

IN CELEBRATION OF

Black

HISTORY MONTH

This is a three-part series addressing the presence of Black Americans in early Addison County. Today we introduce the topic and share relevant documents available at the Sheldon's archives; part two will tell a fascinating story of Middlebury Black resident, Prince King; the last essay will outline the Twilight Project and explain how Middlebury College students are using local archives to research difficult moments of local history.

UNSEEN NEIGHBORS: BLACK RESIDENTS IN ADDISON COUNTY

There is a thin line between benign neglect and purposeful disinterest in gathering knowledge about those who live on the margins of society. Ideally, archival collections should reflect a community's past with equal weight allocated to all residents. But historically, the lives of racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, women and the less affluent have too often gone unnoticed. The Sheldon Museum archives, although abundant with historical knowledge of early Addison County, is no exception, and its collections offer little insight into the past lives of the county's Black residents.

People of color, although small in number, lived in Addison County from early on. Nineteenth-century census records attest to clusters of Black Americans residing in Vergennes, Pantton, Ferrisburgh, Bristol, Middlebury and

other locales. Most supported themselves as unskilled laborers or as domestic workers for white families. Only a very few could afford to purchase land or other property, including Prince King, about whom you can read in this series next week.

Racial issues were certainly familiar to local people. Throughout the 19th century, the problem of slavery and the destiny of free Blacks were hotly debated in churches, in the Vermont legislature, and at social gatherings. Middlebury newspapers regularly published regional and national voices on both sides of these debates, sometimes not shying away from racial slurs and mockery. The Sheldon archives holds many sources illuminating these subjects, including the Addison County Antislavery Society Records, documents, books, pamphlets, newspapers, ephemera and visuals.

Not infrequently, white Americans, including



Fig. 2 - Children, Bristol, VT, 1892.

COURTESY OF THE HENRY SHELDON COLLECTION

residents of Middlebury, found humor in derogatory images that stereotyped African Americans. Such images appeared on business advertisements displayed in local stores [Fig. 1]. Similar imagery was also featured on post cards, stereographic photos, and covers of sheet music collected by area citizens. Henry Sheldon amassed an impressive collection of posters and broadsides advertising blackface minstrel performances by troupes from all over the country that entertained the Middlebury public regularly during the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries.

The Sheldon archives also hold other documents that may give a bit of chill to some of us today. One of them is a 1779 will of Virginia resident John Rolls, who bequeathed several slaves ("negros") to his descendants. Another example is a 1783 Bill of Sale by Ebenezer Weeks of a "Negro boy named Kitt about seven years of age" to his son, Holland Weeks of Litchfield, Conn. Holland later settled down in nearby Salisbury and is a grandfather of our own Henry Sheldon.

Our voluminous photographic collection yields only a handful of images of anonymous Black people, among them three nameless children from Bristol [Fig. 2]. Who were they? What happened to them? Regrettably, our archive is silent on these questions, as it is on the lives of so many other Black residents.

Middlebury cemetery records provide another enticing yet tacit glimpse into the local presence



Fig. 1 - Advertising Card, ca. 1880.

COURTESY OF THE HENRY SHELDON COLLECTION

SEE SHELDON ON PAGE 23

SHELDON

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

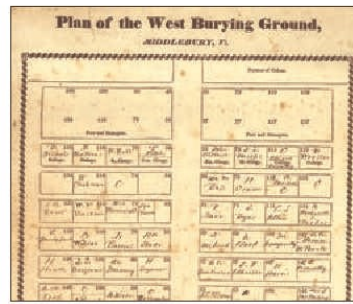


Fig. 3 - West Cemetery Lot Plan, ca. 1860 (detail).

COURTESY OF THE HENRY SHELDON COLLECTION

of Black Americans. The lot plans of the West Cemetery from around the 1860s reveal that the back section of the burial grounds was once designated for "Poor and Strangers." One of these plans shows a small sub-section here allocated to "Persons of Colour" [Sic] [Fig.3]. This designation suggests that Middlebury's Black population was considerable enough to warrant a separate plot for burying their dead. Although today this area is largely void of markers, nearby there are a few scattered tomb stones, some of foreign soldiers — "strangers" — who died in the Civil War. Unfortunately, the records for the "Poor and Strangers" section were poorly kept making it difficult to determine who was buried there.

In the central section of the West Cemetery, right next to the lot of the prominent Battells, stands an obelisk of the Slade family [Fig.4]. William Slade was a Vermont Governor, U.S. Representative, and a vigorous anti-slavery advocate. The monument largely commemorates his family members, but one side bears a curious inscription: "In memory of Eliza Dodson, colored. Born in the City of Washington. Died Apr. 29, 1853, aged 18. Given by her mother to Wm. & Abigail Slade at the age of 7. A faithful, conscientious, devoted servant." According to Dodson's obituary in the Middlebury Register, her mother was "once a slave in the District of Columbia." It is perplexing, that a small child of color became a servant in an antislavery family, but, at the same time, was given a prominent place on the family gravestone.

Today, let us tap into our collective memory and save important stories from oblivion. At the Sheldon Museum archives, we are attempting to amend the gaps in our historical records. If you know of any people of color who once lived in this area or have any documentation that may shed light on their lives, please share them with us. With your help, we will strive to enrich our local history and preserve that which we must.

Contributed by Eva Garcelon-Hart, Sheldon Museum's Stewart-Swift Research Center Archivist. She can be contacted by email at eghart@henrysheldonmuseum.org.



Fig. 4 - West Cemetery, Slade Family obelisk on the right. COURTESY OF THE HENRY SHELDON COLLECTION