

HISTORIC ROOTS

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HISTORIC ROOTS

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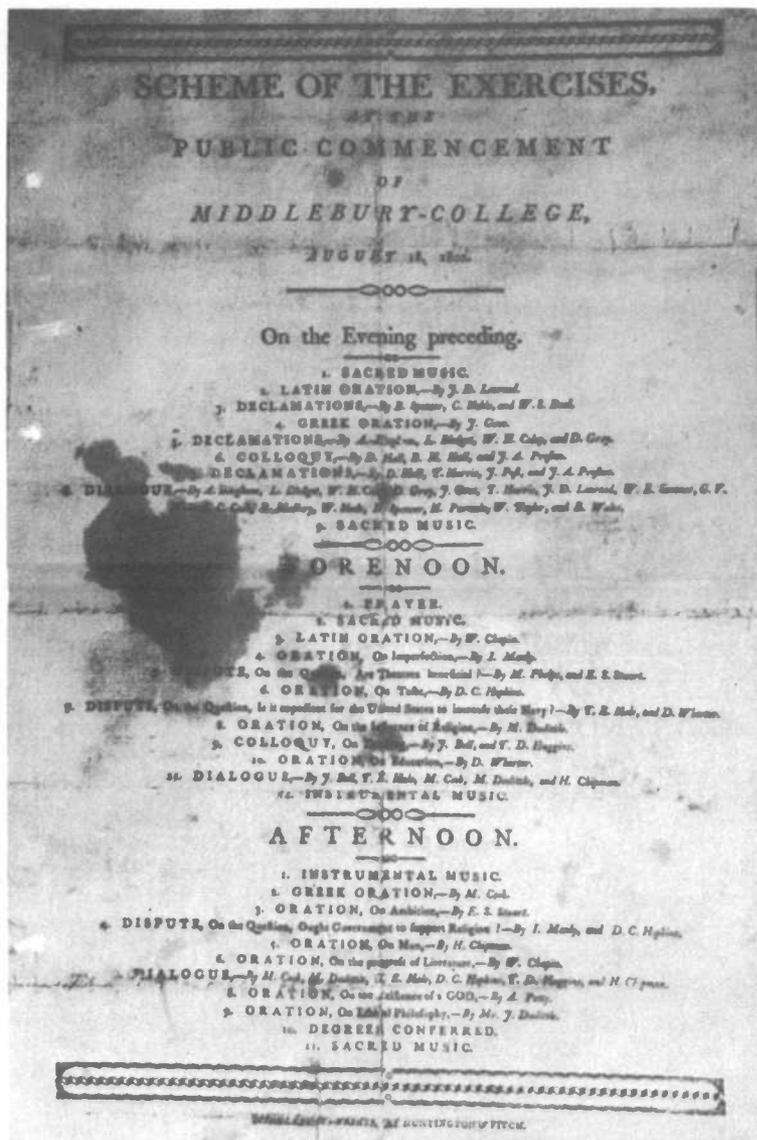
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The program for Middlebury College's first graduation on August 18, 1802. The one graduate, Aaron Petty, died six months later.

THE FOUNDING OF MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

By DAVID M. STAMESHKIN

In November 2000, Middlebury College will celebrate the 200th anniversary of its founding. Middlebury College is one of the oldest institutions of higher learning in the United States. But it is only the second oldest in Vermont. The University of Vermont (UVM) was chartered nine years earlier, in 1791. The story of Middlebury College's birth is related in important ways to the founding of UVM.

In 1791, when Vermont became a state, most of it was frontier country. Towns were small and scattered. Farmers had to create fields and pastures by cutting down the heavy forests that covered the land. As more settlers came and towns began to grow, competition developed among them. Each wanted to find ways to attract more settlers and more businesses. So towns competed to become the county seat, where the courthouse was located. They competed to develop good schools. In those early days, before there was a state capital, the state



Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale College, advised Middlebury town leaders on the founding of Middlebury College.

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legislature met in a different town every year. And towns competed to host their meetings.

The Vermont constitution called for a strong educational system. It stated that every county should have a grammar school.¹ It also provided for the establishment of a state university and set aside rents from some state lands to help support it.

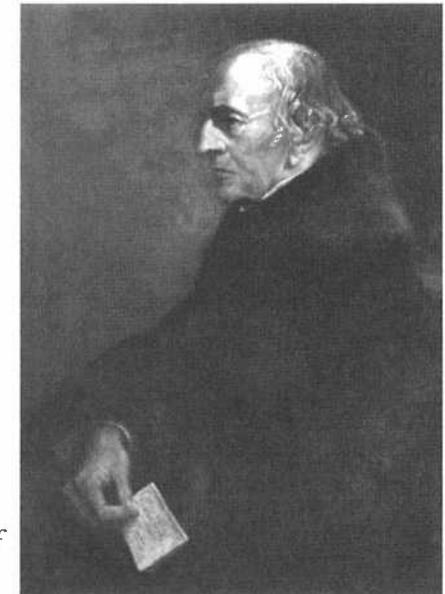
In 1791, the community of Burlington petitioned the legislature for a college charter. The legislature granted the charter, and UVM was founded. The legislature also set aside money for UVM's support. For many reasons,

¹ A grammar school in those days served as both primary school and high school.

but mostly because of a lack of money, UVM did not open its doors until 1799.

When UVM was chartered in 1791, Middlebury was only the ninth-largest village in Addison County. Yet because of the leadership of one of its first settlers, Gamaliel Painter, it was the county seat, or shiretown, as it is still called in Vermont. Six years later, in 1797, the town was also able to convince the state legislature that the Addison County Grammar School should also be in Middlebury. This was a great disappointment to Vergennes, which had also made a strong plea to have the school built there.

The people of Middlebury were very



Jeremiah Atwater, principal of the Addison County Grammar School and first president of Middlebury College.

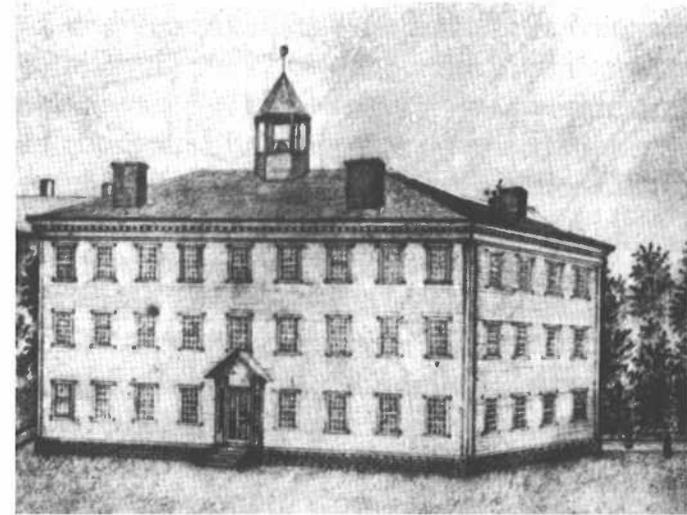
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excited at the prospect of the school. They quickly raised \$4,500 for its new building. But even then they were dreaming of a college, which, they thought, would make the town even more attractive to newcomers.

The next year, 1798, Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, visited Middlebury and met with the town leaders. They asked Dwight if he thought they should found a college as well. They told him that, because UVM had not yet opened, there was no place for students to attend college in Vermont. They went to Yale, Harvard, or Dartmouth College. Dwight advised them to go ahead with their plans.

In both 1798 and 1799, the leaders of Middlebury petitioned the state legislature to grant a charter for a college in Middlebury. The legislature refused both times. The leaders of Burlington were very angry about the Middlebury petition and convinced the legislators to turn it down.

In 1800, however, the legislature met in Middlebury. Legislative sessions were held in the new courthouse the town had built when it was named shiretown for Addison County. Legislators could see for themselves the growing prosperity of the town. And town leaders were quick to show off their new grammar school building. They also introduced members of the legislature to the new school principal,



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The Academy Building for a time housed both the Grammar School and the College.

Jeremiah Atwater. Atwater had studied at Yale with Timothy Dwight and was hired on Dwight's recommendation. He was capable, the town leaders pointed out, of becoming the head of a college too.

That year, Middlebury once again petitioned for a charter to open a college. This time, Burlington residents argued that UVM was finally open. Another college, they insisted, was unnecessary. But the legislature granted the charter. Trying to placate² UVM supporters, however, they decided not to give the new college any state money.

² Placate means to make less angry.

The charter appointed Jeremiah Atwater the first president of the College and named 15 Vermonters as “Fellows.”³ Five days later, on November 5, 1800, Middlebury College opened its doors. Its students were seven grammar school students who had passed its tests for admission. It had taken UVM nine years to open; Middlebury did so less than a week after it received its charter.

The first hundred years of Middlebury College’s existence were a period of competition with UVM and a struggle for economic survival. But after two hundred years, the College has grown to become one of the finest in the country. The dream of its founders has also come true. The College has indeed increased the town’s standing—in the state, the country, and around the world.

³ The Fellows, or Trustees, named in the charter included Middlebury leaders Gamaliel Painter, Seth Storrs, Samuel Miller, Darius Matthews, and Daniel Chipman.

Rooting Around

With what towns did your town compete in the early days? What happened? Are there still competitions? Over what?

David Stameshkin has written a two-volume history of Middlebury College: *The Town’s College* and *The Strength of the Hills*.