

HISTORIC ROOTS

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CELEBRATING WITH A POSTCARD

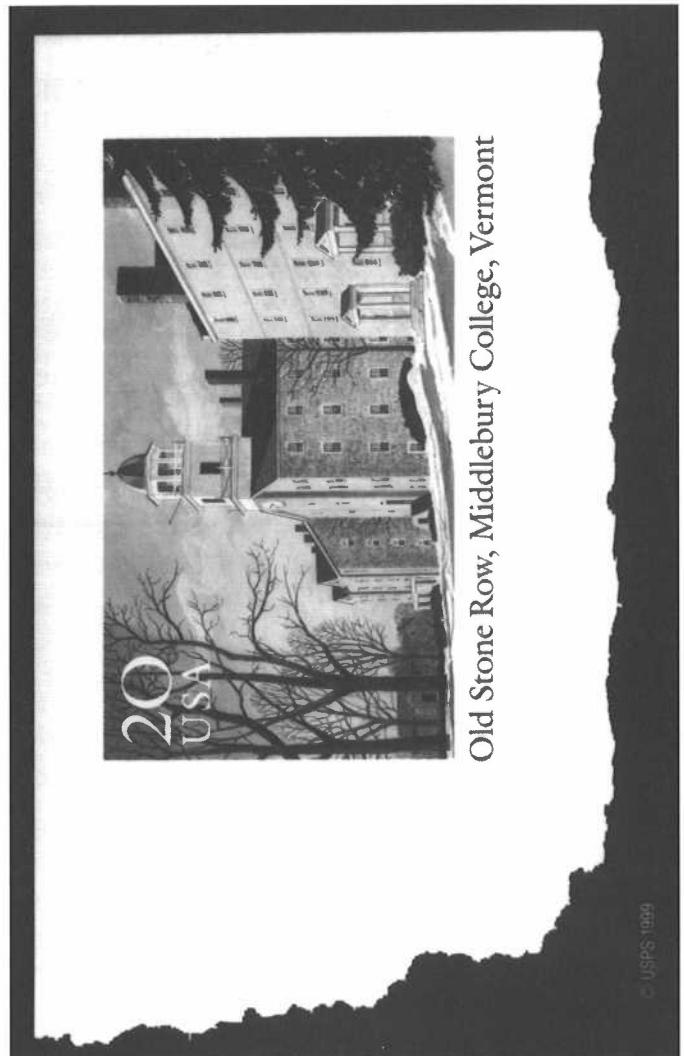
By GLENN M. ANDRES

On May 19, 2000, the United States Postal Service issued four million postcards that show the three buildings of Old Stone Row at Middlebury College. Why are these buildings important enough to be on a postcard?

There are two reasons. The first is that they are the first buildings that were built by Middlebury College. They are listed on the National Register of Historic Places because of the stories they tell — stories of a town building a college, stories of their connections to other historic buildings, some of which have been lost.

When Middlebury College opened its doors, in November 1800, it had seven students. Five were freshmen and two were sophomores. There was one professor, Jeremiah Atwater. Atwater was also the principal of the Addison County Grammar School. At first, the College shared space with the Grammar School in a big wooden academy building at the foot of Main Street.

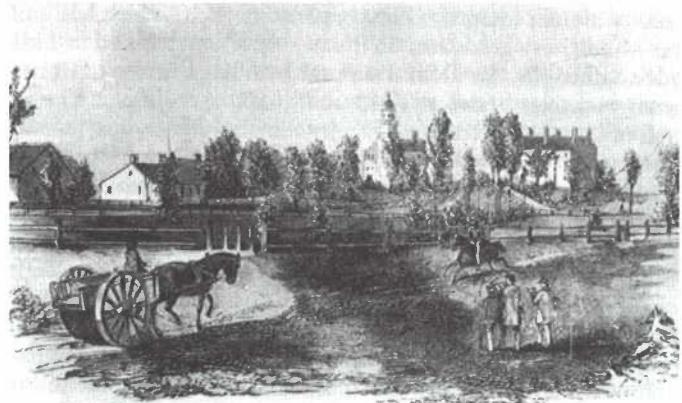
By 1810, the College had 110 students and needed a new home. Townspeople argued over where the new buildings should go. The people



The stamp on the United States Postal Service's postcard, showing Old Stone Row at Middlebury College.

on the east side of Otter Creek wanted to have the College in their part of town. Those on the west wanted it there. Finally, town father Gamaliel Painter suggested a contest. The side of town that gave the most money and materials for the building would have the campus. Seth Storrs offered sixteen acres of land. His neighbors pledged supplies, and the west side won. So the townspeople brought their donations of stone and wood to a western ridge overlooking the village.

There the College planned to build a row of three buildings. There would be dormitories on the ends, with a chapel and classroom building in the middle. This was a pattern that the founders of the College knew well. It followed the layout for the early buildings at Yale College, where some of them had gone to school. Yale had brick dormitories, a chapel, and classrooms in a row, along one side of the green in New Haven, Connecticut. The Middlebury College buildings would be similar, except for one thing. They would be made of stone. It was a strong and practical way to build, and limestone was available locally. In fact, the mill buildings at the falls on Otter Creek were also of stone. As a result, Old Stone Row reminds us of what Yale University once looked like (the Yale row has been torn down). It also reminds us of the mill buildings that were so important to early Vermont.



Middlebury College Archives

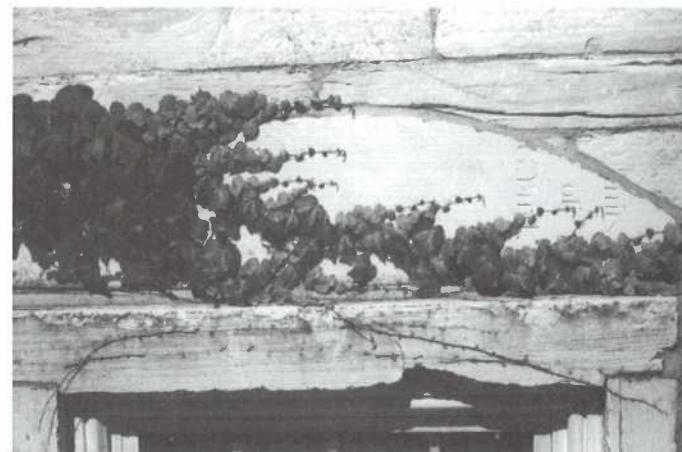
An 1850 view of Old Stone Row from the site of the old Grammar School. It shows Old Chapel in the middle and Painter Hall on the right. Starr Hall had not yet been built.

The first building in the row was a dormitory that came to be called Painter Hall, after Gamaliel Painter. It is the oldest standing college building in Vermont. It was built between 1812 and 1816, at a cost of \$8,000. Like the dormitories at Yale, it was built as a long building, with several entries. Each entry had its own staircase, with four rooms on each of four floors. Each room had its own fireplace. So Painter Hall has many chimneys on its roof.

The materials for Painter Hall were donated. Most of the building is limestone, cut from a ledge in nearby Weybridge. Someone gave local marble, but it was only enough for the front wall of the first floor. Over one of the front basement windows there is a piece of marble that has letters cut into it. Perhaps it was originally meant to serve as a road marker

or a tombstone. Maybe the stone cutter had made a mistake. Although it had been rejected for other uses, it was still considered good enough to use as building material at the college.

The second building on the row is Old Chapel. It was built between 1834 and 1836. It housed the library, museum, classrooms, laboratories, offices, and the chapel. Even the cupola on top had a use. It was the first College observatory. Old Chapel may have served as a model for Alexander Twilight, who studied at Middlebury College and then became the schoolmaster in Brownington, Vermont. In 1836 he built his own school building, now



Glenn M. Andres

The right-hand side of this curved stone over a window on Painter Hall has letters carved into it. Clearly it was meant to be something else. But, for whatever reason, it became part of the material that was donated to build the College.

known as the Old Stone House, to look very much like Old Chapel.¹

The third building was another dormitory, Starr Hall. It was finished much later, in 1861. It caught fire and burned on Christmas Eve of that same year. By 1865, it had been rebuilt.

All told, it took the town and its college fifty years to complete Old Stone Row. The three buildings housed the entire College for most of its first hundred years. Now, at the end of the Middlebury College's second hundred years, they still play important roles, as dormitories and administration buildings.

Which leads us to the second reason that the United States Postal Service has issued

¹For more information about Alexander Twilight and the Old Stone House, see the April 1997 issue of *Historic Roots*, pp. 27–33.

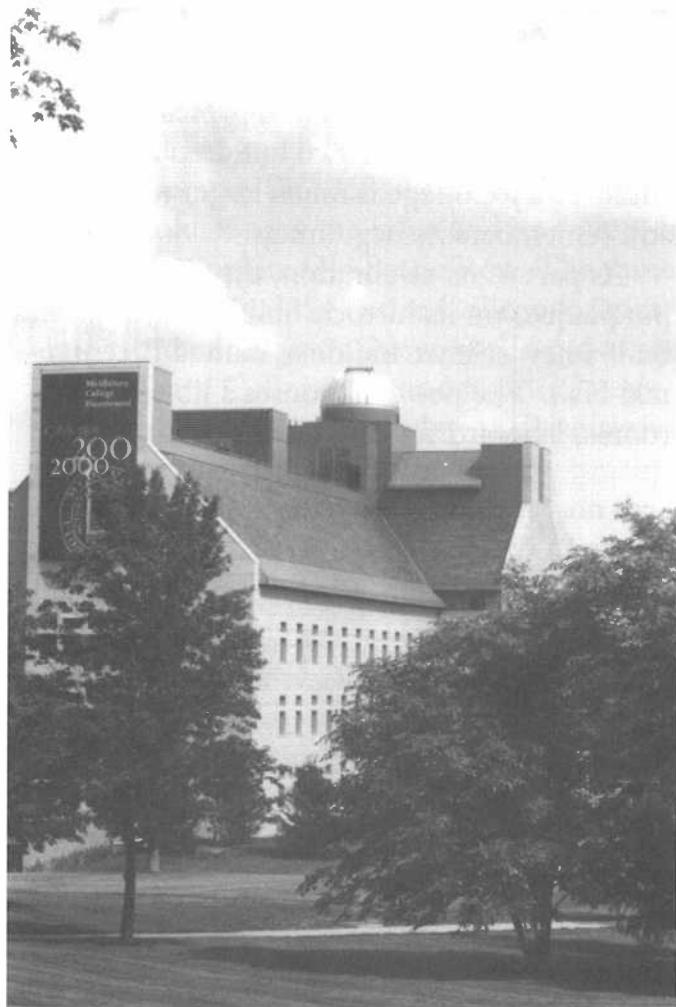


The Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History

this special postcard: it celebrates the 200th birthday of one of the oldest colleges in America. With more than two thousand students, almost two hundred professors, and a main campus of over two hundred fifty acres, Middlebury College is much larger now. But it still remembers its beginnings.

As part of its celebration, the College has put plaques on its historic buildings. And it has built a new science building, named Bicentennial Hall. The new hall houses a library, classrooms, laboratories, and offices. It is very

Pencil drawing by Maria Graves Oakes of Old Stone Row some time after 1865. Starr Hall is on the left.



Glenn M. Andres

Middlebury College's Bicentennial Hall, in 2000. The stone facing, the domed observatory on the roof, and the shape of the many air vents on the roof, all call to mind Painter Hall, the College's first building.

modern inside. But there is much about it that reminds us of the Old Stone Row. Its outside is faced with stone. The many vent stacks on the roof have been made to look like the chimneys on Painter Hall. The very top of the building houses an observatory, as did the cupola on Old Chapel.

In November 2000, there will be a week-long party for the town's college and the College's town. There will be lectures, concerts, speeches, a parade, a dance, and fireworks. And for the rest of the country, a birthday postcard.

Rooting Around

Take a look around your town. What old buildings still exist? When were they built? For what purpose? What are they used for today?