

# PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

## ***Emma Hart Seymour and Philip Battell: A Middlebury Love Story***

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Emma Hart Seymour was the beautiful daughter of Middlebury's most prominent citizen, Horatio Seymour, former Senator for Vermont. Philip Battell was a Middlebury College student, the second son of a wealthy merchant family of Norfolk, Connecticut. She was only sixteen when their paths first crossed, but she decided on the spot that he was the one. He seemed taken with her, too, and soon there were clandestine meetings, filled with innocent professions of true love.

Emma's parents valued intelligence in women, naming their daughter after a respected family friend, Emma Hart Willard, the local pioneer of female education. Friends described her as 'accomplished.' She was certainly a matrimonial prize, as good a match as any man could expect to find in the increasingly elegant boom towns of early Vermont.



**Emma Hart Seymour, Middlebury's Belle of the Ball in the late 1820s, waited 10 long years for her suitor, Philip Battell, to finally marry her.  
Photographs Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum**

Philip was a good catch, too—rich, intelligent and well-connected. His parents had wanted him to uphold the family tradition and go to Yale, but he chose instead to follow his big brother to Middlebury. His college friend, Truman Post, wrote that among the students, “He was then a general favorite. His bright and genial temperament, his frank and generous bearing, his refinement of taste and feeling...made him one of the most delightful of companions, admired and beloved of his classmates, and respected by all.”

On a fateful spring day in his graduation year of 1826, the two sat in a bower in the back garden of the Seymour mansion (now the yellow brick Community House next to the Middlebury Post Office) and pledged themselves to each other for life. It would become ‘their place.’ Three years later, she was writing to him of their, ‘own beautiful Grove,’ visible from her window, where she goes “to look at our names written by my Dear Philip’s own hand; and to sit where we have sat happily together is a happiness too great to be relinquished for any trifling trouble. I believe the first time we were together to that grove, you picked some wild blossoms from a tree to give me. Last spring I went to the same place—walked on the same log that you did, Philip, to reach the tree and brought some of those blossoms home.”

From the start, there were signs that Philip’s ardor may have outstripped his immediate intentions. His secret fiancé had eagerly anticipated dancing with him at his Commencement Ball, but though he made a brief appearance he barely acknowledged her, preferring to spend his last night in Middlebury carousing near the Creek with his college friends. She wrote that his negligence had left her ‘disappointed.’ His sheepish response presumed that her ‘kindness’ would lead her to forgive him and harkened back to his marriage proposal in the Grove and her quiet, “Yes.” Both letters are reproduced in Andy Wentinck’s online exhibit on social dance at Middlebury, *The Giddy Whirl: 200 Years of Social Dance at Middlebury College*.

Philip headed off to law school at Yale, and the two young lovers settled into an epistolary relationship. Their long letters crossed back and forth every other week or so. Emma’s are always hopeful that he would soon return to town. On May 9, 1829, “Philip, I do not think I could bear the disappointment of your not coming now as well as I did then. I am not afraid, Dear Philip, that I shall have it to bear, for I feel quite sure you will come.” His reply, on May 26, gave the sad news that he had to stay in New Haven to take the bar exam: “Forget your love, my own Girl, and amuse your thoughts independently of me. I shall come all in good time, to trouble you enough. If you can not partly do this, my Dearest, the beauty of June will be lost to you this year, and the blame of your loss falls on me.” He reassured her that he will be her husband, adding that, “The longing to see you is greater than I could have supposed possible;—it is a feeling I never had in reference to any thing else, and I have always considered the description of it in books exaggerated. I can not describe it at all.”

Emma wrote that people were starting to talk about them, “...it is has been quite an amusement to me to hear every few days, the last two summers, that you were coming the next week, or the next month, or to occasionally hear you would never take the trouble to come at all.”

After passing the bar, Philip finally sent good news, "Now, Emma, do you wish me to come? Can you bear any longer to have your kindest wishes kindled and wrecked by a slave like me?" For the first time in three years, he appeared in Middlebury, and spent five weeks courting her.

If Emma hoped the period of long separations was over, she was mistaken. The years went on and the letters continued, while Philip moved West to Cleveland to start a law practice. Philip continued to write regularly and ardently, but the years went by without his coming to claim her as his bride. In 1832, he accused her of seeing someone else. She assured him she was not, but she, too, was tired of hearing the same small town gossip: "...it is said Emma Seymour and Mr. Battell are no longer engaged...It is hinted that you neglect me or you cannot be much attached, or you would visit here, and other remarks of this kind." Emma assured him that she does not want to push him, though "my father feels you neglect me." Yet things get no better. He writes that he loves only her and they will be together, but there is no pinning him down.

In 1836, ten years after that fateful Commencement Ball, Emma finally snapped. On June 7, she wrote, "But, Philip, our lives are passing rapidly away. I feel it, young as I am. I feel that the years pass swiftly by and soon with those who have gone before and shall be gathered to the tomb."

The eager girl who had fallen in love with the dashing student had spent a decade watching her friends marry and start families, while she pined for her distant lover. No more! On July 29, 1836, she sent the ultimatum. "I have but one object in writing to you this morning... Philip, the time has come when I must know your intentions.... Why hesitate a moment then to tell me if such are your feelings that you feel it not for your happiness to marry me... I must know your intentions, fully and positively—it is my due and all important to my happiness...Philip, you have too long trifled with a heart which has been all your own."

By August 19, Emma had received no reply. In what was obviously meant to be her last letter to Philip Battell, she demanded that he return all her letters, writing, "You have tried me, Philip, beyond all endurance. Do you think because I have loved you forever can my affections endure such treatment?...Philip, few would have been constant as I have. I only blame myself that I did not cease to think of you years ago... You told me early last fall that when the Autumn leaves were falling you should be with me and soon added that when we met it would be to part no more." She blames his behavior on "the procrastinating, indolent habits you have given yourself to," ending with, "I am now decided, Philip—our intercourse must cease forever."

She should have done it sooner. In his wounded reply, dated September 18, he seemed staggered that his docile Emma could have turned on him like this. Now it is Philip's turn to beg. "Why, Emma, shall we not unite? Why not?"

It worked. On October 6, Philip's sister, Irene, wrote a letter to Emma, saying, "I regret very much that I am unable to go with Philip, and attend...the ceremony that gives me a new sister—of all womankind the one whom I would most like to claim as such." It

seems the foot dragging of the bachelor brother had been exasperating his family as well. "I cannot tell you dear Emma, how rejoiced I am that you are to be one of us. It has been my most ardent hope for years"

They were married in Middlebury on October 12, 1836. We can only guess their feelings as, for once, they had no need to write them down. The newlyweds moved to Cleveland, where Emma gave birth to a daughter, also named Emma, in 1837. Emma's friends were soon writing to tell her how pleased they were to hear of her happiness.

Their idyll was to be short-lived. Smith's History of Addison County, says that, "In 1838 [Emma's] failing health impelled Mr. Battell to remove his residence from Cleveland to Middlebury."

Consumption (tuberculosis) was ravaging Emma's body, but it did not stop her from giving birth to a second child, Joseph, in 1839. As her health grew worse, Philip persuaded her to leave the children with her father in Middlebury, and they went searching for a cure. He took her first to Saratoga Springs, and when that disappointed they made a swing through the South.

It was no good. In Smith's words, "the tenderest ministries of her husband and of her own family were unavailing; and after a long illness, Mrs. Battell died on the 3rd of November, 1841, leaving two young children." Her death notice in the newspaper said she died, "of a lingering consumption which she endured with truly Christian fortitude and resignation." She'd had long practice in those virtues.

Philip stayed on in the big brick house with his father-in-law and the children. (A charming portrait of Emma, little Emma and Joseph hangs there in her bedroom). He did not practice law, devoting himself to a "life of learned leisure...He has given much attention to local history and is, perhaps, the best authority in the county on such subjects." Philip never remarried, though he lived to be ninety. It was a lot of leisure to regret an engagement that lasted twice as long as his marriage.

Little Emma grew up to marry Vermont Governor John W. Stewart. Their house on Stewart Lane passed into the hands of their long-lived daughter, Jessica Swift. Jessica left Emma and Philip's letters, as well as many of her beautiful dresses, to the Sheldon Museum. Philip and Emma's son, Joseph, grew up to be Middlebury's greatest philanthropist, leaving behind him the Bread Loaf campus, Morgan Horse Farm, the Battell Block, the Battell Bridge and much of the Green Mountain National Forest. Emma and Philip's romance left us quite a heritage.