

Your Story

Fur Trade Letters

Don Macdougall reflects on his family connection to the early Canadian fur trade.

The handwritten letters of my great-great-grandfather, independent fur trader James S. Bangs, open a window to the fur trade and mercantile business in eastern Ontario during the mid-1800s.

I found the 545 letters quite by chance. Wandering into the Stauffer Library at Kingston's Queen's University during a conference, I typed "Bangs" into the catalogue and was astounded to find the name James S. Bangs listed in the archives.

A few scattered visits over the years demonstrated how difficult and time-consuming it would be to uncover the

One night, during a break from this intense work at Ottawa's National Archives, I found two more letters on the database. Seven Algonquin chiefs had written them to Bangs, asking him for assistance. What a bonus!

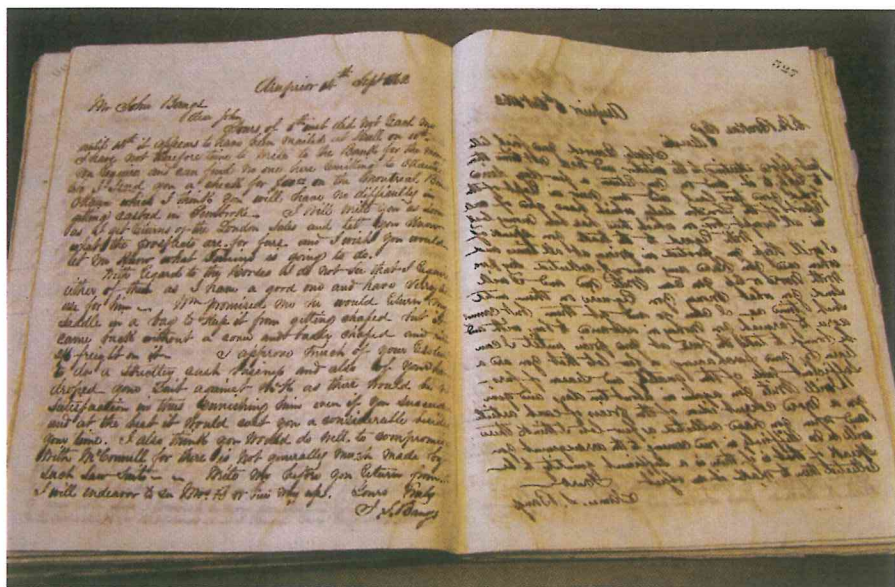
Bangs was between 29 and 36 when he wrote the letters between 1855 and 1862, usually to order items and make payments for supplies, record fur-gathering trips and report to partners in the fur-trade business. They were probably copied and retained as business records; seldom does Bangs's personal life intrude. We learn very little about his marriage or his children.

copy ink, which was then positioned behind a dampened tissue page in the book. Sheets of oiled paper were placed on either side to protect the adjacent tissues from the damp paper. After the paper was inserted, the whole book was closed and placed in a screw press to compact it and allow the ink to produce a mirror copy of the letter on the treated paper. James Watt, famous for his steam engine, had patented the process in 1780 and Benjamin Franklin was the first American to possess a copybook kit.

James S. Bangs and his nephew John worked the Ottawa and Madawaska Rivers, building up an extensive native trade stretching from Penetanguishene to Temiscaming. They faced strong opposition from the Hudson's Bay Company when they established a trading camp at Lake Temiscaming. Bangs described one confrontation in a letter to George Brown's *Toronto Globe*, reporting that "[the HBC] were Spending about two thousand pounds a year to watch and oppose us and Still we got the furs from under their closest watch." He finally "saw plainly that it was necessary to close up the Temisg Trade for it was not possible for us to compete with the immense opposition which the H.B.Co. brot to bear upon us." Bangs's invasion of the HBC territory resulted in the first customs officers being dispatched to Temiscaming in 1858 after he claimed that the HBC was importing furs from Moose Factory without paying duties. Bangs continued to trade with native suppliers in other areas, although his nephew was enticed to work for the HBC at Mattawa, where he also became postmaster.

In August 1862 Bangs wrote to his financiers and buyers in England that he had travelled:

Sometimes two hundred miles back in the woods threading my way on snowshoes through the trackless forest from one Indian camp to an other and at others dashing down the Rapid



In addition to writing hundreds of letters, 19th-century fur trader James S. Bangs maintained copybooks to record his business transactions. Special inks, treated paper and a screw press were used to make mirror copies of original entries.

contents. Fortunately, my daughter Heather's two free months before a university course led to the real project. We arranged with the Queen's and National Archives archivists to transfer the two copybooks to Ottawa – a rare event in the archive world, I learned – and my daughter (with a little paternal help) painstakingly typed these handwritten onion-skinned letters into a computer.

There was one oblique reference to a family tragedy – intrigued, we dug deeper, found a different source and learned that his sister-in-law and her husband, Joseph Currier, lost three children to scarlet fever. (Currier later built the house at Ottawa's 24 Sussex Drive.)

Copybooks contain specially treated tissue paper. The original letter would be written on a separate sheet of paper using

streams in a small birch canoe which to you would look more like a childs Toy than an article for voyaging in ... [in] the interior ... thousands of Indians never see any other traders than the Hudsons Bay Co man [and market prices] are little known.

Bangs mainly sold his prime furs to Freeman Dodd, a "house" located in New York City, and to James Coates and M. Lampson of Tokenhouse Yard, London, England. It appears from his letters that Bangs travelled to New York a number of times and at least once to London. For his direct purchases from native peoples, he often traded gold beads (which seemed very difficult for him to obtain), cloth and other items.

Interestingly, Bangs obtained traps for his fur suppliers. These he got from Oneida Castle, a small village in central New York, where a "free-love" commune had begun to manufacture guns and traps in the early 1800s. (The business has since become Woodstream Canada, maker of animal traps, large and small.) Bangs quickly learned of their reputation and visited them to assist with trap designs. He later sent detailed diagrams for additional modifications, explaining, "while some of my customers are satisfied with them many (particularly the Indians in the interior) object to them and take the Montreal made (though inferior in many other Respects)."

Our history is not always one of great men and heroes, but of work done by those who have left their own small mark. James S. Bangs was born at Hawkesbury, Ontario in 1826, the son of Benjamin Bangs, a hatter by trade who was born in Massachusetts in 1780. The Bangs family had arrived in Massachusetts on the second pilgrim ship after the *Mayflower*. One of his brothers was an Ottawa alderman for nine years and eventually became mayor in 1878.

My daughter and I physically touched our family heritage and felt we had the chance to know James S. Bangs through his letters. His smooth, cursive writing, competent grammar and wide vocabulary belied his lack of education and showed a man striving to succeed. We came upon

interesting words and phrases from the 1800s: *firkin* (small cask for butter), *lenity* (mercifulness, used to humbly thank his creditors), *prox* (next month), *ult* (last month) and *high wines* (adulterated liquor). (Readers might help us with one of the mysteries: the meaning of the superscripted word "to" that is used only on numbers relating to beavers.) Bangs signed off each and every letter with "Your humble

servant" or "Your most obedient servant."

The *Perth Courier* reported the suspicious circumstances of my great-great grandfather's death in April 1867. Apparently, it was common knowledge that he often carried a large sum of money. He drowned in the Snake Rapids of the Madawaska River, fur trading to the end. 🐾

Don Macdougall is a lawyer who lives in Ottawa.

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