

# HISTORIC ROOTS

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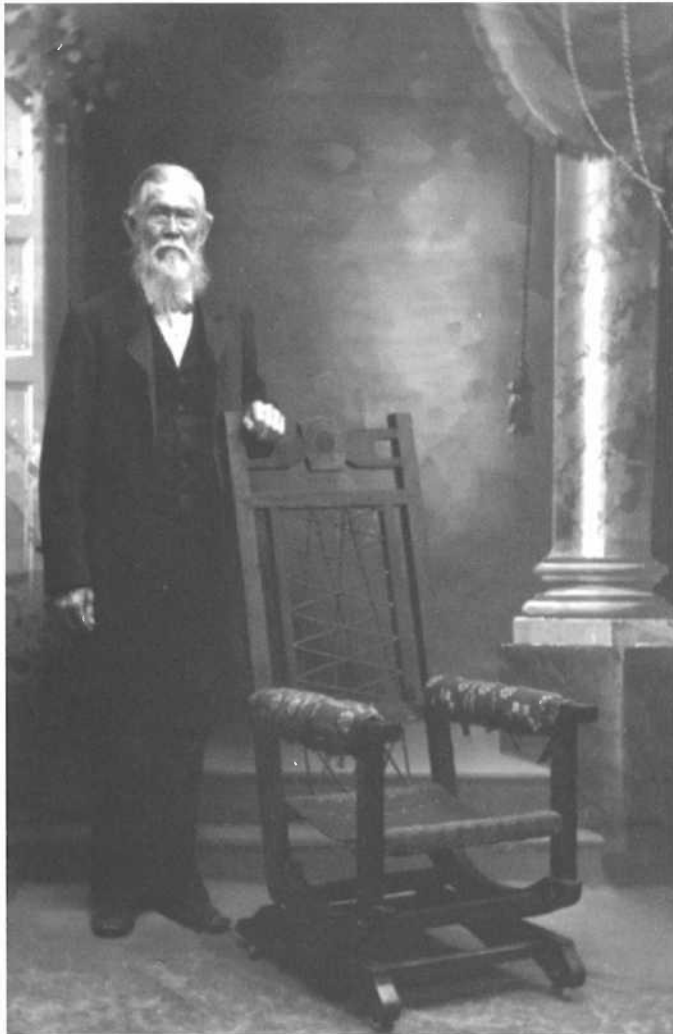
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The Sheldon Museum

*Henry Sheldon on his 80th birthday, in 1901. The chair, which he made, is still in the museum.*

# HENRY SHELDON'S MUSEUM

By LIZ FITZSIMMONS

Henry Sheldon was born in 1821. By the middle of the 19th century, when he was a young man, people were looking to the future. They were furnishing their homes with up-to-date furniture. They were buying labor-saving devices, such as stoves for cooking and heating, to make their work and home lives easier. In Middlebury in the 1880s, there were plans for a new town hall and courthouse. But, unlike many other people of the time, Henry Sheldon was interested in the past.

His interest started early. His family was proud of its history. His mother's ancestors had come over on the *Mayflower*. Henry Sheldon compiled a complete genealogy and wrote biographies of some of his ancestors.<sup>1</sup>

In 1873, Sheldon was asked to organize an exhibit to help celebrate Middlebury's centennial.<sup>2</sup> From then on, history became his primary interest. He started a coin collection. Eventually, he had coins from the reigns of

<sup>1</sup> Genealogy is the study of family history. Biography is the story of a person's life.

<sup>2</sup> Centennial means hundredth anniversary.

future. But there was only a small amount of money in the museum's bank account. For more than 20 years, the museum "was the joke of the community," according to a Middlebury College professor. Everything was piled up in disorder. But despite the chaos, the professor could see the value of the objects.

In the 1930s, volunteers began to sort and organize the materials in the museum. They arranged exhibits and organized a research



The Sheldon Museum

*This wheel is on exhibit at the Henry Sheldon Museum. It was used to spin wool. It has no foot pedals. The spinner walked away from the wheel to spin the wool. When she walked forward, the wool rolled onto the spindle. This kind of wheel was used in this country from the 17th century to the middle of the 19th.*

library. In the 1940s and 1950s, they redecorated and refurnished some of the rooms. The mummy was cremated and buried in 1950. Its grave is in the West Cemetery in Middlebury. Many people visit an exhibit about it in the museum.

The museum has changed and grown over the years. Its collection of newspapers, letters, photographs, and diaries in its research center attracts people interested in local history. There are programs for school children. There are lectures and workshops.

Today, the museum Henry Sheldon founded 117 years ago is recognized for its fine



The Sheldon Museum

*An exhibit at the Henry Sheldon Museum. The portraits are of members of the Wainwright family, around 1845. The dress is also from that period. The instrument is an early piano.*

programs, exhibits, and archives. Recently, the museum's board of trustees decided to change the name to The Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History. The new name does honor to the man and his mission: to preserve the past for us and for future generations.

### **Rooting Around**

The Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History is open, from late May until mid-October, Monday to Saturday, from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m., and occasional Sundays, from noon to 4 p.m. The rest of the year, it is open Monday to Friday, from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. The research center is open Tuesday to Friday, from 1 p.m. until 5 p.m. The phone number is 802-388-2117.

If there is an historical museum near where you live, it might be interesting to go and learn some more about the people and past of your area.