

“The History and Future of the Vermont Landscape”

Dr. Jan Albers  Aiken Lecture

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If you look around the country, you find that many states have strong senses of identity. There's Texas, constantly confusing being biggest with being best; or glamorous California, like a young starlet trying to prove it is not just another pretty face. Aristocratic Virginia thinks it won the Revolution single-handedly—as does Massachusetts. Other states' images are more murky—think of North Dakota or Delaware or Nebraska. New Jersey recently tried to address its image problem head on with a contest for a new license plate slogan. One of the front-runners, last I heard, was “New Jersey—The Whatchalookinat State.”

Vermont may be small, but it is a place imbued with a strong sense of being special. Our exceptionalism is largely based on two things: first, a belief that Vermonters have retained more of their crotchety independence than other Americans and, secondly, our pride in having preserved a landscape of exceptional beauty. Tonight I am going to talk about some of the historical forces that have created the Vermont landscape we value. Darby will have the more difficult task of trying to predict its future.

The landscapes we live in are the greatest example of the transformative force of human beings, and yet we generally take them for granted. Step back for a moment and think of the clearing and earth moving and extracting and burning and building we have done on this great ant farm of the earth, and it hits you again that there is no more potent symbol of the pure power of our species than the landscape. Most of what we see around us is the result of human choices, piling up in layers, like silt or snow, year by decade by century, until its has all been transformed again and again.

We live surrounded by our decisions, but not all landscape decisions are created equal. Each age finds its own answers to what my fellow-Minnesotan, Garrison Keillor, has dubbed, “life's persistent questions.” So the history of the landscape is the history of how people have chosen to change the land in the course of creating shelter, getting food and making a living; and what they thought they were doing, at the time. That is where our historical understanding of Vermont's landscape can begin.

I am going to speak tonight about four formative periods of Vermont history and how their distinct characteristics have shaped the landscape for good and for ill. First, the peculiar circumstances of its settlement gave Vermont a distinctly independent air. Secondly, the growth

of community in the early-nineteenth century bequeathed to us a remarkable aesthetic legacy. In the third era, the poverty of the late-nineteenth century preserved lost ways of life and reinforced the state's remoteness. Finally, the modern period sees a Vermont struggling with the tensions between freedom and community, preservation and development.

Vermonters feel an affinity with the rest of New England--so much so that we tend to forget how much later European settlement came here. The Puritans who settled southern New England came in groups and set themselves up in the English pattern, where farmers live close together in villages and go out from there to work their fields. So they dwelled in close communities from the start, with all the social constraints that entailed. The records they left us are full of disputes over pigs wandering into neighbor's gardens, fights over fences and nosy Parker condemnations of improper behavior. They had to adapt to each other so that the community could survive in this place that was, to them, a wilderness.

As European settlement progressed in the rest of New England, Vermont remained a remote frontier—a rugged and dangerous battleground between the farmers of New England and the trappers of New France. This no-mans-land could not be settled safely until the battles of the French and Indian Wars came to a virtual end at Quebec City in 1759. The subsequent fights between New York and New Hampshire over the right to grant land in the region led to further delays. By the time most of Vermont was opened for settlement, in the decades before the American Revolution, it was almost 150 years since the first pilgrims sailed into Plymouth Harbor. That is about the same amount of time we have between us and the Civil War.

So almost everything about the founding of Vermont was different from the experiences of much of the rest of New England. Their settlers came from Europe—most of our earliest ones came from later generations of what had, by then, become New England Yankees. Their settlers came to a wilderness, while ours came from families with generations of experience in this environment. The first New Englanders chose to live in tidy, well-regulated communities, but Vermont was settled in a wild free-for-all of land speculation and mayhem.

The young men and women who came to Vermont were fleeing the confines of the hothouse villages of their forbears to the south. Many of their holdings were 50-100 acres in size, so they were necessarily spread out on the landscape. Villages only developed here when they became economically necessary. So, right from the start, Vermont may have attracted people who wanted a greater measure of freedom—or could at least endure a culture of less restraint. Long before America had the Wild West, it had the Wild North Woods of Vermont.

Land speculation was rampant in this wild place, and no one participated in it with more glee than Vermont's own Allen brothers. I have told this story before, but as we are in the Ira Allen Chapel tonight, it seems only right to begin with a tale of Ira himself, for he was the greatest land speculator of them all. He would survey a section of Vermont, then go down to southern New England and sell it off to a group of land speculators, or proprietors, who would then sell it to potential settlers. Once a section was sold, Ira would get the money for the survey. Lots were described by the trees listed on their corners, so some buyers started to get wise to the fact that evergreen trees meant poor farmland. In his autobiography, Ira bragged about how, in 1772, he fleeced a group of proprietors into buying a useless tract of farmland called "Mansfield," the future site of Stowe and Underhill. His account gives the flavor of the times:

My next object was to make a map of the township of Mansfield, with the allotments & surveys bills thereof. I so completed the map: but turning my attention to the field books, that Captain Remember Baker and I had kept, a difficulty arose in my mind, for my object was to sell out of Mansfield and if possible get the ninety pounds for the survey. A great proportion of the corners of said lots were made on spruce or fir timber, and if I described them as such, it would show the poorness of the town. In my survey bills, I called spruce and fir gumwood, a name not known by the people of Sharon [Connecticut], where the proprietors lived. They asked what kind of timber gumwood was. I told them tall straight trees that had a gum... I took aside the brother of one of the principal proprietors, who was an ignorant fellow and owned two rights, I tried to buy his rights, but he dared not sell them without first consulting his brother. By this the proprietors all got the alarm that I wished to purchase, and land in Mansfield was considered of consequence. I was urged to sell back to the proprietors the twenty rights I had bought, which I did, and obtained the ninety pounds for the survey, &c., which I considered of more consequence than the whole town. I returned to my brothers, and had a hearty laugh with Heman and Zimri, on informing them respecting the gumwood.

Other places name their churches after saints, but Vermonters named this one after Ira Allen! That tells you something about the unique character of this place.

Vermont had no shortage of hucksters, willing to extol her virtues to potential buyers, and it was working. By 1790, over 85,000 people had come to Vermont to make their fortunes, swelling to 217,000 by 1810. Some made bad choices, like Moses Warner, the first settler in Andover, of whom it was written, "...he selected his farm ...because, as he said, it was free from stones; but he soon found that there were plenty underneath the leaves, and the farm is today the most stony one in town."

Like all frontiers, early Vermont was short of women, but the ones who came were pretty feisty. When the Rev. Nathan Perkins of Connecticut toured Vermont in 1789, he wrote, "I ask myself are these women of ye same species with our fine Ladies? tough are they, brawny their

limbs,--their young girls unpolished--& will wear work as well as mules.” Conditions could be very primitive. In one village, a dozen women had only one needle between them, and would meet for sewing bees where they could share it.

So settlement happened in an atmosphere that put few restraints on the rights of the individual. Tens of thousands of axes were chopping down acre after acre of virgin forests, with devastating environmental consequences. Without their trees, the mountainsides were opened to erosion, and the habitats of plants, birds and animals were destroyed. By the time of statehood, in 1791, beaver, otters, catamounts, deer and many other creatures were already becoming scarce. All the while, the settlers, acting independently, never doubted that they were nature’s improvers, not its destroyers.

But as the first frantic scramble of hand-to-mouth subsided, even wild Vermonters started to create the structures of community. Town meetings began and town officers were selected—the beginnings of that face-to-face local government we still hold so dear. In this second phase, taverns, schools, lawyers' offices and churches were beginning to appear, usually in about that order. Tidy towns were being built, as the settlers sought out supplies, markets and a new measure of culture. The growth of community would gradually lead to greater restraints on individual freedoms, and the exploitation of the land.

Vermont’s economy was starting to take off. As early as 1791, John Lincklaen, a Dutch land agent who was visiting Vermont, found that “The settlements are new, but people begin to live at their ease.” The turn of the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of a great economic boom. Crops were initially bountiful, stoked by centuries of nutrients that had built up in the forest soils. The Merino sheep was introduced in 1811, and soon a million and a half of them would dot the freshly-cleared mountainsides. Extractive industries were furnishing lumber and stone to the world. A small Industrial Revolution was getting off the ground, making textiles, stoves and many other products. By 1820, over 80% of the families around Windsor were buying things from local businesses each year—most of them people whose settler parents and grandparents had hardly ever seen a shop.

In town after town, the Vermonters showed that, once they could afford it, they cared about the aesthetics of their environment. You could argue that the luckiest thing that ever happened to the Vermont landscape was to have had its first great building boom take place in a time when Americans were building everything from the smallest farm cape to the grandest church in a tasteful and adaptable neoclassical style. Civic buildings became a matter of public pride, and homes and businesses were built to reflect larger social and community values. Here

in remote Vermont, the simple settlers were spawning children who grew up to want homes and villages full of buildings whose lines echoed the classical world. They would show that Vermonters understood the glories of Western civilization.

Middlebury is a good example of such an upwardly mobile young town. The little hamlet got its first shop in 1790. By 1830, it was the second biggest town in Vermont, [pop. 3468] because its boosterish citizens--eager to show their taste and self-confidence-- had cared enough to build schools, a courthouse, a Masonic lodge, four beautiful churches, a few shops, some imposing private houses, a number of substantial industrial buildings and a College.

The Vermont villages were not large, but they represented a distinct break with the surrounding countryside. Farmers might come to the village to do their business, but the villagers were not going out to work on the farms. Vermont was generating enough wealth to allow some folks to move off the farm and live lives more like the ones their ancestors from southern New England had left behind. The classic Vermont village of our fantasies—and our postcards—is largely the product of their efforts in the early-nineteenth century.

By 1853, in a talk before the Rutland County Society, Henry Lester was boasting of Vermont:

Where else can be found so many elegant and commodious dwellings, adorned with trees and flowers and everything to make home desirable, such convenient roads, so many churches and public schools so well supported, where such deep and general devotion to religion, and where else do the morals and intelligence of the community come up to those of the rural districts of our own Vermont?

He spoke too soon. After the Civil War, Vermont was facing a force that would have the greatest impact on the landscape here since the clearing of the Northern Forest: poverty. The poor had always been with us, for even in the good years there had not been a lot of wealth here for most people. Stories like that of John Whittemore were common. As a baby, his parents brought him from Massachusetts to a farm in St. Albans. When his father died, the mother was left with four young children; and John later wrote that, “It may well be supposed we were poor and needy, and often in need of the comforts of life...[In winter] to rise in the morning and see the ground covered with snow and no wood to make a fire, and no clothing to keep me warm, and no shoes for my feet, but old worn out ones of my mother’s—all these together made it so gloomy that I would almost give up in despair.” Tales like his would become all too common as Vermont went downhill.

As the nation moved West, Vermont was not in a position to compete. The state's economy was largely based on agriculture, but it proved to have very little prime agricultural soil. While the settlers had tried to farm right up to the tops of the Green Mountains, many were fighting a losing battle with the rocks. The amount of land in private ownership stayed stable, but the amount of it that was "improved" by clearing for grazing or cultivation declined rapidly as Vermont was ground down into a depressed poverty. In 1870, nearly 70% of farmland was considered improved, while in 1920, only 40% was improved. What that figure reflects is that, before the turn of the 20th century, Vermont was over 70% deforested--almost the exact reverse of what we see around us today, when it is about 70% forested. Farms that had sold for \$100-200 an acre in 1874 were fetching \$5 an acre by the end of the century.

The new railroads filled up with Vermont's greatest export in this period: her people, heading West. By 1870 over 1/3 of Vermont's natives had moved out of state. Many Vermont towns reached their highest populations by 1850, when the median town size was 1200 souls, and then began to shrink. By 1920, the median size had shrunk to 900 people, and many towns did not recover to 1850 population levels until well after 1970. Some never did.

Late 19th century Vermont was a sad place where man had exploited nature, and nature was now mindlessly striking back by making it clear that much of the state had never been meant for agriculture. Many farms were flat-out abandoned, with devastating consequences for the hill towns. Clarence Dempsey, Vermont's Commissioner of Education, lamented the impact on rural schools:

When the family furniture is loaded in the wagon, the key is turned in the door and the boards are nailed over the windows, children do not come from that home. Thus many a school becomes lonesome, and many are closed because the children are gone. Oftentimes the small school which may be continued becomes lifeless, difficult and expensive to run. Its upkeep seems a burden...Conditions then go from bad to worse, and discouragement, dissatisfaction and fault-finding are common.

The loss of the hill farms meant the loss of communities.

By 1900, apart from the successful valley farms, which were increasingly dominated by dairy, a few small-scale industries and a limited number of extractive stone and lumber operations, the Vermont economy was in bad shape. Some immigrant groups were able to find employment in specialized trades—Italian granite workers in Barre, Welsh slate cutters in Proctor—but for the predominant Yankee population, Vermont had little to offer in the way of

opportunity. While other states blossomed with the fruits of the Industrial Revolution and its attendant urbanization, Vermont was never fully able to compete.

There is nothing pretty about poverty, but in landscape terms it is a powerful preservative. When people are poor, they don't—they can't—replace the old farmhouse with something new. Big factories don't get built where there's no money. The countryside doesn't get eaten up by suburbs in places with no jobs for suburbanites.

Farm abandonment was tragic for those who lived through it, but it also removed the human pressure from fragile soils and allowed the trees to reemerge. Many of the landscape features we love the most here today--the beautiful old farmhouses and snug villages and open fields--still exist because no one back then could afford to mess them up. Vermont's preservation has often come at a bitter human price.

It is not just poverty that has helped Vermont retain so much that other states have lost—it is also its relative isolation. Our geographical position made settlement a challenge. At every stage since, transportation tended to lag: water travel, roads, railroads, freeways and airports were hard to get built here because of the state's economic and demographic limitations. Vermont never really came to be on the way to much of anywhere, and that has also had enormous repercussions for the state.

Most people who grew up in rural Vermont [and even 'urban' Vermont was relatively rural] had very limited contact with a broader world. A good sense of this can be gleaned by reading the memoirs of Walter Rice Davenport, who wrote in the 1920s about the isolation of his childhood on a dairy farm in the hill town of Williamstown, located between Montpelier and Randolph Center, in the decades after the Civil War. The biggest excitement he could hope for in a year was haying season, when he got to stay at neighboring farms—an experience that seemed very exotic to the boy, finding out that his neighbors did things a little differently at their houses. But the highlight of his youth came when he first got a chance to visit the booming metropolis of Montpelier. For him, the sight of this town of well under 5000 souls was almost overwhelming. In a section of his memoir called "Montpelier Vs. Heaven" he described its impact on a boy who had barely been off the farm:

I think my first trip to Montpelier must have been made... just after the [Civil] War.. We went, of course, by team, going through Berlin, as the "turnpike"...was a shorter cut than the route through Barre.

Up to that time Northfield was the largest village I had ever seen...But when we reached the crest of Berlin hill overlooking the capital of the state and I saw the golden dome of the State House, the spires of the village churches, the seemingly majestic facades of the business blocks, and the meandering Onion, as it wound through the place,

I was filled with unspeakable joy. If when my raptured eyes finally beheld the New Jerusalem, it seems as wonderful to me, as did Montpelier as I saw it from the hills of Berlin, I shall be abundantly satisfied.

For a boy living who had only lived at home, on a remote mountainside, with tallow candles, a pump for water, and so few books that he knew them all by heart, this small taste of the world outside was a revelation that would change his life. Thousands of Vermonters grew up in conditions equally remote.

Even in the 1870s and 80s, Vermont was already one of the most rural states in the Union. Some Vermonters figured this meant they were the nation's worst failures, as nowhere else seemed to have had the Industrial Revolution pass it by so decisively. As one of Vermont's critics saw it, the Green Mountains had always been the state's problem, precisely because they encouraged provincialism. Speaking to a Boston audience in 1911, James Paddock Taylor argued that,

The mountains have not proved to be a blessing...[but] they have inevitably been a hindrance to the State of Vermont. Unclimbed, they have made a commonwealth of valley-dwellers, complacent and provincial. Undeveloped, they have fostered local conservatism and narrowness of interest. Unrevered, they have cultivated in us all an excess of individuality. And so the mountains have had their revenge on us. We have misinterpreted our mountains. Shadowed and hidden by our ranges, we have stayed close in the valley, content to be a valley people, each feeling that his mountain-fringed plot is a world.

But change was coming even to the remote mountains of the Green Mountain state. In the first half of the twentieth century, rural electrification brought new contact with the outside world through radio and telegraph and telephones. The pace of these changes—as with most changes before and since--was slower here, but it was coming, nevertheless.

In 1929, an inspector for the Vermont Commission on Country Life was noting a closing of the gap between rural and town life:

Twenty years ago when walking along the street of Middlebury or Brandon you could recognize a farm boy as far as you could see him. Today, with...automobiles, radios, movies, etc...you can not tell the farm boys from the other boys. There is one aspect I have thought about in my farm bureau work. One hundred years ago the farmers did not have nearly what they have today. They had tallow dips and spun their own clothes. They had none of the luxuries. Neither had anyone else. One hundred years ago, the farmer was the squire of the community. He rather looked down on the other people of the community. Today things are reversed. His conditions are not like his grandfather's were, but he has not so much money left over at the end of the year as the town boy has...How can I tell my boy to stay on the farm?

The homogenization of culture he describes was to continue, as Vermont slowly began to catch up with the rest of the United States. The loss of local identity has been one of the most pronounced trends of the past century in America. We Vermonters have been granted something of a reprieve from the excesses of this trend by inheriting a tinier, more manageable, version of America. The question is, how much of what makes Vermont special can we keep?

At the dawn of the 21st century, we are reaping the benefits of many of the Vermonts that have come before us. The Vermont tradition of crusty independence can still be seen all over the state on Town Meeting Day. Many people don't want their landscape freedoms infringed upon, whether the issue is farming or hunting or septic regulations. It is an independence that can threaten planning and conservation. But this independence has as often been put to the service of the community, manifesting itself in a willingness to try things to preserve the landscape that most states wouldn't, like the billboard ban, and the bottle bill and Act 250. All these things have been more boon than bane to the economy of this state.

The beauties of the Vermont landscape are largely the result of a fortuitous boom and what has been, for our generations, an equally fortuitous bust. Vermont had its greatest early economic success at a time when everyone who could afford lintels over the windows and a lovely paneled front door thought it was worth it to put them on. Good architecture survives, and the fruits of their legacy are still desirable residences. Where the hill farms failed, the trees have grown back, and these areas are now in great demand for housing lots and recreation.

Poverty has been bred in the bones of the state for so long, that it has become one of our defining characteristics. In saying that, I do not mean that Vermont is still as poor as ever. But I believe that a century of poverty has given us a culture here that is somewhat less materialistic than that which prevails in much of the rest of America. Calvin Coolidge noted this tendency in his *Autobiography*, saying of the Vermonters he grew up with in Plymouth, "They drew no class distinctions except toward those who assumed superior airs. Those they held in contempt. They held strongly to the doctrine of equality." Native Vermonters do not tend to be wasteful of resources. And many of the wealthy people who retire here from out of state choose to come because they want to leave the worst of American materialism behind. Apart from a few pockets scattered around the state, you don't see a lot of Hummers, or 10,000 square foot houses, or even \$500 a plate charity dinners in Vermont. We don't much go for show.

But, perhaps without realizing it, we have for too long relied on our relative remoteness and poverty to save us from ourselves. We may once have been rocky ground for the excesses of American consumer culture, but the big box land of Williston might be changing all of that. We

don't want a Vermont covered with McMansions, but we're loath to curtail our neighbor's freedom to build what and where they like—or our own desire to sell them a lot.

Some politicians and developers will tell you that “we can have it all” here in Vermont—the sprawl and suburbanization that characterize much of America's current development and the small scale and character we have long revered. They are wrong. The economic engine that drives the Vermont economy is our state's uniqueness. That is we what we have to offer, and what will attract jobs that pay a whole lot better than a Wal-Mart. Our riches are based on the richness of our landscape, and anything that erodes that threatens to make us poorer.

We can no longer rely on the isolation and lean resources that long served to protect our state from the trends that have undermined the character of much of America. We live in an age of telecommuters, who can use computer hookups, faxes, and satellites to do a wide variety of jobs from Vermont without reference to the limitations of the landscape. Does the new economy hold more peril or promise for us? It is our job to create a new land ethic that will protect this landscape while providing people with a satisfying and supportive place to live. Because we all have our hands on the land.