

A Brief History of the Bread Loaf Campus



The central location for the Bread Loaf School of English is the campus located outside Middlebury, in sight of Bread Loaf Mountain in the Green Mountains of Vermont. The original mountain and forest area in which the School of English is located was willed to Middlebury College in 1915 by Joseph Battell, breeder of Morgan horses, proprietor of the local newspaper, spirited lover of nature, and a major benefactor of Middlebury College.

One fine day in the 1860's, Battell, still a young man, and a prosperous one, rode his horse up Sand Hill, beyond East Middlebury, on past Ripton, to a farmhouse on a plateau, within sight of Bread Loaf Mountain. He apparently found the farmhouse sitting on one of the most beautiful sites he had ever seen, for he proceeded to buy it, and the surrounding countryside. Before he was done with his purchases over the next decades, he owned some 40,000 acres. He liked to brag that as he stood on the front porch of the farmhouse he had purchased, he owned all the land he could see from there. When he died, he owned more land in Vermont than any other resident.

Battell soon set about transforming the farmhouse into an inn. One of the most characteristic architectural forms in Vermont is the farmhouse that the nineteenth-century owner built onto as his prosperity and his family grew: you can see many farmhouses, within driving distance of Middlebury, that look something like trains, with additional cars built onto the original structure as the number of children increased. That's how Battell set about constructing an inn at Bread Loaf. The original farmhouse is in fact still embedded there, in the lobby of today's inn. But Battell added on wings and then added first a second and then a third story. But he didn't end with anything ramshackle. He had the splendid architect Clinton Smith build the major buildings that stand at Bread Loaf today, the same architect who built the major structure at the Morgan Horse Farm out from Middlebury on the way to Weybridge. The elegantly simple buildings that were the result are the architectural equivalent of what antique furniture dealers call country formal.

Battell was a member of the generation of the first great wave of American capitalists, and he was himself a supremely savvy entrepreneur, full of Yankee ingenuity. He built the inn and the other structures that now line route 125 in order to attract paying customers to come and stay at Bread Loaf in the summers. He allowed some of his friends to build their own cottages there, so long as they agreed to sell him the structures at a later date. Today, all of the structures painted cream and green at Bread Loaf were built during Battell's lifetime; all the structures painted white were built after his death.

But if Battell was an entrepreneur, he was also a philanthropist. If he was a member of the generation of the great American capitalistic robber barons, he was also just a little older than the great American trust-buster and environmentalist Teddy Roosevelt, who began the system of America's national parks. Battell didn't buy up his 40,000 acres simply out of greed; he bought them up out of an appalled concern that the American wilderness was disappearing. When he died, he left his many acres to Middlebury College and to the state of Vermont, with the devout hope that they would be preserved for future generations, in perpetuity. Battell may accurately be called the founder of a tradition that today makes Middlebury arguably the most environmentally conscious college in the country.

The Bread Loaf School of English is Founded

Battell left the Bread Loaf campus to Middlebury College, and at first the College wasn't entirely sure that it was very lucky in receiving the bequest. For a few years, the college simply ran the place as Battell had run it, as an inn and a collection of cottages for paying customers. But Middlebury was a less successful entrepreneur than Battell, and the enterprise began to lose money.

What to do? In fact, Battell, with his usual canniness, had chosen a good year to die in: 1915. That was the year in which the first of the Middlebury Language Schools was founded. As the German School and, subsequently, other Language Schools were founded, someone at the college—and no one is sure quite who it was—had the fortunate idea of founding a similar school for teachers of English. And that was how the Bread Loaf School of English came into existence, in 1920.

Famously, Robert Frost was closely involved with the first half-century of the school. There is a letter from Frost to a friend, written just a couple of years earlier, in which he entertains a fantasy of founding a school where people could come and do nothing but study and discuss literature. Frost got his dream with the founding of Bread Loaf. He purchased his own acreage in the immediate vicinity, and he subsequently spent more than 40 summers coming to the school and giving lectures there.

A few years after the founding of the school, Director Wilfred Davison noticed that students were coming to Bread Loaf with two different sets of interests: those wishing to study literature and those wishing to write it. The result was the formation of a second Bread Loaf institution in 1926: the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the granddaddy of what are now the dozens, if not hundreds, of writers' conferences in the United States, which budding writers attend in order to sharpen their skills. The School of English itself, however, continues to teach creative writing, along with the teaching of writing, literature, and theater arts.



Bread Loaf Today

Until 1978, Bread Loaf was the Vermont campus, pure and simple. In that year, however, Bread Loaf began to occupy a second summer campus, at Lincoln College, one of the smallest and most beautiful of the colleges at the University of Oxford. At Oxford, Bread Loaf classes are run on a variation of the "Oxford system," with very small classes, often accompanied by tutorials, with one or

two students meeting at periodic intervals with their tutors. The majority of the Bread Loaf/Oxford faculty members are drawn from the faculty of the University of Oxford itself.

In 1991, Bread Loaf, seeking to extend its national presence beyond New England, sought out a distant spot for a second U.S. campus, in New Mexico. Since 1991, Bread Loaf has occupied several sites in northern New Mexico. The chief of these has been St. John's College in Santa Fe, where Bread Loaf/New Mexico was founded and where it offers its courses today. Bread Loaf's New Mexico curriculum offers some courses particularly relevant to its Southwestern location—for example, courses in Hispanic and Chicano literatures, the literature and films of the American West, and American Indian literature.

In 2006, Bread Loaf began offering a summer program of courses at the University of North Carolina in Asheville, with the Blue Ridge Mountains providing much of the spirit of place that the Green Mountains offer in Vermont and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains offer in New Mexico. The Bread Loaf curriculum in North Carolina lays special emphasis upon African American literature and the literature and music of the American South.

Over the years, Bread Loaf has experimented with campuses in other sites, in an effort to gain diversity of various sorts and to serve the needs of teachers from all across the U.S. and around the world. Bread Loaf had a summer presence for nine years at the campus of the University of Alaska Southeast in Juneau, and Bread Loaf also tried a one-year experiment in Mexico, at the Universidad de Guadalajara. Bread Loaf always has the interests of its students at its heart and does not rule out returning to these campuses or to others in future years.

Bread Loaf Writers' Conference History

Bread Loaf is the oldest writers' conference in America. Since 1926—a generation before "creative writing" became a course of study in educational settings—it has convened in mid-August at the Bread Loaf campus of Middlebury College.

Set in the Green Mountain National Forest in Ripton, Vermont, the land was acquired in the nineteenth century by Joseph Battell, breeder of Morgan horses, proprietor of the local newspaper, and spirited lover of nature. He added a cupola and three-story wings to an existing Victorian farmhouse, and built a series of cottages to house his summer guests. Ultimately, Battell purchased more than 30,000 acres of forest and farmland in the mountains, and in 1915, willed all of it to Middlebury College. The College established a graduate school of English and American literature—still in session for six weeks every summer—and housed it on the Bread Loaf campus.

The impulse to establish the "Conferences on Writing" came initially from Robert Frost, who loved the inspiring setting. Willa Cather, Katherine Lee Bates, and Louis Untermeyer—all of whom taught at the School of English in 1922—also suggested that the campus be used for a writers' conference when it was vacant at the end of each August. The idea took hold. At Middlebury College's request, the young editor John Farrar organized a teaching staff and program.

The writers John Farrar attracted to the campus in the first few years—among them Stephen Vincent Benet and Hervey Allen—helped established the reputation of what came to be called the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. They were followed by a long line of writers with established reputations, as well as writers in more formative years, for whom Bread Loaf was a source of encouragement.

The buildings at Bread Loaf have been modernized in the years since Joseph Battell stood near the horse-block, welcoming guests as they alighted from carriages. The old stage route up the steep pitches and hairpin twists of the Ripton Gorge has been paved. Despite concessions to convenience, the campus has changed little in the last half century. The old wood-shingled Bread Loaf Inn, the huge Barn with its fieldstone fireplace, the outlying buildings with their porches and wicker chairs, the stillness of the surrounding forest—all are much as they were in 1926 when the Conference began.

*[Historical facts are taken from *The First Thirty Years* by Theodore Morrison and *Whose Woods These Are* by David Haward Bain and Mary Smyth Duffy.]*

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A Walking History of Middlebury

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[Previous] [Next]

The Mountain Campus

Contents

Home

Preface to the Online Edition

Preface to the Revised Edition

Introduction

Middlebury Before the Village

The Village Tour

The College

The College Campus

The Mountain Campus

Middlebury Village Continued

In the Town

East Middlebury

Bibliography

Glossary

Bread Loaf On Route 125 fifteen miles east of the campus, in Ripton, are additional college facilities developed on part of the land left to the institution in 1915 by Joseph Battell. The Bread Loaf campus is set in a beautiful mountain meadow and includes Battell's 1861 Victorian inn and its adjacent barn, "cottages," library, and "Little Theatre." Formerly a summer hotel, since 1920 Bread Loaf has been the home of the summer school of English and, since 1926, of the summer Writers' Conference (first of its kind in the country). Just to the west is the college-owned Homer Noble Farm, former summer home of Robert Frost, who was for years an important participant in the Writers' Conference.

Here in the winter can be enjoyed the Rikert Ski Touring Center, with fifty kilometers of groomed trails connecting the Bread Loaf campus to the Snow Bowl.



View of Bread Loaf Inn (right), the Eli (left) and the Music Studio (far left) from Route 125, ca. 1900. The Eli burned in the 1930s and was replaced with the Little Theatre and Library buildings. Stewart-Swift Research Center at the Henry Sheldon Museum, Albert Fletcher Collection

The Snow Bowl Further east on Route 125 (and open only during the skiing season) is the Middlebury College Snow Bowl, with its three chair lifts, and fourteen trails and slopes. The area is served by the Neil Starr Shelter, which—with its food services, huge fireplace, glazed balcony, and sunny terrace—is an ideal location from which to observe the Snow Bowl's activities.