

Ask the Archivist: What's Behind Professor Quinby's Smile?

A question for Melissa Mead, the John M. and Barbara Keil University Archivist and Rochester Collections Librarian.

I have, over the years, become fond of visiting the portrait of Isaac F. Quinby, one of the University's first professors, in Rush Rhees Library. The placard next to the portrait says he taught mathematics but also fought as a commander throughout the Civil War and later was a US Marshal. His portrait shows him with a kind smile that has a hint of wry humor. I wonder what this man, who was both scholar and person of commitment and action, was like? The Civil War took a heavy toll on those who fought in it. What was his life as a professor like when he returned? And what was up with being a US Marshal? Was he out catching dangerous criminals when not solving detailed mathematical proofs?—Adam Frank, Helen F. and Fred H. Gowen Professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy

The October 1873 *University Record* (precursor of today's *Campus Times*) noted that artist John Phillips (1822–1890) would create a portrait of Isaac Quinby. Phillips depicted Quinby seated with a sword leaning against the back of his chair. The weapon, symbolizing his military service, may have been the one given to him by his Rochester students in May 1861 when he formed the 13th NY Regiment. It bore the Latin inscription *Ne quid detrimenti capiat res publica*: that no harm befalls the Republic.

Space does not allow a full accounting of Quinby's life and Civil War service: he saw frontline action, as well as administrative assignments, punctuated by sojourns in Rochester to teach and recuperate from illnesses, including malaria.

In 1883, a year before Quinby resigned from the University, professor of Greek Asahel Kendrick contributed a biographical sketch to the *Interpres* yearbook that succinctly outlines Quinby's education at West Point (class of 1843), teaching appointment at his alma mater (1844–47), active military service in Mexico (1847–1851), arrival at Rochester as professor of mathematics and natural philosophy (1851), and Civil War service but includes few details about Quinby the person. The University's collections hold just enough material to give the same glints of resolve and humor that the painting captures.

Beloved enough that alumni commissioned his portrait, the generally taciturn Quinby joined his students in games of chess, and the student yearbook records the membership of the "Quinby Chess Club." Each new year began with the pronouncement "If you came to learn, I will teach you; if not, I cannot." He was quick to deflate students who attempted to cheat.

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Quinby's correspondence shows he was equally unforgiving of grown men whose behavior he found wanting. His letters home (copies of which were generously given to the University Archives by family

descendants) show an emotional, loving husband and father agonizing over both the human cost of the war and the political missteps which prolonged it.



LEGACY: A portrait of Isaac Quinby in Rush Rhees Library has had many admirers, including Quinby's grandson, DeHart G. Scrantom Sr., Class of 1911, and great-grandson, Charles Quinby Scrantom, Class of 1952.

These letters also reveal that his teaching salary alone could not support his family of 13 children. During the summer of 1858, Quinby oversaw the construction of a lighthouse in Kenosha, Wisconsin. His position as US Marshal (1869–1877) was concurrent with his faculty position but not very remunerative. Writing to fellow Rochesterian and US congressman Freeman Clarke, Quinby asked for a revision of a rule providing that government employees "shall not be allowed mileage, but only actual travelling expenses." The rule meant that after traveling hundreds of miles over several days, "he can only receive . . . fifty cents and the actual and sworn cost of his travel, exclusive of meals and hotel bills."

Quinby may have dealt with dangerous criminals, but surely the most notable order he received as marshal was issued December 26, 1872: it instructs Quinby or his deputies to "convey and deliver" Susan B. Anthony to Albany, where she was to answer the civil charge of illegally voting in the 1872 election. 

To read Quinby correspondence and for more images, visit <https://www.library.rochester.edu/rbscp/blog/ata-fall2023>.