



James Otis Follett:  
“Builder of Bridges and Men”

***By Karson Petty***

*Photos sourced from the Townshend Historical Society website: [www.townshendvt.org](http://www.townshendvt.org)*



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*Traveling by ox cart along dusty dirt roads to his new home in Townshend, six-year-old James Otis Follett could never have imagined the immense impact he would later have on the surrounding community. In the spring of 1849, his widowed mother, Eliza Bemis Follett, finally obtained the money needed to purchase her dream farmhouse on East Hill. Because widows could not own property in that era, the purchase was made in young James's name, solidifying his Townshend citizenship. For the remainder of his childhood and subsequent teenage years, Follett lived a simple life working on the family farm with his younger brother Samuel and attending school.*



*Photo 1: The Follett Homestead on East Hill*

*All was well for Follett until years of rising tension between the Northern and Southern states erupted into what was to become the deadliest conflict in American history. Follett was a young man of nineteen when the nation was shattered by war in 1861. By the summer of 1862, the Civil War was proving to be costly, and not even rural Townshend was left untouched. On August 29<sup>th</sup> of that year, in response to President Lincoln's need for more*

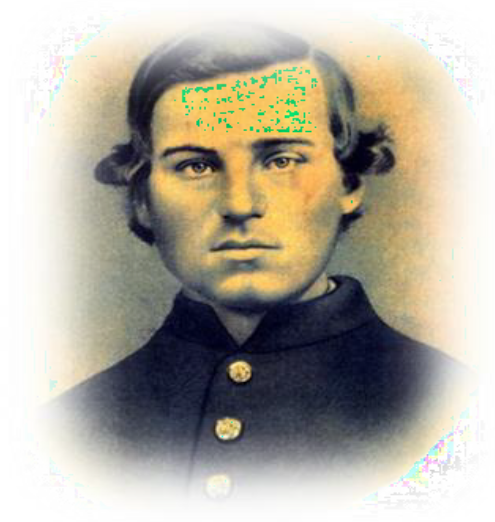
*able-bodied men, Follett and twenty-three of his fellow Townshend compatriots enlisted in the Union Army.*



*Photo 2: Private James O. Follett, 16<sup>th</sup> VT Reg.*

*They had joined Company D of the 16<sup>th</sup> volunteer regiment, which was comprised of men from towns in Windham and Windsor counties. Follett began his 9-month service in October 1862, with two weeks of equipping and training at Camp Dummer in Brattleboro. Before he was deployed by rail to Washington D.C., James began writing faithfully to his brother Samuel in Townshend. The thoughtfully and elegantly fashioned letters reveal an intelligent, sincere, and passionate young man with a handle on national politics beyond his years.*

*I never thought slavery right. ...when [the southern states] dare to rebel, and use slavery as the principle object and strength thereof then I say deal the blow where it will be the most effectual, for the best interest of the Union.*



*Photo 3: Private Samuel; Follett. 11<sup>th</sup> VT Reg.*

*Stationed in Fairfax County, Virginia, James Follett poignantly observed the South as a soldier and as a Vermonter:*

*But what most attracted our attention were the inhabitants, not merely the Blacks but the Whites for as a poor class they seemed, if possible more degraded than the former...Some of [the children] were bright-eyed and quite intelligent looking, but very dirty and ragged; and the hut in which they lived a VT farmer would think unfit for a hog pen; and these children had never had the privilege of a common school, and must necessarily grow up in ignorance, forever degraded—a burden to themselves and those around them.*

*Follett had not yet seen combat in his 9-month-service.*

*Until one day, in late June of 1863, he and the rest of Company D began to march northward to Pennsylvania. They were to aid in the repulsion of Confederate forces that is now infamously known as the Battle of Gettysburg.*

*On July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1863, the third and final day of the terrible battle, the VT 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment was commanded to conduct a flanking maneuver that disrupted the Confederate attack since known as Pickett's charge. In forcing a Confederate surrender, the course of the war was ultimately changed. And almost exactly a year after he enlisted, Follett returned to Brattleboro, where he was mustered out of the army as a corporal.*



*Photo 4: 1886 Reunion of Vermont veterans at Devil's Den, Gettysburg*

*Young Samuel shared his brother's patriotic hunger for justice and joined the Union army for a subsequent term of service in December of 1863. His regiment, the Vermont 11<sup>th</sup>, was under the command of General Ulysses S. Grant during the grueling Virginia campaigns of 1864. Unlike James, Samuel's good fortune expired during his service. A battlefield illness claimed his life at a military hospital near Washington D.C. By the end of August 1864, he had been sent home and buried in Oakwood Cemetery. He was not yet 21 years old.*

*After the untimely death of his brother, Follett resumed his life in Townshend as a humbled young man all the wiser. He intensified his dedication to the Christian Faith and became a deacon of the Townshend Congregational Church at the age of 22; a position he maintained for the rest of his life.*



*Photo 5: Townshend Congregational Church c. 1857*

*While undergoing the transition to independence of self and profession, at the same age, Follett found love with a respectable young woman named Clara Elizabeth Kimball. They were married on November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1864 and had six children over the following decade: Alice, Abby, Mattie, Orison, Arthur, and Florence Ethel. All of them would come to work on the East Hill farm; of which Follett had succeeded his mother as proprietor.*

*With a blossoming family and a burgeoning farm, Follett gradually began to cast his bright ambition upon the local community; directing his ceaseless passion toward enhancement, altruism, and conservation.*

*Follett's life-long commitment to the betterment of Townshend was initiated when he became the town's first and longest-serving road commissioner. He was successively elected to the offices of lister and selectman, then was chosen to represent Townshend in the state legislature in 1896; for it was commonplace that all towns had a seat in the statehouse in Follett's era.*

*However, the crowning achievements of Follett's unique legacy of selflessness were seeded two years prior to his term as town representative. In 1894, the first of Follett's incredible stone arch bridges was erected. Using a method employed by the ancient Romans, stones of varying size and shape were placed in an arched wooden scaffolding which spanned the stream bed. Once the keystone was placed at the peak of the arch, the bridge could stand freely, and the wooden "crib" was removed. This was due to the displacement of the enormous weight of the stones along the length of the arch. Follett's construction method provided an ingeniously inexpensive and efficient alternative to the widely accepted iron bridge construction of his time. His first bridge reportedly cost the town the modest sum of 160 dollars. He could use local resources, materials, and labor to erect a bridge that*



*would perfectly meet the town's needs and last for decades; and the incredible fact is that he had no formal education in engineering or architecture whatsoever!*

*Neighboring towns soon took notice of Follett's engineering prowess, and historical records indicate that he built as many as forty stone arch bridges in Southern Vermont and New Hampshire. He built seven bridges in Townshend alone; six of which still stand to this day. Perhaps the most impressive of his engineering feats is the Tannery Brook Bridge in West Townshend. The thirty-five-foot-long span is made of roughly hewn granite blocks that now withstand the immense weight of town trucks the likes of which Follett could never have envisioned. The Simpsonville arch bridge now supports present-day Route 35. Since its construction, it was buttressed by large culverts to meet the demands of modern traffic.*

*The Buck Hill arch bridge, located just southwest of the Scott covered bridge, supports a ten-foot-long section of town road, and still withstands periodic traffic from motor vehicles. Three of the arch bridges, which no longer see vehicle traffic, are located between the Townshend State Park and Townshend Dam reservoir on the west side of the West River.*



*Photo 6: Tannery Brook Bridge, West Townshend*

*James Follett died of a sudden illness on February 23, 1911. He was buried alongside his mother and brother in Oakwood Cemetery. With no signs of retiring from his many construction projects or religious activism, his death came as a tremendous shock to the local community. More than two-hundred people attended his funeral. Having lost not only a phenomenal craftsman and master builder, but an outstandingly compassionate citizen and father, he was missed indescribably. After a seventeen-year stretch of bridge construction, and a lifetime of unrelenting service to his country, his community, and his family, he will forever be immortalized in Townshend's vibrant history.*

*His bridges currently stand as Townshend's very own monolithic wonders. They are a testament to the monumental figure of James Otis Follett. His legacy, and the colossal impact it made on the town, is still felt today. An excerpt from his obituary in the Vermont Phoenix (1834-1955) reads:*

*He has always been a devoted Christian, whose sacrifice of time and means for the moral and spiritual life of the community will not soon be forgotten.*



*Photo 7: James O. Follett & Clara E. Kimball headstone, Oakwood Cemetery  
(Taken by Karson Petty)*

## Bibliography

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