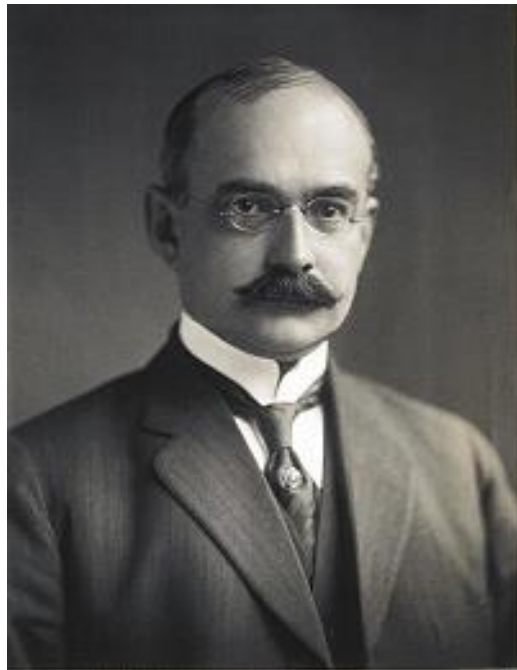


PAST TIMES STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

The Improbable Story of William Porter and His Amazing Hospital

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William H. Porter,
founder of Porter Hospital
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

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Those of us who live in Addison County all talk about 'going to Porter' and 'who's in Porter,' but how many of us know who this oft-named 'Porter' actually was? The story of William Porter, the founder of our hospital, is so touching and improbable that you might think it could only happen in America.

William Henry Porter's biography reads like a classic Horatio Alger story of his era. He was born in Middlebury in 1861, to parents who were struggling farmers. When he was fifteen, the family faced financial ruin and was forced to sell their beautiful farm in Middlebury. They

moved on to start over in Saratoga Springs, New York. Young William had been a bright student, but this period of impoverishment meant that his schooldays were over. His parents needed all hands at work, so William got a job at a local inn. While waiting table there in 1878, chance handed him an opportunity that would seem unlikely if you read it in a novel.

A wealthy banker who was staying at the hotel watched the boy at work, and was so impressed with his intelligence and work ethic that he offered him a job at his bank in New York City. The banker obviously had an eye for talent, because William Porter soon proved himself to be a banking genius. The impoverished boy from Vermont climbed steadily through the ranks, until he became the president of the Chemical National Bank in 1908 and a member of J.P. Morgan and Company.

Despite his amazing change in circumstances, William Porter did not forget the town where he had spent his childhood. Despite having had to leave in difficult circumstances—or perhaps because of it—he was happy to do what he could for the people of Middlebury. Middlebury, like most rural places in this period, had no local hospital, and the College worried that it could not provide adequate student health care without one. In 1914, Middlebury College President John Thomas was thinking that the college needed an infirmary to care for sick students.

Thomas floated his infirmary idea to William Porter, now a wealthy member of the College's Board of Trustees. Porter was sympathetic to the plan, but felt it did not go far enough. What about health care for the people of the town of Middlebury and Addison County? Their needs were as great or greater than those of the College students.

Porter agreed to donate the then-huge sum of \$50,000 to build a facility that would serve the dual role of community hospital and College infirmary. In giving the money, he expressed his wish that the hospital should be “erected on some part of the College land where it would face to the Northeast and have that wonderful view of the Green Mountains.”



Photograph of Porter Hospital, c. 1925. Postcard Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

The building of Porter Hospital was delayed by World War I, after which the inflationary economy led Porter to add two more gifts of \$25,000 each. The building was finally dedicated on June 15, 1925 (on the same afternoon the College opened its new French house, the Chateau). It provided Addison County with a medical facility far better than most small towns of the era could boast, including two operating rooms, fitted to Porter's specifications, “with the best modern equipment.” In the following year, the Addison

County Hospital Association was formed to assume management of the Hospital from the College.

Porter Hospital helped to draw good doctors to the community—as it does today. It also provided professional nursing care, encouraged by the building of the Nurses' Quarters in 1929, through a generous gift from Porter's wife, Esther, in memory of her husband.

Today, Porter Hospital is the heart of the health care system in this region. It sits on the very site of the farm William Porter's family lost when he was a boy, overlooking the beautiful view he loved so well. The small town boy had turned his childhood hurt into a place of hope for the whole community.



Porter Hospital and Nurses Home, Middlebury, Vt.

Porter Hospital and Nurses' Quarters, c. 1930.
Postcard Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum