Dear Members and Friends,

This newsletter is now in its 9th year. It has been a very rewarding job researching, writing and bringing these to you. Everyone in our group contributes to its production. We are a small group of dedicated workers who love what we do and we encourage you to join us. We are currently working on several projects, long and short term, so your participation can be as much or as little as you are comfortable with. You will find that history is quite interesting.

Our longtime volunteer and friend, Harold West who has been with the Society for many years, has been having health problems and is unable to be with us. Harold knows so much Middlebury history and has been so good scanning photos, postcards, and many other things. We miss him and wish him the best.

Thanks to the efforts of our volunteer, Bob Scholl, the records of the Society meetings from its inception in 1974 to the present have been organized, sorted and filed. While doing this, Bob also compiled a list of all members and officers between 1974 and the present day. Much information is readily available to us now as a result of his work. Bob also maintains our collection of obits, news articles, and much more.

We have a new volunteer, Alice DeMartino, who started recently and has already been such a help to us. Alice has been reorganizing our file cabinets and will be learning to scan our photos and other old documents.

The article on penmanship was inspired by children who visit our building. They are fascinated with our chalk boards. We keep chalk and erasers handy and invite them to write something. Over the years we have enjoyed many of their drawings and autographs. These children say they no longer learn to write in cursive but instead learn print script and keyboarding. We have made so many technological gains, but they come with the cost of losing our traditional ways. I urge each of you to take a pen and paper and write something, whether it be a list, a journal, or a letter to a friend.

Have a happy Spring!

Agnes Lutes
Vice President

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The writing is on the wall: penmanship is becoming a lost art. More recently known as cursive, this method of handwriting has been taught in schools for over 400 years. The rapid development of modern electronics is leading a march toward obsolescence. Today with a simple click, we can communicate at the speed of light. This instant gratification comes with a high price. Soon we may lose handwriting altogether.

Writing is essentially a manual method of recording ideas using established symbols. Its beginning could go back 40,000 years and the cave paintings in Europe and elsewhere may present a tantalizing hypothesis to its origin. Alongside the perfectly rendered paintings of animals, are small marks, grouped and repeated, which could be a first attempt at written communication by our Cro-Magnon ancestors.

When hunter-gatherers began to settle into agrarian societies and acquired property, it became necessary to account for ownership and quantity. A primitive method of bookkeeping was developed using clay coins imprinted with lines. Simple lines developed into pictograms, symbols that represented objects. By 3000 BCE the Mesopotamians had Cuneiform, and about 2800 BCE the Egyptians were using hieroglyphics.

The development of the phonogram, symbols representing the sounds of the spoken language, followed. As early as 1500 BCE the Phoenicians were using what is considered the oldest phonetic alphabet which had 22 separate symbols. Soon it was in use in India, Persia, Egypt and Greece. After their invasion of Greece, the Romans adopted this alphabet, combining it with Etruscan and taking it with them wherever their conquests took them. Their alphabet now totaled 23 letters. In the late 700s Charlemagne undertook the standardization of handwriting in order to create a more legible script. By the 15th century, the alphabet contained 26 letters.

Interestingly, the invention of the printing press in the mid-1400s and copperplate engraving influenced the handwriting of the time. Engraving was capable of great delicacy which in turn was imitated in handwriting with flowing letters and decorative capitals.

Handwriting developed more or less into the style it is presently during the 1800s. Originally, quill pens were used but they were labor-intensive since their points had to be repeatedly trimmed using the sharp blade of what came to be called a pen knife. They were abandoned when steel drip pens became available but these, like quills, had to be dipped into little ink wells which was messy. You can view several of these ink wells and pens at the historical society building. The first patent for a fountain pen was granted in 1827. This eliminated the dipping through the incorporation of a refillable ink reservoir. These pens allowed for smooth fast strokes which made flowing joined scripts possible. One was Spencerian Script. It was highly legible with oval slanting letters which could be written and read quickly. This has been used for the logos of many familiar products such as Triumph Motorcycles, Ford Motors, Bass Ale, Coca-Cola and numerous sports teams. Other scripts were used until the beginning of the 20th century including the famous and lovely Palmer Method, the writing of our grandparents and great-grandparents.

The typewriter appeared in the 1860s gradually taking some of the pressure off scriveners of the day. A writer could produce 30 words per minute and a typist 130. It was the beginning of the end for handwriting.

Ballpoint pens also contributed to handwriting’s demise. Their ink never needed refilling and there were no drips or smudges. They were plentiful and inexpensive. They did not however, float across the paper like the fountain pen. Pressure had to be used which slowed the writer down. They did not lend themselves to loops and flourishes; indeed, these were almost impossible.

The lovely longhand produced by the abecedarians of the past is being supplanted by the sterile technology of the present day. It is sad to think that future generations will be unable to decipher the handwritten documents we all know – letters, identification on the backs of photos, property deeds, and legal documents like birth, death and marriage certificates.
How Far Back in History does Your Historical Society Go?

In December 1974, Malcolm Clark, in his letter to the board of selectmen, stated that a group of interested Middlebury people met in November to discuss the formation and need for a historical society in town. His letter states “We are all very proud of our community and desire to establish a local historical society so that we may discover and collect material which will help to illustrate and establish the history of our community: its settlement and development, its activities in peace and war, progress and population, wealth, education, arts, science, agriculture, trade and transportation, and to provide for the preservation of the collected material and for its accessibility to all those who wish to examine or study it”.

Our historical society has just passed its 42nd birthday. It was incorporated on February 7, 1975. Below is the Voices newspaper notice of its beginning.


date

New Historical Society

MIDDLEBURY – The newly-formed Middlebury Historical Society, Inc. was officially incorporated February 7 according to Malcolm Clark, President of the group. Other officials are Vice-President, Margaret Hetzel; Secretary, Esther Duryee, and Treasurer, William Goss, Jr. Directors are Russell Tollees and Evelyn Spencer for three-year terms, Robert Penn II and Carlos Hill for two years, John Coe and Della Bronson for one year.

The certificate of incorporation lists the following purposes of the historians:

“To bring together those people interested in history, and particularly the history of Middlebury to promote a better appreciation of our American heritage.

“To discover and collect any material to help establish or illustrate history of the Middlebury area with respect to: its exploration, settlement, development and activities in peace and war; its progress in population, wealth, education, arts, science, agriculture, manufactures, trade and transportation.

“To collect printed material such as histories, genealogies, biographies, descriptions, gazetteers, newspapers, posters, etc., and museum material such as pictures, paintings, aboriginal relics and other material objects illustrative of the life, conditions, events and activities of the past and present.

“To provide for the preservation of all those items and for its accessibility as may be feasible to all those who wish to study it.”

The group will also undertake the acquisition, preservation and maintenance of historic buildings, monuments and markers.
Not to know the events which happened before one was born, that is to remain always a boy.

Cicero

Our hours are Monday from 2 to 5 and other times by appointment.

Our Board of Directors meetings are open to the public and you are welcome to join us. If you are interested in a tour, joining the Society, or volunteering, please contact us at 203 206-4717 or middleburyhistoricalsociety.org.

Officers and Board members

President          Bob Rafford       Secretary          Open
Vice President    Agnes Lutes       Treasurer         Terry McAuliffe
Board members are Frank Mirovsky, Edward St John, Dr. Raymond Sullivan and Harold West.