, 1854, stated simply "I was married." Those three little words are the only written remembrance Daniel left with regard to meeting, courting, and wedding Ann Elizabeth. Regardless of the paucity of information, however, meet, court, and marry they did, and their marriage lasted 51 years.

The couple was married at the home of the bride's parents, when Daniel was 30 and Ann Elizabeth was just 17. Daniel brought his bride home, via horseback, to his "two-room mansion" as Ann Elizabeth somewhat facetiously described the cabin. "The furniture for this palatial home consisted of seven chairs, a table, two bedsteads, a cook stove, and a stove in the living room. It was one of the long-to-be-remembered days of my life when we bought some lace curtains for the house."

At some point after the wedding, the Bigelows began construction of a much larger home, which still stands today as the oldest remaining residence in Olympia and one of the oldest frame buildings in the state. (Some family members claimed that the house was built in 1854, but historians cannot verify that date, so today the house is said to have been built circa 1860.)

Over the next few decades, Ann Elizabeth dedicated herself to raising and educating a large family, and Daniel continued to involve himself in various civic activities and public offices.

Ann Elizabeth gave birth to nine children, eight of whom survived to adulthood. Daniel and Ann Elizabeth felt their children should receive a complete education—not just in the basics, but also in music and art. In 1871, the family purchased a Steinway square grand piano and a large reed organ from back East. Additionally, a traveling artist was hired to instruct the children in drawing and painting. The Bigelows also amassed a sizable private library.

Daniel continued to be extremely active in public

service, although he expressed the hope that he would soon "see the day when I can live on my claim entirely independent of office and politics." His offices included those of school superintendent, police magistrate, University of Washington regent, county probate judge, county representative to the territorial legislature, and territorial treasurer. In addition to his elected or appointed offices, he also raised funds for the construction of a Methodist church, helped organize the local Temperance Society, formed a cemetery association, served as a trustee of the new Puget Sound Wesleyan Institute, co-founded and served as chancellor for Puget Sound University, and co-founded the Olympia Union Academy.

Ann Elizabeth was eager to expand her own education, and so attended the new Union Academy, along with her daughters.

Larger social issues did not escape the Bigelows' notice. In 1865, Daniel published an opinion article stating his opposition to slavery, and denouncing the secession of southern states from the Union. Also that year, the Bigelows served on Olympia's host committee for the "Mercer Girls," a group of single women

The Bigelow Family, ca. 1889: (Front) Evaline, Daniel R., George, Anne Elizabeth, Margaret; (Rear) Richardson Lee, Tizrah, Jotham Duncan, William, Ruth. *Courtesy Bigelow House Preservation Association.*

The family parlor in the restored Bigelow House Museum. *Courtesy Bigelow House Preservation Association.*

encouraged to come west by Asa Mercer of Seattle. Many of the women had been orphaned, widowed or left homeless due to the Civil War—a number of them eventually found homes within Thurston County.

By 1871, the Bigelows had become deeply involved in the woman suffrage movement. In October of that year, the Bigelow home was honored by a visit from famed suffragist Susan B. Anthony, who was on a speaking tour of the West Coast. In her diary for October 18, Anthony wrote "Dined at Judge Bigelow's. His wife splendid. Met several members of the Legislature." Shortly thereafter, Daniel helped draft documents for the formation of the Women's Suffrage Association. Ann Elizabeth was appointed to the executive committee of the new organization.

Final Years

As the years passed, Daniel's involvement in the local political scene tapered off, and the family spent more time on their farm, which had increased to over 300 acres above Budd Inlet. Daniel and Ann Elizabeth built a mini-neighborhood of several houses—some to be occupied by their adult children, and others to be rented out for additional income. As Olympia grew, however, it became advantageous to downsize the family acreage, and lots were occasionally sold off.

On September 14, 1905, the pioneer and civil rights activist passed away at age 81. He was the last surviving member of the first territorial legislature. His life of public service was lauded in obituaries, which stated that he "...held at different times nearly every office in the territorial government...So full has his life been of public acts that pages would be required to recount them."

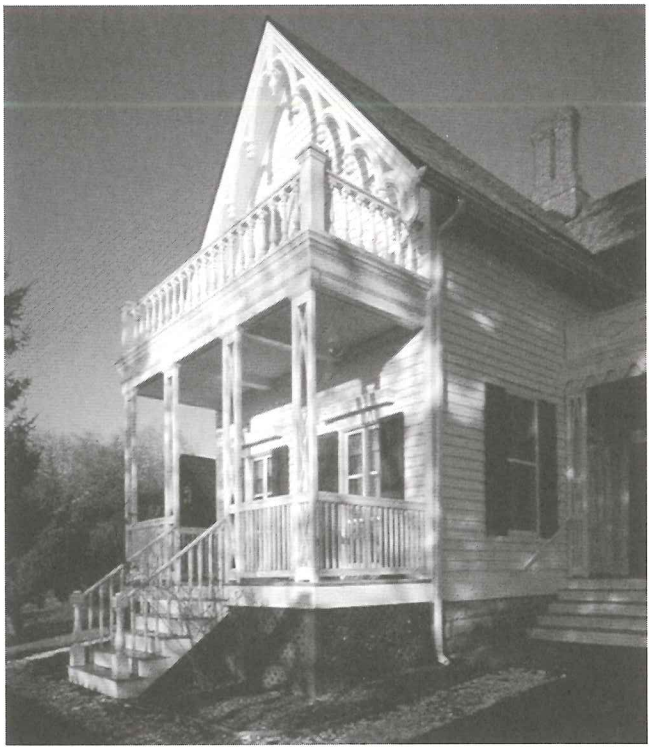
Ann Elizabeth lived to see women achieve the right to vote. She also became a businesswoman in her own right—owning and managing close to a dozen rental houses in the neighborhood. She was an accomplished horsewoman, but eagerly made the change to automobiles. She was active in remodeling her house to accommodate new generations, worked tirelessly for her beloved Methodist church, and took part in the Thurston County Pioneer Society.

On February 8, 1926, Ann Elizabeth slipped away to rejoin Daniel.

A Legacy for the Future

Succeeding generations of the Bigelow family appreciated the importance of Daniel's and Ann Elizabeth's role in territorial and state history. In the early 1990s, then-owners of the house, Daniel S. and Mary Ann Campbell Bigelow, conceived the idea of turning the venerable home into a museum. Through the careful direction of Mary Ann Bigelow, and the sensitive restoration work of many volunteers, the Bigelow home has been saved for the edification and enjoyment of future generations. Original furnishings—Daniel's desk, law books and journal; Ann Elizabeth's school bell, chairs, spice box, and needlework—are still in place and richly illustrate the story of a couple dedicated to civil rights and instrumental in creating a new territory.

The family's deep devotion to public service may have kept them from achieving a greater economic status (although they were by no means poor). Perhaps this explains, at least in part, why they maintained the old homestead, instead of "trading up" to a newer, fancier residence. Perhaps they were just satisfied with their home as it was. Whatever the reason, their residence and life lessons continue to be assets to our capital city.



The front of the restored Bigelow House Museum, an historic landmark in Olympia. *Courtesy Bigelow House Preservation Association.*

Karen L. Johnson is a past director of the Bigelow House Museum. She currently serves as a board member of the Bigelow House Preservation Association, and the Tumwater Historical Association. Her special interest in history involves early transportation, including the Oregon Trail, the Cowlitz Trail, and stagecoaches of southwest Washington.