



BIDWELL MANSION ASSOCIATION

CHICO, CALIFORNIA

To the Honorable Judge Caraway,

On behalf of the Bidwell Mansion Association, a community organization dedicated to preserving the legacy of General John and Annie Bidwell and the historic home that bore their name, we wish to convey the profound and irreparable impact that the December 11, 2024, arson attack has had on our organization, community, history, and shared identity.

The Bidwell Mansion was more than just bricks and plaster—it stood as a testament to how far our community and region have come. It served as a living monument to the perseverance, innovation, and civic spirit that built Chico and shaped California's early history. Its loss is not merely physical; it is an assault on the cultural, educational, and emotional fabric that binds our community together.

For generations, Bidwell Mansion has stood as a bridge between the past and the present, welcoming thousands of schoolchildren, families, scholars, and visitors who have walked its halls to learn about the Bidwells' contributions to agriculture, education, social reform, and natives' rights. The Mansion played a pivotal role in the development of Chico Normal School, later becoming California State University, Chico, reinforcing its legacy as a cornerstone for education. It was also a cherished gathering place, hosting weddings, cultural celebrations, agricultural festivals, and community events that deepened local connections and traditions. This was a place where residents and guests forged lifelong memories. Now, these moments feel more poignant as they can never be recreated.

The fire that consumed the Mansion stripped us of far more than the loss of a historic building—it tore away an essential part of who we are. In a single night, decades of preservation work, priceless artifacts, and generations of memories were reduced to ash. Every piece told a story that can never be retold: John's map table, where he meticulously planned Chico's agricultural development and helped shape early California politics; the taxidermy case, a valuable historical and scientific record of the region's native wildlife; Annie's piano—a cherished wedding gift whose melodies once reverberated through the halls, as well as her wedding portrait showing her with hope for the future; and the beloved, life-sized portrait of John that welcomed countless visitors with a silent but dignified presence. There were rare, out-of-print books—including those by Susan B. Anthony—that provided insight into the social reforms championed by the Bidwells. There were numerous cultural artifacts, such as the priceless embroidered tapestry gifted by Chico's Chinese community to the Bidwells, symbolizing their enduring respect and gratitude. Indigenous artifacts documenting the Mechoopda people's connection to this land further anchored the Mansion's significance as a bridge to diverse histories.

These irreplaceable links to the past have been stolen from us, leaving only memories in their place. These and everything else lost were not mere relics but tangible reminders of where we came from and who we are as a community. The fire obliterated an essential and inimitable

archive of our collective heritage. This loss is permanent, affecting not only our community but also the broader historical record of California and the nation.

This devastating act of arson was more than just the destruction of a priceless piece of our past—it was an assault on our community, our values, and the lessons we pass down through generations. If politically motivated, it was an act of terrorism against our community and a deliberate attempt to erase the past rather than engage in meaningful dialogue. The Bidwell Mansion stood as a testament to history, representing different things to different people—some good, some painful—but it was a place where stories could be told, lessons could be learned, and conversations could be had. Destroying a historic site to silence its narrative is not just an assault on a building; it is an attack on education, preservation, and the very foundation of our society.

History should never be rewritten through violence. It should be studied, understood, and preserved, allowing future generations to learn from it. If this crime was driven by political extremism, it deserves the utmost gravity in this Court's deliberation. Failing to deliver justice would deepen our communal loss and embolden those who would dismantle, silence, and erase rather than enlighten.

The citizens of Chico are grieving but also determined. The loss of the Bidwell Mansion has ignited a collective outpouring of support demanding justice. Many want the Mansion rebuilt, further reaffirming the resilience of our community and our refusal to let its history and culture be erased. While rebuilding at this time is unclear, we can call for justice to be served.

Judge Caraway, we ask as you deliberate on the appropriate sentence that you consider not just the physical structure and the priceless and irreplaceable artifacts that were lost, but the generational impact on educational enrichment, cultural identity, and local heritage. We implore the Court to impose the maximum sentence allowable under the law, sending a resounding message that acts of targeted destruction will not be tolerated. To do otherwise would diminish the severity of this crime, dishonor our community's pain, forsake all the Bidwells gave so that our city could prosper, and risk suggesting such acts can be committed without significant consequences.

While this loss has deeply saddened and shaken us, it has also stirred our resolve to protect our shared heritage and honor the sacrifices and legacy of the Bidwells.

Thank you for your time, service, and careful deliberation of this crime's gravity.

Sincerely,

Board of Directors of the Bidwell Mansion Association

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