



Bidwell, George R. (born c. 1859). Papers, c.1862-c.1946.

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Bidwell, George R. (born c.1859). Papers, c.1862-c.1946
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George R. Bidwell was born in Buffalo, N.Y., on November 8, c.1859. He was the son of Charles S. Bidwell, a shipbuilder, and the grandson of Benjamin Bidwell, who, along with his partner, Asa Stannard, built the five ships of the Commodore Perry fleet. At some point, Bidwell moved to New York City, where, in the 1880s, he built a successful bicycle manufacturing company, the George R. Bidwell Company. In 1890, he became the first American manufacturer of pneumatic (inflatable tube) tires. Soon after, though, he lost a patent infringement lawsuit involving this new type of tire. In 1892, he won an appeal of the original ruling, but at that point had lost so much money he was forced to try and find backers for his business. Unfortunately, Bidwell was unable to secure any investors, and he had to liquidate the pneumatic tire department from his business. The George R. Bidwell Company went into receivership in 1893. Bidwell continued on in the bicycle business for a few more years, but his career path took a dramatic turn in 1897.

On July 14, 1897, Bidwell, having been appointed by President McKinley, took over as the collector of customs at the Port of New York, a job he held until April 3, 1902. During his time as collector, Bidwell fought to clean up the corruption and smuggling that were then plaguing the Port of New York. Also during this time, Bidwell was very active in politics. He held several different positions in New York's Republican Party, including that of president of the Republican County Committee of New York. He supported Theodore Roosevelt for governor of New York and, at President McKinley's request, played an integral role in helping to end the political war in New York between U.S. Senator Thomas C. Platt and his supporters and the William Brookfield Republican Organization.

After serving in the Customs Office, Bidwell went to work as manager of the International Fire Engine Company in New York City. As it became apparent that the company was not doing too well, he came up with the idea of making automobile engines for the pioneers of the auto manufacturing industry. This, he deemed, would be an efficient and profitable use of their machinery plant in Elmira, New York. However, he was soon called to the offices of Standard Oil, which was large investor in the International Fire Engine Company, to defend this strategy for turning the company around. Regrettably, Bidwell could not sell the men of Standard Oil on this idea as they saw no chance of the horse being replaced by the motorized engine.

Bidwell later went on to work for the Trackless Transportation Company in New York City. In the early 1920s, he and Ezra Bull, who had been associated with the automobile industry since 1905, surveyed the entire automobile industry to see what would be the most promising line in which to engage as manufacturers. They decided on the manufacturing of a properly designed passenger bus, and then set out on designing such a vehicle. The result of their efforts was the Imperial Omnibus, which by 1921 was "on trial" with the New York City Department of Plant and Buildings.

A tireless worker, Bidwell worked into his mid-seventies, retiring sometime around 1934. He was living in Brightwaters, L.I., as early as 1938 and possibly even earlier. During his

retirement, he devoted a good deal of his time to the promotion of bicycling and bicycle safety. He also supported the “cycle path movement,” which sought to convert the shoulders of highways into cycle paths. Bidwell carried out his support of these causes by writing letters to various government and industry officials.

In his later years, he spent time writing articles about his experiences in the bicycle industry and in politics. Some of his articles on bicycling were published in the *American Bicyclist and Motorcyclist*, and it appears that at least one of his articles on politics was submitted to the Dright Literary Agency in New York City.

Bidwell apparently was a lawyer and also had achieved the rank of colonel in some organization or branch of service, but little is known about these aspects of his life.

Certainly having lived an interesting life, Bidwell himself may have summed it up best when, in a letter dated February 26, 1944, he wrote:

My trouble has been, to some extent, that I could develop and make the business but didn't always have the thing necessary to aid me in holding on to it. But I am satisfied and look back with satisfaction on what I accomplished, in business, in the administration of the New York Customs and in politics.

The collection, which spans from c.1862-c.1946, is comprised mainly of typescript materials, including articles and correspondence. Also included are patent documents, memorandums, publications, reports, and photographs.

Noteworthy among the collection are letters from various government officials—including then Governor Theodore Roosevelt—written to Bidwell during his tenure as collector of customs for the Port of New York; assignment documents related to patents for inflatable rubber tires; articles written by Bidwell that recalled his days in the bicycle industry and in the Customs Office in New York City; and a small group of photographs, including images of Bidwell on a “tricycle,” c.1885.

SUBJECTS

Names:

Bidwell, George R., born c.1859
Republican County Committee of New York.
Trackless Transportation Company.
United States. Customs House, New York City.

Subjects:

Bicycles-- New York (State)--New York--History
Bicycling--New York (State)--New York--History
Customs Administration--New York (State)--New York.
Customs Officer.
Customs officials.
Patents.

Tires--Patents.

Places:

Brightwaters (N.Y.)

Buffalo (N.Y.)

New York--New York (State)

Form and Genre Terms:

Articles.

Correspondence.

Photographs.

The George R. Bidwell Papers are arranged in four series:

- I. The Customs Office and Politics – articles written by Bidwell concerning his nearly five years as collector of customs of the Port of New York, and correspondence—including a few personal letters—mostly with various government officials. Articles arranged chronologically, then alphabetically; correspondence arranged chronologically.
- II. Bicycles and Bicycling - articles written by Bidwell concerning his life in the bicycle manufacturing industry, and correspondence, mainly to government and industry officials, but also includes some personal letters. Articles arranged chronologically, then alphabetically; correspondence arranged chronologically.
- III. Trackless Transportation Company – promotional business report re: manufacturing and the Imperial Omnibus
- IV. Photographs – ten photographs, including images of Bidwell on a “tricycle” and, later in life, at social events. Arranged chronologically.

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Box and Folder Listing

Series I: The Customs Office and Politics

<u>Box /</u> <u>Folder</u>	<u>Title/date</u>
	Articles written by George R. Bidwell (Possibly written for the Dright Literary Agency, New York, N.Y.)
1-1	“The Author, A few words, “touching on and appertaining thereto,” c.1940s
1-2	“Behind the scene in 1898. Electing Theodore Roosevelt Governor of New York.” <i>Politics in the Gay Nineties</i> . (Includes copies of rewritten version and the Roosevelt Affidavit Memorandum of 1898.)
1-3	“Behind the scenes in the White House. Naming a Secretary of War and an Ambassador to the Court of St. James.” <i>Politics in the Gay Nineties</i> , c.1940s
1-4	“Republican Politics in the Gay Nineties.” <i>Politics in the Gay Nineties</i> , c.1940s
1-5	“The Internal Combustion Engine and the Automobile in 1903. What the great men of Standard Oil thought,” c.1940s
1-6	“Smuggling as a Fine Art.” <i>In the Gay Nineties</i> , c.1940s
1-7	“Smuggling as a Fine Art. The case of Max Lazar.” <i>In the Gay Nineties</i> , c.1940s
1-8	“Smuggling as a Fine Art. The case of Mr.[?]” <i>In the Gay Nineties</i> , c.1940s
1-9	“Smuggling as a Fine Art. The case of Mrs. Harry S. Black” <i>In the Gay Nineties</i> , c.1940s
1-10	“Smuggling as a Fine Art. The case of the Reverend Roger Williams.” <i>In the Gay Nineties</i> , c.1940s
1-11	Baggage Declaration and Entry forms, 1899-1900
1-12	Correspondence, letters (typescript/signed) from Theodore Roosevelt to George R. Bidwell, 1898-1901 (5 items)
	Correspondence
1-13	Oct. 1896-Jan. 1898
1-14	Feb. 1898-May 1898
1-15	June 1898-Oct. 1898
1-16	Dec. 1898-Jan. 1900
1-17	Feb. 1900-May 1900
1-18	June 1900-Jan. 1901
1-19	Feb. 1901
1-20	Mar. 1901-June 1901
1-21	July 1901-Apr. 1902
1-22	Recommendations and report re: the examination of baggage, etc., 1901
1-23	Resolution, Progress Republican Club’s endorsement of nomination of George R. Bidwell for “Collector of the Port,” 1897

Series II: Bicycles and Bicycling

<u>Box /</u> <u>Folder</u>	<u>Title/date</u>
	Articles written by George R. Bidwell
1-24	“The Smith Bottom Bracket Patent,” 1944
1-25	“The Pneumatic Tire 1889 ----- 1892,” c.1944
1-26	Untitled article re: pneumatic tires, c.1944
1-27	Untitled article promoting bicycling and the cycle path movement, c.1944
1-28	Untitled article re: the Spalding-Bidwell Company (includes information re: bicycle school that they operated briefly at Madison Square Garden), c. 1944
	Correspondence
1-29	Jan. 1936-Oct. 1939
1-30	Nov. 1939-Dec. 1943
1-31	Jan. 1944-Apr. 1944
1-32	May 1944-Oct. 1945
1-33	Jan. 1946-Feb. 1947
1-34	Membership card, George R. Bidwell, League of American Wheelmen, n.d.
	News clippings
1-35	<i>Bicycling Today and Yesterday</i> . The Sun (New York), May 1938-June 1939
1-36	<i>Bicycling Today and Yesterday</i> . The Sun (New York), July 1939-Oct. 1939
1-37	Patent documents, inflatable tire tubes, 1891-1900
1-38	Publications, <i>Old Timers News</i> , 1944. (See pp. 8-10 for Bidwell articles re: pneumatic tires.)

Series III: Trackless Transportation Company Business Records

<u>Box /</u> <u>Folder</u>	<u>Title/date</u>
1-39	Correspondence, 1922 Report, 1922
1-40	“Four Essentials of a Successful Manufacturing Business: Satisfactory Products”
1-41	“Four Essentials of a Successful Manufacturing Business: Sufficient Market and Profit”
1-42	“Four Essentials of a Successful Manufacturing Business: Competent Management”
1-43	“Four Essentials of a Successful Manufacturing Business: Ample Capital”

Series IV: Photographs

<u>Box /</u> <u>Folder</u>	<u>Title/date</u>
1-44	George R. Bidwell, portrait, c.1862
1-45	George R. Bidwell, portrait (facsimile), c.1880s

Series IV: Photographs

Box /

Folder

Title/date

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| 1-46 | George R. Bidwell on "tricycle," 1885 |
| 1-47 | George R. Bidwell on "tricycle," 1885 |
| 1-48 | George R. Bidwell, portrait, c.1890s |
| 1-49 | George R. Bidwell, John Tenant, and others at luncheon at the St. Regis Hotel in New York City, 1943 |
| 1-50 | Pope Memorial Methodist Church, Cohasset, MA, 1945 |
| 1-51 | George R. Bidwell at desk, reading, c.1945 |
| 1-52 | George R. Bidwell at 50 Year Club event, c.1946 |
| 1-53 | Columbia Light Roadster (velocipede bicycle), 1887 model, 53 inch, n.d. |