

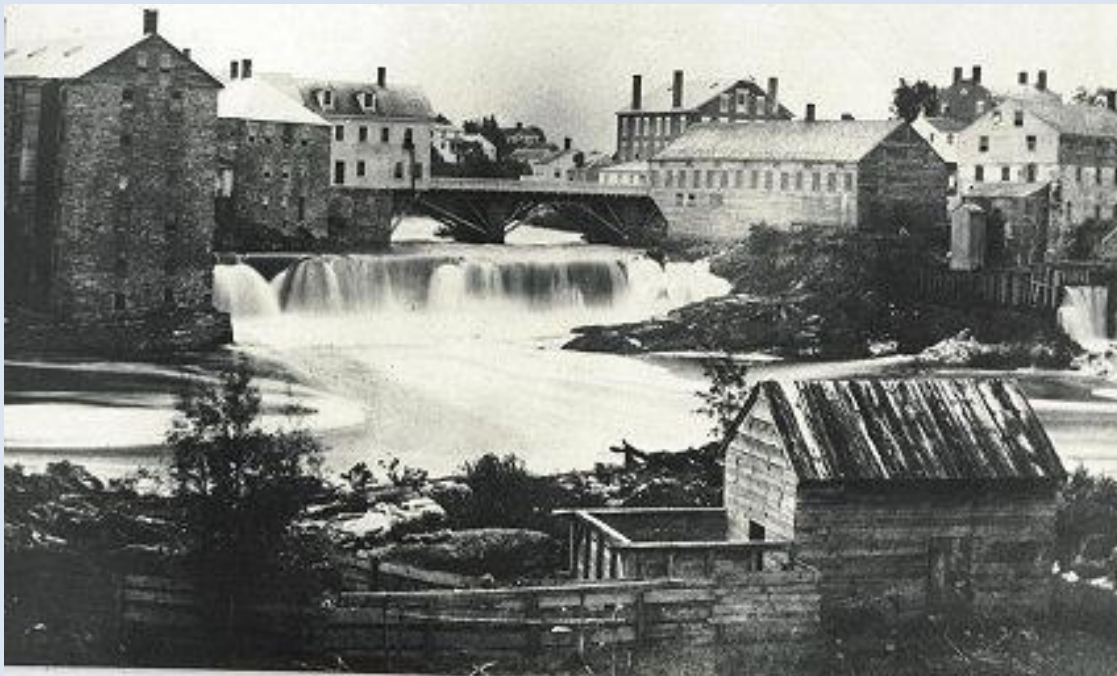
# PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

## *Mill Girl's Letters Provide a Peek into Middlebury's Industrial Past*

**Jan Albers, former Executive Director, Henry Sheldon Museum**

This article first appeared in the *Addison Independent* in February 2008. Reproduced with permission.

The first thing that might have struck her was the sound—the chugging, whirring din of textile machines echoing in the basin of Frog Hollow. When Rebecca Ford came to Middlebury to work in the mills in 1838, she was trading the pastoral quiet of a struggling hill farm in Granville for a new world of noisy capitalism Addison County's bustling shire town. As an unmarried 28-year-old, it was time for her to support herself down in the valley. Her sister Caroline would join her three years later.



**View of Frog Hollow. Collection of the Henry Sheldon Museum**

Middlebury's textile industry was already well-established. In 1801, John Warren bought a grist mill at the bottom of Frog Hollow, rebuilding it as a stone cotton factory with 600 spindles and eight looms. The building, very similar to the one now housing the Storm Cafe, was extensively rebuilt by the Middlebury Manufacturing Company for

a woolen factory in 1840. Moses Leonard installed a woolen factory in the star Mill building in 1837. The biggest textile mill of all was David Page's huge cotton mill of 1811, on the north side of the Creek. In 1817, Page hired a Scottish mechanic named Joseph Gordon to put in twenty state-of-the-art power looms—only the second set in the U.S. It was also the first American factory to be lit by gaslight, allowing a longer work day. The biggest factory in Vermont, it was running 100 looms by the mid-century.

Mills need workers, those human cogs in the wheel who generally come down to us only as names in the foreman's book. In the case of the Ford sisters, we are lucky. Early Vermont was a highly literate culture, and like many of their contemporaries they were dutiful letter writers. Their letters now rest in the Sheldon Museum, allowing us insight into the mental universe of the Middlebury mill girls.

The Ford sisters spent most of a decade making woolen cloth at Davenport and Nash's Middlebury Manufacturing Company. In November 1838, Rebecca's first letter to her big family back in Granville is filled with homesickness, "I think of you all very often and wish I could Jest step in set down have a chat with you [and] eat some hominy an milk." She signs it, "so good night...Don't forget to write...from a factory to her friends, Rebecca Ford."

Rebecca was boarding with the Stowe family, who lived toward the far end of Weybridge St. They were fellow Methodists, offering a wholesome atmosphere for a young woman on her own.

Religion offered her both social and spiritual sustenance. Like many of her contemporaries, she was open to the revivalist spirit. "I went to campmeeting and staid a week—liked [meet]ing in the woods verry well. We have had a protracted meeting here three weeks...there has been quite a number converted."

When two of her coworkers were courting, her wry account was couched in textile language. "Elizabeth has got Hall pretty well soapt and the wool down over his eyes so he don't see far beyond his nose. They step out most every night some where arm in arm. I have not a [word] to say, I stand still and see the fun go on."

Two years later, the good news was that she might be joined by her younger sister, Caroline. They would do everything together. "Caroline sent word that she wanted to come...I spoke to Mr. Flower about it...she can have looms in the alley with me, can board at Mr. Stows, [have] a seat in Huldah Murry's pew [at the Methodist Church] where I set. I feel quite anxious to have her come if she wont be home sick."

The next year, Rebecca decided to try her hand at the looms of Lowell. It is not clear whether this was out of a spirit of adventure (she went with two girlfriends from Middlebury) or because work was scarce. Writing back to her sister from Massachusetts,

she seemed to be having a great time. She was one of 23 boarders at the happy home of “quite a motherly lady we all call her Mother Stephens...i will tell you we have baked pork and beans Sunday morning at noon we have bread butter crackers and...sweetcake and tea at night we have some more meat and beans mince pie with raisin in it...tell Mother I fare as well or better than I deserve.”

Despite the comfortable lodgings, she was back in Middlebury a few months later. She got her old job back, and was soon throwing herself into town life again. Sunday was a special day, when the looms were quiet all over town and the girls could devote some time to their spiritual lives. In April 1843, the main excitement was centered around a revival at the Methodist Church, where, “our Minister commenced a protracted meeting new years night it held twelve weeks we went to meeting evenings and work days...the Lord has graciously revived his work about two hundred and fifty have been converted and made happy in a saviours love. Caroline is one of the number.”

Religion was a comfort in a world where death so often came calling. A young mother in the boarding house was sick with consumption, and as “she was dying she gave up her four little children and her husband and said she had no ties to bind her to earth she told her folks not to mourn for her when she was dead she is waiting in that happy frame of mind for her change to come.” A father drowned in a fruitless effort to save his son, who had fallen into the Creek, leaving behind a wife and seven other children. “How true it is that in the midst of life we are in death.”

Rebecca was generally contented in her work, mainly complaining when there was not enough of it. If the mill was closed and workers couldn't work, there was no money. In the spring thaw of 1843, “the factory business is rather dull now the snow is melting off from the mountain the water is so high has not worked any since a week ago last Saturday. I don't know how soon we shall go to work I hope we shall be fore long for I have not most tired of doing nothing and paying my board in the bargain.”

Factory days were 12-13 hours long, with some workers choosing to stay longer to make more money. Rebecca worried about the long hours Caroline was working, so that her health, “is not verry good she works to hard...she earnd twelve dollars and ten cents beside her board and was out a week in the bargain I did not make but nine dollars and twenty four [cents] beside my board.” These are monthly rates, for the average mill girl made around \$3.15/week, paying \$1.25 for room and board. This was about three times what a domestic servant would have made in the 1830s.

The mill owners were glad to have hard-working, docile farm girls like the Ford sisters to work in their mills. In return, the mill girls of Middlebury worked hard for six days, and prayed hard on the seventh. Back in Granville, their loving Ford family treasured their letters and kept them safe, allowing readers today to come to the Sheldon Museum and share in their world.