

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Battell Bridge

Jan Albers, former Executive Director, Henry Sheldon Museum

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On a crisp November day in 1893, 117 years ago this fall, Middlebury businessman Henry Sheldon decided that the rubble-strewn road surface of the new stone bridge under construction downtown might just be passable in his horse and carriage. He excitedly organized “a rather impromptu celebration,” filling the carriage with local dignitaries. Grab your top hats, gentlemen! It was finally time to make the first crossing.

It was probably difficult for anyone present to believe the day had really arrived. Bridges have never come easily in Middlebury, and the building of what we now call the Battell Bridge had been a long, hard-fought proposition.



Henry Sheldon and friends make the first trip over the Battell Bridge in November 1893, a month before work on the bridge was finished. Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

The town had already gone through five wooden bridges on this prime location above Middlebury Falls. The first was erected in 1787, when settler Daniel Foot built a rude log bridge convenient to his new sawmill and gristmill on the Falls. It made for a daunting crossing. Glenn Andres has written of the 70-foot span, “One approached it down

muddy banks and crossed the springy, open-sided structure only twelve feet above the rushing water.”

Faced with more repairs in 1879, some of the town’s movers and shakers began to think the time had come to build a more impressive bridge. Predictable battle lines were soon drawn between those who wanted the town to invest in a beautiful new stone structure and those who were worried about increasing the tax burden. At a special town meeting in January 1879, the majority voted to build yet another wooden bridge, allotting no more than \$3000.

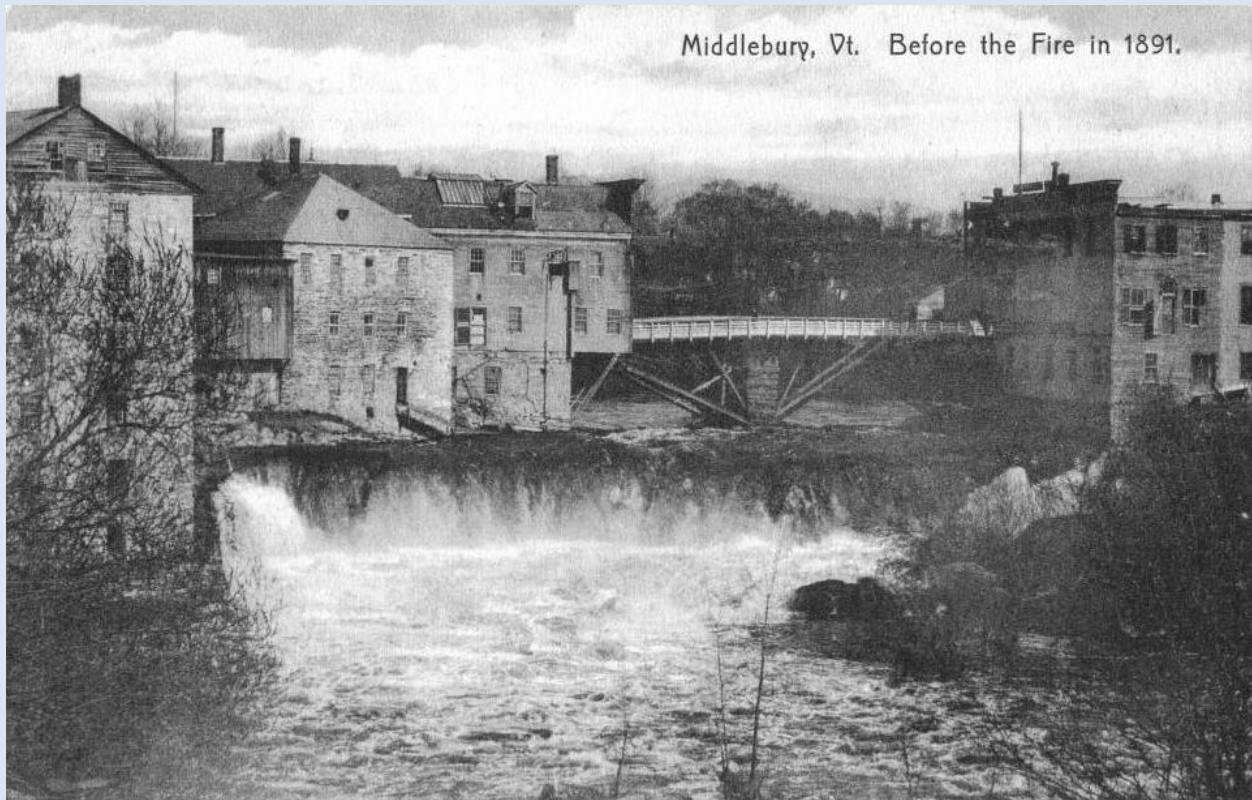
The boosters were furious at what they deemed a backwards response and demanded a new meeting. Their leader was Joseph Battell, the town’s most prominent citizen. The wealthy Battell was the editor of the Middlebury Register, founder of the Bread Loaf Inn and a breeder of fine horses at his Morgan Horse Farm. He was a man so wealthy that he collected whole mountains in his spare time.

In a second meeting on January 27, 1879, Battell first broached the subject of building a stone bridge downtown, arguing that it could be done for less than \$10,000. His reasons were, “It cannot burn. Your wooden one may all be lost in a night. The great expenses of repairs and rebuilding will be avoided. You will escape the risk of accident to teams...It is a better bridge. Who would exchange our stone sidewalks for wooden ones?” The wooden bridge had become an embarrassment, for “...the village, in respect to shade, embellishment and taste in any buildings, has outgrown it, and is leaving it behind.”

They say money talks, but not this time. The townspeople upheld their previous vote by 104-62, deciding to replace the bridge yet again in wood. Battell and his friends were furious. At town meeting in March, Battell at least got the town to agree to let him get an estimate for a stone bridge from New York architect Charles Hilton. At Battell’s instruction, Hilton came back with a design that mimicked Rome’s Ponte Sant’Angelo, which has spanned the Tiber since 130 A.D. The quote to build it was under \$11,000.

But by June, when the issue was raised again, there were too many competing civic improvements underway and both the stone and wooden bridge plans went down to defeat. The Middlebury Register reported that, at the meeting, “J. M. Slade stood forth like a father to protect the poor man from the taxation which a stone bridge would entail, and was quite eloquent in his plans for economy...while the town is bending its energies to improve its roads.” A mere \$500 was voted for repairs to the old span.

Twelve years later, a tragedy revived the stone bridge plan. At 7:00 p.m. on November 23, 1891, the fire alarm went off in downtown Middlebury. The first flicker came from the basement of the old clapboard Smith and Sheldon Building on the corner of Main St. and Merchants Row. A crowd rushed to help, but the pump malfunctioned just long enough to allow the conflagration to spread. Four hours later, the shops on Merchants Row were gone and Main St. was wiped out as far as the stately Beckwith Block.



This old wooden bridge spanning the Otter Creek at the falls in Middlebury was repaired in 1879, although Joseph Battell lobbied for a sturdier stone one. The wooden bridge burned in 1891. Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum.

The wooden bridge had burned, just as Battell foretold. Surely now the townspeople would see the sense of building in stone, right? Wrong. A fortnight after the fire, a town meeting was convened to discuss the situation, and all agreed that the age of the flammable bridge was over. No stone masons were in attendance, but eight iron bridge representatives showed up to offer their services. Over Battell's objections, the town quickly voted to build an iron bridge and signed a contract with the Pittsburgh Bridge Company.

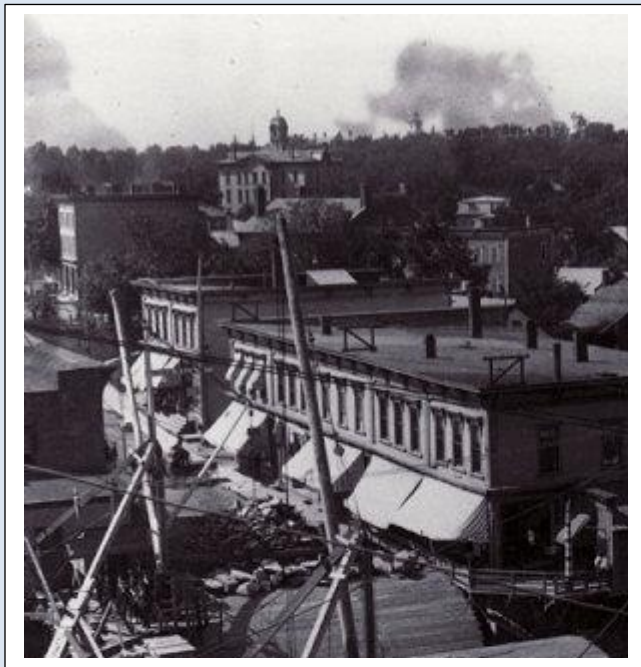
In a repeat of 1879, the angry stone bridge boosters demanded that the vote be overturned and the contract rescinded. Pittsburgh Bridge Company President, J.C. Turk, attempted to hold the town to their contract, but finally decided it was not worth his time to wait for town divisions to resolve themselves. In releasing the town from this obligation, he wrote, "If you will excuse my being a little frank, I will tell you that in all my experience, I have never seen any town of the size and wealth of Middlebury, take quite so long to decide such a small matter as the purchasing of this bridge, nor have I ever seen any town change its mind so often."

Joseph Battell was determined to have the stone bridge, whatever the cost. With estimates now coming in at around \$17,000, he and his father, Philip Battell, made an offer their fellow citizens could not refuse. If the town put up the first \$12,000, the two Battells would split anything over that amount. The deal was sealed.

The old Charles Hilton plan was dusted off and given to the masons. Why shouldn't Middlebury have a span as beautiful as anything in Europe? The stone bridge, based on its Roman model, would be strikingly elegant and sophisticated. While the old bridge had sloped down to just above the water level on both sides, the new bridge would be

raised ten feet to street level, causing the entrances to the stores on the south end to move up one story.

Stonecutting began at the old Lawrence quarry off what is now Route 23 in Weybridge. In June 1893, Joseph Battell undertook to supervise the work himself. Parts of the old bridge that could be salvaged were moved a short distance upstream to serve as a temporary bridge until the new one was in use. By August, the arch forms were taking shape, looking like great wooden wagon wheels that would soon carry the stone. By October, the arches could be seen, projecting like giant camel's humps, in the roadway. The piers and arches were gradually faced with stone and rubble was used to fill the interior.



Wooden forms were built to support the Battell Bridge's stone arches that were laid by masons in 1893. The piers and arches were gradually faced with stone and rubble was used to fill the interior. Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum.

And the cost? Let's just say it is a good thing that the Battells were a family with very deep pockets. The final price tag was over \$31,237, with Philip and Joseph splitting \$17,174 and a couple of small donors picking up the remaining \$2000. Joseph's niece, the grande dame of Middlebury's next era, Jessica Stewart Swift, later wrote, "Uncle Joe carried the day by promising...he would pay what was necessary to supplement the whole thing...and it did cost him a lot."

The bridge was not officially finished until December 12, 1893, but a month earlier, on Tuesday, November 14, Henry Sheldon and his fellow stone bridge boosters jumped the gun with their 'impromptu celebration,' crossing the bridge for the first time. To heighten the memorable nature of the occasion, Henry brought the flag carried by

Vermont troops at the Battle of Plattsburgh. His museum also contributed a very special carriage from its collection—one that had carried President Monroe when he came to Vergennes back in 1817.

A small crowd of workmen and curious locals gathered to witness the historic scene. Henry shared his carriage with major bridge donor Philip Battell and former Governor John Stewart. As the Morgan team picked its way across on the stony rubble, Sheldon excitedly told his driver, M. T. Butterfield, that "it would go down in history that he was the first to ride across the bridge." Coachman Butterfield replied, "How do you make that out, Henry? I'm ahead of you. I'm in the front seat."