

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Henry Sheldon's Letters Illustrate the Bond Shared by Bibliophiles

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The Henry Sheldon Museum collection is always growing, as people bring in things they would like to see preserved. Some of the gifts have great monetary value, while others would be meaningless to outsiders but have a resonance because they are tied to this particular part of the world. There is a comfort in seeing Addison County documents and objects 'come home' to a place where they will be available to everyone who might want to see them in the future. Last week a batch of letters came back to the Sheldon with the closest ties to this building. The story of their return is as good as the letters themselves, because it is a tale of true friendship.

One Friday a couple of weeks ago, a rumor began flying around the Museum to the effect that some letters of Henry Sheldon's were about to come up on the famous antiques auction web site, eBay. My husband and I hoped to follow the auction through to its conclusion on the Saturday, but we were called out of town. Upon our return, we were sad to see that the letters had been sold.

That very evening an e-mail arrived at my office with the subject line, "A Gift in Honor of Jim Ralph." It came from a Dr. Thomas A Underwood, Preceptor in Expository



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Writing at Harvard College. I was delighted to read his opening: "I have recently purchased a small collection of letters by and to Henry Sheldon...I am writing to see if it might be possible for me to donate these to the museum in appreciation of Jim Ralph's contributions to the town of Middlebury." How fitting that Henry's letters were coming home. The Museum staff now had two enticing objects of curiosity. First, who was Henry corresponding with and what were the letters about? And secondly, who was Dr. Underwood and how had he had the impulse to honor someone whose value we at the Sheldon know so well, Middlebury College history professor and the Sheldon Museum's immediate past President, Jim Ralph?

The answer to both turned out to lie in the bonds that are formed between people who share a love of books. Within a few days, a padded envelop arrived at the Museum containing a neatly-preserved stack of nineteenth century letters. They were written by Henry Sheldon of Middlebury and a Mr. W. P. Baxter of Chicago, Illinois during the later months of 1889. All were addressed to a Mr. Charles J. North of Buffalo, New York. The three men were corresponding on the subject of books, particularly books on Vermont history and genealogy. On Nov. 23, for example, Henry wrote to Mr. North to say, "The book you ask for is, "Thompson's History of Vt. Natural, Civil and Statistical, in three parts, Burlington, 1842. They are scarce, I have had all of them before now, saw one recently for sale in a Boston book auction." (Today Zadock Thompson's natural history of the state is one of the Holy Grails for the Vermont bibliophile, who may be discouraged to learn it has been hard to find since 1889).

The letters gradually became more detailed, as the three men sold and swapped books in their area of interest. Henry soon asked North to give him more details of what he was collecting, "perhaps we could make some exchanges, as I am doing that very often." The next month, Henry was offering North a book he'd been wanting on the Battle of Hubbardton, with the words, "I will cheerfully loan you the vol. containing it, if you will...see it safely returned." Later letters became more detailed as the writers got better acquainted. There is a long exposition of the Chipman family history that is interesting to anyone with knowledge of Daniel Chipman's importance in the founding of Middlebury. Mr. Baxter was particularly well-read, writing that he had "over Two Thousand Vt. books in my collection" as well as autographs of Vermont's most prominent citizens.

Henry was a thrifty man, and his letters have the bonus of having been written on the backs of advertising flyers for his Museum. The seller who put the letters on eBay noted, in his description of this lot that, "Today, his museum is the oldest community museum in the country and now contains one of the very best representations of Vermont objects and records in the state. Nice collection."

Henry's letters have made a full circle. It turns out that this correspondence joins numerous other letters we already had between Henry Sheldon, W.P. Baxter and Charles North. Our understanding of all three of these nineteenth century bibliophiles has been enhanced. It is hard to imagine that there is a more appropriate place for them to have ended up than right here in Middlebury.

But what can we learn of our mysterious benefactor, Thomas A. Underwood? When I informed Jim Ralph of the gift that had been donated in his name, he gave a warm laugh and said, "Oh, Tom! That's so nice of him." It seems that Jim and Tom had met in 1983, when they started graduate school at Harvard. Over the next few years, they studied and taught together. They were close enough friends that in 1993 Underwood and his wife

rented an apartment in Middlebury for the summer. His regular visits thereafter gave him a great appreciation for the area and its history.

A little over a year ago, Tom Underwood was walking his two dachshunds near his home in Marblehead, Massachusetts on a summer day, when he was pulled down a long flight of slippery steps. His injuries were so severe that he spent months in bed recovering from repeated surgeries. His friend, Jim Ralph, has gone down a number of times to visit him and help out during his convalescence.

Jim describes his friend Tom as a “modern day Henry Sheldon,” with a house filled with an interesting collection of Americana. It is not surprising that he would have wiled away some of the long hours of his recovery keeping an eye on eBay. What great luck that he would have been on line when Henry’s letters came up for auction.

Underwood’s regard for Jim Ralph is shared by everyone here at the Sheldon Museum. Jim’s academic work on the Civil Rights movement in America is nationally known and his fine record as a scholar and teacher was recently acknowledged by his being made the first holder of the College’s recently-endowed Rehnquist chair. In making his gift, Tom said of him, “I think very highly of Jim and know how much he cares about the Sheldon Museum.” Here at the Museum, Jim is revered as one of the greatest, most hard-working and dedicated presidents in our history. We are so pleased to see him honored in this way.

This is a story of two widely-separated generations of book buddies, sharing a passion for history and learning about friendship in the process. It is with great pride that we thank Thomas Underwood and Jim Ralph for what they have done for this community. And thanks to Henry Sheldon for creating a place where lovers of books and manuscripts can deepen their bonds of friendship through a shared passion for the past.