

Who is James Burrill Angell and Why is Our School Named After Him?

*A short essay by Donna Nissani with a lot of help from the autobiography of Mr. Angell
himself!*

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Introduction

Two years ago, Andrea Kaye assigned her 3rd grade students a paper asking who their school was named after. After consulting with Principal Housel, it was discovered that readily available information was sketchy, and, as I later found out, sometimes inaccurate. It didn't really explain to us why a man named James Burrill Angell from a long time ago deserved to have his name on our school.

Both Dori and Andrea very patiently allowed me time to look into this omission and find out what I could. What follows is the long ripening fruit of that labor. I would like to thank them both for their openness to my idea and their support. I truly enjoyed writing this and my two years at Angell School. Also, a thank you to my husband Moti, for his wonderful editing skills, without which, this essay would have been far less coherent.

This is a cut and paste effort—about half of the essay consists of Mr. Angell's autobiography and the other half is mine. I have simply bridged one of his life experiences to the next and tried to summarize his story.

At one point it occurred to me that the material in this paper could be expanded or used as a jumping off point for several subjects such as vocabulary expansion, math story problems, a first-person history (including life in the 1800's, the Civil War, Slavery, and many Presidents), geography (he traveled extensively), time lines, a lever and how it works, comparing and contrasting schools and life in his times and ours--the potential is there--all that is needed is the time (and we have lots of *that*, don't we?).

I hope all the students and anyone else who reads this enjoys it, and, when they look back, will have as many good memories of Angell School as I do.

The following information was gleaned from:
"The Reminiscences of James Burrill Angell--1829-1916".

Donna Nissani, October 6, 2000

James Angell was born in Scituate, Rhode Island on January 7th, 1829. He was the oldest of six living children. Two other siblings died at birth. By the time James was born, his family had lived in the United States for well over 200 years. James' father was a farmer who understood the importance of education, so James was sent off to the local school. There were no public libraries in his home-town, and very few books in people's homes.

At a very early age (I know not how early), I was sent to the District School. I remember that I was so young that my father used frequently to take me to school on horseback in front of him on the saddle. A large boy of the neighbourhood was hired to take charge of me on the road when I walked. The district school was then in a very primitive state. A sloping board attached to the wall quite around the room was the writing desk for all the larger

pupils. They sat on benches with their backs towards the middle of the room. The small scholars sat on low benches in the centre of the room. Those who wrote made their own writing books. They purchased unruled paper, cut it into leaves, stitched them together, put a rough brown paper cover on, and ruled the lines with a leaden plummet. The first duty in the morning was to mend the goose-quill pens, and in the winter to thaw the ink on the stove.

As a boy growing up on a farm, James did not have a lot of fun things to do. Everyone worked hard and contributed to making a living. The highlight of the year was the annual community clam bake at the beach. This was a big affair with lots of fresh clams, corn and potatoes--all slowly baked in the sand. While waiting for dinner to cook, anyone who wanted to played and bathed in the ocean.

James was a good student, and when he had gone as far as he could go in the schools near his home, he needed to decide what he wanted to do next.

In my fifteenth year it was clear that I ought to decide what career I should endeavour to follow. My father informed me that he was able and willing to send me to college, but in that case would hardly be able, in justice to my five brothers and sisters, to aid me further. It was left to me to say whether I should go. I was certain that it would gratify both him and my mother if I chose to take the college life, and so the die was cast.

The years spent at Brown University were exciting for James. He studied hard and entered into academic life with great enthusiasm. Although Scituate--James' home-town--was only twelve miles from the University, he was the first person from Scituate to graduate from Brown.

To us country boys, as we entered upon college life, nothing was more fascinating and more novel and more helpful than the access to well-furnished libraries and the society of students of marked ability and scholarly enthusiasm. The boys who are reared in the neighbourhood of libraries can have no appreciation of the sensations which we country lads, whose supply of books had been the most meagre imaginable, but whose thirst for reading was insatiable, experienced in being ushered into a large library and told that all these books were now at our service. I sometimes tremble to think what an onslaught we made upon the crowded shelves.

While at Brown, James tutored by reading aloud to a visually impaired student. During this time he caught a bad cold, but continued to read aloud for about five hours every day until he was so hoarse he could converse no longer. His voice never fully recovered from this injury. While this did limit the careers James might follow, he did recover sufficiently enough to lecture for many years to come.

A great aide in his recovery was a trip taken with Rowland Hazard--a man who was to become his lifelong friend. Rowland was also in need of recovery from an illness, so Rowland's father suggested a horseback journey to the warmer climate of the southern states. Together, they headed south on October 5th, 1850. On their journey, James and Rowland witnessed the horrible conditions of slavery first hand. Later, these experiences led James to write passionately against slavery during the Civil War. Their trip took them through New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Georgia and Florida. By then, James was 21 years old and a graduate of Brown University.

One day we had a long fast because we reached no inn. The country was very sparsely settled. The roads were indescribably bad; swamps, corduroys, roots of trees, gullies, mud holes, creeks to be forded, were our obstacles. Three nights we travelled in these conditions, much of the time in heavy rain, and finally reached Quincy at 2 A.M., after the most fatiguing and uncomfortable journey we had ever taken. This was Friday morning and we had not been in bed since Sunday night. Southwestern Georgia, as we saw it, was not very inviting.

Despite the some of the hardships during his trip, James returned home May 22nd, 1851 feeling "reinvigorated in health".

It was now time for James to decide in which direction he wanted his life to go. He thought about becoming a minister, but a throat specialist advised against it. At the time, the doctor even warned against teaching. For some time, James felt sad and low trying to decide on his future. After much thought, it seemed to James, a career in Civil Engineering would fit the bill nicely. In August of 1851, he reported to work for the City Engineers Office in Boston, Mass. He had completed one project, and was hard at work on a second, when his friend Rowland sent him an urgent message. It explained that Rowland had not yet recovered from his illness and was advised to spend the winter in Southern Europe--would James care to join him? After some consideration, James ended his five month career as an engineer. Following^a short visit with his family, he and Rowland set sail for Europe in December, 1851.

James and Rowland had many wonderful experiences wandering around France, Italy and Austria.

The places of amusement were all open. At the Theatre Français we saw that great actor Got in Molière's *Malade Imaginaire* and Rachel in *Phèdre*. and the theatre was crowded on both nights. When I was in college we were, like students in most New England colleges, forbidden to attend the theatre on pain of expulsion. Therefore I had never before seen plays presented by great actors and actresses. Although my understanding of the language was imperfect, these performances were the revelation of a new world to me.

While at Vienna I received a letter from President Wayland, offering me as I might prefer either the Chair of Civil Engineering or that of the Modern Languages in Brown University, with permission to remain abroad a year and a half for the purpose of study. After deliberation, I decided to accept the Chair of Modern Languages. My throat had so far regained its strength that I thought I could venture to try the experiment of teaching.

The young men saw the Pope at St. Peter's and witnessed a military ceremony led by Franz Joseph, the Emperor of Austria; Nicholas, the Emperor of Russia; and Joseph, the Prussian King. James and Rowland briefly visited Germany and Czechoslovakia before Rowland returned alone to the US in June of 1852.

James, on the other hand, remained in France to concentrate on his language and culture studies. After spending four months intensely studying French language, writing, and literature, James returned to Germany to learn all that was German.

My landlord's eldest daughter, who was a teacher in a private school and was a scholar of large reading in English as well as in German literature, became my teacher. She was most competent. I have always regarded myself as so greatly indebted to her that I continued correspondence with her until her death in 1907. I know few American women who can recite so many fine passages from English poets as she could. I was impressed by this and other facts with the excellent literary training which the German schools gave their girls.

James spent nine enjoyable months in Germany. But, after a two-year absence, it was time for James to head home and assume his professorial responsibilities at Brown. On his way home, he made stops in France, Holland, England and Scotland. He arrived back in the US in July of 1853.

One of Professor Angell's most famous students at Brown University was John Hay. Mr. Hay went on to become a writer, Abraham Lincoln's secretary, and a respected Secretary of State.

The "most fortunate event" of Mr. Angell's life occurred on April 26, 1855. On that day he married Sarah Swoope Caswell, who was his lifelong wife and most trusted friend.

While teaching at Brown, Professor Angell took on the additional responsibility of writing articles for the *Providence Journal*, a Rhode Island newspaper. He wrote many articles about foreign affairs for the owner of the paper--who happened to also be the governor of Rhode Island. It became very hard to do both jobs well, so when Mr. Angell was offered the editorship of the paper, he accepted, and left Brown.

By 1859, heated discussions of war between the northern and southern states were underway. Throughout the Civil War there were many sad and tragic stories for Mr. Angell to report. Slavery was one of several bitterly debated and fought over issues. Coming from a northern state, and having seen the horrors of slavery first hand on his trip with his friend Rowland, Mr. Angell wrote tirelessly throughout the Civil War against this barbaric practice.

We invited Abraham Lincoln to make a speech in Providence. He had come to New York to give his Address, now so famous, which shows that the Fathers of the Republic lived in the hope of the ultimate extinction of slavery. He was an entire stranger in Providence; and when he appeared on the stage with his long, lank figure, his loose frock coat, his hair just cut rather close, his homely face, we were rather disappointed. But as he proceeded with his speech our solicitude disappeared.

And when the news of Lincoln's nomination came, we recalled that awkward figure which we had seen in Railroad Hall, and heard the commendations of him as a rail-splitter, and we wondered whether he was to prove the leader we needed for the trying days we were expecting.

In 1866 the severity of the work in which I had really been engaged for eight years, with only a week's vacation in each year, was beginning to affect my health. An urgent call to return to academic life led me to accept the presidency of the University of Vermont in August of that year. But my experience of newspaper life has been of great service to me in all my subsequent career. Editorial work trains one to both readiness and accuracy in writing. One learns to say on the first trial exactly what one means to say, and to avoid diffuseness. One who has a responsible charge in the conduct of a newspaper has large opportunities to understand men and to test his own courage in standing for what is right and conducive to the public good, especially when in his opinions he differs from some of his friends. It was not without much reluctance that I decided to abandon editorial life and return to academic work.

In 1866, James Angell became the president of the University of Vermont. During his tenure, the University was trying to reorganize and expand its College of Agriculture. As the new president, Mr. Angell was called on to raise funds and create a harmonious blend between the Schools of Humanities and Agriculture.

After four years at the University of Vermont, Mr. Angell was invited to be president of the much larger University of Michigan. At first, he was a little nervous about taking on such a huge responsibility. While struggling to make his decision, a friend offered him this little piece of advice: "I have found that if you have a long lever it is as easy to lift a large load as it is to lift a small load with a short lever." Armed with this wisdom, and the encouragement of his friends and family, James Angell accepted the Presidency of the University of Michigan.

During his tenure at University of Michigan, Mr. Angell was asked by President Rutherford B. Hayes to go to China and represent the United States as a Commissioner. He was sent to secure a revision of a US-China immigration treaty.

On March 11, I wrote to the Secretary to the following effect: that if direct and formal prohibition of Chinese immigration was desired I preferred that some one else should undertake the work, but that if correction of the abuses now connected with the immigration was desired, and this correction should work as a restraint on the immigration, I was willing to undertake the task.

After a grand dinner in President Angell's honor, he, his wife, daughter and youngest son set sail from San Francisco and arrived in China on June 19, 1880.

While in China, Commissioner Angell was successful in signing a treaty with the Chinese government as well as establishing much good will between the two countries. He later reminisced that the treaty was successful in part due to his patience and respect for the Chinese people and their culture. The Angell family remained in China for almost two years. They returned to Ann Arbor in February of 1882.

President Angell dedicated the next five years to innovation and expansion of the University of Michigan. In his autobiography, Mr. Angell recalls some of the many fine professors he was privileged to work with. He observed a few common qualities and virtues running through the best: Their love of teaching and the great enthusiasm they had for it. They shared a deep love of learning simply for the sake of learning. Their excitement was contagious, and the students caught it as they sat through their professor's lectures.

The appeal to a college student to work for the sake of learning is an appeal of a noble sort, and if heartily responded to, yields a result of a higher order than an appeal to ambition for class rank.

I was early impressed with the great advantages both to teachers and students of having the three departments: the Collegiate, known here as the Literary, and the Medical and the Law Departments all upon the same ground. It gave a certain breadth

and catholicity to the views of all. The professors, organized as a Senate, met socially at stated intervals to listen to papers and discuss them, and so to consider subjects from their different angles. As there were no dormitories, the students of the different departments were thrown together in their temporary homes and were led to see that there were things worth knowing outside of their own special lines of work.

Despite his many obligations as president of a large university, Mr. Angell never stopped teaching, continuing to lecture until his retirement. He took pride in knowing--by name--each of the 800 students he personally registered in the Literary Department.

Throughout the years, the Angell family hosted many interesting visitors to the university.

Our Law students have for many years celebrated Washington's birthday by securing an address from some eminent man. The February before Mr. Cleveland's second election to the Presidency, he was the orator of the day. I invited a number of the prominent citizens of both political parties to meet him at my house at luncheon. An immense throng from various parts of the State came to hear his address, which was very felicitous. In the evening a public reception was held by him in the city, and

on the next evening another was held in Detroit. The result was that the Democratic party in Michigan raised with much spirit the cry for his nomination to the Presidency. And they have always boasted that the impulse thus given led to his nomination and election.

However that may be, his visit to Ann Arbor certainly had one result of some consequence. Years after I asked him how it happened that he chose for his permanent residence Princeton rather than New York. He replied, "When I visited Ann Arbor, you remember that you drove with me through several of the streets of your city. And when I saw so many modest and pleasant homes, I said to myself it is in a college town with its simple life that I will try to find a home when I am through with public life. I never lost sight of that thought. Hence my decision to live in Princeton rather than in New York."

In 1887, President Grover Cleveland asked Mr. Angell to leave for Canada and try to resolve international fishing rights disputes. The two countries had been disagreeing with each other for years. This trip was a disappointment for James, as it did not turn out as successfully as his trip to China: a treaty was agreed upon, but the United States Congress failed to ratify it.

Later, President McKinley asked Mr. Angell to travel to the Ottoman Empire (Turkey and its possessions) to represent US interests there. The Board of Regents of the University of Michigan gave their permission and the US Senate approved his appointment. Mr. and Mrs. Angell sailed for Turkey on July 14, 1897. The Sultan of Turkey met with Mr. Angell several times; James reported that the two of them got along very well--so well in fact that when the Angells traveled to the Sultan's dominion of Egypt and to what is now Israel, they received VIP treatment. The Sultan's influence helped to make it a memorable trip for the Angell family.

The Sultan worried constantly that someone would try to hurt him or take over his country. He worried so much, that he discontinued mail service in Turkey, as he believed people may send letters plotting against him. On the other hand, two private US universities were allowed to flourish in Constantinople--free of the Sultan's censorship.

One case of the unjust punishment of boys came to my personal knowledge. A lad who had been a student in Robert College found his funds exhausted so that he could not complete his education there. Having heard that the Sultan sometimes gave scholarships in a Turkish school, one Friday he pushed through the military lines which guard the Sultan on his way to the mosque, and threw into the carriage a petition for the scholarship. It is a tradition of great antiquity in Oriental lands that any subject

may petition the sovereign. When the lad came home, one of his comrades asked him how he succeeded in approaching the Sultan's carriage. The lad replied with fatal indiscretion, "Why, it was easy enough. I was so near him I could have shot him." This unhappy remark being repeated, he was arrested, charged with threatening the life of the Sultan, convicted and sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment. All efforts of influential friends to secure a modification of the sentence were in vain.

The Angell family said goodbye to their friends of the Ottoman Empire and steamed home to America and Ann Arbor in August of 1898.

Although President Angell retired from U of M in 1909, he and his family remained at the University until his death in 1916.

Today, President Angell has several buildings, trees, plaques, windows and entire schools--such as ours--named for him. It is an honor he never asked for, but richly deserves. In the 38 years he was at the helm of University of Michigan, he created many new programs and expanded others. Women had only been allowed to study at the university for one year when he arrived--and their enrollment had not been a popular decision. Many of the faculty felt women would not be able to stand up to the rigors of university life, nor would they be smart enough to understand the material. President Angell encouraged women to enroll, and their numbers grew. Under his auspices, U of M became a place other universities called upon when they were looking for good women instructors. President Angell's support and women's obvious suitability for academic life, eventually showed that this controversial, but now obvious, decision was correct. The University can also thank him for setting rigid entrance standards. This means a student had to work hard in high school and receive good grades before he or she would be accepted at the University of Michigan. These high standards are still enforced today.

President Angell encouraged an open door policy between the University, the local communities, and their high schools. Many of the professors as well as himself, went into schools and held conferences. They met with school boards, interviewed students and offered advice anywhere it was needed or requested. All of this made for an excellent relationship between the public schools and the university.

During President Angell's tenure he saw the faculty expand from 35 to 400, and the library's collection increased from 25,000 books to 260,000. The student population climbed from 1,110 to 5,383. Many new departments were added, including a teaching hospital and a dental school. Many of these innovations are commonplace today but were unusual for universities of that time.

Finally, President James Angell's "two great ends"--his two most important goals--sum up why we can be proud that our school carries his name:

First: I have endeavoured to induce every citizen to regard himself as a stockholder in the Institution, who had a real interest in helping make it of the greatest service to his children and those of his neighbours.

Secondly: I have sought to make all the schools and teachers in the State understand that they and the University are parts of one united system and that therefore the young pupil in the most secluded school house in the State should be encouraged to see that the path was open from his home up to and through the University.