

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Salisbury Man Founded Sheldon Museum *125 Years Ago*

Jan Albers, former Executive Director, Henry Sheldon Museum

This article first appeared in the *Addison Independent* in September 2009. Reproduced with permission.

On a July Monday in 1884, Middlebury businessman Henry Sheldon opened the door to his 'museum' in the big brick house on Park Street for the first time. Nine people passed the great marble pillars, tromped up the central staircase to the third floor and signed the fresh new visitors' book. The Sheldon Museum had found its home.



Henry Sheldon, c. 1880s. Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

The presence of such a distinctive civic amenity put the Middlebury community on the cultural cutting edge in 1880s America. It was the beginning of what has been called the Museum Age, as Americans bought into the Victorian passion for acquiring, classifying, displaying and examining all manner of natural and cultural objects. Museums were considered an innovative urban phenomenon. Natural history started the trend, with the opening of the Peabody Museums at Harvard and Yale (1866). In 1870, two great art institutions, New York's Metropolitan Museum and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts first opened to visitors. Wealthy patrons were soon commissioning architects to build temples to house their collections in cities all over America.

The urge to acquire quickly trickled down, even to a little college town in Vermont, where Henry Sheldon caught the bug. It would be hard to find a more unlikely museum founder. Born dirt poor on a Salisbury farm in 1821; he had almost no formal schooling

and learned most of the basics at home from an intelligent mother. As a young man, he tried his hand at a host of jobs—farming, store clerking, post office attendant, mail agent for the new railroad—until he finally got enough money saved to start dealing in downtown real estate. He slowly built a nest egg; but he was never wealthy.

What money Sheldon made would be his own, to use to do what he liked. By his twenties, his accomplishments as an organist and singer made him popular with the girls in the drawing room crowd, but he decided early on that he would remain a bachelor. After hearing a Mr. Chase speak on the subject of, “Matrimony,” he went home and wrote in his diary, “The lecture was good for those to whom it was applicable.”

Henry’s first real love was a Diocletian coin he bought for one dollar in 1875. The thrill of holding a tiny piece of ancient Rome in his hand was almost overwhelming. He was determined to collect more such interesting objects. He bought coin after coin, and then turned to other categories: books, pamphlets, letters, diaries, autographs, clocks, guns, furniture, paintings, household objects, agricultural implements and more.

By 1880 he was referring to his collections as ‘the museum,’ though they had no formal home. Two years later he went in with a friend and bought Park Place, the great brick mansion on Park Street that had been built in 1829 by the marble kings of Middlebury, Eben Judd and Lebbeus Harris. The Moore family took the downstairs, Henry got half of the second floor as living space and the collections began to pile up on the third floor. Henry’s half of the purchase price was \$1750.

While he continued to collect in many areas, he was becoming increasingly interested in preserving the relics of the settler generation, many of whom survived into his childhood but had now passed away. In his diary entry for January 1, 1882, he began the year by dedicating his soul to the Lord and his heart to his collections. “I have spent all my leisure, the past year trying to benefit future generations by preserving the handiwork of the early settlers of Middlebury, books [and] all printed matter, manufactured articles representing all the different occupations of the early pioneers which I have called a Museum.”

He decided that if he was going to start a Museum he would do it right, through a formal charter from the State Legislature. The Act of Incorporation was passed on November 28, 1882, granting it the formal name of the Sheldon Art Museum, Archaeological and Historical Society. The board was to be made up of the vestry of St. Stephen’s Church, with an initial roster of officers that included a President (Rev. William Tilley) and Vice President (Albert Chapman), with Henry holding the other four offices of Secretary, Treasurer, Manager and Janitor. Middlebury was now graced with what may be the oldest chartered community museum in America.

The Museum was Henry’s obsession. An 1883 visitor, Loyal C. Wright, was struck by the founder’s enthusiasm. He wrote in a newspaper piece, “Mr. Sheldon is one of the busiest men in the State of Vermont, and the longest day is too short for him, so intent is he at his great work. ‘I have just received a bundle of old letters this morning, that I wouldn’t take ten dollars for,” said he, his eyes lighting up with all the ardor of a boy, telling what a big string of trout he had caught.” Wright felt that Henry’s efforts were appreciated in

the town, where, “Mr. Sheldon is known and respected by everybody, and everybody knows just what a place he fills, and what a product of New England civilization he is.”

The urge to collect and categorize is also a yen to control and create a reality that conforms to the collector’s view of the universe. Henry was a proud descendant of the Mayflower Aldens, inclined to viewing the settlement of New England as a purely Yankee enterprise. In this, his board was eager to help, by appealing to the public for those pamphlets, books and papers about the early history of the county that “housekeepers gather in the course of years and store away in garrets, or sell to the rag-peddlers.” They beseeched the public to “place them in our possession that they may be classified and preserved...from destruction.”



Henry Sheldon standing on the porch of his museum. Collection of the Henry Sheldon Museum

The Museum’s collections continued to grow throughout Henry’s long life. He was an inveterate record keeper, listing everything he bought for the museum and the price he paid. The Gamaliel Painter portrait was one of the most expensive acquisitions, costing the lofty sum of \$19.50. Sermons and pamphlets went for a nickel or a dime. Autographs of the famous were a bargain. He got signature of Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglas, Julia Ward Howe and Oliver Wendell Holmes for a dime apiece. In Yankee New England he shelled out \$15.00 for a George Washington autograph, but only had to pay \$3.00 for Queen Victoria. His total expenditures on all the objects he bought for the museum between 1881 and 1905 came to the relatively small sum of \$3500, though many more pieces were gained through swaps and donations.

The older Sheldon got, the more he was focusing on historical objects and “the products of local industry and handiwork.” To this end, he eventually swapped his valuable coin collection to the College for their run of virtually every newspaper ever printed in Middlebury. Henry would be thrilled that this collection continues the run of the Addison Independent right up to the present.

The Sheldon Museum was thriving during Henry’s lifetime, but he was only able to leave it \$100 at the time of his death in 1907. Maintaining the building and its contents was a

huge undertaking for the vestry of St. Stephen's. An elderly woman acted as caretaker for awhile, but the door was eventually locked and the dust began to gather.

The Sheldon Museum did not begin to come back to life until the 1930s, when Middlebury College's W. Storrs Lee and art historian Arthur K.D. Healy got inside and started to look at the collection in detail. They were amazed by its quality, and rallied a group of townspeople to help whip the old Museum back into shape again. The Victorian yen for objects lined up in cases had now been supplanted by the 20th century's passion for Colonial Revival domesticity. Henry, who had written that, "my home is alone but not lonely...with no one to care for me," would have been surprised to find his collection arrayed in a homey setting that had never been his lot.



**Collage of Ephemera
from the collection of the
Henry Sheldon Museum**

Subsequent decades have seen the Sheldon Museum grow into one of the most professional and well-respected history museums in New England. And thanks to Henry's good eye for paper records, we live in what one historian has called, "the best-documented community in America." Collecting did not end with Henry. The Sheldon is constantly receiving donations of objects and documents that enrich our understanding of the past in this place. The bulk of the current Sheldon Museum collection came here long after Henry's time—from wedding dresses to photographs to last week's newspaper. We would love to have even more of the 20th century and look forward to a day when we might be preserving as many letters from the World Wars, for example, as we have from the Civil War. People will want to know about the experiences of those generations, too. The Sheldon Museum of the future will soon be evolving again as we find fresh new ways to make meaningful connections between the past and people living today.