

Apr-2018

From the BSU Archives - Robert Pellissier (Bridgewater Normal '03): Classmate, Educator, Soldier and Friend

Orson Kingsley

Bridgewater State University, orson.kingsley@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation

Kingsley, Orson (2018). From the BSU Archives - Robert Pellissier (Bridgewater Normal '03): Classmate, Educator, Soldier and Friend. *Bridgewater Review*, 37(1), 26-31.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol37/iss1/9

FROM THE BSU ARCHIVES

Robert Pellissier (Bridgewater Normal '03): Classmate, Educator, Soldier and Friend

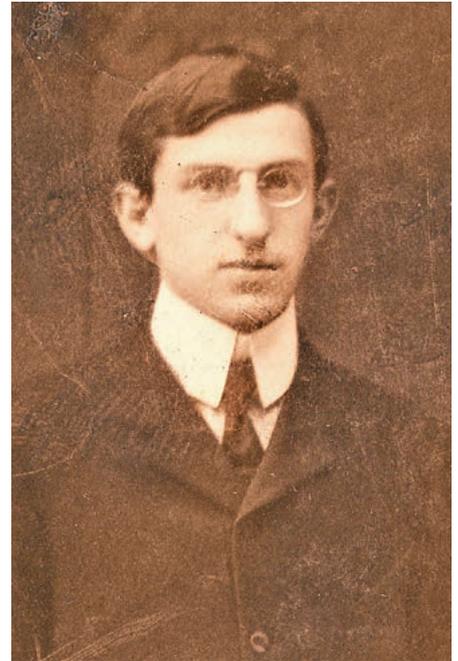
Orson Kingsley

It is a rare occurrence when a forgotten story can be discovered and recreated. Historians typically get their information from archival repositories dedicated to preserving the records of our past and making them accessible to the public. The work that archivists do often goes unnoticed outside the walls of our profession and the occasional acknowledgment in someone's book. Most archival institutions have backlogs of unprocessed collections. These documents remain in limbo until analyzed and made available to the public by archivists. Every now and again we come across something in these backlogs that is so unexpected and exciting that it reminds us why we got into the field in the first place. A recent discovery in the archives at BSU has done just that for me.

“Men in class of 1903, Bridgewater Normal School: M. Davitt Carroll – Irish – Harvard '04; Jesse Matossian – Armenian – Yale; Robert E. Pellissier – French – Harvard '04; Wm G. Vinal – Yankee – Harvard '06.” These names were handwritten by William G. Vinal on the inside cover of a 1917 scrapbook dedicated to the life of Robert Pellissier. Glued into the book's pages are a fascinating collection of photos and handwritten letters from Pellissier to Vinal. Each of these four friends finished the four-year program at Bridgewater Normal before continuing their education at Ivy League schools (*Bridgewater State Normal School, Massachusetts: Catalogue of Addresses, 1906*). Three of them were early members of Kappa Delta Phi, a fraternity focused on the profession of Education

and whose Alpha chapter originated on Bridgewater's campus in 1900 while they were enrolled as students (Robert Clemence, *The Golden Year of Kappa Delta Phi, 1950*). Two of them died during World War I. The bonds of affection cultivated among these men during their formative years at Bridgewater must have been stirred when the news broke that on the morning of August 29, 1916, Robert Pellissier was shot through the chest by German machine-gun fire at the Battle of the Somme (Adeline Pellissier, *Letters from a Chasseur à Pied: Robert Pellissier, 1917*). The scrapbook helps us to reconstruct a world we had lost, a Bridgewater story involving foreign students, the pursuit of education, fraternal bonds among classmates, and the horror of the First World War.

Robert Edward Pellissier was born in 1882 in a small town in the Jura Mountains of eastern France, only a few miles from the Swiss border. The death of his father when he was six years old began his family's upheaval. At age 13, when a brother's death left his mother in a depressed state, as Adeline Pellissier's compilation reveals,



Robert Pellissier at Bridgewater Normal, 1903 (taken from a photograph of members the Editorial Board of the Normal Offering. BSU Archives).

Robert and his mother made the decision to leave France. They boarded the ship *La Normandie* and crossed the Atlantic to live with his older sister in Brooklyn. It was a classic voyage of European immigrants to Ellis Island, only ten years after the Statue of Liberty had been gifted to the United States by France.

Pellissier had virtually no knowledge of English when he arrived in the U.S. in 1896. He was encouraged to enroll at Bridgewater State Normal School in 1899 after spending time in the White Mountains of New Hampshire with a relative. His challenge in languages, however, did not center so much on English while at Bridgewater,

but specifically with the German-born Civil War veteran and language professor Dr. Franz Kirmayer (1840–1919). Kirmayer’s ethnic background may have been the cause of friction that developed between him and Pellissier years later, as Pellissier’s sister Adeline described in 1917. “In the Bridgewater Normal School Robert met with no difficulties except when he wished to be excused from taking a course in beginner’s French. The teacher of French, who happened to be a German, would not believe that Robert was a French boy and he made him take the course (Pellissier, *Letters*, x).

Very little was known about Pellissier’s time at Bridgewater Normal until recently. What had been known is that Pellissier graduated in 1903 before continuing his education at Harvard through a scholarship awarded during his last year at Bridgewater. He secured a teaching position at Stanford University in 1911, and finished his Ph.D. at Harvard during the summers of 1911–1913. While at Stanford, he authored a widely praised book, *The Neo-Classic Movement in Spain during the XVIII Century* (1918), which he had begun as a student at Harvard.

Immediately after the war began in 1914, Pellissier (who kept his French citizenship throughout his life and never sought U.S. citizenship) took a leave of absence from Stanford and boarded a ship to France to enlist in the French Army. His sister Adeline’s privately published book, *Letters from*

resources are of significant use. BSU’s student scrapbook collection helps us flesh out Pellissier’s life as a Normal School student, classmate, and friend.

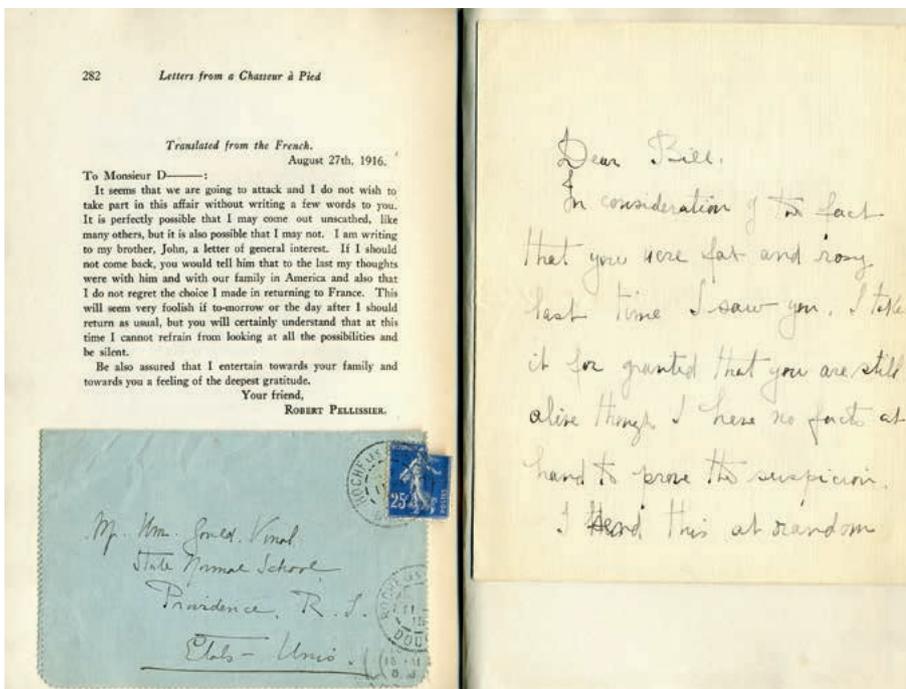
Pellissier began his education at the Bridgewater State Normal School in September 1899 at the age of 17. Two close friends with whom he remained

Like Bridgewater graduates before him and ever since, Pellissier struggled to keep in contact with his classmates as his career advanced.

a *Chasseur à Pied*, focused largely on his role in the war. His letters were insightful enough to convince his great nephew, Joshua Brown, to republish the book in 2003 as *A Good Idea of Hell: Letters from a Chasseur à Pied*. Brown’s edition provides more background on Pellissier, but largely skips over his Bridgewater years. Here, our own

connected until his death were Vinal and Michael Davitt Carroll, who was better known as “Dab.” Two other close friends were Nahum Leonard and Sumner W. Cushing, both of whom were a year ahead of Pellissier and also went through the four-year program before going on to further study at Harvard (BNS, *Catalogue of Addresses*, 1906). Intertwined from the day they met until well after Pellissier’s death, all of these men appear in the scrapbooks of Nahum Leonard, the father of the Kappa Delta Phi fraternity.

Nahum Leonard kept detailed scrapbooks during his time at Bridgewater Normal, which included playful diary entries involving his classmates, friends, and fraternity brothers. Candid photographs of friends are scattered throughout them and reveal the crude quality of the early years of amateur photography. One photograph of the interior of the room where Pellissier stayed while at Bridgewater has Leonard’s handwritten inscription below it: “Royal Palace of Pellissier.” Another page in Leonard’s scrapbook includes a photograph of Pellissier with his personal calling card glued underneath. Around



Pages from William Vinal’s Scrapbook (BSU Archives).

it are written witty comments about Pellissier, including a playful reference to him as “that Frenchman.” Leonard’s scrapbooks are also significant in that he documented and described the creation and very first meeting of the Kappa Delta Phi fraternity on April 14, 1900. “A number of speeches were made, all expatiating on the desirability of perpetuating this secret band of brothers. Suffice it to be said, that an organization was effected which we hope may be as lasting as the universe itself.” The earliest record indicating Pellissier was a member of Kappa Delta Phi dates from January 1903, during his senior year at Bridgewater.

Within a month’s time, he went from a highly respected position at Stanford to being in a trench in eastern France, fighting to stay alive, voluntarily sacrificing his own American Dream to ensure that future generations would be given the same opportunities that he was.

The friendships that Robert Pellissier made at Bridgewater Normal were central to his identity for the rest of his short life. After he graduated from Bridgewater in June 1903, Pellissier went on to further his education at Harvard before eventually getting a teaching position at the Williston Seminary in Easthampton, Mass. In an October 1916 Williston Seminary publication, Pellissier’s sister gave a brief account of her brother’s frantic year at Harvard. “Fortunately, during that year Robert had as a neighbor a Bridgewater friend, a very witty young Irishman, and there was, between them, many

a bout enlivened by flashes of French and Irish wit” (*Williston Bulletin*, 2, 1 [October 1916], 21). Though not referenced by name, that Irishman was “Dab” Carroll.

Like Bridgewater graduates before him and ever since, Pellissier struggled to keep in contact with his classmates as his career advanced. His letters to William Vinal are both nostalgic and inquisitive; he wished to know how the old gang was doing. One undated, but pre-war letter written during his time at Stanford explains that their mutual friend from Bridgewater, Edward Allen Boyden, was trying to line up

a date for Pellissier with a woman he knew who lived near the campus in Palo Alto. Edward Allen Boyden was the son of the long-serving principal of Bridgewater Normal, Arthur Clarke Boyden. Another letter shares the news that their friend “Dab” had nearly died from appendicitis (Pellissier Collection, BSU Archives).

Pellissier’s published letters and diary extracts complement and help contextualize his unpublished letters held by BSU. With frightening foresight, his published letters describe the experience of entering Paris from the west

in September 1914 and seeing soldiers returning from the Front. “These men who have come from the front are very still—they look listless . . . They seem all to have become fatalists” (Pellissier, *Letters*, 15). Within a month’s time, he went from a highly respected position at Stanford to being in a trench in eastern France, fighting to stay alive, voluntarily sacrificing his own American Dream to ensure that future generations would be given the same opportunities that he was. In his letters, he expressed his love for America and Americans, but the nostalgia he had for France and his family (many of whom never left France) trumped all else.

Classic World War I literature, including novels such as Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), generally decries the war’s leaders as having cruelly taken advantage of the exuberance of youth, using adventurous young men as naïve pawns in their larger schemes. The accusation doesn’t quite fit for Robert Pellissier. Pellissier was a 32-year-old man holding a Ph.D. from Harvard when the war broke out, and he fully comprehended his own motivations and instincts for going to war. In one witty comment, he wrote: “I am putting all manners of curious and interesting facts in my diary, which one hundred years from now should be worth millions of dollars from an historical perspective” (Pellissier, *Letters*, 80). In another letter, readers can feel his sense of being a father figure to his former students. He wrote to his sister: “Do you remember one of my Williston boys named Henderson? He enlisted in a Canadian unit and the poor boy was killed at Loos [France]” (Pellissier, *Letters*, 253). He wrote, too, about how the Boyden family continued to help him while in France. “My friend Allen Boyden shipped me a fine Colt automatic and a letter full of gentle reproaches. He thought that I had gone in the army for good, giving up teaching. Can you think of a more crazy idea?” (Pellissier, *Letters*, 218). A Boyden shipping a

weapon through the mail to a former Bridgewater student—the very idea seems absurd to us now.

One of the last letters he sent to his Bridgewater classmate, William Vinal, is perhaps his most revealing. In it, Pellissier describes the endless monotony of trench warfare—repetitive yet terrifying. The letter was written while Pellissier was in a hospital recovering from a shrapnel wound to the shoulder, which allowed him time to articulate his own thoughts on the war. His bitterness towards Germany is palpable.

The scrapbook helps us to reconstruct a world we had lost, a Bridgewater story involving foreign students, the pursuit of education, fraternal bonds among classmates, and the horror of the First World War.



“The Royal Palace of Pellissier” (Scrapbook Collection of Nahum Leonard, BSU Archives).

“I am putting all manners of curious and interesting facts in my diary, which one hundred years from now should be worth millions of dollars from an historical perspective.”

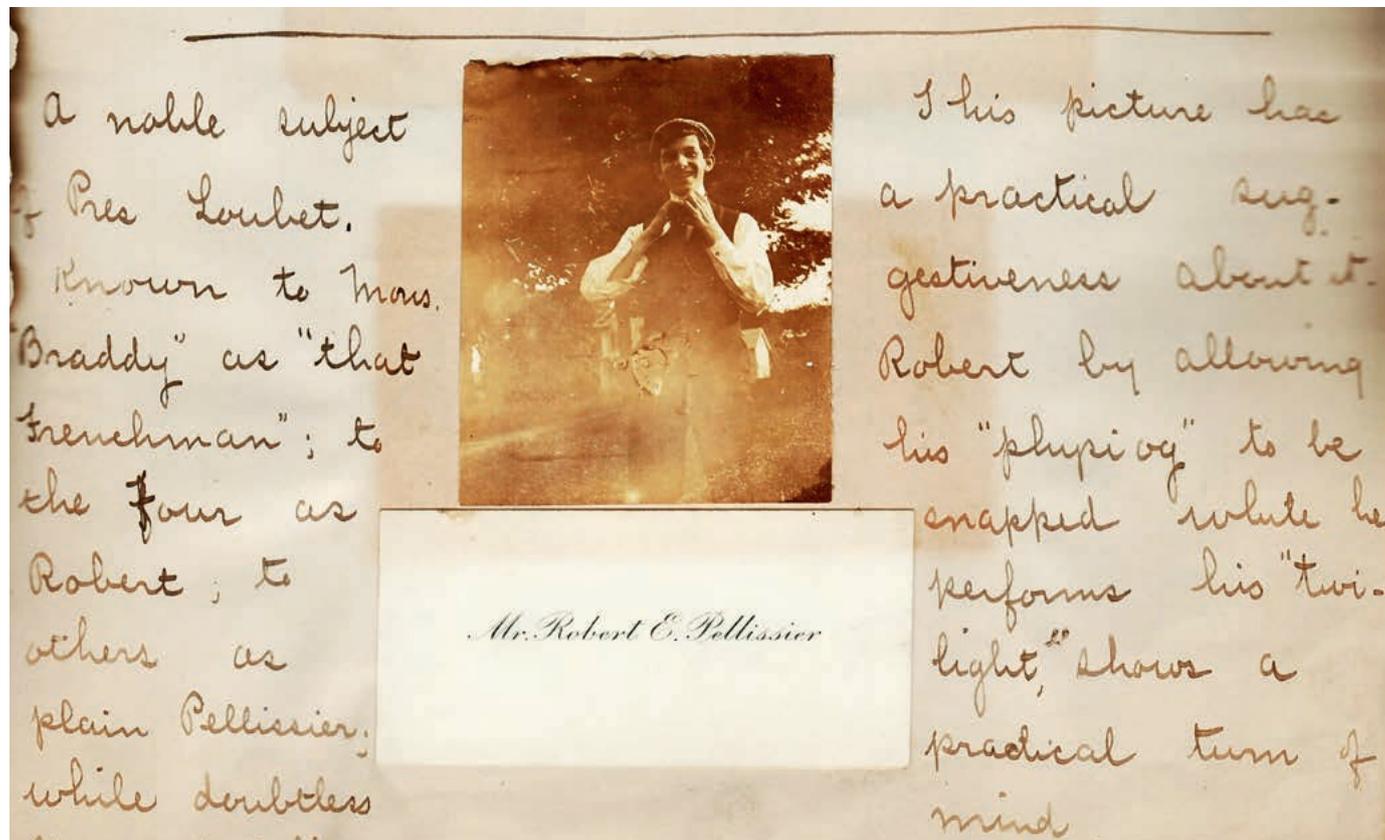
“Near here there are 800 women refugees from the North. Two hundred of them are about to give birth to children who are the results of rapes committed by German soldiers last Fall. These women are only a few of the victims. The government is going to establish great orphan asylums to take care of the little Deut[s]ch bastards. It’s clear that in the majority of cases the mothers will refuse to take care of the poor kids or at least will never consent to bring them up with their family. So you see

that if there is real trouble ahead for old Deut[s]chland, it’s not altogether a pity” (Pellissier, *Letters*, 218).

Pellissier was buried where he was killed on August 29, 1916. It took a while for the news to make its way back to Bridgewater. By that time, many of Pellissier’s cohort of friends from his Normal schooldays had moved on to prominent roles in the field of Education. Perhaps inspired by the actions of Stanford University, which in

1916 raised money to buy an ambulance for use on the Western Front in honor of Pellissier, Bridgewater Normal began a similar effort in early 1917 (before America’s formal entry into the War). The Pellissier Memorial Committee was formed and began raising money in February. The committee consisted of M. Davitt Carroll, William G. Vinal, Nahum Leonard, Sumner W. Cushing, and others. Correspondence held by the archives at BSU shows a whirlwind of fundraising activity. Kappa Delta Phi fraternity played an important role in the process and donations came in from Bridgewater students and teachers, fraternity members from other chapters, and from local people in town. Within three months, nearly \$1,000 was raised. An ambulance was purchased and sent to France through the American Ambulance Field Service Fund (Pellissier Collection, BSU Archives).

The ambulance sent to France had a memorial plate attached to it with Pellissier’s name on it. By this time,



“That Frenchman”: Robert Pellissier at Bridgewater (Scrapbook Collection of Nahum Leonard, BSU Archives).



Robert Pellissier Memorial Ambulance (from: Arthur C. Boyden, Albert Gardner Boyden and the Bridgewater State Normal School. A Memorial Volume [Bridgewater, Mass.: Arthur H. Willis, 1919] 114).

“My friend Allen Boyden shipped me a fine Colt automatic and a letter full of gentle reproaches. He thought that I had gone in the army for good, giving up teaching. Can you think of a more crazy idea?”

Pellissier’s friend and fraternity brother, Sumner W. Cushing, was a professor at the Salem State Normal School. In a strange coincidence, one of his previous students turned soldier, Joseph P. Devaney (who was, like Cushing, a Kappa member), sent him a letter from France in May 1918. In his letter, Devaney reported finding a French ambulance that had “American Field Service” painted on the side, which caused him to inspect it further. He noticed a brass plate attached that stated: “Robert Pellissier Memorial Ambulance, Established by Graduates

and Undergraduates of the Bridgewater Normal School.” The Pellissier Memorial Committee’s treasurer records show that Devaney himself had donated money for the ambulance in March 1917. “It was a pleasant surprise to me to know that Lieut. Pellissier was a fraternity brother of mine . . . Now that I have seen actual progress of the fraternity I am stronger than ever holding to the ties of friendship, duty, and philanthropy imparted by its constitution.” For Cushing, the meaning of Pellissier’s ultimate sacrifice for the cause was amplified after the U.S. entered World War I and played so large

a role in winning it. “How Pellissier would exhilarate to fully appreciate what his adopted country finally did in the great struggle!” (Pellissier Collection, BSU Archives).

How all of the correspondence revolving around Robert Pellissier and an ambulance made its way to the Bridgewater State archives, I do not know. Devaney’s letter is accompanied by others from the driver of the ambulance, Carroll, Cushing, Leonard, Arthur Clarke Boyden, representatives from the American Ambulance Field Service, and more. Some of these letters were originally sent to Salem Normal School; others directly to Bridgewater. Nearly all the names attached to the letters can be traced back to a handful of students who attended the Bridgewater Normal School between 1899 and 1903. Perhaps they were all brought here by William Vinal himself, the man who pasted letters from a long-lost friend into a scrapbook, closed it up, and donated it to Bridgewater State College nearly 40 years later, when the location of the archives was an old bank vault in the basement of Tillinghast Hall. Whatever route these documents took in coming to us, we are fortunate to have them in our archives. And however long they have been buried in our backlog, we are richer now to know about “that Frenchman,” Robert Pellissier, and the bonds of friendship that he forged with others while a student at Bridgewater almost 120 years ago.



Orson Kingsley is Librarian and Head of Archives and Special Collections.