

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

May I Have Your Autograph?

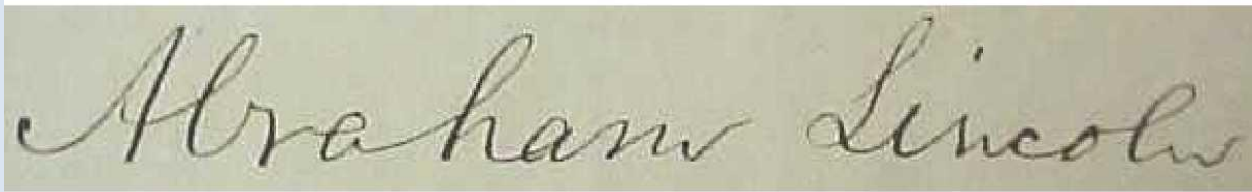
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When I was in pigtails back in the Sixties, one of my most precious possessions was my autograph book. This little tome, with its brown suede cover and gold-tooled script spelling Autographs, was hawked around to family and friends until it was brimming with silly sayings and heartfelt good wishes.

Autograph books had a long history. They were very popular throughout the 19th century, and many examples remain here at the Sheldon Museum. They were usually filled with standard verses that recurred from one end of America to the other. In true Victorian style, many of these little poems are maudlin, the author already anticipating how poignant her little verse will be for her friends when she was gone or they were separated as adults: “Forget me not, forget me never/Till yonder sun shall set forever.” or “When you get old and cannot see/Put on your specks and think of me.” Other verses were just silly, as in, “Remember me and my gray eyes/When you’re at home and making pies.” No doubt this one was completely innocent: “When at home and in the tub/Think of me and give a rub.”

Autograph collecting is a far different hobby—less personal, yet far more serious. The general passion for collecting that gripped so many in the 19th century became a craze for procuring the autographs of famous people. And no one was more passionate about this hobby than Middlebury’s own collector extraordinaire, Henry Sheldon.



Autograph of Abraham Lincoln. Collection of the Henry Sheldon

Henry and his brother, Harman, caught the autograph bug as teenagers, when they began to scheme about how to get their hands on the signatures of the powerful. They had little money, so they simply wrote off to every member of the United States House and Senate asking for their autographs. In that simpler time, a very high percentage responded, providing their John Hancocks for the boys from Vermont. Henry carefully

pasted them into a neat scrapbook, which includes many of the Congressional luminaries of 1837: Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay and more.

This success flamed the initial passion into an obsession. Throughout his life, Henry continued to amass the signatures of many categories of people. The Sheldon Museum has around four dozen scrapbooks filled with the scribblings of the rich and famous. Henry's hand-written and alphabetized guide to his autographs names hundreds of well-known luminaries: royalty, presidents, Vermont governors, millionaires, "Persons 100 Years Old," Middlebury College presidents, Episcopal bishops and more.

Sheldon did not confine himself to the names of the living; as soon as he could afford it, he branched out into collecting the handwriting of the famous dead. While most of the scrapbooks have simple paper covers or no covers at all, special autographs were carefully placed in sturdy books with tooled and embossed covers. One striking royal blue volume contains the names of the famous in many fields. There is a wonderful letter from Susan B. Anthony, on the letterhead of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, announcing that Vol. IV of the History of Woman Suffrage was now ready. A note in French sets up a time and place to meet and is signed by Lafayette. There is a simple clipped signature from Benjamin Franklin.

Some of the autographs were obviously solicited by Henry himself. One note from 1888 is personally addressed to Henry L. Sheldon, Esq., saying, "My dear Sir, with very much pleasure, Faithfully yours Charles Dickens." There is a signature from opera singer Jenny Lind, the "Swedish Nightingale", dated Boston, October 1850. Later additions included Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Julia Ward Howe. There are great abolitionists: Frederick Douglass, signed a paper with "Very truly yours." William Lloyd Garrison wrote a whole letter of thanks for the delightful time he had when he lectured in Vergennes. A long letter from John Quincy Adams to his friend, Middlebury's U.S. Representative, William Slade, tells him he's too old to get involved in education reform and notes wily that abolishing slavery will have to wait for another generation.

A newspaper clipping in one of the scrapbooks provides insight into the commercial autograph market of Sheldon's day. It is an ad for an autograph sale to be held on Beacon St. in Boston in June 1876, offering the signatures of Benedict Arnold for \$12, Aaron Burr for \$7 and Ethan Allen, a bargain at \$5.25.

The most exalted signatures in the collection include those of most British monarchs from George II through Queen Victoria and a special book of the U.S. presidents from Thomas Jefferson onwards. Henry collected the autographs of every president during his lifetime, except the elusive Zachary Taylor. Other presidential souvenirs were added later, so twentieth century presidents are also represented. Herbert Hoover's came on

the stationery of a suite in the tower of the Waldorf Astoria, where he was weathering the financial crisis in style.

The magic of seeing a famous person's autograph is still powerful today, but perhaps the most unique scrapbook is one Henry Sheldon compiled when he was an old man. This tome is labeled, "Autographs of Middlebury Citizens, 1800-1860." It contains page after page of varied documents, usually receipts for simple financial transactions, signed by local people. Sheldon put them in alphabetical order, running them vertically down each page. In the blank space next to each one, he wrote what he remembered about the person, creating a running commentary on one man's community.

The scrapbook provides a fascinating stroll through the characters and occupations of the developing village of Middlebury. Henry's notes are often simple identifications of people's line of work, from the exalted to the humble. Joseph Adams was "A Shoemaker of the Village." Jonathan Allen is cited as, "A prominent Surgeon and Physician." Many agriculturalists are mentioned, like David Boyce, "a fine old farmer much respected and held many town offices," or Edwin Hooker, "the most prominent sheep raiser in Addison County." There are jewelers and harness makers, carters and College presidents, merchants and marblen.

The early nineteenth century valued innovation. On Seymour Street, S.M. Bent, a "Manufacturer of hand cards [for carding sheep]...for many years used dogs for motive power" Virgil Blanchard was "an M.D. and inventor," who Henry deemed "slightly visionary." (If only he'd been more so). Of Jeremiah Hall, "It is said he invented and used the first circular saw." The innovative James Mile "made flax spinning wheels, and I have one of his made to spin two threads same time, a curiosity."

Henry did not like everyone in town and was not shy about saying so. As a fervent Republican and Freemason, he was suspicious of E.D. Barber, "a prominent attorney Democrat and Antimason," and reveled in his comeuppance: "Bought the Lake Dunmore property fitted it for summer boarders and then--.died....." Gunsmith Elias Hall was said to have "a very quarrelsome and fault-finding disposition,"—not what you want in the heavily armed. The henpecked S.C. Hyde's wife "wore the pants in earnest."

Henry frequently mentioned people's physical appearance. John Atwater was "a large fleshy man [who] lived adjoining the 'College Green'" Bookseller L.W. Clark was "small in stature, large in talk. Consequently was sometimes called Bumblebee Clark, which did not detract from his general usefulness." A son of Congregational Church architect, Lavius Fillmore, had a "long white mustache so thick that he couldn't blow out a candle!" Abijah Stearns was "a very lively man with a very large nose." Stonemason Isaac Wellington had "a peculiar laugh I remember to this day." He notes that Nathaniel Hervey "Lived in the Village with a very dark skin."

Sheldon was unstinting in his praise for his friends. H.B. Chapman was “a fine fiddler. Many an hour I spent playing piano accompaniment to his airs on the violin, and sometimes there was a little dance too usually at the Addison House.” Thad Chapman “married a rich and pretty wife, and made business whoopi. Prominent in masonry and may other good things. May we have many such.” The kindly Nathaniel Harris, the “marble worker and then Dentist” who inherited the Judd-Harris House, now home to the Sheldon Museum, “lived beloved and died regretted.” Sheldon liked people to do their civic duty, praising Calvin Hill as “An honorable man a public man in the full sense of the word.”

There are also echoes of local scandals. Prominent local lawyer, Daniel Chipman, was embroiled in “a lawsuit with Alexander Young [that] resulted in his residence being changed to Ripton.” County Sheriff D.S. Church “received his death wound on the head with a flatiron, thrown by a worthless Irishman whom he went to arrest.” [Henry would probably have applied that adjective to more peaceable Irish people as well, alas]. Hiram Munger was a rich farmer on Munger Street, but his wastrel son, Edmund, “thought to put on style & sold his farm, moved into the village, bought a jewelry store and busted.” Attorney Collins Wickes married a wealthy woman: “He told me he’d rather marry a lady with a shirt than one without.”

The oddest entry concerns a man named ‘Barty’ McKillop, who “lived many years with Dr. Judd and Dr. N. Harris, assisted in building the Museum or Park Place. He turned the marble pillars by hand. He died in 1884 & his remains were given by himself to Dr. Sheldon for preservation.” Thankfully, they have not turned up here...yet.

Henry Sheldon, the ultimate scrapbooker, finished his local autograph book and signed it on September 26, 1889. Ever mindful of his obligation to the future, he added a note to posterity: “I hope some antiquarian will rummage these pages a thousand years hence.” Here at the Sheldon Museum we are preserving this legacy in the hopes that his wish will come true.