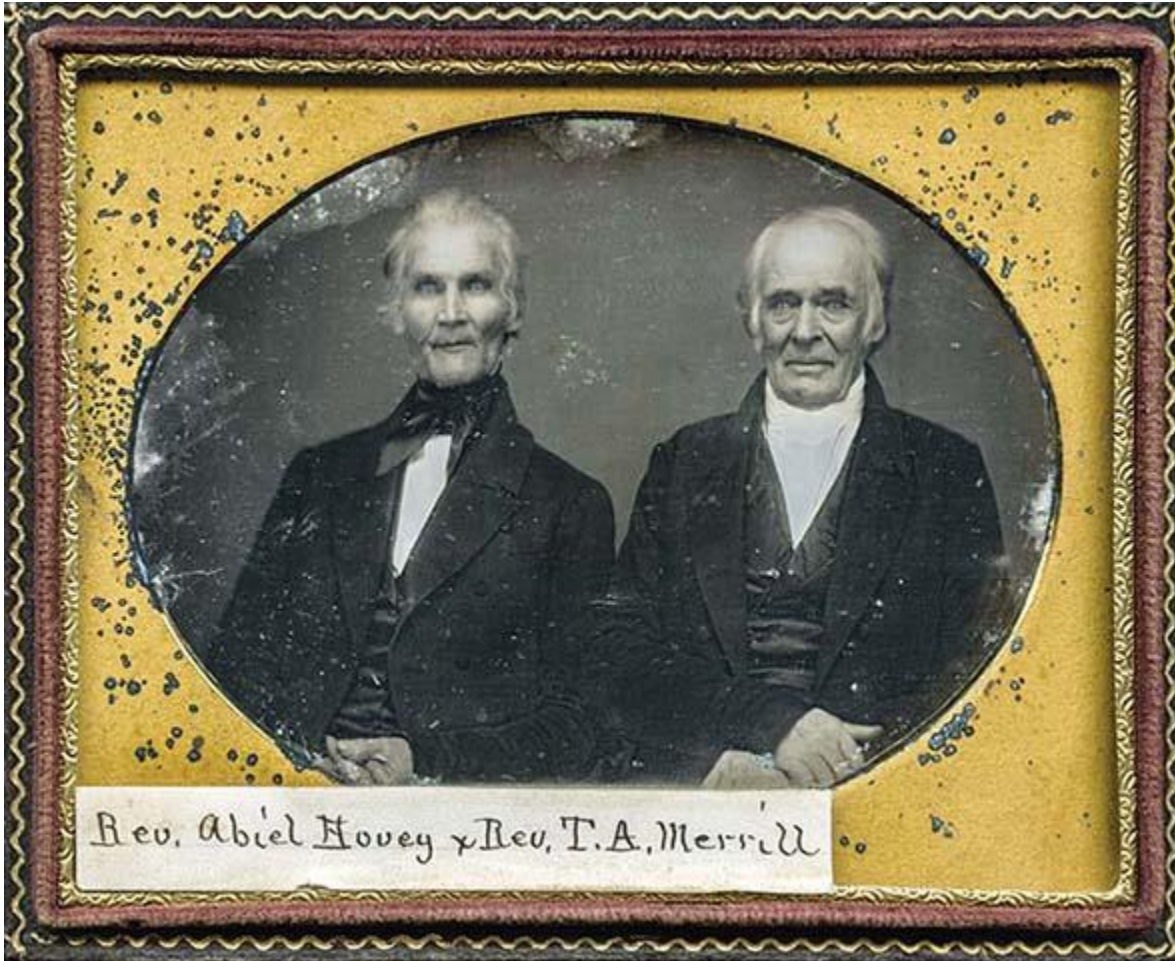


Photos at Sheldon conjure 100 Years of Local History

By John Flowers

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"THE TWO REVERENDS," a photo taken in 1845, depicts Addison County preachers Abiel Hovey and Thomas Merrill. It is one of the oldest images in the new Sheldon Museum exhibit that features local photos that depict life here over 100 years.

MIDDLEBURY — The Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History has for years proudly shown visitors various objects Addison County's earlier residents prized for work and play, as a way of better understanding what life was like in this area during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

Museum officials are now giving visitors a glimpse of what some of those earlier residents looked like, through a new exhibit titled, "Our Town: Love, Joy, Sadness, and Baseball — 100 Years of Photography from the Sheldon Museum." The show, on display through July 8, borrows from the museum's archive of almost 30,000 photos that have been restlessly reposing in the organization's climate-controlled archive.

Who knows how long these timeless faces and familiar places would have remained hidden were it not for the combined efforts of Sheldon Archivist Eva Garcelon-Hart and renowned National Geographic Society photographer James P. Blair.

With his keen eye for photography and respect for history, Blair sought out antique images of his newly adopted town upon moving to Middlebury a few years ago. His quest naturally led him to the Sheldon Museum, a rich repository of Addison County artifacts ranging from maps to quilts to penny-farthing bicycles.

Garcelon-Hart introduced Blair to the museum's treasure trove of photos, some of them dating back to the 1840s and the very birth of photography. Turns out the late Henry Sheldon was keenly interested in photography, prizing the new technology as an ideal medium through which to faithfully record the county's visual history. Sheldon through the decades received oodles of donated photos — including tintypes, daguerreotypes and more conventional prints.

“We don't know the full richness of what we have here because it's all hidden away,” Garcelon-Hart said.

Blair was fascinated by what he saw in the archive, and he knew he was only scratching the surface. He and Garcelon-Hart last summer discussed ways of liberating some of the photos for the public appreciation they deserved.

“We agreed that an exhibit was in order,” Blair said in a statement about the show.

Blair volunteered to do the editing, scanning and printing in his home studio to faithfully reproduce and enlarge the 36 photos that would ultimately make up the exhibit.

“So, once a week, Eva would bring several heavy boxes to my studio,” Blair recounted. “We would spend the day selecting the best images. She would return the following week with new material and we would look at the result of the work I had done to enhance the images and make the best possible prints.”

They repeated this process through the fall and winter of 2017.

“What you see is just a small sample of the best in the collection,” Blair noted.

One can appreciate Blair's keen eye for photography and Garcelon-Hart's sense of grouping when inspecting the exhibit.

Using the Sheldon walls as their photo album, they assembled a family of images that tell a century's worth of stories through the people who lived them.

An 1845 photo of “The Two Reverends,” featuring the no-nonsense Thomas Merrill and Abiel Hovey, conjures echoes of a fire-and-brimstone sermon at one of the local churches. Square-jawed with cutting eyes, Merrill in particular seems like one with little patience for those short on their tithing or who had been caught with a whiskey flask.

Perhaps a little vexing to the reverends is the neighboring print of 15-year-old “Young Fannie Smith,” taken in 1855. The Monkton brunette is a vision of beauty and appears ready for a night at the opera, attired in a fine formal dress, delicate black lace gloves and a choker necklace. She appears transfixed by the newfangled machine capturing her countenance for a 2018 curtain call she could never have imagined.

Some of the curated photos have a backstory, and Fannie Smith’s is tragic. She and her physician husband died three days apart, of pneumonia, in 1902.

The exhibit includes portraits of local celebrities, affluent and organized enough to seek out a photographer for a prized family keepsake. Local icons Jessica Swift, the so-called “queen of Middlebury,” prominent citizen and lawyer Philip Battell and banker John Fletcher are all featured in the show.

But “regular folks” can also be seen in abundance.

“We selected for people who ‘mattered’ for the town, and supplemented it with photographs that also attest to a cultural scene and the quality of photographers who were here,” Garcelon-Hart said.

There’s the “Unknown Civil War Soldier,” peering sternly from under his Union Army cap.

“Woman Wearing a Bonnet” is the simple caption for an elderly, bespectacled lady whose heavily wrinkled visage tells the story of a tough but proud life.

“Postmaster Makes a Special Delivery,” circa 1935, shows Middlebury Postmaster Julius Otis Seeley beaming down at an infant cradled in his mail satchel.



ADDISON COUNTY RESIDENTS’ long and continuing interest in hunting is front-and-center in the circa-1900 photo “Hunting Party, Pierce House,” part of the new Sheldon exhibit. The Pierce House was located at 15 Court St., Middlebury. Celebrated photographer James P. Blair curated the show.

A photo of the Middlebury Marble Workshop, circa 1900, shows a work crew during a brief pause in what was once one of the town’s thriving manufacturing industries.

“Children in Front of a Rural School House,” circa 1895, offers a time-capsule view of Vermont’s rustic education system. A dozen children of varying ages have gathered outside of the ramshackle, one-room Addison County school (specific location unknown). The students — dressed in no-frills, hand-me-down clothing indicative of the hardscrabble agricultural economy — look like they were admonished by their mustachioed teacher to stare as sternly in the camera as he is.

A few of the children appear either superbly tanned or under a thick layer of dirt — probably the latter. A young, disabled girl sits in a wagon in which she can be pulled around.

Garcelon-Hart explained it was common for photo subjects to appear expressionless during the early years of cameras. A long exposure cycle forced subjects to stay motionless while the camera did its work.

“It was a serious affair,” she said. “‘Say cheese’ wasn’t part of the culture yet.”

Saying “cheese” would have been highly appropriate for the eight women featured holding each others’ waists, conga-line style, in the 1900 photo titled, “Maids at the Bread Loaf Inn.” But their blank expressions don’t quite live up to the gag, and that’s part of what makes the photo interesting and memorable.

LANDSCAPES & SCENES

The exhibit also features interesting scenes — such as an 1890 “Blizzard on Main Street” photo. What is now a sometimes bustling street is strangely deserted and blanketed with more than two feet of snow, with, of course, nary a car nearby.

Other photos are notable for what they don’t show — such as an entire segment of the Battell Block in downtown Middlebury that would come years later.

One of the more breathtaking photos in the exhibit was taken from the air by George N. Lathrop. “Lake Champlain Shoreline,” circa 1938, is an aerial shot of the lake in Ferrisburgh, with Grosse Pointe, Kingsland Bay and Gardiner Island to right, and Long Point, Mt. Philo and Green Mountains in distance. The black-and-white shot is as artistic as it is descriptive. It makes one wonder how Lathrop was able to get such a clean shot from his plane given the technology of the day.

Garcelon-Hart has complemented the photos with examples of period clothing of the day, along with antique cameras.

There’s an early stereographic wooden camera dating from the late 1860s or early 1870s. A Vindex camera dates to the late 1890s. The exhibit also features a Vest Pocket Autographic Kodak camera produced from 1912 to 1926. It was advertised as a “soldier’s camera” and was widely used by troops during World War I and the general public.

All of the limited edition photos in the exhibit are for sale for prices ranging from \$125 to \$325 (framed), and they are well worth it. Unframed prints are available at the museum store. All proceeds go to the Sheldon Museum.

Garcelon-Hart hopes the exhibit will lead to greater exposure of the museum’s photographic assets. The University of Vermont has thus far digitized 6,000 photos in the Sheldon’s collection, but most of those are landscapes.

“It’s a selection that offers a glimpse into the larger collection we have,” Garcelon-Hart said of the exhibit. “Jim was able to see artistic qualities in images we usually see as documents.”

And speaking of art, the Sheldon is proud of some other, concurrent exhibits that are also sure to please the eyes.

Amazing animal carvings by local artists Gary Starr, Chuck Herrmann, and William Holway are on display through the summer.

A folk carving exhibit features a retrospective of John Cross, which dovetails with his return to Middlebury College for his upcoming 60th reunion. He now lives in Elizaville N.Y. A big New York Yankees baseball fan, his carvings include one of Joe DiMaggio and one titled “Ultimate Yankee Fan,” a bikini-clad, tattooed beauty sporting a Yankees cap. The Cross exhibit is on display through July 8.

For more information about the Sheldon Museum, visit henrysheldonmuseum.org.

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