

Benjamin Franklin Mudge: A Letter from Quindaro

edited by Melville R. Mudge

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN MUDGE, one of the foremost pioneer scientists in Kansas, headed the state's first geological survey and served as a longtime professor at Kansas State Agricultural College in Manhattan. As a scientist and geologist, Professor Mudge studied the rocks and fossils of Kansas, and between 1865 and 1874, he spent many holidays and all but one summer in the field at his own expense. He received some reimbursement for his field expenses in 1865 and 1872, and beginning in 1874 through 1877 his salary and expenses were paid by O. C. Marsh of Yale University. Prior to 1874, Mudge sent many of his finds to Marsh including a fossil that Marsh named *Ichthyornis dispar*, a bird with teeth. According to Samuel W. Williston, a student of Mudge and a successful paleontologist in his own right, this find was "by far the most important specimen of these early years, if not the most important of all those succeeding. . . ."¹

Benjamin Franklin Mudge was born at Orrington, Maine, on August 11, 1817. His family moved to Lynn, Massachusetts, the following year. Mudge attended the Lynn and Wilbraham Academies, and graduated from Wesleyan University at Middleton, Connecticut, in natural science studies in 1840. A year later he completed the classical course. He then studied law in Lynn and was admitted to the bar in 1844 and was elected mayor of Lynn in 1852. During his years in Lynn, he continued his interest in geology, and in 1860 he left that city to spend a year as a chemist for the Breckenridge Coal and Oil Company, with the final year in Cloverport, Kentucky.²

In the summer of 1861, just before his forty-fourth birthday, Benjamin Franklin Mudge, with his family,

arrived in Kansas. Mudge had decided upon emigration to Kansas Territory because of his strong anti-slavery feelings. To exhibit those sympathies, he chose to settle in one of the most dedicated free-state towns in Kansas—Quindaro.³

In Quindaro the Mudge family encountered a bustling river town of which it was claimed, "there was more business done in Quindaro in a day than there was in Wyandotte [town] in a week." Founded in 1857 the town was promoted widely in Kansas and the East and land speculation was rampant.⁴ Mudge taught in local schools, served as superintendent of public instruction for Wyandotte County, was an organizer of the Wyandotte County Agricultural Society, and spoke at Quindaro's local lyceum meetings.⁵

Several sources provide glimpses of Mudge's life in Quindaro,⁶ but of special interest here is a letter written from that town on February 27, 1862. The letter, written by Mudge to his older brother the Rev. Zachariah Atwell Mudge, is of particular interest because it was written at a time when much of Quindaro had become abandoned and because it mentions one of the ongoing issues of the day—contrabands coming into Kansas. This letter is in the personal collection of the editor, and the correspondence is presented here with no changes except for a modernization of some spellings to improve readability.

Quindaro, Feb. 27, 1862

Dear Brother Z. A.

Yours of 13th arrived the 22d. I don't think Bro. Bice is very neighborly not to visit you oftener. Hope B makes up his remissness but I am afraid she does not visit

Melville R. Mudge is the great-grandson of Benjamin Franklin Mudge and like his great-grandfather also a geologist, having retired from the U. S. Geological Survey. Melville Mudge and his wife Dorothy have researched the life of Benjamin Franklin Mudge and have compiled their findings into *The Life of Benjamin Franklin Mudge in Kansas, 1861-1879*.

1. Melville R. and Dorothy L. Mudge, comp., *The Life of Benjamin Franklin Mudge in Kansas, 1861-1879* (The authors, 1989), 1; John M. Peterson, "Science in Kansas: The Early Years, 1804-1875," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 10 (Autumn 1987): 231.

2. Mudge, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin Mudge*, 1-2.

3. *Ibid.*, 2, 7.

4. *Ibid.*, 7-23 *passim*. For quote see "Suo-Quindaro," *Wyandotte Gazette*, December 30, 1881. For a general accounting of Quindaro see Alan W. Farley, "Annals of Quindaro: A Kansas Ghost Town," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 22 (Winter 1956): 305-20.

5. Mudge, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin Mudge*, 1-2.

6. Among the sources that refer to Mudge in Quindaro are Isaac T. Goodnow Diary, October 23, 1861, Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS); Mudge to Zachariah A. Mudge, December 17, 1861, and Mudge to brother, January 31, 1862, the editor's private collection; *Wyandotte Commercial Gazette*, January 3, July 4, 1863; Mudge to Isaac T. Goodnow, January 12, 1863, Manuscripts Department, KSHS.



*Benjamin Franklin Mudge—pioneer
scientist and teacher and one-time
resident of Quindaro.*

Lynn, Mass. frequently. The Jour. & Rep. comes regularly and your occasional papers. The two No. [numbers] of the Ag, have also come, but before I rd [received] your letter I had subscribed with a club for it at 80 cts & not knowing what the two copies meant I had written to Judd that it might be a mistake & he need not send the 2d copy. Can you get your 80 cts back?

We have had quite an episode to relieve the monotony of our life. About two weeks ago 8 contrabands came over from Mo. one night, & we took a woman & 3 children to keep till they could get a better place. The woman was smart & capable and did work about enough to pay for the board of all. As their master lived almost in sight across the river he soon learned where they were. A week ago to-day [Thursday] a half-breed Indian sent me word that their master was coming after them that day. I knew that he would not dare to use force in the daytime, but thinking that he might come after dark I went over to

Mr. Storrs' and borrowed his gun. He loaded it with 13 buck shot. Nobody appeared that day nor Fri. nor Sat. But Sat. night, a little after midnight I was aroused by a loud knocking at the door. I went to the door at the upper piazza & asked *what they wanted*. There were 3 men on the steps but the night was so dark that I could not see a man 60 feet from the house. The answer was that they wanted me to come down and open the door, they wanted to see me. I repeated my

7. Presumably this is the Rev. Sylvester Dana Storrs (1820-1886). The Reverend Storrs, born in New York, was one of four Andover Seminary students who organized the Andover Band, pledging to come to Kansas to aid in the free-state struggle. Arriving in Quindaro in 1857, the reverend was pastor of Quindaro's Congregational church. He remained in Quindaro until sometime in 1862, went to Atchison, returned to Quindaro for a short time in the late 1860s, and then moved to Topeka in 1877. "Sylvester Dana Storrs," in *Kansas*, pt. 1, vol. 3 (Chicago: Standard Publishing Co., 1912), 689-91; "Old Quindaro," *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, October 27, 1895.



Despite the high hopes reflected in O. A. Bassett's 1856 survey for town lots, by the early 1860s Quindaro was almost abandoned.

question after answering as before some parley, "they said their master is here and we have come for those blacks that ran away from the other side of the river." My only answer was, "you *can't* have them" was my reply. They then said "We *will* have them for we've got men enough to tear the house down, so you had better let them go." I said, "That makes no difference, I am well armed and ready for you." "My 2 boys are here to help me." * Then turning I said loud enough for them to hear. "Melville have everything ready." Mary⁸ said I spoke very calm and deliberately. This decided ans [answer], took them aback. They then changed tone & began another. They said that they did not want to

* Recollect I had but one gun.

8. Mary E. Mudge was the wife of Benjamin Franklin Mudge.

harm anyone but only wanted their slaves. I told them in reply, "I don't want to harm any one but if any man undertakes to enter my house in the night without my permission he will be very likely to get hurt." They then concluded that they would "go see the Captain." They went off down into the woods & after some whispering together they cleared out. I next heard something stepping about in the road in front of the house but could not tell whether it was man or beast. Thinking that they might possibly come back I asked M. & J. [Melville and Josiah]⁹ if they would be afraid to go over

9. Melville R. Mudge and Josiah B. Mudge were the sons of Benjamin Franklin Mudge. At the time of this incident, Melville was fourteen years of age; Josiah, eleven.

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ter midnight I was awakened by a loud knock-
ing at the door. I went to the door at the
Creek's house & asked what they wanted. There
were 13 men in the steps but the night was
so dark that I could not see a man go
out from the house. The answer was that they
wanted me to come down and open the door, they
wanted to see me. I repeated my question and
after answering as before and some partly, they said
"their master is here and we have come for
those blacks that run away from the other
side of the river". My only answer was, "You
can't have them". They said they would & must
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one but only wanted their slaves. I told
them in reply, "I don't want to harm any

Presented here is the portion of Mudge's letter that referred to harboring newly escaped Missouri slaves who had come across the river to Quindaro.

to Mr. Storrs & get aid. They said no & I let them out the back door & told them to go through the fields where they would not meet any one. After they were gone I heard a man (the Sentinal [*sic*]) blow his nose & continue to walk up & down the road. He was some times within 75 feet of me (or less) but neither of us could see the other. As I kept still he did not know I was watching. Soon the boys came back with Mr. S. Storrs & Mr. Brown,¹⁰ a lawyer. The sentinal "picked up his heels" & sent after the others and we have not seen them since. I expect they are still looking for "the Capt." After staying a short time S & B went home leaving me a revolver & double barrellled gun. We kept the slaves till Monday afternoon when I took them out 3 miles & on Tues. Mr. Learned (formerly a sheriff in Franklin Co. Ks & a man who had been to Pikes Peak & C)¹¹ & myself took them (the slaves) and one other contraband to Leavenworth. The Col. of the Reg. at Quindaro¹² is proslavery & half secest [secessionist], which emboldened the slave catchers, but on Monday he re [received] his discharge. The Lieut. Col. & Major are right, and on Monday soon after I had gone, hearing that the master was again after them, sent 13 soldiers past to the (my) house to look after things.

I do not think there were more than four of them Sat. night. It is said their master offered \$50. a head to recover his slaves. The blacks are frequently coming over on the ice & very often go back to get others away. Leav. [Leavenworth] is full of contrabands.¹³

10. Presumably this is Erastus D. Browne, a native of New York who came to Quindaro in 1857, opened a law office, and "invested his savings—some thousands of dollars—in 'town shares'." In 1879 it was stated that "No one laughs more heartily than he over his now-plowed corner lots." "Hon. Erastus D. Browne," in *The United States Biographical Dictionary, Kansas Volume* (Chicago: S. Lewis & Co., Publishers, 1879), 661-63.

11. The identity of Mr. Learned, other than that provided in letter, cannot be established.

12. From January 20 to March 12, 1862, the Ninth Kansas Volunteer Infantry was quartered at Quindaro. With so many men away at war, the town was virtually deserted except for the troops stationed there. Farley, "Annals of Quindaro," 316.

13. For a general reference on contrabands in Kansas and in Leavenworth see Richard B. Sheridan, "From Slavery in Missouri to Freedom in Kansas: The Influx of Black Fugitives and Contrabands Into Kansas, 1854-1865," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 12 (Spring 1989): 28-47.

On the same letter, with the page turned upside down, a note was pencilled on the page. This note, in a different hand, may have been written by Mary Mudge.

Friday morn—It is rather cool but the sun is shining & birds singing. Our *domestic* fowls are jubilant. We recd your "Traveler" last eve. My pocket Diary is very useful. Wish I cd [could] send you some eggs or filberts. The children crack the nuts & put the meats in my pocket & if Henry was here he might help himself. The prospect now is for pleasant weather & gardening soon. Yesterday Col. Johnson and the Indian agent here¹⁴ lent us a minnie rifle. I do wish we could buy a gun—it would be convenient for wild game as well as intruders. Our table (box!) upstairs is set out with a gunpowder flask—cartridge box—percussion caps—shot box—minnie rifle balls. The gun boxes have come into very good use for chamber & kitchen tables. As to *chairs* they are too high to buy—we have 5, 2z [?] hand odd ones. 2 of "shucks" + 3 of bark made in the style of some that were my *great grand mother's*. The two little cane seat & Rocking chair wh [which], we brought we have still. A cabinet maker in Wyandotte asks for a custom made blk [black] walnut cane seat 10/, and these old fashioned *new* ones cost from 1.00 to 1.25. We use . . . [the last two sentences are too faint to read].

In December 1865, Benjamin Franklin Mudge was elected professor of natural history and natural science at Kansas State Agricultural College. The appointment was undoubtedly made possible by his long-standing friendship with Isaac Goodnow and Joseph Denison, president of the college, as well as his work as state geologist. Mudge then moved his family in late December 1865 from Quindaro to Manhattan, Kansas, where he remained as a teacher until 1874.¹⁵

[KH]

14. Presumably this is Fielding Johnson (1810-1872) who was born in Indiana, fought in the Black Hawk War, and supposedly smuggled weapons to free-staters in Kansas in 1856. He settled in Quindaro in 1857 and set up a mercantile business with a "branch store" in Topeka. From 1861 to 1865 he was Indian agent to the Delaware. "History of Fielding Johnson," biographical clipping pamphlet, Library, KSHS; Clara Gowing, "Life Among the Delaware Indians," *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1911-1912* 12 (Topeka: State Printing Office, 1912): 184n.

15. Mudge, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin Mudge*, 24.