

**MEMOIR OF
JOHN BROMFIELD**

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Memoir of John Bromfield by Josiah Quincy

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Roxbury, and granddaughter of the Rev. John Wilson, of Boston. Their son, Edward Bromfield, born in 1696, married Elizabeth Coney in 1722, became a merchant of character and influence, and died in 1756. The youngest of the sons of his numerous family was John Bromfield, the father of the subject of this Memoir. He married Ann Roberts, the youngest daughter of Robert Roberts, who emigrated to this country from Wales, and became a much respected inhabitant of Newburyport. The character of Mr. Roberts was marked by "uncommon decision and energy"; he was "stern, self-sustained, thinking for himself, with a never-wavering resolution to do what he deemed right, irrespective of the opinions and practice of others"; and the same spirit was so strikingly developed in his grandson, that it was said of him that the same Cambrian blood flowed in his veins as did in those of his maternal grandfather. Having been educated at one of the English universities, he bestowed on his daughter great advantages of education, of which she had the disposition and power to avail herself.

The current of her husband's affairs became troubled, and at last seriously embarrassed, by circumstances of which the war of the revolution was one of the causes. Their son, JOHN BROMFIELD, the subject of this Memoir, was born in Newburyport, April 11th, 1779. His early years were passed with his brothers and sisters, under the pressure of misfortunes involving the necessity of great pecuniary restraint, and with no refuge or support except in the elevated spirit of their mother, who was, in all respects, entitled to the epithet of "admirable." Beloved by all, by her children she was little less than adored. Such were the impressions made deeply on the mind of the writer of this Memoir, during many years of intimate friendship with this lady; whose virtues and character are accurately portrayed in the following touching tribute from her surviving daughter.

“In all the more trying exigencies of her life, her conduct was noble and magnanimous; nor was it less so, while pursuing the even tenor of her daily life-long course, unnoticed and unknown. Retired from the world, and needing not its stimulus of praise or applause, she was never happier than when surrounded by her nursery flock, to whose early training she devoted her almost undivided attention; and for this she was eminently qualified. Her own home school-education, under the supervision of her father, was the best that could be obtained. Her intelligent and highly cultivated mind, good judgment, modesty, sweetness of temper, together with a dignity of manners, commanding, yet strictly feminine, formed a charm that bound her children to her irresistibly, her life being to them a *living commentary* upon the truth and grandeur of what were to them her oracular teachings.”

Mr. Bromfield, after receiving his early education from his mother, became, in 1792, a pupil of Dummer Academy, in Byfield, where his habits were so studious and his scholarship was so satisfactory, that his friends were advised to send him to the University; the means for which were kindly proffered by his father's sisters. With that decision and firm spirit of independence, which subsequently marked his character, he refused with grateful acknowledgments this kind offer, saying that he was resolved to make his own way to fortune, as a merchant; and accordingly at the age of fourteen he entered the counting-house of Messrs. Larkin & Hurd, of Charlestown, and afterwards, during the period of his apprenticeship, that of Messrs. Soley & Stearns. The failure of this house, just as he became of age, was the first cloud upon his prospects as a man of business; but with characteristic kindness he assumed, as far as was in his power, the settlement of their concerns, and devoted himself to their service, without reward, or the hope of it.

Mr. Bromfield thus entered upon life without patronage, and without prospects, other than such as his own talents and enterprise might open for him. The times were difficult. Several months elapsed, and every attempt to obtain mercantile employment failed. His desire of activity, and his earnest anxiety to begin the work which might lead him to independence, became at last insupportable, when he said to his sister, "I have made up my mind, I will no longer remain idle. I have spoken to a master-carpenter; I have made arrangements with him to teach me his trade; and, if for three weeks I continue unable to find mercantile employment, I will change my profession and become a mechanic." With those who knew the firmness of his character, it was unquestionable that he would have kept his resolution. Happily an opening occurred within the prescribed period, and he was enabled to enter the path he had prepared himself to pursue.

The confidence, which his conduct in relation to the concerns of Messrs. Soley & Stearns had created, as well as his known talents and urbanity of manners, soon opened to him opportunities for employment; but in whose service, or for what objects, is not at this day to be ascertained. By letters from him, preserved in the family, it is known that on the 16th March, 1806, he was at Rotterdam, as factor, or agent, for some mercantile house, and that success had not attended the enterprise, of which he had the superintendence. "I have been pursued," he writes to his mother at that date, "by the most untoward and sinister events. Forty days on my passage to Nantes, — fifty-three days embargoed, — I could not arrive in Holland until the first of March. Fortune has pursued me, undeviatingly, with ill luck; I cannot charge her with inconstancy. Existence is not worth possessing unaccompanied by independence of mind."

It appears that in April, 1808, he was again in Europe, in like service, with a similar result. On the 18th of that month, he wrote to his mother from London; "My fears of a bad voyage are completely realized. I have been obliged to land my cargo, and make a ruinous voyage for the gentlemen who were good enough to give me employ. My own loss will be total, of all that I have earned during my past life. The decrees of France and England are ruinous to American commerce; which is a whip-top, scourged by both parties. Though a neutral, it is attacked by all the belligerents." In the spring of 1809, he was intrusted with large funds by Mr. Theodore Lyman, senior, upon an agreement to remain in Canton for a year, as his factor; and for this purpose he was associated, as supercargo, with William Sturgis, who was appointed to the command of the ship *Atahualpa*, owned by Mr. Lyman, with joint control of the destined funds. At the request of the writer of this Memoir, Mr. Sturgis has favored him with the subjoined letter, conveying his impressions of the character of Mr. Bromfield.

"HON. JOSIAH QUINCY, — My Dear Sir: When you asked for reminiscences of our late friend, Mr. Bromfield, I readily promised to give them, and was gratified at having an opportunity to express and record the high estimation in which I have long held him. But, when I sat down to perform this promise, I found that I had undertaken a task not easily executed, and became conscious of my inability to convey to those not acquainted with Mr. Bromfield the impressions of his character and qualities, that are indelibly stamped on my own mind. He was one who can be appreciated only by those who knew him intimately; and of such the number is small, for he was by no means lavish of his confidence, and, though courteous to all, was intimate with few.

“My own acquaintance with him began under the following circumstances. In the spring of 1809 I was in command of the ship *Atahualpa*, belonging to the late Mr. Theodore Lyman, senior, preparing for a voyage to China. When nearly ready, Mr. Lyman decided to add another hundred thousand dollars to the large funds already provided, which sum might be left at Canton for investment out of the regular business season, in the expectation that it could be then done on the most favorable terms. This arrangement made it necessary that some one should be associated with me, who could remain a year at Canton; and Mr. Bromfield, who had previously been in the service of Mr. Lyman, was selected. We met for the first time only the day before sailing, and were wholly ignorant of each other's views, habits, and tastes.

“The relation in which we were placed, does not always tend to harmony and mutual good feelings. On shore we were upon a footing of equality; but at sea I was vested with exclusive and almost despotic power, to which he, in common with all on board, was bound to submit. In two voyages previously made to Europe, he had unfortunately been associated with ship-masters, whose narrow prejudices made them foolishly jealous of their authority, and disposed to regard as interference with it any inquiries or comments (however natural and unobjectionable they might be) made by the supercargo, relative to occurrences and passing events on ship-board. This induced Mr. Bromfield to practise extreme caution at the outset of our voyage; and he afterwards declared, that for the first week he scarcely knew whether the fore-topsail was set or furled, for, when walking the deck, he avoided raising his eyes above the direct line of vision lest he should be suspected of prying into matters that did not concern him, as had happened to him on previous occasions. We soon, however, came to a full