

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Of Marble and Men

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Middlebury was known as a marble town long before it was a cow town. If you stand on the footbridge in Middlebury's Frog Hollow and look at the banks of Otter Creek, you see that they are strewn with chunks of the beautiful marble that underlies the town. Marble quarrying was an important industry here from 1803, but the deaths of the original producers, Eben Judd and Lebbeus Harris, caused the trade to go into a steep decline after 1837.

The picturesque industrial site we know as the Marble Works was not built for another sixty years. In 1898 the Brandon Italian Marble Company's mill burned down in Brandon and Middlebury's boosters offered tax breaks to persuade the company to rebuild here on the banks of the Otter Creek, where waterpower and rail transport were at hand. The first marble working shed was constructed in 1898. Large wooden towers transferred waterpower from a turbine in the wheelhouse below the falls to belts that drove the great marble-cutting gang saw.

The Brandon Italian Marble Company soon became the largest industrial firm in



Proud craftsmen from many lands stand behind their handiwork in the marble finishing shed at Middlebury's Marble Works, circa 1900

Middlebury, employing 175 men by 1904. In this era, Middlebury was not the predominantly Yankee town some historians have portrayed. The history of the stone industry shows that broad-based immigration from Europe was transforming rural Vermont as it was the rest of America. In 1910 just over half the Middlebury marble workers were born in America, while the rest were Italian, French Canadian, Irish, Hungarian, Finnish, German and Russian. Many of the workers lived nearby, particularly on North Pleasant, Seymour and Weybridge Streets.

The company's high quality 'clouded' white marble was in great demand for architectural details like door caps and sills, as well as big buildings like St. Mary's

Church and the College's Starr Library. Great slabs of it were brought from Brandon on the railroad. In 1900 the firm moved into the lucrative marble finishing trade in Middlebury, producing funeral urns, gravestones, crosses and markers. A simple marble cross cost \$6-\$12, while a headstone went for \$18-\$35.

The workers ran the risk of needing these products for their own graves, if they were not careful. Marble working was a very dangerous trade, with many injuries occurring in the sheds. Some men were crushed by falling chunks of marble and others were lost when loose clothing pulled them to their deaths in the machinery. Marbleworkers also risked contracting the lung disease silicosis from breathing marble dust.

The Brandon Italian Marble Company became the Vermont Marble Company in 1907. It continued production in Middlebury until the Depression put it out of business in 1931.

Marble working may have ended in the village of Middlebury, but there was still valuable marble and high quality limestone to be found in rural areas of the town. A number of quarries had existed over the years, but the most familiar were those that gave Quarry Road its name.

In 1940, local quarryman George Palmer was able to buy out his employer at the bankrupted Brandon Rock Products Company quarry on this site, changing its name to the Addison County Lime Company. Palmer took over the management, got a loan to pay the workers wages they were owed and restarted the operation with six men.



No. 5 Quarry, north of Quarry Road in Middlebury, circa 1942

Limestone and marble was taken from the No. 5 Quarry, north of Quarry Road in Middlebury, circa 1942. The quarrymen blasted the walls and used sledge hammers to remove the stone, which was carried to the mill by a metal cart on tracks. Photo copied from an original owned by Oakley Palmer

Marble is metamorphosed limestone, so the two tend to be found together. The men were looking for marble, but the limestone that ran through most of the site was also lucrative for agriculture, decorative gravel, paving and other products. One sideline at the Quarry Road complex was garden furniture, made in molds from a mixture of Portland cement and ground limestone. Examples of their pure white bird baths, loveseats and flower urns can still be found around the area.

The quarry complex included four houses for workers, a pump house with a large air compressor, an office, storerooms, a garage

and, most importantly, a four-storey wooden building (still standing) containing four large storage hemlock storage bins holding limestone and marble chips of varying sizes.

George Palmer's son, Oakley, of East Middlebury, remembers what life was like for the quarrymen. It was a tight-knit little community. He lived with his family in the boss's residence and foreman Donald Desjadon had the other large house. His maternal grandfather, Don Carlin lived in another house in the complex, which included rooms for two of the hired men.

It was tough work, largely done by hand. The men used air from the compressor to drill into the rock, then blasted it out with dynamite. The real fun began when they started swinging twenty pound sledges to break up the stone. This gave them pieces small enough to shovel into a little steel skip that ran into the quarry on little two-gauged track. When the cart was full, they dinged two bells and an electric-powered cable pulled it up to the hoist room.

When it got to the big mill building, the cart was dumped into the 'crusher,' which worked like a big steel mortar and pestle. After being crushed, the stone was sifted into three different sizes and stored in the great hemlock bins.

For all this work, George took home the boss's wages of \$22 per week, while the men were paid \$18. And a long week it was, running from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday. The tough physical labor made a man strong. Oakley remembers that his father could lift 400 pounds.

They were making a go of it until 1942, when disaster struck. The great eight-foot metal shaft in the crusher was damaged by a heavy load and had to be replaced. With World War II raging, metal was needed for the war effort and it was not possible to order a replacement. The Addison County Lime Company was forced to cease production on July 1, and all of its assets were liquidated.

The Marble Works Partnership will soon be adding signs featuring historical photos and stories from the days of marble working in Middlebury. The Sheldon Museum has enjoyed being a part of this project.