A documentary history of fellow feeling: Tracing connection at Harvard

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citable link</td>
<td><a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42668795">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42668795</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Documentary History of Fellow Feeling:
Tracing Connection at Harvard

Caroline Tanski

Those of us who can will gather together at Commencement to renew and keep strong the friendships of youth. Many of us will meet again for the first time since we parted in Cambridge, a quarter of a century ago. So strong is the tie of sympathy born of early friendship and association that we shall meet as if we had separated but yesterday. Reminiscence will take us back to college days, and we shall then be eager to learn what life has brought to each of us. I hope the biographical form of this report will add to the success of our reunion, and give some pleasure to those who cannot be with us. I have attempted to gather together the important events in the life of each classmate. It would have been ideal could we all have been persuaded to tell what these events have meant to each one of us, but such intimate confidences we are not willing to print, even for the eyes of classmates. Some of this we shall tell when we meet, and our old friendship will help us to read between the lines.

John Woodbury, Class of 1880

Among the most notable aspects of Harvard’s social history is the close bond formed among classmates, even those who attended but did not graduate. This bond often endures for decades after a class has passed Commencement and scattered from the Yard. While it is hardly unusual for alumni of any institution to maintain long friendships, Harvard takes exceptional care in fostering and documenting this spirit of fellowship. The Harvard University Archives hold many collections that demonstrate this dedication: class albums, class reports, personal papers, and the records of the Harvard Alumni Association. With the help of

1 Harvard College, Class of 1880, Secretary’s Report No. 7: Upon the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of Graduation ([Cambridge, Mass.:] Riverside Press, 1905), v. HUD 280.25.
these collections, we can look at our presidents, musicians, tech giants, and other global leaders through the eyes of their friends and classmates as they rose to the heights for which we recognize them now.

John Langdon Sibley

Of the individuals who have had long careers at Harvard, John Langdon Sibley (1804–1885) was one of its most faithful documentarians. Sibley earned his A.B. from the College in 1825 and graduated from the Divinity School in 1828. He served as assistant librarian from 1825 to 1826 and again from 1841 to 1856, then as the librarian of Harvard College from 1856 to 1877. After the daily duties of the librarianship became too taxing, Sibley stepped down from that role but continued to serve as librarian emeritus from 1877 until his death. Sibley is best known for his *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University*, in which he detailed what was known of the lives of Harvard’s graduates of the classes of 1642–1677 in three volumes published from 1873 to 1885 (fifteen successive volumes were written by other authors). As Sibley wrote in the preface of volume one:

The collecting of the material for these Biographical Sketches was begun in 1842, just two hundred years after the first class at Harvard College took their degree of Bachelor of Arts. Many errors having accumulated in the Catalogue of Graduates, which, with probably a single exception, had been issued triennially for about a century and a half, the President and Fellows resolved to have a responsible editor; and after repeated applications I was reluctantly prevailed on to accept the appointment. ²

Sibley did faithfully undertake the editing of the *Triennial Catalogue*, and then in turn the *Quinquennial Catalogue* after the schedule of publication moved from every three years to five, both of which series are now preserved at the Harvard University Archives under the title *Harvard University Bibliographical Files*. As he documented the lives and achievements of graduates, he also kept a personal diary from January 1, 1846, to August 29, 1882. From this diary we get a sense of the daily comings and goings around the university over a span of nearly forty years. Topics covered include a great deal about the weather, visits with alumni, and the scandalous murder trial of a faculty member. Through this documentation of his life, Sibley allows us to trace trends in


40 A Documentary History of Fellow Feeling
technology, the expansion of Boston and Cambridge, and often some of the jubilant spirit of graduating classes.

Harvard’s first photographic class album was a set of daguerreotypes made in 1852. Photographic technology was rapidly changing at that time, and by Sibley’s first mention of photography—dating to June 14, 1855—a new process was in fashion.

At the request of several members of the Senior Class had photograph taken. Many who were practicing ambrotype taking at the rooms urged me to sit for ambrotypes, as I was considered a good subject & to gratify their very polite requests often repeated, & to allow them to practice I sat fourteen many times. The defect always is too great sternness of expression, a common failing in all likenesses taken by this and similar processes.³

Even within the first few years that class albums were made, it became common for students to include images of buildings, views, and significant figures from the administration. In this way the members of the class could display a more rounded picture of their time at the college. These inclusions represented the places and people that had been meaningful to each class, and were a further form of personalization between class years. Sibley’s diary makes note of five separate classes specifically asking to include his portrait in their class albums (see figure 4.1).

In addition to the graduating classes, Sibley gives us a sense of how photographs were used to preserve connections among other segments of the Harvard community. For example, on August 28, 1869, he wrote, “Rear Admiral Thatcher & a son of the Hon. Samuel Thatcher, H.U. 1793, called on me. The son of the oldest living graduate gave me a photograph of his father recently taken.”⁴ Here we see Sibley serving as the repository for continuing and updated information about past graduates. Indeed, he knows exactly who the oldest living graduate of the university is, and is well enough known as a record keeper that the descendant of that graduate brought a photograph of his father to Sibley.

Further reflecting the spirit of brotherhood among Harvard affiliates, Sibley offers the following account in his diary entry for October 24, 1877:

Amos Adams Lawrence called & said it occurred to him that five Presidents of Harvard College being alive, he would have them all photographed on one plate & one hour afterward he had written a note to them to that effect. He never saw a jollier set than they when they


Caroline Tanski 41
Figure 4.1. A page from John Langdon Sibley’s diary. In the entry dated June 14, 1855, he discusses sitting for numerous ambrotype portraits for the senior class. 27 x 21 cm, image only. HUG 1791.72 vol. 1 p. 362.

42 A Documentary History of Fellow Feeling
came together. Quincy, the oldest, said he had never been happier than since his resignation of the Presidency. They made many jokes, poking fun at each other, he accusing Felton who brought his official dress as the President in office of having his cap greasy & dirty whereas he was very neat. A.A.L. had never called on me previously. He was astonished at the quantity of materials I had accumulated for Biographical Sketches of Harvard Graduates.\(^5\)

Such layers of record keeping! The photograph on its own shows us that the five presidents were concurrently alive, but thanks to Sibley we know of the jocular tone of the day, which is not apparent in the presidents’ solemn expressions (see figure 4.2). This same light tone is evident in many internal class documents, but rarely do we get such an inside glimpse of the humor and friendship among the university’s top leaders.

All along, as he kept these detailed notes of his own life at Harvard, Sibley continued his work of compiling information about graduates every five years to be

included in the *Quinquennial Catalogue*. He took great pains to look through every newspaper available to him for news of Harvard alumni. He documented marriages, births of children, addresses, career changes, and deaths. The *Quinquennial Catalogue* clippings files accumulated into a central source for all available information about Harvard College’s graduates and allowed former students to keep tabs on those they had held dear. Sibley continued his duties as editor of the *Quinquennial Catalogue* for the remainder of his life, even as he came to rely on his wife for assistance in his advanced age. We have Sibley to thank for giving much of the multifaceted view we have on graduates of the college from its first two and a half centuries. In the process of documenting their accomplishments, Sibley himself became a fixture in Harvard history.

**CLASS REPORTS AND ALUMNI ASSOCIATION**

While Sibley dedicated most of his life to the college and its history, some positions and organizations far outlast any one lifespan. The Harvard Alumni Association, which dates to 1841, was established to promote a mutually beneficial relationship between the university and its alumni. In a report of the Committee of Alumni appointed to consider forming a permanent alumni association, sent around to graduates in 1841, the committee members wrote:

> After much deliberation and conference with many zealous and conspicuous friends of the College, they are convinced that such an Association is desirable alike for the happy influence it may exercise in the promotion of good fellowship and personal regard among the sons of our Alma Mater.6

Aside from this role, the Alumni Association today is involved with representatives of each class before they become alumni. Every senior class elects two marshalls, under the aegis of the Harvard Alumni Association and the Harvard College Fund, who then appoint a Senior Class Committee. This committee includes the class secretary, whose role, among other duties, is to connect members of a class to each other and to the college. After graduation, the class secretary is responsible for ensuring that class activities continue on an annual basis, for maintaining contact with the Alumni Association, and for managing reunion volunteers. While the role does not always remain with one person in perpetuity, taking on the responsibilities of the class secretary is a decades-long commitment to the enduring bond of a class.


44 *A Documentary History of Fellow Feeling*
Over 150 years ago, class secretaries began to compile memorial tributes to fallen classmates. As time went on, the emphasis of these reports swung around to those who were still living. Participation in these reports has always been voluntary, sometimes to the frustration of the class secretary. Frederic Almy, secretary of the class of 1880, wrote in that class’s Secretary’s Report No. 1:

If any member of the class wishes to know what his friends are doing, or where they are, he should feel perfectly free to write to the Secretary, but you must all remember that unless you keep me posted I cannot answer your questions. If you will write frequently I will endeavor to do my part.

To this day, though they suffer from some omissions due to the voluntary nature of submissions, these class reports provide a long and fairly consistent history of those who have passed through Harvard’s halls. Issued every five years, these reports allow alumni to reconnect with each other, if only on paper. Individuals receive the request, “Please tell your classmates, in a paragraph or two, what you would like them to know about your activities, interests, family life, career, etc., concentrating on the past five years. No résumés, please, and first-person narratives only.” With only this guideline, some alumni contribute a few terse sentences about career achievements and geographical location. Others write essays nearing 1,000 words on their children, spouses, hobbies, or losses.

Many alumni use the opportunity of the class reports to reflect on their days at Harvard, and often to remember the friendships they formed. One of the things these reports allow the reader to do is to trace the evolution of these memories and reminiscences over a span of decades. This is a particularly interesting exercise with major historical figures: the reports give us a chance to read about these famous people through the eyes of their friends and peers, from an age before most of them had accomplished the feats for which we know them today.

Take, for example, Frederic Almy’s classmate from the class of 1880, Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt’s entry in the Secretary’s Report No. 2, published in 1883, mentions his marriage to Alice and a trip to Switzerland, and then spends a bulky paragraph breaking down his margins of victory in the elections for his New York Senate seat in 1881 and 1882. His contribution to the Secretary’s Report No. 3, published in 1886, allots one sentence to the birth of his daughter and the death of his wife. He contributes four paragraphs on his political career, hunting trips, and real estate, and the class secretary supplements the entry with three more paragraphs on Roosevelt’s position in

---

the Republican party. It is not until the Secretary's Report No. 5, published fifteen years after the class graduated, that Roosevelt loosens up. He contributes seven paragraphs, noting:

I haven't made any journey in foreign countries, save a flying trip to England and France early in '91, but I have made several hunting trips in the Rocky Mountains, which were a good deal more important and interesting than going to Europe . . . Civil Service Commissioner is about all the office I have held . . . Except the fact that I have been annually investigated by Congress and have made about monthly investigations of other officials myself I do not know that I have had many interesting experiences, unless you include bear hunting in the list.8

Yet we need not rely only on Roosevelt to get a sense of him within the context of his class. Five years later, in the Secretary's Report No. 6, his classmate William Hoff Cook (a lawyer, no doubt about it) invokes Roosevelt in his own contribution (see figure 4.3):

You ask what "literary, scientific, political, or commercial work performed, or honors received" by me. In answer to this prolific question, I would state that I have performed and received none. Whether the "hoodoo" began with the Hispano-American war I do not know, or whether it was because while in college I studied Spanish with Mr. Bendalari, or French with Professor Bocher, or German with "Professor" Faulhauber, or whether it was because our "Teddy" Roosevelt became a Rough Rider, and accepted a "military" commission in advocacy of the historical and constitutional "principles" in which we were instructed together, or in subjugation to political "principles" with whom he later became acquainted, I do not know; but the fact remains that my present success seems to be no more advanced than does the political future of "imperialism," "expansion," "exploitation," "annexation," or any other "dark horse."9


46 A Documentary History of Fellow Feeling
Figure 4.3. Here, nestled among his classmates, is the senior portrait of Theodore Roosevelt. This page, from the album of the class of 1880, depicts Roosevelt as merely one student among many, shortly before his rapid political rise. 10 cm x 8 cm, mounted in album vertically. HUD 280.04 p/f.

Caroline Tanski 47
In a summary of the class’s twenty-fifth reunion, John Woodbury, who took over as class secretary after Frederic Almy resigned, wrote:

The outstanding event of the evening, indeed of the entire reunion, was the intimate address of Theodore Roosevelt to his classmates. He had asked that it should not be reported with a confidence that has never been broken. Today in his autobiography we can read much of what he said to us that evening, but to have heard it from his own lips with all his earnestness and humor and sincerity and with the well remembered peculiarities of speech and manner is a great remembrance.¹⁰

This report was printed in July 1921, due to a printer’s strike, a year and a half after Roosevelt’s death. It is not surprising, therefore, that a fair amount of the report is given over to remembering Teddy, who may have been more among his peers within his Harvard class than anywhere else. There are a number of poems contributed to the report that center on Roosevelt’s legacy, his guidance of the country. The tone of the report retains the lightheartedness and self-deprecation characteristic of these volumes, but with a noticeably deeper current of mortality and grief. In this foreword, in contrast to that of the twenty-fifth anniversary report, Woodbury writes, “We were classmates and friends more than forty years ago. The tie has grown stronger with lessening numbers and advancing years. We know in our hearts it will be so to the end.”¹¹

The reports have continued to document the strength and variety of friendships among class members. Whether detailing the lives of past presidents or those of complete strangers, these reports are small, progressive autobiographies that display the enduring connection Harvard graduates feel to each other no matter where their lives take them.

**The Archives**

That Sibley’s diary and the class reports exist is one matter. An entirely different and equally important aspect is access. Class reports are sent to members of their respective classes and several depositories, but they are not circulated for general consumption. Without access to these materials, the perspectives within them—personal, historical,


political—would be as good as nonexistent. Thus enters the role of the Harvard University Archives (HUA).

The mission of the Archives is to collect, protect, preserve, and provide access to more than 375 years of life at Harvard. This broad mission allows HUA to provide a home for an astonishing variety of materials, all of which enrich an understanding of the university’s history and the lives of those who touched it. Being open to the public, the HUA provides an opportunity for anyone interested to access primary sources related to the university and its graduates.

By collecting Sibley’s diary, class albums, class reports, and the records of the Alumni Association, HUA supports the validity of these types of documentation. These materials trace and give weight to all of the different lives to pass through Harvard. They also allow intimate glimpses into some of those lives, a closer look through the eyes of a friend, a classmate, or a friendly librarian. Rather than seeing Roosevelt only through the eyes of biographers and through posed photographs of him in the Oval Office or crouched next to a rhino he had slain, we can sit with his class at that twenty-fifth reunion and hear his warm, humorous voice addressing his equals. We can walk with Sibley through Gore Hall, a building demolished over a hundred years ago, and hear the knocking of the furnace Sibley objected to having installed for fear that it would cause drafts. We can flip through class albums and come across photos of subjects who are the spitting image of our own friends.

All of this is meaningful only when it is accessible. HUA strives to preserve these materials and to keep them available to all curious searchers. Its mission is to document life at Harvard, and central to life at Harvard is the closeness of the classes within it. Through these different forms of documentation we can relive some of the events and friendships of the long and illustrious history of the university. Through these sources we can delve into not only the dry, sepia-toned past, but also into the beating heart of that past. The records that preserve these long friendships also serve to humanize some of the great historical figures whom Harvard nurtured. With every class that graduates, this legacy of fellowship continues, and so too does the documentary evidence of that fellow feeling.

Caroline Tanski 49
Contributors

Melissa Banta is Projects Curator at Weissman Preservation Center, Harvard Library.

Kate Bowers is Collections Services Archivist for Metadata, Systems, and Standards at Harvard University Archives, Harvard Library.

Elena Bulat is Photograph Conservator for Special Collections at Weissman Preservation Center, Harvard Library.

Megan Sniffin-Marinoff is University Archivist at Harvard University Archives, Harvard Library.

Caroline Tanski is Holdings Management Associate at Harvard University Archives, Harvard Library.