

# HISTORIC ROOTS

## HISTORIC ROOTS

Ann E. Cooper, *Editor*  
Deborah P. Clifford, *Associate Editor*

## ADVISORY BOARD

Sally Anderson	Nancy Chard
Marianne Doe	Mary Leahy
Robert Lucenti	Caroline L. Morse
Meg Ostrum	Michael Sherman
Marshall True	Catherine Wood

Publication of *Historic Roots* is made possible in part by grants from the A. D. Henderson Foundation, the Vermont Council on the Humanities, the Vermont Historical Society, and Vermont-NEA

**A Magazine of Vermont History**

Vol. 2

August 1997

No. 2

# AN ARCHITECTURAL DETECTIVE STORY

By GLENN M. ANDRES  
PROFESSOR OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY  
MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

There's nothing mysterious looking about the house at 41 South Street in Middlebury, but it does have a mystery: When was it built? The owners asked me to find out.

Henry Sheldon, who was the town historian at the beginning of the century, listed every house in the village and gave a date for each. He said this house was built in 1870, just like the others in the neighborhood. But this did not seem right to me.



Glenn M. Andres

41 South Street, Middlebury

For one thing, all the other houses line up evenly along the street. Number 41 sits way back from the street, as you can see from the map on the next page. ("A" on the map.) This made me think that it might have been built before the rest of the neighborhood, when there were no other houses to line up with.

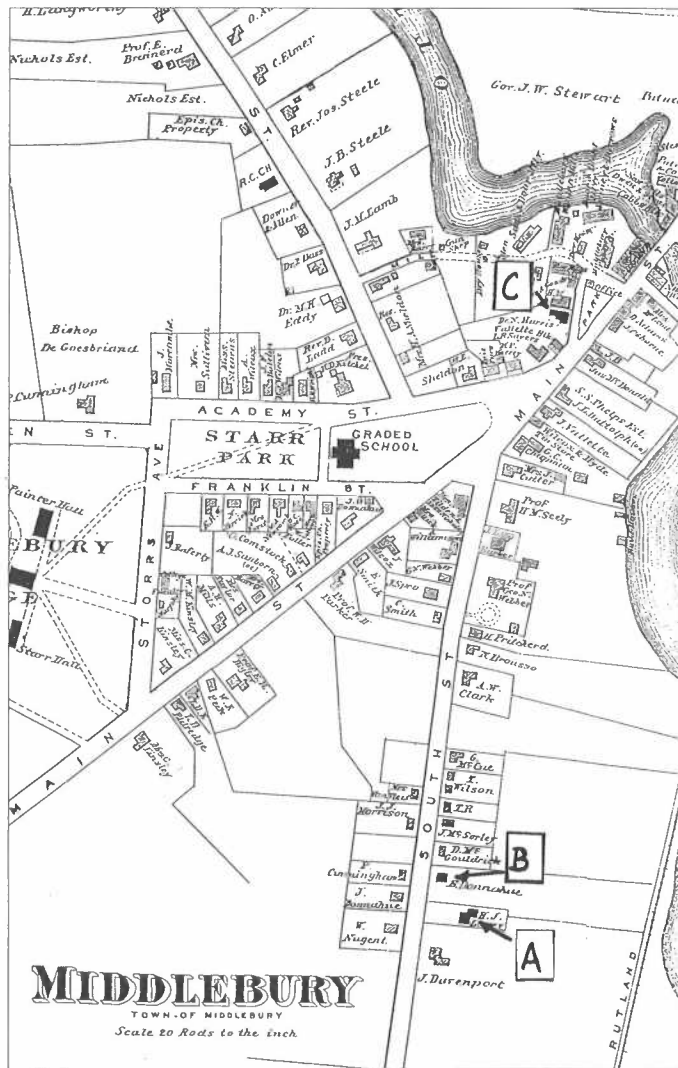
It also does not look like the other houses around it. The houses built in the 1870s are tall. They have high ceilings and large windows. Their walls are about 6 inches thick. (There is a picture of one on page 15.) Number 41, on the other hand, has very low ceilings. Its front rooms have small windows and walls that are 12 inches thick in some places. I decided to find out why it was so different.

The attic and cellar are good places to look for clues to the age of a house. There you can see how it was put together. In the main rooms plaster covers the construction.

In most of the attics and cellars on South Street you can see wood framing made of boards that are very even in size. Such lumber, cut at a sawmill, was available in Middlebury village early in the 19th century.

The attic at 41 South Street has the same kind of framing. But the cellar under the front of the house has rough, heavy beams with axe marks on them instead. They seem much older than the milled boards.

The first floor contains other clues to the



This is part of a map of Middlebury printed in Beer's Atlas in 1871. The letter A shows the location of 41 South Street. B shows the house next door at number 39. C shows where Eben Judd's log cabin once stood. The Sheldon Museum stands there today.

house's age. The thick walls, the lowest ceilings, and the smallest windows are in the two front rooms. In the rest of the house the walls are less thick, the ceilings are a little higher, and the windows are larger. This suggests that parts of the house were built at different times. But when?

I took another look at Henry Sheldon's list. It said that the house next door to Number 41 ("B" on the map) was built in 1795 by Appleton Foot and originally stood on the site of Dr. Harris' house ("C" on the map). Sheldon said that it was moved to South Street in 1829 and rebuilt sometime between 1885 and 1901.

But the house he is describing, 39 South Street, looks as though it belongs to the 1870s. What he says about it better describes 41. I began to think that Henry Sheldon had switched the houses on his list by mistake. I decided to find out more about the houses of Appleton Foot and Dr. Harris.

The *History of the Town of Middlebury*, written by Samuel Swift in 1855, tells us that in 1795 Appleton Foot built a house on what is now Park Street. Not long after that he sold it to Eben Judd. In 1829 Judd moved the house and built a large brick house on the lot on Park Street. That brick house later belonged to Dr. Nathaniel Harris. It is now the Sheldon Museum.

Swift's history also says that the early houses in Middlebury were "chiefly log houses...built

with small expense.” I knew that later the log walls of some of these houses were covered with clapboards on the outside and plaster on the inside to make them look more like their neighbors’ houses. But the cabin walls were much thicker.

With all this information I now felt fairly certain that Henry Sheldon had indeed switched the houses on his list. The mystery was solved. Here’s what I think happened.

41 South Street began in 1795 as Appleton Foot’s log cabin on Park Street. Its two rooms had low ceilings and small windows. In 1829 Eben Judd moved it to the open fields of what is now South Street. Later, in the 1870s and 1880s, a neighborhood grew up around it. At that time its owner remodeled the house. He added a porch on the front and side and new rooms in the back. He built an upper floor and put on a new roof. It was probably he who hid the log walls between plaster and clapboards. The old log house was completely hidden.

If I am right, 41 South Street, in spite of what it looks like, is much older than its neighbors. More important and more interesting, it is probably the only log cabin left from the early days of Middlebury village.



Glenn M. Andres

*39 South Street, Middlebury*

### Rooting Around

See if you can find out the history of some of the houses in your town. When were they built? Who lived there? What did the neighborhoods look like?

Can you find log cabins in your town, or houses that were built in the late 1800s? Your historical society and library may have old records, maps, and pictures.