

History Space: Ephemera is a link to our past

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Ephemera? We all have it: the receipt in your pocket, the business card handed to you last week, the pamphlet you picked up at the doctor's office.

"Ephemera" are paper items intended for short-term use, and then discarded. They have been inexpensively mass produced for everyday consumption since the 19th century.

The term stems from the Greek *ephemeros*, meaning "lasting a day," and suggests the fleeting and quickly forgotten nature of these articles. Ephemera are part of the popular culture and personal history of our everyday lives today, but the same can be said for Vermonters of long ago. They came in many formats ranging from small trade and greeting cards, tickets, pamphlets, circulars, menus, calendars, and trade catalogs, to simple informative broadsides and colorful oversized posters.



A 1905 postcard showing golfers. Photos From Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum

Nowadays past ephemera are eagerly collected by institutions and individuals, who revered them for their graphic design, typography, color printing processes, and content. The images, humor, and perspectives represented in these items reflect opinions, interests, and social attitudes of the period and should be viewed through the lens of historical time. Today, these disposable scraps of earlier generations, some still bearing nail holes or glue stains attesting to their practical use, provide a wealth of information about past daily lives, popular culture, and visual aesthetics. Ephemera may also offer unhindered glimpses into quotidian aspects of political, social, religious, and commercial life that written sources may not readily reveal.

The Stewart-Swift Research Center of the Henry Sheldon Museum in Middlebury houses a voluminous and diverse ephemera collection.

Largely assembled with scrupulous diligence by the museum's founder, Henry Luther Sheldon (1821-1907), during the late 19th century, the majority of the collection focuses on local Vermont history.



Top: Pictured is just some of the ephemera from Middlebury's Henry Sheldon Museum Archives. *Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum*

The greatest strengths of Sheldon’s ephemera lay in the realms of agriculture, commerce, medical practices, politics, sports and entertainment. They publicize farming events and equipment, local stores and businesses, questionable health remedies, religious and temperance meetings, politics, foods, holidays, and scores of other subjects.

Publicity for Vermont events

Among the largest and most colorful items in the collection are the posters advertising agricultural fairs and events around Middlebury and Vermont, which were printed locally, but used eye-catching images by noted artists and engravers supplied by national stock agencies. One such poster publicizes the joint exhibition of the Vermont State Agricultural Society and Champlain Valley Association that took place in Howard Park in Burlington in 1889. Among the attractions that visitors at the exhibit could enjoy was the “grand gas balloon ascensions with parachute drop from an altitude of one mile.”

Less elaborate but no less informative are black and white broadsides that advertise myriad athletic activities in which 19th century Vermonters engaged, including ice and roller skating, tobogganing, wrestling, boxing, billiards, and football and baseball games.

The most unique items include fragile broadsides announcing several baseball games in the 1890s between the Cuban Giants, the first African-American baseball club in the country, and the Middlebury College team .



Poster from the joint exhibition of the Vermont State Agricultural Society and Champlain Valley Association that took place in Howard Park in Burlington in 1889. Photos By Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum

At first glance, one card showing a jolly baseball player tossing a ball appears to be promoting a baseball game. It is a trade card, an example of one of the most effective and popular ways of advertising a product or business during the Victorian era. Typically constructed of a picture on one side and an advertisement on the other, the version of this card features an ad for the Great American Tea Company.

The card also provides a colorful glimpse into the early days of organized baseball as the National Baseball League was formed in 1876. Baseball cards continue to be one of the most popular collectibles for young and old alike today.



What appears to be a baseball trading card from 1876 has an ad for the Great American Tea Company on the back. *Photos Frp, Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum*

Miraculous cures for everything

With the advancement of color printing, business trade cards flourished and some printing companies specialized in producing stock cards. An example is this 1880 trade card for Kendall's Spavin Cure stamped with Sheldon & Co. A Burlington Medical College graduate, Benjamin J. Kendall, invented his famous Spavin Cure for the treatment of bone disorders in horses' legs. In time, people began using it on their own aches and pains.

The key ingredients were most likely alcohol, and possibly opium. In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt signed into law the Food and Drug Act that changed the medicine business and forced Dr. Kendall to drop the word "cure" from his advertisements.

Frederick Douglass, a noted abolitionist, orator, and former slave and his wife, Helen Pitts are portrayed in one chromolithograph. Douglass carefully promoted his image to help him

with his cause of racial equality. As a result, he was the most photographed American in the 19th century.



This trade card from 1880 is an ad for Kendall's Spavin Cure. A Burlington Medical College graduate, Benjamin J. Kendall, invented his famous Spavin Cure for the treatment of bone disorders in horses' legs *Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum*

His well-recognized image was sometimes used without his consent by advertisers, not always in a flattering way. The caption of this image features a sarcastic exchange between two boys: "... I spec that Fred Douglas and his wife golly he is going to take de Sulphur Bitters for his complexion." Such commentary playing on racial differences was a familiar theme in ephemera. Vermonters at the time may have recalled that Douglass visited Middlebury and Ferrisburgh in 1843, his first stop on the One Hundred Conventions anti-slavery tour.

Appealing to vanity and hopes of eternal youth is not an invention of modern times. The 1889 pamphlet, "Look ... how we shall look when we grow old advertises Shaker Extract of Roots, Seigel's Syrup," which offered to cure old-age afflictions, including bodily pains, liver diseases, rheumatism, and bowel problems, while also promising "elasticity and ivory whiteness of skin."

Presently, we most associate the Shakers with well-made antique furniture but during the 19th century they were best known for their herbal and medicinal preparations. Introduced in 1876, “The Shaker Extract of Roots,” consisting of 16 ingredients, was a collaborative venture between Dr. A. J. White of New York and the Shaker community.



An 1885 leaflet promoting Sulphur Bitters featured famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass and his wife. *Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum*

The business of ephemera

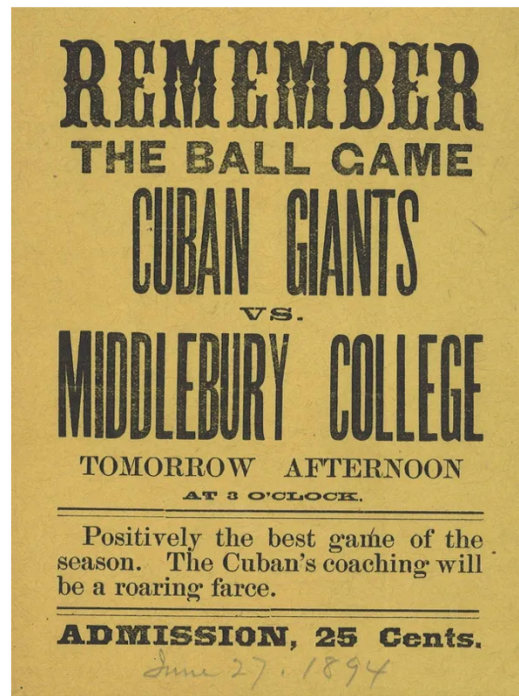
One of the most prolific producers of business ephemera was based in Burlington. Wells, Richardson & Company was a worldwide producer of medicines, dyes, and other products into the 1920s. The company cleverly produced thousands of pamphlets, product labels, trade cards, almanacs, tickets, broadsides, and posters to advertise its products. The whimsical ad, An Elephant Dude, promotes Diamond Dyes, a product line of aniline dyes. The firm claimed that their “Dyes” were the best, had no equal, and were so easy to use that even a child (or elephant) could use them. The Wells, Richardson building still stands today on College Street in Burlington and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Calendars were another way of appealing to the public with products and services. An 1877 calendar sold by a Middlebury agent advertised Melville Mutual Marine & Fire Insurance Co. with a colorful image showing a horse-drawn engine rushing to a fire. Such clever use of publicity assured the year-long presence of this advertisement on someone's kitchen wall.

19th-century show business

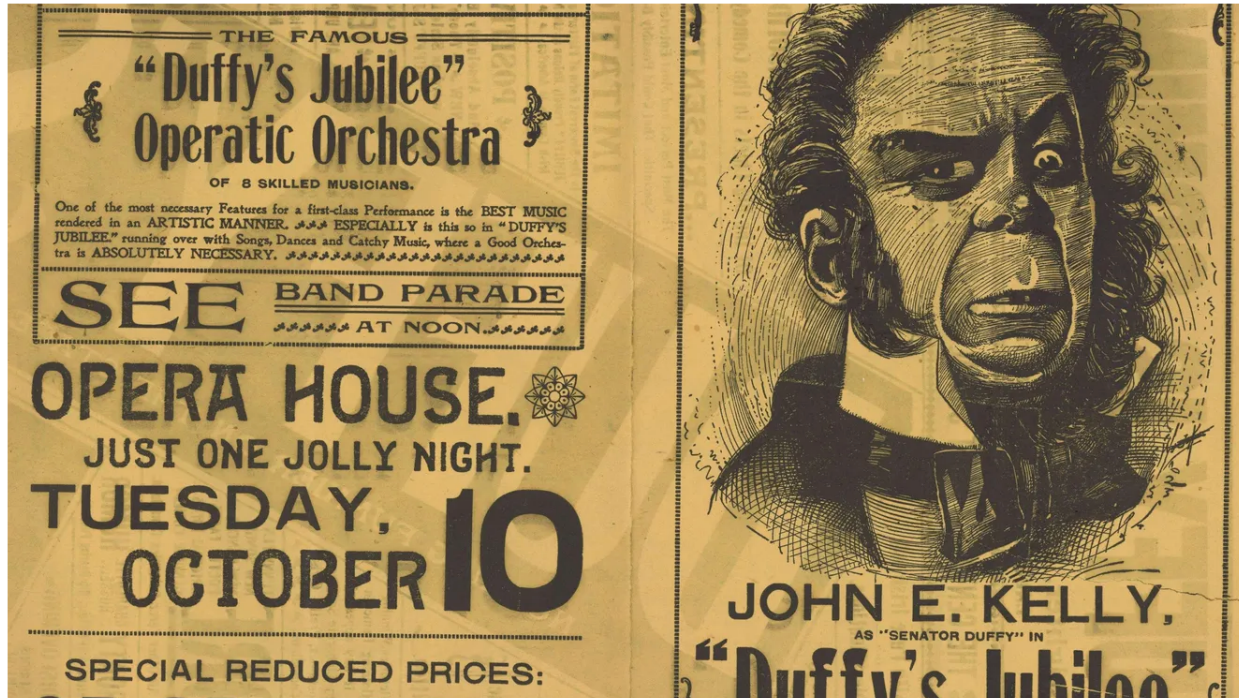
The Sheldon archival collection is rich in entertainment and performance ephemera and attests to a robust and diverse social life in 19th century Vermont towns.

Audiences enjoyed theatrical performances, musical concerts, vaudeville and minstrel shows, and traveling circuses. One such group was Duffy's Jubilee, a troupe of Irish actors that toured the country from the 1880s to the early 1900s and made frequent stops in Middlebury and other Vermont towns. Several New England newspapers called Duffy's Jubilee a "funny comedy" with "that famous natural born Irish comedian, John E. Kelly," who is pictured in this advertisement.



An 1894 broadside announcement of the baseball game between the Cuban Giants vs. Middlebury College. Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum

Some Vermonters traveled elsewhere to see famous performers. One concertgoer kept a ticket from a performance by Jenny Lind in Boston. The wildly popular "Swedish Nightingale" soprano toured America from 1850 to 1852 at the invitation of the showman, P. T. Barnum. Lind gave 93 concerts across the United States, earning her an astonishing \$350,000 (over \$10,000,000 today). Barnum made out well, too; at one concert on Oct. 12, 1850, at the newly finished Fitchburg Depot in Boston, Barnum slipped out of town on the night train apparently to avoid "a close approach to a riot, — glass being smashed and many ladies fainting," for taking money for standing-room only tickets that did not exist.



An 1899 advertisement promoting Duffy's Jubilee, which was a troupe of Irish actors that toured the country from the 1880s to the early 1900s and made frequent stops in Middlebury and other Vermont towns. *Photos From Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum*

Merging past and future

Like the fleeting ephemera of text messages today, early 20th century postcards provided the same expedited correspondence. One postcard was written and postmarked July 16, 1905 in Griffin Corners, N.Y., and arrived in the hands of its Middlebury recipient the next day. Millions of postcards were sent during the first quarter of the last century because they were a cheap, fast, colorful, and collectible way of communicating.

Often colorful, humorous, odd, beautiful, and sometimes disconcertingly familiar, the surviving



The whimsical ad from, *An Elephant Dude*, promotes Diamond Dyes. Wells, Richardson & Company of Burlington was a worldwide producer of medicines, dyes, and other products into the 1920s. *Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum*

ephemera of previous generations provide a captivating window into the daily lives of Vermonters a century ago.

The plethora of 19th-century ephemera, a rich resource for study, could have been lost easily to obscurity had Henry Sheldon not collected it and the archive preserved it. So the next time you throw away that advertisement, discard that greeting card, or delete that text message, say good-bye to the ephemera of today. Stop by the Sheldon Museum in Middlebury; there you will find the ephemera of yesteryear.

Eva Garcelon-Hart is the archivist at the Stewart-Swift Research Center of the Henry Sheldon Museum in

Middlebury since 2011. She previously worked as pictorial archivist at the Bancroft Library of UC Berkeley. Lucinda Cockrell is a former curator and archivist who worked at the Center for Popular Music archives in Tennessee. She is also an ephemera collector. Eva and Lucinda are currently working on Sheldon ephemera collection inventory in preparation for a future digitization project.



This 1889 pamphlet advertises the Shaker Extract of Roots, Seigel's Syrup, which offered to cure old-age afflictions, including bodily pains, liver diseases, rheumatism and bowel problems. Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum