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ARC Knickerbocker Award Summary

During the course of my archival research this summer, I visited the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library and the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale. At the Beinecke, I read through the George Brinley collection, which was comprised of a series of pamphlets, political tracts, and polemical writings on nineteenth century culture and society. These texts covered a range of topics including slavery and secession, North/South relations, the development of manufacturing technology, and patent laws. What interested me about my encounter with this collection was the way in which it necessitated a nonlinear research agenda, as it brought together a number of unrelated topics. I requested the box due to my interest in the rhetoric of southern secession, and found myself particularly interested in the separate writings on patent law. It's unlikely I would have stumbled across this writing otherwise. I'm following up this archival finding with a research program on the transitioning nationalist context in which the debate over patent laws and technological innovation was occurring in the early decades of the nineteenth century. I'm hoping to submit this research to the conference for The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists. The wider impact of this archival work on my future research is that I may focus on early American literature and culture rather than the post-Civil War period.

At the Sterling Memorial Library, I had the pleasure of reading through a huge collection of journals, mementos, photographs, letters, and scrapbooks belonging to the Saxton family of Massachusetts and Connecticut. The collection spans 23 boxes and a hundred years (1834–1934) and documents the personal and professional lives of Rufus and Willard Saxton. Rufus Saxton was a Union General during the Civil War, and his memos regarding the administration of the Department of the South were extremely interesting to read. They reveal the stark lack of resources that were available to the Freedmen's Bureau, as well as the incredibly restricted mobility of former slaves in the Reconstruction South. Because this collection was so comprehensive, I was able to get a very intimate feel for the texture of the family's history and experience over time. There were a number of archival materials that I'd never come into contact with before, and I appreciated the way that material artifacts could tell a story about a life in a way that text alone cannot. For instance, the scrapbooks were composed of carefully clipped editorials, exhibition catalogues, prints, and sketches, and spoke volumes about the way the object itself would have been used, enjoyed, and circulated, and reflected the values and aesthetic tastes of the family.

I intend to read more tracts and pamphlets on the culture of patents and copyright in the nineteenth century, with plans to visit the archives at the New York Public Library. The trips I made to Yale were extremely useful in increasing my comfort with navigating digital finding aids, documenting my archival findings, and narrowing my research interests. It was a great way to dip my toes into the practice of archival research and has made me excited to continue the process.