

# PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

## ***The Nichols House at 250 Weybridge St., now Middlebury College's Atwater Commons***

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We live surrounded by ghosts. You can be drifting along, minding your business in the eternal present, when you suddenly find yourself wondering about the people who used to live in your old house. What builder carved the lovely trim around the mantle? Has a coffin gone through that wide door? Whose eyes have looked through the wavy glass of these windows?

Pick an old house, any old house, and you will find a story.



**The Nichols House at 250 Weybridge St., now Middlebury College's Atwater Commons. Collection of Henry Sheldon**

The grand white house at 250 Weybridge St., now Middlebury College's Atwater Commons, is one of the town's architectural masterpieces. Art historian Glenn Andres has called it "the most complete example of Greek Revival architecture to be found in Middlebury." Stop out front and look at the details around the main door, with its beautiful sidelights, colonnettes and pilasters. The gleaming white paint and Classical details were meant to remind the viewers of the 1840s that Middlebury was no longer a hick town in the forest. It was a cultured place, with schools and churches and a college.

The house was built for David B. Nichols, one of the town's most prominent manufacturers in the second quarter of the 19th century. The Nichols family had owned a swath of land on both sides of Weybridge St. from the town's beginnings, where they first lived in a small house next to their original tannery. The tannery grew into a large concern, supplying leather for shoes and harnesses. After the great downtown fire of 1831, Nichols built a large building on the south-east corner of the downtown bridge. There he produced great quantities of leather and rented space to two shoemakers and a saddler.

As he prospered, it was time for the family to have a house befitting their rise in circumstances. We do not know who designed the house or the exact year of its construction. In his hand-written House Book, Henry Sheldon stated that it was built in 1847, though other evidence suggests it might have been built up to a decade earlier. The exceptional elegance of the details, inside and out, has led to speculation that it was designed by James Lamb. Lamb was the master architect of Vermont's great Greek Revival palace, the Wilcox-Cutts House in Orwell (Historic Brookside Farms). The theory makes sense, as we know Lamb was living on Weybridge St. at this time.

What can we discover about the Nichols family? In 1813, David married a local woman, Sophia Stearns, who bore him five girls and a boy over the next fifteen years. Then, as now, wealth was no barrier to tragedy. Little Susan died in 1821, when she was only three, and her sister, Julia, followed her a decade later, at seven. Clara died at thirty-one. Of the other girls, the eldest, Jane, remained single—perhaps the reason she lived to the ripest old age. The only sister who married was the youngest, Martha. Her union with Sylvan Daunis produced David Nichols's sole grandchildren, Effie and Mattie.

Nothing is grayer than the names and dates of someone else's family history. This would be true of the Nichols, if it weren't for that one little son, David Jr. He might have been expected to grow up in Middlebury, take over the tannery and perhaps, eventually, bring his bride to live in the beautiful family home on Weybridge Street.

But some sons bristle at the thought of following the preordained path. The younger David Nichols had grown up enjoying the fruits of his father's labors. His family was now part of the town's elite. His father could have sent him to the College and he was certainly bright enough to have done well. But while he enjoyed hanging out there with local student friends like Dugald Stewart, the academic scene was not for him.

He couldn't wait to get out of Middlebury. By 1841, the twenty-four-year-old had made his way to New York City, where he wrote back to Dugald, humorously chiding him for staying in their home town. "Well, Dugald...it really strikes me that you are doomed to have very dull times in Mid...as it is utterly impossible to raise a dance there this winter." He himself was glad to be "delivered from that land of superstition...where every kind of amusement, be it ever so trifling is considered irreligious and quite unchristian like." After all, "What is the use of a persons living if he can't enjoy himself? None! say I—and if one can't enjoy themselves when they are in the 'bloom of life,' when can they?...N.C.(nuf ced)."

He worried that Dugald was becoming as dull as his surroundings, and worried that he might have given up smoking and drinking. "Last but not least of all do you still chew tobacco? Oh, Yes...You may think it strange for me to ask such a question, but someone informed me that you had declined using the beverage. I can hardly believe it as I

consider it too much of a seckond nature.”(Boring old Dugald, Middlebury Class of 1842, went on to become a lawyer, State Representative and the uncle of Jessica Swift).

The younger David’s life becomes ever more mysterious from this time onwards. We do not know what he was doing and how (or whether) he had to make a living. It is likely that he was still in New York in 1849, when his father paid a fateful visit. The city was in the grips of a cholera epidemic. The elder Nichols began to exhibit symptoms of the disease on his way back to Middlebury. He died a few days after his return, at the age of 62.

His obituary in the Middlebury Galaxy for October 16, 1849, described a man who would be greatly missed in his community: “In the death of Mr. Nichols society has sustained a severe and irreparable loss.” His economic acumen and integrity were extolled. “For a long series of years he has identified himself with the business, growth and prosperity of our village.” He was also known as a loving father, who “lived to rear up and train for usefulness, a large and interesting family of children, who together with his beloved wife, mourn his loss.”

The elder Nichols was particularly known for his philanthropy. “As a neighbor, his kindness was proverbial, and by the poor, he was correctly regarded as their friend.” The writer of his obituary sought to stress this point: “Emphatically, he was the poor man’s counselor, the poor man’s friend.”



His second wife, Persis, was left to live on in the big house on Weybridge St. They had no children together, but she remained there as stepmother to his three surviving girls.

His useful and interesting son, David, now appeared to be dividing his time between New York and Europe. He had his portrait painted in this period, and through the generosity of his nieces, Effie Nichols and Mattie Ten Broeke, it has come to the Sheldon Museum. It is a large painting in an ornate oval gilt frame, showing a strikingly handsome man of early middle age. His black hair has a raffish curl, his dark eyes show a

**David Nichols, Jr.**, c.1850. Artist unknown.  
Oil on canvas.  
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum  
Gift of Effie Daunis

glint of humor and there's a slightly ironic curve to his lips. He is a perfect leading man for a time travel romance, and more than one female Museum employee has fallen for him.

But his time, too, was drawing short. Three years after his father's death, in November 1852, David Nichols, Jr. died in Paris, at the age of 35. We do not know the circumstances, but the news electrified Middlebury. The young man who once wrote to Dugald Smith with youthful bravado had grown into a much-admired figure. Samuel Swift described him as, "a young gentleman, greatly respected here for his amiable, courteous, and enterprising disposition and character."

Some records say that David, Jr. was buried in Middlebury, but Kay Teetor's thorough study of the family suggests that this is not the case. There is a David Nichols, Jr. buried in the cemetery, but other evidence points to its being another local man with a similar name. His father, mother and sisters lie together in another section.

David Nichols, Sr. had been known for his philanthropy and, in the end, the younger David proved to be his father's son. In his will, he left a large chunk of his personal fortune, an impressive sum upwards of \$15,000, to a then-struggling local institution, the Middlebury Female Seminary. Swift described the bequest as showing "his regard for educational institutions, and the prosperity and happiness of the place where he spent his childhood and youth."

Maybe he left his money to the cause of female education because he grew up in a house full of bright and lively sisters. And now, in the big white house on Weybridge St., Atwater Commons continues to be a special place for young women and men who come to be educated in Middlebury.

Do you have an old house in Middlebury? Have you wondered about its history? The Henry Sheldon Museum's Research Center has sources for uncovering your house history, such as our Middlebury building register and photographs filed by street.