

# PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

## *The Little-Known Story of a Central Spot in Middlebury*

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Why are there children's swings on the grounds of stately Twilight Hall on College Street? We all know Middlebury College students look younger every year, but surely not young enough for swinging.



**The Grammar School in 1868. Collection of the Henry Sheldon Museum**

Landscapes are full of ghosts, the remnants of uses that have long been supplanted. As our older generation knows, the little story of the College St. swings is tied to the larger history of education in Middlebury. Twilight Hall's history as a College building only goes back to 1984; but it sits on ground earmarked for education for over two centuries.

The Sheldon Museum staff was reminded of this recently when the board of the Addison County Grammar School asked whether they could donate their records to the Museum. After years spent safely tucked in the vault at the National Bank of Middlebury, Bank President Ken Perine suggested that the Sheldon could better preserve them and make them available to the community. We were honored to oblige. The two leather-bound record books, covering board notes and finances, and a few files, have a lot to tell us about that green and its role in the life of the town.

The Addison County Grammar School is one of the oldest corporations in Vermont, established in 1797 by an act of the new state's legislature. The bill's sponsors were the big wigs of the settler generation: town founder Gamaliel Painter, physician Darius Matthews, and three lawyers: Seth Storrs, Samuel Miller and Daniel Chipman. A plot of ground was designated as the site, the strip that now runs from Storrs Avenue to the point on South Main where the Municipal Building stands, bounded on either side by College and Franklin Streets. It was to be "free and forever exempt from taxes."

The founders had a year to raise \$1000 to build the new Grammar School. The account book records the results of the capital campaign: 89 men contributed, most giving \$25. A few high rollers chipped in more. Seth Storrs took the lead with \$350, Samuel Miller gave \$300 and Painter was in for \$200. In a few months, the little settlement had raised four times its goal: \$4150. (In the same era they would give like amounts towards the Congregational Church, the Court House and the College—staggering amounts in a frontier town where money was in short supply).

The Addison County Grammar School building quickly went up on a site at the western end of the property, between Old Stone Row and Twilight Hall. The Academy, as the new school was called, was a stark white Federal structure, 40 feet by 80 feet and three stories tall.

Why was it so big? Its backers had a larger plan. A year later, in 1798, the same group met with visiting Yale President Timothy Dwight at Samuel Miller's house on North Pleasant Street. What if they also started a College, sharing the building with the Grammar School's college preparatory students? Dwight was encouraging, and said he would send one of his best pupils, Jeremiah Atwater, to oversee both institutions. He was as good as his word, and Atwater was soon installed as first head of both ventures.

The Addison County Grammar School board was intimately involved in the running of the school. They oversaw the Grammar School endowments, which included rents from a number of lease lots, many of them in mountain communities like Goshen, Granville and Ripton. They also laid down the rules that ran the place. The trustee book contains a list of regulations for 1828. Boys had to be at least 9 years old. Tuition was \$3/quarter for "common English studies" and \$4 for "those who are preparing for College" by doing higher math and science. The boys were to study at least six hours a day, and were

required to attend public worship on Sunday. By law, any instructor or student was “exempt from taxes and military services”—an early educational deferment.

The new College quickly pushed the Grammar School out of the Academy building. By 1805, the school had moved to the other side of town, sharing space with Emma Willard’s Female Seminary. With a decline in its undergraduate enrollments, the College allowed the school back into the Academy building in 1844.

In 1866, Middlebury School District #4 was created, and it struck a deal to share the town’s educational administration with the Grammar School Board. The following year they tore down the Academy and built the brick school building that stands on the green today. Joint town/board oversight of the Grammar School continued for most of the next century.

Many locals today retain fond memories of their years in the bright classrooms of the ‘graded school.’ The floors were oiled to keep the dust down, a hockey rink was created in the park every winter and the swings went up on the playground.

Middlebury High School was built on the eastern end of the lot. When its second storey burned in a terrible fire in 1954, the High School was rebuilt on Court St. and the remaining ground floor became the Municipal Building. The graded school building was largely supplanted after the building of Mary Hogan School in 1955, although fifth and sixth graders continued to be educated there until the late 1970s. The College bought the old school in 1984 and renovated it, naming it Twilight Hall after Alexander Twilight, the first African American graduate of an American college (Middlebury Class of 1823).

So why does the Addison County Grammar School board continue to meet every year? Aren’t its duties done? Not really. The board has the responsibility of ensuring that this plot of land is used “only for municipal, educational and recreational purposes.” Any violations of these injunctions would cause all titles to revert to the Addison County Grammar School Corporation. They still collect certain small rents from parcels of land in the Green Mountains and have given grants to Mary Hogan School.

The lovely green on College St. is legally entailed as a “public park or playground.” It takes its name—Storrs Park—from the civic-minded Seth Storrs, who had the vision to donate the land to a good cause. (A Storrs Park sign would be a nice addition.) It is maintained by the caring trustees of the Addison County Grammar School. Call them if you have any trouble with the swing sets. And if you want to learn more about the early history of Middlebury’s schools, come to the Sheldon Museum.