

# HISTORIC ROOTS

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## HISTORIC ROOTS

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# GAMALIEL PAINTER, MIDDLEBURY'S TOWN FATHER

By DEBORAH P. CLIFFORD

No one in Salisbury, Connecticut in the 1760s would have predicted that Gamaliel Painter would some day be a powerful and respected leader of a wealthy New England town. This young man spoke little and had little education. He seemed to possess no real leadership qualities. What he wanted was to become a farmer, like his father.

In 1767, one of Painter's good friends, John Chipman, bought land in the newly-chartered town of Middlebury, Vermont. No one else had settled in Middlebury yet, but he hoped Painter would some day move there with him.

Gamaliel Painter was married to John's sister Abigail, and it was she who persuaded him to move. In 1773, the Painters and their two sons traveled north with the Chipmans to start a new life. Soon more settlers joined them, near the banks of Otter Creek.

To protect his right to the land he had bought, Painter, with others, joined Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys in what

became a struggle for Vermont's independence from New York.

Painter was caught up as well in the American colonies' fight for independence from Great Britain. During the Revolutionary War, he moved his family back to Connecticut. Then he served as a master carpenter in the Continental Army.

At the war's end, in 1783, Painter returned to Middlebury. The British had destroyed



The Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History

*Gamaliel Painter.*



The Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History

*Gamaliel Painter moved into this house in the town of Middlebury in 1787. The photograph was taken around 1900. You can see the marble works in the background.*

nearly everything, including his own house and barn. He spent a year rebuilding and helping his neighbors. Then Abigail and their two sons rejoined him.

By this time, there was a stream of new settlers. Painter earned their respect through his willingness to help, his common sense, and his blunt, fatherly manner.

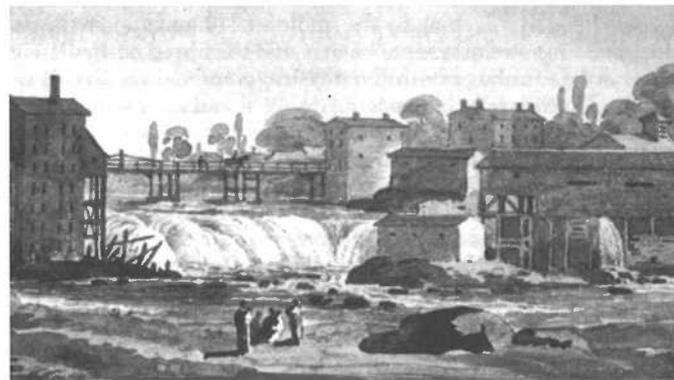
Middlebury, in the mid-1780s, had no town center. Most of the houses were scattered along the Otter Creek, near the border with Salisbury. There were no stores, no churches, and no taverns. There was no place where people could get together to shop, or eat, or talk.

In the late 18th century, most towns of any

importance were centered near a waterfall. Waterfalls powered mills and factories, and towns grew up around them. Painter realized that Middlebury's future depended on using the power of the Otter Creek falls, downstream from where most settlement was located. And he hoped to develop the town center there as well.

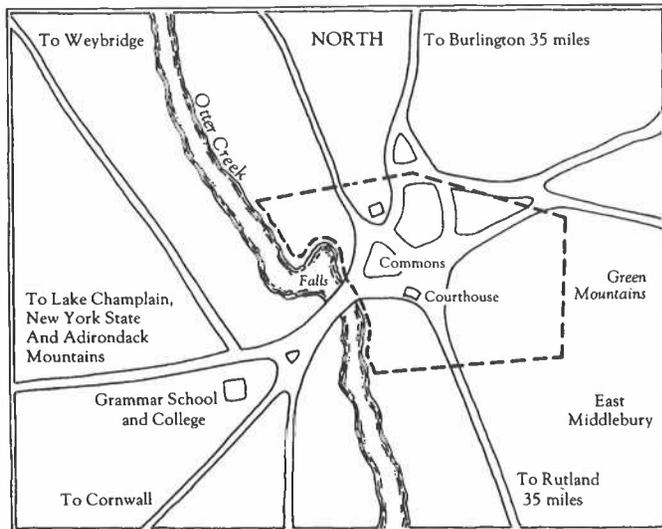
In 1785, he bought a 50-acre lot on the eastern side of the falls and began building mills. He sold parcels of land to others willing to build the mills and factories, stores and taverns that would attract people and businesses to town. He also sold small lots to doctors and lawyers and others, who would provide needed services to Middlebury residents. He himself moved to into town in 1787.

In 1786 Painter became the county sheriff. The next year, he was appointed judge of



Middlebury College Archives

*This picture of the mills and the Otter Creek falls was painted around 1810.*



Middlebury College Archives

*The town of Middlebury in 1800, showing the Grammar School and courthouse. The land inside the dotted lines belonged to Gamaliel Painter.*

Addison County. By 1788, the village near the falls was growing. In April 1793, Jabez Rogers, the owner of the first store in town, wrote that he had “counted every building of Middlebury Falls and found the number to be 62.”<sup>1</sup>

By 1794, “Painter’s Mills,” as that part of town was also called, had become the largest “central place” in Addison County. But Painter

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Foot owned land and built mills on the western side of Otter Creek, which was then part of the town of Cornwall. The competition between Foot and Painter encouraged industrial development on both banks of the river. In 1796, Painter realized his dream of joining the two banks. Middlebury annexed the northeast corner of Cornwall, and the industrial center doubled in size.



The Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History

*Gamaliel Painter completed this beautiful house in 1802. Middlebury College later restored it. It now houses the offices of nonprofit organizations.*

knew that Middlebury still needed three things to make it the town he dreamed of: a church, a courthouse, and a first-rate school system.

The courthouse came first. Back in 1790, Painter had given a parcel of land for a courthouse to the county. This gift had helped persuade the state legislature to make Middlebury the shiretown of Addison County. A jail was built in 1794, and the courthouse, begun in 1796, was finished in 1798. Eight years later, the Community Congregational Church was built nearby on a hill above the town green. Painter donated the land for it as well.

Painter valued education a great deal, even though he was a man of little schooling himself. And it is his contribution in this field that is perhaps most important.

In 1797, Painter obtained a charter for the Addison County Grammar School from the Vermont legislature. Three years later, he and other town leaders helped persuade the legislature to grant a charter to Middlebury College. Painter raised money for and oversaw the growth of both these institutions.

When Gamaliel Painter died, in May 1819, he left Middlebury College \$13,000, a large sum of money for those days. He is also said to have given it the cane he always carried as he walked around his town of Middlebury. Every graduate receives a copy of the cane, and students still sing a song about it.

Both the College and the town remember him in many ways. Painter Hall, built between 1812 and 1816 is the oldest college building. The elegant Painter House in town, where Painter and his family moved in 1802, now overlooks the town green and houses the offices of some nonprofit organizations.

There are those who say that Gamaliel Painter's ghost haunts the town he loved and nurtured. But whether or not there is an actual ghost, the town and its college are a lasting tribute to his work and his pioneering spirit.

### **Rooting Around**

Early history is full of questions. Who were the first settlers in your town? Where did they come from? How did the town grow? What stories do people tell about those times?