

# PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

## *Old Trestle Was Site of 1893 Train Wreck*

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A giant screech, as metal hits metal in a deafening crash. The site is on the train track along Otter Creek, just south of downtown Middlebury. Townspeople rush to see the freight cars scattered on the hillside next to the track, like an overblown version of a child's toy. Thanks go all around that there was no loss of life. What a close call!



**Following the train derailment of 1893. Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum**

The first great Middlebury derailment took place at 4:40 in the morning, on Friday, May 5, 1893. At that early hour, the sound of the crash was so loud that the sleeping residents of South Street were jolted into consciousness. At number 7, National Bank President Albert Fletcher and his family were all awakened by the sound. The Middlebury Mercury reported that Dr. Mellon, the local dentist at number 15, immediately identified the sound as a crash and, “went at once to the scene for the purpose of helping any persons that might need aid.”

The spectators found a shocking scene of devastation. The wooden railway trestle that crossed Otter Creek at the bottom of Water Street had collapsed under the weight of a heavily-loaded twenty car coal train. The engine, boxcars and five coal cars crossed just fine, but as the rest of the coal cars came on to the two hundred foot span, the trestle gave way.

The devastation was sudden and catastrophic. The first reporter on the scene said that, "The wreck is total and indescribable," though this did not deter him from doing his job of describing it. Early speculation was that the rainy weather and high water of the previous 24 hours had undermined the trestle's central pier. Others suspected that a car had done off the rails and hit the edge of the bridge, causing it to collapse. From the state of the wreckage, it was deduced that, "The bridge gave way all over. As it sank, it careened to the westward. A more complete wreck than the bridge presented it would be hard to imagine."

The bridge was "an old-fashioned covered wooden affair" of 1860, built to replace the first railway bridge of 1848, which had burned. The town's first depot had been located near the crash site, at the bottom of Water St., but two years before, in 1891, it had been replaced by a more convenient new facility on Seymour St.

Luckily, no one was hurt in the accident. The Rotchford family probably came closest. They lived in the railway company's house at the north end of the trestle. After the accident, the paper said, "The remains of the bridge are piled up within a few feet of their front door."

It could have been much worse. A train filled with passengers had just crossed the bridge. Of this train, it was said, "Rumors are current that the engineer of the morning sleeper north, that passed over the bridge only a few minutes ahead of the coal train, felt the bridge give under him." If so, he had failed to mention it to anyone.

Bridge collapses were nothing new for the railroads of the times. Rumors were quickly flying around town to the effect that the wreckage would not be cleared for days, because "two other railway bridges had collapsed [in Vermont] last night [as well as] a trestle in Proctorsville."

In fact, the clean up took place at record speed. By 9 a.m. on the morning of the crash, the Rutland Railroad had already sent a wrecking gang to begin work. "It was a hard wreck to get at and clear away, but by nightfall much of it had been removed."

Large crowds appeared to watch the festivities, despite a cold, steady rain. The paper said that, "Every one in town who could leave his business put in full time watching the novel proceedings." (Human nature has not changed, as we saw in Middlebury this past week).

Readers of today will be amazed to hear that, by Saturday morning, one day after the collapse, company crews were at work rebuilding the trestle. It was said that, "They did not stop until it was done Sunday noon." To accomplish this Herculean feat, "Large fires were kindled when darkness fell Saturday evening, and by the light of these the men worked all night." Their work was impeded by the depth of water in the main south channel, which was running 16 to 20 feet deep, with the usual Addison County clay at the bottom making it hard to get a firm footing. By Sunday evening, trains were already passing over the new trestle.

Before you get too nostalgic for those wonderful days before regulations, and think of calling in a crew to slap up a second in-town bridge next weekend, read on, dear reader. The rebuilt trestle of Sunday promptly collapsed again four days later, at 6 a.m. on the morning of Thursday, May 11, sending the engine and one car into the Creek. "Isaac Goodro and his mother, who live close by the bridge, were the only ones to see it go down. They were looking out of the window at the time." The Rutland Railroad soon got the trestle into temporary working order, and then took measurements for a permanent iron bridge, to be erected as soon as they could get it to Middlebury. On November 26, 1893, Henry Sheldon wrote in his diary, "The new Rail Road iron bridge is so far completed that trains cross tonight." It is still in service at the end of Water St. today.

Investigations into the cause of the 1893 accident concluded that the original wooden trestle had been too flimsy to support the ever-heavier trains that were using it. The structure was built for the relatively light weights of the first trains, but by 1893 each coal car weighed over 30,000 pounds in itself, and carried a further 95,000 pounds of coal. The whole train would have weighed in at over 500 tons. The conclusion reached was that, "[The trestle's] breaking was merely a question of time." According to one crusading reporter, "The question is forced upon the public by this accident, How many more unsafe bridges are there on the line?" This is a question that has not gone out of style when we look at our own roads and railways.