

# History Space: Treasure trove of Middlebury photos

**Eva Garcelon-Hart**

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MIDDLEBURY - Louis Jacques M. J. G. Daguerre, a Frenchman, is largely credited with the invention of photography in 1839, although many others on both sides of the English Channel contributed to his huge success. Nevertheless, Daguerre's idea of securing a camera image on a mirror-like copper plate that he dubbed after himself, took the world by storm.

Soon after its Parisian debut, daguerreian galleries were popping up in major cities across the Atlantic, and it didn't take long before small localities across America embraced this new medium.

Remarkably, photography arrived in Middlebury, shortly after its European unveiling. Already in June 1843, a local newspaper, *The People's Press*, began advertising daguerreian artists (aka photographers), who offered to take "daguerreotype miniatures" The ad asserted that the "productions of this [photographic] process are the works of nature, and not of art — the light of heaven alone is the pencil used."



Woman Wearing Bonnet, c. 1856. From ninth-plate ambrotype. *Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum*



Children in front of rural schoolhouse in Addison County, c. 1895. *Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum*

## A visual history of Middlebury

For years to come, Middlebury newspapers and merchant registers attested to a continuous presence of itinerary photographers offering their services in town. Daguerreotypes were soon replaced by ambrotypes, then tintypes, followed by many other photographic processes and formats practiced by photographers in Middlebury and elsewhere. Local citizens took advantage of this new astonishing way of capturing their likeness, and as a result became a visual record of the history of this small, but booming college town.

The Henry Sheldon Museum's Stewart-Swift Research Center archival collection cares for close to 30,000 photographs tracing the development of this medium from its inception through the mid-20th century. Only a portion of the collection is available in digital format. Most photographs are hidden from public view, residing in dark climate-controlled storage that ensures their longevity, but also conceals the richness of the history and splendor of the bygone Middlebury community.

This March, an exhibit, “Our Town: Love, Joy, Sadness, and Baseball - 100 Years of Photographs from the Sheldon Museum,” opened at the Sheldon. The show is a result of many months of collaboration between retired National Geographic photographer, James P. Blair, and the Sheldon’s Stewart-Swift Research Center archivist Eva Garcelon-Hart.

Several years ago, when Blair purchased his retirement home in Middlebury, he visited the Sheldon archives in search of pictures documenting his dwelling. He found not only what he was looking for but he also became aware of the richness of the photo collection. This memory brought him back years later with an offer to curate the show that is now on view. In his statement to the “Our Town” exhibit, he writes:

“I have been a photographer for the National Geographic Society for almost sixty years.... As you might imagine I have had a lot of adventures – from corralling cobras in India to sailing down the middle of Russia on the Volga River. My latest adventure has been right here in Middlebury!”

Anybody who has looked at historic photographs is aware that they are not necessarily physically attractive. Nevertheless, we cherish these images for their historical significance or their importance to our family. Few of us can easily navigate between photographic formats and appreciate their artful results. The pictures are often faded, worn by rough handling. Some may be difficult to interpret. But with loving care they can come back to life once again.

In the current Sheldon exhibit, Blair has achieved exactly that. He selected three dozen remarkable historic images that best spoke to his artistic imagination. He then scanned them, gently digitally corrected the most obvious damage, and reprinted the images in a large format. The photographs now beautifully framed, adorn two Sheldon galleries dazzling us with their renewed directness of human and geographic subjects. The eyes of people who perished so long ago lock with ours, and the beauty of the landscape continuous to whisper its charms.

## A variety of photographic formats



Two Reverends, c. 1845. Rev. Abiel Hovey and Rev. Thomas A. Merrill. From quarter-plate daguerreotype. *Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum*

The exhibit presents a variety of photographic formats from the early cased photographs to the amateur snapshots from the mid-20th century. The earliest ones - daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and tintypes - were commonly framed in brass mats and enclosed in decorative cases in the manner of painted miniatures. On display are nine of them along with their framed enlargements. These images hold in many cases the only existing likeness of early citizens of Middlebury, some of them, notable citizens.

One of the more arresting is an early daguerreotype portrait of two reverends, Abiel Hovey and Thomas Merrill. Merrill was a pastor at the Middlebury Congregational Church from 1805 to 1842. He was also an avid follower of temperance. Merrill's "Semicentennial Sermon" delivered in 1840 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the church, is one of the earliest sources of information about the history of Middlebury. The minister's portrait undoubtedly conveys his gripping personality, but the subjects' intense expressions may have been exacerbated by the early photographic process that required long and motionless poses in order to secure the image.



Jessica Stewart, (1871-1982), c. 1890s. She was the future Mrs. Charles M. Swift. Photo by By A.J. Schillare, Northampton, Mass. *Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum*

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Among the early portraits are a tintype of an unknown Civil War soldier; a daguerreotype of Phillip Battell, a lawyer and prominent member of Middlebury society; and several images of men and women, whose identities are now lost, but whose facial features and attires are preserved in exquisite detail.

Around 1890, a mesmerizing portrait of a young Jessica (Stewart) Swift was taken by a Massachusetts photographer. She was a member of a prominent Vermont family, the daughter of Governor John W. Stewart and granddaughter of Philip Battell. Jessica Swift also may have been the most photographed woman of Middlebury. On display are several of her studio portraits taken by American and European photographers during her travels. One would not imagine that this glamorous, world traveler experienced her share of misfortune. Among them was the untimely death of her twin brother, Robert, at age 9, portrayed in this carte-de-visite with his sister.



View of Middlebury Village, c. 1900. Chipman Hill to left, Green Mountains in the distance. *Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum*

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Later in life, Swift became a generous benefactor to the Sheldon Museum. Largely due to her financial support, a separate wing was erected to preserve and service the archival collections. The Stewart-Swift Research Center is named after her. Jessica Swift lived to the ripe old age of 110.

The exhibit also includes several town views that depict Middlebury in its early days. The panorama, with treeless Chipman Hill in the distance, provides a glimpse onto several early Middlebury landmarks from the turn of the 20th century. In the center, stands the well recognizable white spire of the Congregational Church, to the side a partially completed Battell Block, and nearby, the Middlebury Inn and Twilight Hall, with their intricate cupolas that no longer adorn either building.

Another view shows Middlebury's Main Street taken during a blizzard in the 1890s by an unknown photographer. It captured a fleeting moment of the town's past with mounds of snow concealing the unpaved street and business signs advertising commercial enterprises that rotated in and out of town. Like ghosts from the past, unnamed people amble through the streets.

## The fires of Middlebury

Middlebury's architectural landscape was frequently changing due to numerous fires that consumed large sections of town in late 19th and early 20th centuries. The photographer of this striking view, taken on January 4, 1929, captured a crew of firemen attempting to extinguish flames that engulfed Roger's Block, a commercial row of buildings. The image can be relished not only for its historical value but also for the abstract beauty it conveys.

One section of the exhibit spotlights Grosse Pointe, a luxury estate on the banks of Lake Champlain that belonged to the Swifts during the first decades of the 20th century. A photo album from which the enlarged photographs were taken is also on display. It contains numerous views of picturesque landscaping of the property and leisure activities enjoyed by the owners and their guests. One of the photos shows a young and playful Mary Fletcher, later wife of Middlebury professor and painter, Arthur Healy.



View of Otter Creek, Middlebury, c. 1885. Verso: "Otter Creek from Grandpa's lot, P. Battell." By Ruluff A. Dean, local photographer. *Collection Of Henry Sheldon Museum*

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Also included are photographs that focus on ordinary people who worked to earn their living, like local marble workers, female staff of the Bread Loaf Inn, and members of a hunting party together with their game and dogs. One of the school photos, most likely

taken in Addison County, portrays a group of humbly dressed children. Among them a young girl, who appears to have a disability, is resting inside a wooden cart.

Many of these photographs were taken by photographers who practiced in Middlebury, including Ruluff Dean, whose collection of glass plate negatives was recently donated to the Sheldon Museum. Dean's tranquil view of the Otter Creek bend still projects a lasting serenity of the Vermont landscape. Among other local photographers represented are O.C. Barnes, Adoniram J. Styles, Cove Studio, and George N. Lathrop. Lathrop was a local pioneer of aerial photography. While piloting his own plane, he took hundreds of bird's-eye views of Addison County and central Vermont from the 1930s on.

The exhibit only brushes the surface of the potential of the Sheldon's holdings. Many of the photographs were collected by the Museum's founder, Henry Luther Sheldon (1821-1907). Others came later accompanying manuscript collections or were donated by families, institutions or collectors. One way or the other, these visual records of the bygone era, captured with care and preserved with reverence, found their way to the local archive and remain a tangible testimony to the history of the Addison County community.

Perhaps we should ask ourselves whether our digital images will survive in the same way. Will we care with the same devotion for hundreds of images that we incessantly take with our digital cameras? The next time you pull out your cell phone to take another snapshot or a selfie, ask yourself, "Is it worth preserving for the future?"

*Eva Garcelon-Hart is an archivist who has managed the Sheldon's Stewart-Swift Research Center since 2011. She holds a master's degree in art history and master's degree in library and information science, both from the University of California at Berkeley. She has worked for institutional and private archives since mid-1980s.*

## **About the museum**

The Henry Sheldon Museum in Middlebury is open Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Stewart-Swift Research Center is open Thursdays and Fridays 1.p.m. to 5 p.m.

One Park Street, Middlebury, VT 05753, [www.hernrysheldonmuseum.org](http://www.hernrysheldonmuseum.org), 802-388-2117.