

Migration: A Story of Vermont Before 1850

By Scott Andrew Bartley

A researcher cannot hope to truly understand Vermont history without first studying the migratory history of the region. Vermont's history is all about people on the move, in search of that better life beyond the congestion of the big cities and towns of southern New England. It is also about a political way of life. That, however, is a subject for another time. Let us turn our attention to the first settlements in Vermont.

The Abenaki Indians, and other tribes, were the original Vermonters. The French had been visiting the region since 1609 but had not established a permanent settlement. Massachusetts granted lands in southern Vermont in 1716 and built a fort in the "Great Meadows" called Fort Dummer (now in the town of Dummerston) in 1724. The French established themselves along the eastern shores of Lake Champlain in 1731. Vermont was still a frontier, with heavily forested lands, and far from the thriving ports on the coast or major rivers. Travel was difficult, usually done on Indian trails or the frozen pathways of the winter's rivers and brooks. The first major settlement commenced in 1749 around the Bennington area and the southernmost tier of towns nestled along the newly defined Massachusetts border with New Hampshire established by King George II in 1740. New Hampshire seized this opportunity and granted many towns to groups of people called "proprietors" until 1754.

The constant raids and uncertainty of the French and Indian War from 1755 to 1763 almost completely stopped the flow of settlers. It was that war, however, that brought news of the new land so green and unsettled and provided the impetus to build several roads into the region. The first was the Crown Point Road, which was constructed from the Fort at No. 4 (Charlestown, N.H.) and Crown Point, N.Y., from 1759 to 1760. New Hampshire resumed its granting again until 1764. The politics of the time created a major dispute between that state and New York over legal claims to the land in present-day Vermont. The political winds of the time sided with New York, but the migration to Vermont was already in full swing. Not even the actions of New York invalidating the New Hampshire Grants stemmed the tide.

This migration was a multistage process. Families often lived for a short period of time in various communities along their way to Vermont. People poured into the Grants, as they were known, coming up the Connecticut River valley on the east. These settlers were generally from the east side of southern New England. People in southeastern Massachusetts would move through Rhode Island or eastern Connecticut. They would make their way west to the Connecticut River towns in northern Connecticut or western Massachusetts, called the "Pioneer Valley." This would be the launching point to their final destinations within eastern Vermont. Immigrants from the Boston area and just north and west usually moved into the heart of Worcester County or the northern fringe towns close to New Hampshire. From there, they went directly west, again to the Connecticut River, or briefly settled in the towns of southwestern New Hampshire before making their way to the central and northern parts of eastern Vermont.

Settlers also used the Hudson River to enter on the western side of the mountains. They often came from western regions of Connecticut and Massachusetts; others came to Vermont from the several counties above New York City, where they had settled earlier. These settlers filled the counties of Bennington and Addison, as well as the northern reaches around Burlington. A smaller influx came from the "Upper Valley" region of New Hampshire, moving to the Northeast Kingdom (basically Essex County).

These migration patterns were the norm, but there were exceptions, as illustrated by the following examples. The Scots moved to Barnet and Ryegate in the early 1770s. The Irish were in Vermont as early as 1774, though settled in earnest between 1816 and 1822 from Quebec City. The Quakers first settled in Danby in 1780. They soon spread into Ferrisburg, Starksboro, South Hero and other places from Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Nine Partners, N.Y. The families of Ellsworth, N.H., moved en masse to Sharon, save five families that remained behind. My own ancestry provides another fascinating story.

William⁴ Olney and his wife Alice Dexter were living in Smithfield, R.I.. They took their family, including their adult children, up to Sackville, New Brunswick, then in Nova Scotia, in 1761 when the British were trying to repopulate the Acadian region with hearty New England stock. William and Alice both died there. The children began to have children of their own before many of them returned to New England, most by 1774. Their son Abraham and his wife

Esther Young were among them. Soon they joined the migration to Vermont. They likely stopped somewhere in between but ended up in Springfield, Vt., where many descendants now live. The records show that all of these children were born in Nova Scotia -- not a place most researchers would suspect!

The American Revolution was a turning point for migration. People moved about much more freely, and the flow of settlers increased. Vermont, some thought, would become the most populated state. A case in point was Vergennes, established as a city in 1788. Another would not be designated for almost 100 years. The irony here is that the city is no bigger now than it was 200 years ago. The majority of Vermont towns, in fact, peaked in population between 1810 and 1830. French Canadians started moving south from Eastern Townships of Quebec, then called Canada East or Lower Canada. Their numbers swelled between 1808 and 1820. Many of them were Catholic, but it was not uncommon to see them convert to Methodism. The migration was sometimes disguised by name changes or corruptions such as LeBrun, which became Brown, Beausoleil to Son, and so on.

Great changes were on the horizon. The newly independent state of Vermont was formed in 1777. With it was the first great out-migration. Loyalists from all over the colonies started moving to Quebec and Ontario between 1776 and 1783. Vermont helped motivate this group by confiscating their land to support the state treasury and its war effort. Few of them ever returned.

After the war ended and peace across the borders was secured, the frontiers were now safe for general pioneering. Vermonters answered that call in numbers larger than those that came to Vermont a generation before them. People moved up the Connecticut River valley through St. Johnsbury and into the Eastern Townships. Greater numbers headed through the valleys west and out of the state. One diary often quoted made note that on a single winter's day in 1795, more than 500 sleighs filled with families moving west came through Albany, N.Y. The Northwest Territories was set up in 1787, drawing many there. The "Genesee Fever" and other named massive exoduses called Vermonters to central New York, Pennsylvania, and beyond. The first wave of Vermonters who settled upstate New York along the Canadian border became the dominant group. Lake Champlain and the Saint Lawrence River were the "roads" to the Great Lakes region and settlement in Michigan and Wisconsin.

Vermont history is truly one of migration. Its history shows it ballooning with people eager to start a new life beyond the regimented ways in old New England. As soon as the balloon was filled, it was deflated with its people pushing further into the new frontier. They came to Vermont for many reasons, and they left her for the very same ones!

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