

TRAVELING THE PAST:

VERMONTERS ON VACATION

BACK WHEN THE LEISURE INDUSTRY WAS YOUNG

August is traditionally vacation month, but many of us will not be travelling this year. The following article explores how Vermonters of the 19th and early 20th centuries travelled to places far and near and is based on the archival collections found in the Sheldon Museum's Stewart-Swift Research Center.

Joseph Battell loved to travel. The wealthy conservationist, philanthropist, lover of Morgan horses, enemy of automobiles, newspaper editor and eccentric owner of the Bread Loaf Inn, was born in 1839 to a prominent Middlebury family. He had life-long health issues that, among other things, prompted him to drop out of Middlebury College after three years in 1859 and undertake a lengthy walking tour of Western Europe between 1860 and 1863.

BY DAVID STAMESHKIN

Battell's letters to his family from Europe, as well as numerous other documents relating to the Battell, Stewart and Seymour families can be found in the archives of the Sheldon Museum.

It is said that travel broadens us, but it also gives us a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, where we live. For example, on June 18, 1862, as Battell took a walk at Loch Lomond in Scotland, he wrote.



Joseph Battell
COURTESY OF THE COLLECTION OF HENRY SHELDON MUSEUM

"This is the great fault I find with this Highland scenery, and why it never can equal kindred landscapes in America. There's a magnificence in our original forests that nothing I have seen in Europe can supply. The snow or greatness of the Alps won't do it, nor the beauty of the Pyrenees,

nor now again the heather-covered and fern-waving hills of Scotland. Would that the day might never come when our mountains shall lose their greenness, or America her woods and forests."

Several years later, Battell took a much shorter trip, to a small farm just four miles above Ripton Village, to stay with a family in hopes of restoring his health. He loved it there so much that he bought the farm and turned it into the prestigious Bread Loaf Inn, which he owned and operated for nearly 50 years until his death in 1915. Using his hefty inheritance, he began early on to do his part to preserve the "greenness" of the mountains by eventually purchasing all the land he could see from the Inn — over 30,000 acres of mountain forest. And in his will, he left it all to Middlebury College with the proviso that it remain pristine. The College sold most of it to the Federal Government in the 1930s in order to build the Forest Hall dormitory, and it now comprises a huge swath of the Green Mountain National Forest — Joe Battell's magnificent gift to us.

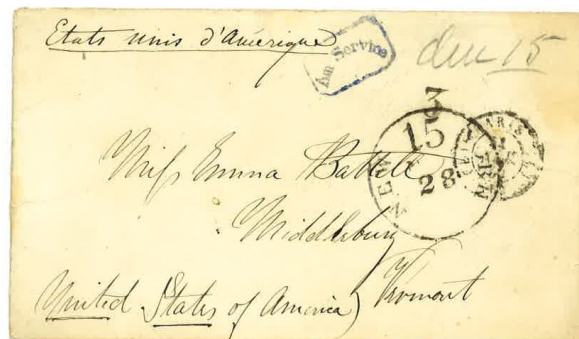


Aerial view of Breadloaf Campus and Green Mountain Forest
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

In his life, Battell traveled thousands of miles across the United States and into Mexico, often to research horse lineages, information that he published in two massive horse registers — The Morgan Horse and Register and The American Stallion Register. In his travels, he never lost the opportunity to send back lengthy reports to the local newspaper he owned — the Middlebury Register (predecessor of the Independent) — expressing his strong opinion that there was nothing to compare with the Green Mountains of Vermont.

Battell never allowed his guests to drive a car up to Bread Loaf, but if you are among the many who have had to cancel your travel

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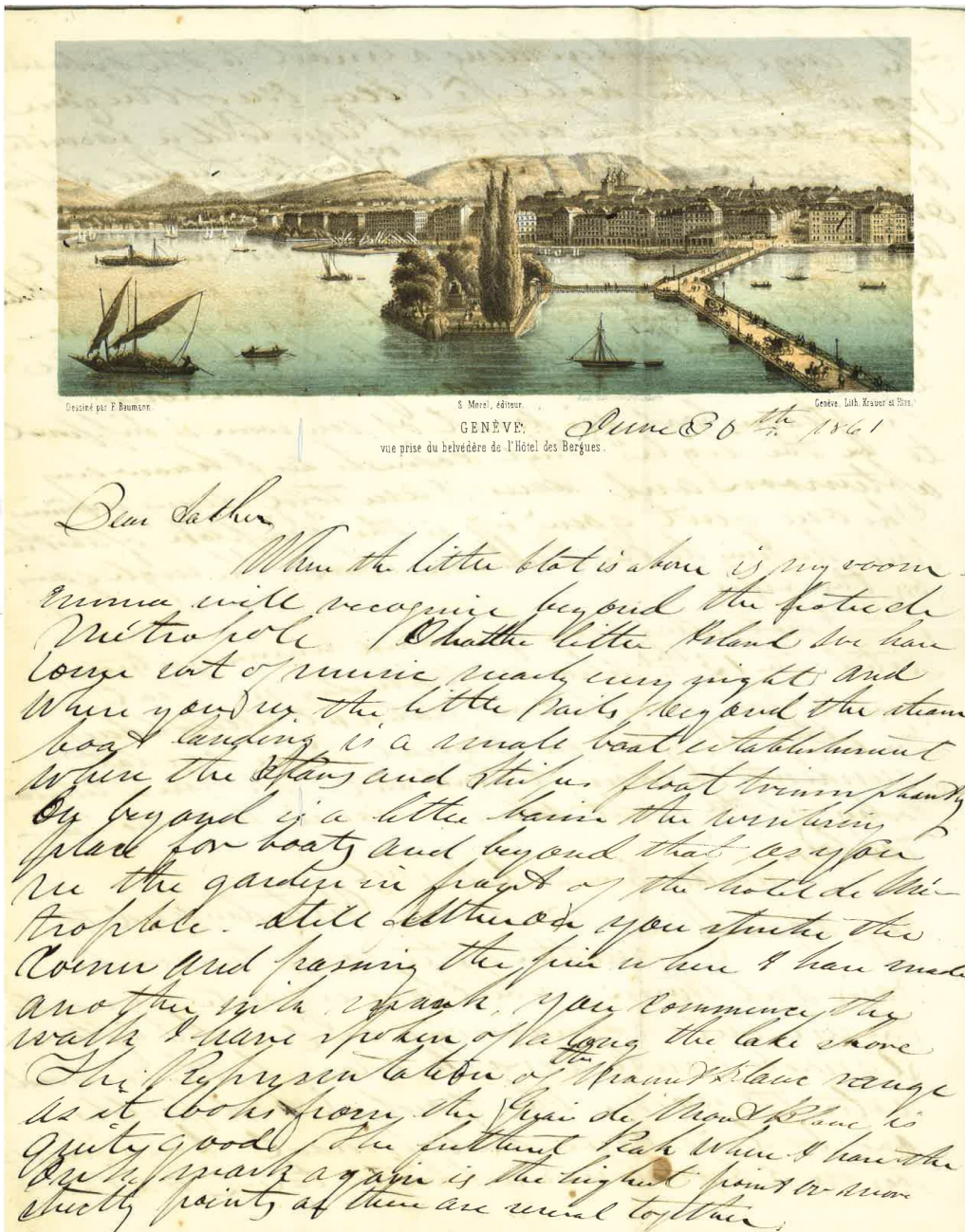
Envelope addressed by Joseph Battell to his sister Emma
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

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plans during this strange time in our lives, do yourself a favor, and take a short ride up Route 125 from East Middlebury and enjoy the beauty on both sides of the road all the way up to Bread Loaf. Park the car (Joe won't be there to block your entrance) and take in the remarkable legacy that Battell has left for all of us. As Dorothy Gale said, "There's no place like home."

Contributed by David Stameshkin, author of a two-volume history of Middlebury College, and the newest member of the Sheldon Museum's Research Center Committee. He is currently writing a history of the museum.



Letter from Joseph Battell to his father Phillip on Hotel des Bergues letterhead, Lake Geneva, Switzerland, 1861
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum