

Sheldon Museum takes on new projects after pandemic closes doors to public

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October 8, 2020

Wedged between Two Brothers Tavern and Leatherworks Shoe Shop is the Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History. Having been around for almost 150 years, it is one of the oldest community-based museums in the country and an important resource for the college community. Although it is currently closed to the public due to the pandemic, the museum has remained active during these past months.

For Research Center Archivist Eva Garcelon-Heart, the pandemic has created an opportunity for her and the archives staff to focus on creating broader access to collections. She has also been working on some exciting projects in collaboration with the college.

One of the most notable is the college's newly announced Twilight Project. The project is named after Alexander Twilight, who graduated Middlebury in 1823 and was the first African-American graduate of any university or college in the U.S. The multi-year project is aimed at researching and uncovering stories of marginalization within the Middlebury community, from its establishment to the present day.

With its wealth of records and documents, the Sheldon Museum archives have an important role to play in the successful completion of this project. As Garcelon-Heart told *The Campus*, "Many of us are digging deeper into issues relating to race, and the archives provide a lot of insight into the past and the uncomfortable moments in history."

The Twilight Project team has already begun the archival work of recording students' experience amid the pandemic, while the rest of the project is still in its planning stages, according to the college's website. The project will culminate in a symposium in 2023, the bicentennial of Alexander Twilight's graduation from Middlebury College.

The founder of the museum, Henry Sheldon, was a Middlebury local. After a patchy

career as a businessman, Sheldon turned his eye to artifact collecting. His main interest was documenting any and all aspects of Middlebury life. However, in the process, he also ended up collecting objects from the rest of Vermont and the greater New England area. Today, the Sheldon Museum houses artifacts like furniture, household objects, documents and paintings “that provide a glimpse into Addison County and Vermont’s past.”

While the Museum is currently closed to visitors, there are two exhibits available virtually on the Museum’s website. The first is “A Neighbor Project: The Downtown Middlebury Portrait,” which is a virtual exhibit by local artist Rebecca Kinkead that showcases over 100 portraits of local community members.

The second available exhibit is “Drawing On The Past” by Miriam Adams. In this exhibit, the artist creates paintings in which she juxtaposes everyday household items with nature to create images of “striking intimacy.”

In a typical year, the museum serves the college community by allowing students to visit with their classes, do research in the archives for thesis projects and intern with them over the summer. While these interactions can’t take place now, the museum wants to make sure that when it does reopen, safe practices like social distancing and proper sanitation can be strictly followed.

Once the Sheldon Museum opens back up to visitors, students can stop by to learn more about the history of the area where they live. “The Sheldon collection is really quite interesting and unusual, and definitely worth exploration by the college community,” Garcelon-Heart said.