

Story by Amanda Kay Gustin  
Photos courtesy of the  
Vermont Historical Society



## VERMONT HISTORY

# Joseph Battell and the Morgan Horse

*Joseph Battell held forth that the Morgan horse—not the Standardbred—was the true trotting racehorse of America.*

**F**EW VERMONTERS HAVE HAD AS VARIED AN impact on the history of the state as Joseph Battell. As a businessman, philanthropist, author, innkeeper, newspaper publisher, and finally horse breeder, his life touched nearly every aspect of life in Vermont in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Born in Middlebury in July 1839, Joseph was the son of Philip Battell and Emma Seymour, both themselves scions of well-connected families. Emma's father was Horatio Seymour, who had served as one of Vermont's earliest United States senators, and she was among Middlebury's most eligible young women. Philip came to Vermont as part of the Middlebury College class of 1826. They married in 1836, but Emma passed away after a long battle with tuberculosis when Joseph was just 2 years old.

His childhood was isolating and difficult, but he followed in his father's footsteps and attended Middlebury College. He would have been part of the class of 1860, but never graduated after spending years fighting his own ill health. He traveled in Europe for several years, and when he returned home he pursued a

number of business ventures including real estate investment, publishing the *Middlebury Register*, and operating the Bread Loaf Inn in Ripton.

Joseph had been a horseman all his life, and he viewed the coming age of the automobile—a “murdering monster destroying the peace of the forest with its thunder and bringing in crowds of people”—with concern and no small amount of disdain. His *Middlebury Register* often carried page after page of notices of gruesome accidents collected from papers across the country, and he tried to have legislation passed forbidding automobiles from using public roads in Middlebury. He did not allow any automobiles at the Bread Loaf Inn. He preferred the pace and aesthetic benefits of horses, whether ridden or driven.

In particular, Joseph loved Morgan horses. His nephew, Philip Battell Stewart, later said of him that “he was a militant partisan for Vermont and Middlebury, for Vermont women and Vermont horses.”

He began breeding horses in 1875 and bred nearly 150 of them during the next 40 years of his life.

In 1878, Joseph commissioned architect Clinton Smith to build a barn on land he had purchased in Weybridge. For the sum of \$10,000, he constructed a







Joseph Battell holding Nocturne, a Morgan he had bred.

Frontispiece for Daniel Chipman Linsley's *Morgan Horses: A Premium Essay*. Illustration of Figure, the first Morgan horse, that appeared in both Daniel Linsley and Joseph Battell's books about the breed.

# MORGAN HORSES:

## A Premium Essay

ON

THE ORIGIN, HISTORY, AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS REMARKABLE

AMERICAN BREED OF HORSES;

TRACING THE PEDIGREE  
FROM THE ORIGINAL JUSTIN MORGAN, THROUGH THE MOST NOTED OF HIS  
PROGENY, DOWN TO THE PRESENT TIME.

WITH NUMEROUS PORTRAITS

TO WHICH ARE ADDED

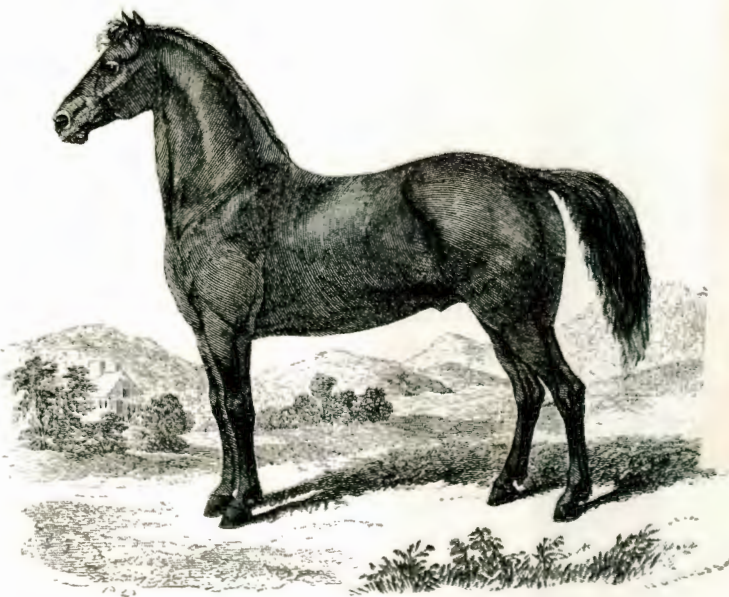
HINTS FOR BREEDING, BREAKING, AND GENERAL USE AND  
MANAGEMENT OF HORSES.

WITH

PRACTICAL DIRECTIONS FOR TRAINING THEM FOR EXHIBITION AT  
AGRICULTURAL FAIRS.

BY

D. C. LINSLEY,  
MIDDLEBURY, VT.



Justin Morgan  
From wood cut in "Morgan Horses"

Frontispiece.





Riders up on U.S. government-bred Morgans in Middlebury for the start of the 1921 300-mile endurance race. Below: Troubadour of Willowmoor, one of the Morgans purchased by government agents and brought back to Vermont, in front of the Figure statue to show his throwback type.



barn and outbuildings that he named the Bread Loaf Stock Farm and moved his nascent breeding operations there. Over the years, breeders across Vermont and then across the world had been developing different strains of Morgans. Joseph's ideal was athletic, thrifty, and keen.

He particularly liked his Morgans to be fast. He himself preferred to drive them and would often fetch visitors to his Bread Loaf Inn himself, covering the flatter miles from Middlebury to the base of the mountains at breathtaking speed. For years, he carried on a feud with John Wallace, editor of the *American Trotting Register*, arguing that the Morgan horse—not the Standardbred—was the true trotting racehorse of America.

After a promising start, the Morgan horse had begun to slide into obscurity when Joseph purchased his farm in Weybridge. The breed's foundation sire Figure had died in 1821 in a field, unknown and unlamented. He had bred horses across Vermont, and several of his sons were beginning to put their stamp on the horse-breeding world. Clearly, a type was developing—but when does a breeding type become a breed?

The first steps in this regard were made by Daniel Chipman Linsley, a businessman and Middlebury native, who after several years of research and correspondence published *Morgan Horses: A Premium Essay on the Origin, History, and Characteristics of the Remarkable American Breed of Horses* in 1857. Linsley's book began with an attempt to describe, in minute detail, a perfect type of horse, and then proceeded to inform its reader that the Morgan horse fit his defined characteristics perfectly. He recounted—as best he could—the history of Justin





General Gates, bred by Joseph Battell



Congratulating a finisher of the 1921 300-mile endurance race at the U.S. government Morgan Horse Farm.

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Telegram from Senator Ralph Flanders to Earl Krantz, director of the U.S. Morgan Horse Farm, confirming the transfer of the farm to the state of Vermont.



Morgan and his horse Figure and traced the most prominent sons of Figure.

Soon after purchasing his farm, Joseph began to embark on an ambitious project. Aided by W.H. Bliss, also of Middlebury, he picked up Daniel Linsley's work and took it exponentially further. He retraced Linsley's steps in researching the life of Figure and added his own new efforts to that story. Even more important, however, he took Linsley's early work in tracking the first bloodlines of Morgan horses to exhausting, almost obsessive detail. In his introduction, he wryly states that "some of our friends have become impatient at the time consumed in the preparation of this work..." After nine years, during which he sent out more than 100,000 letters of inquiry and spent more than \$150,000 of his own money, he published the first volume of *The Morgan Horse and Register* in 1894. Key to his expansion was the creation not simply of a record but of a breed register, complete with rules of admission and standards. Subsequent volumes followed in 1905 and, after his death, in 1915.

In May 1907, Joseph offered the farm he had built to the United States government for a grand total of \$1.00. The gift included the farm buildings and 400 acres of land around the farm as well as 20 or so of his remaining horses, including a stallion of his own breeding, General Gates, that was to become the foundation stallion of the new government breeding program. That program had already begun as a cavalry remount breeding program in 1905, with a certain number of the horses from New England expected to be of Morgan heritage. Agriculture officials had purchased a handful of Morgan horses and begun operations in Burlington at the University of Vermont; with Joseph's gift, they moved their operations down to Weybridge. "In making this gift to the United States I am actuated, in a large measure, by a desire to encourage the breeding of Morgan horses and to effect their restoration to their former breeding position in this country, and I trust this gift of land will be used primarily for this purpose," stated the warranty deed gifting the farm to the government, May 1907, courtesy of the Sheldon Museum of Vermont History.

The United States Morgan Horse Farm, or the Government Farm, operated from 1907 to 1951. During those years, more than 500 Morgans were bred at the farm,

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*The editor's grandfather, Wes Jordan, with his brand-new 1930 Studebaker.*

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*The editor's \$300 1948 Plymouth Special Deluxe 'daily driver' back in 1976.*



**VERMONT**  
 magazine  
*Vermonters, Our Places & Our History*





Then (in 1934, above) as now, visitors flock to the farm, now known as the UVM Morgan Horse Farm (a small admission fee is charged) from May 1 to October 31 each year. (For more information, visit [uvm.edu/morgan](http://uvm.edu/morgan).)



Green Mountain, a Morgan bred by Joseph Battell, being driven in front of the Middlebury Inn.

and by 1915, it totaled nearly 1,000 acres in size. Many of the horses bred at the farm were dispersed to other cavalry remount stations across the United States—at its height, in the 1930s, the remount service nationwide was producing as many as 10,000 foals each year. The farm's goals were to produce an ideal military horse and to research horsemanship. To that end, they tested the speed, athleticism, and endurance of the horses they were breeding in events such as a 300-mile endurance ride organized from 1919 to 1926, in which numerous government-bred Morgans competed and excelled.

After World War II, mounted cavalry was clearly on its way out as a component of warfare, and the remount service was phased out. Unfortunately, many of the horses that had been part of the program were deemed no longer useful and were destroyed. The remaining Morgans in Weybridge were more fortunate; they were dispersed among the New England land grant universities, with 26 remain-





ing at their original farm. The University of Vermont took over management of Joseph Battell's original farm and continues to run it today. ▼

Amanda Kay Gustin is the public program manager at the Vermont Historical Society, where she plans statewide history engagement and programming. She holds degrees in history and museum work from Tufts University and Middlebury College.

## JUST THE FACTS

### Vermont History Museum

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