Montpelier’s State and Main

With a little practice, you can learn how to peel back the layers of time. First, look at dozens of old photographs of the same place over many years. To locate them closely for the telltale details that are your detectives’ clues: buildings since gone or altered, denuded hillsides now lush with canopy (or visa-versa), lamp posts, utility poles, machinery/materials, and architectural fashions. No date! All the more delicious: are there cars yet? Are those electric or the (earlier) telegraph poles? Once upon a time only scholars could luxuriate in such contemplation—access to delicate resources like brittle old photos had to be restricted to protect them, and the public only got to glimpse what was published or displayed in exhibits. The Internet, however, has opened a door not only to the future; it has given us windows we can peer through at the past. The University of Vermont’s Landscape Change Program has image and data archives that provide Vermonters with an exceptionally rich and accessible historic resource. Now anyone who wants to know Montpelier better can begin to recognize the layers, added over time, that make Vermont’s capital city what it is today—and influence what it will become tomorrow.

Town and cities evolve in an organic, humans-made process. To oversimplify just a wee bit, Montpelier’s face changes over time primarily because of fires, floods, utilities, traffic, trees, and (the obvious) construction/removal. There are forces at play that have preserved Montpelier’s historic face, as well; most notably the Montpelier Heritage Group. Using any of these “event or inauguration” elements, we can assess the approximate age of an undated photograph by asking "was it before or after _?" Understanding what shapes our landscape (and when and why) is important: we do it every day, whether we’re paying attention or not! What will it look like in 100 years? —Loona Brogan

Fire

After a string of devastating fires wiped out the better part of both State and Main Streets in 1875 (面孔 was suspected), it became a requirement that new construction downtown be brick with slate roofs, not wood. Other fires would plague the city into the 20th century. Puzzlingly enough, it was only after a fatal hotel fire in 1924 that a central fire station was built to serve the entire city; prior to that, equipment and firefighters were scattered at various locations. That was at a time that the last horse was replaced with a modern ladder-truck and equipment.


Floods

Montpelier is geographically predisposed to flooding because of the convergence of the North Branch with the main artery of the Winooski (combined with human-constructed damsite bridge abutments that can catch ice floes and cause huge jams). This has been a deterrent to residents on a number of occasions. However, it is in part due to the structural and economic impact of the flood of 1992 that funds became available for many of the buildings in Montpelier to be rescued or renovated. There was a ready group of forward-thinking citizens, which had formed in the 1960s (the Montpelier Heritage Group), who spearheaded the preservation and restoration efforts that would return downtown to the look it sported 100 years ago.

Traffic

Foot and horse-drawn carriage were the primary means of transportation early on, of course. The earliest photos of Montpelier show wide dirt streets to accommodate the bustling trade in horses (and the legislative session brought each year). Note the sidewalks. Starting in 1875, passenger train service became available between Montpelier and Barre. A trolley line was installed downtown in the late 1890s. It ran down State Street from Bailey Avenue, on the other side of the State House, all the way to Barre via Barre Street and the Pioneer Bridge. There was a spur that went up Shibley to Nabi, Kemp, College, Prospect, and Hazen Hospital. The 1927 flood damaged the tracks, and it was discontinued not long afterwards. The first car drove into Montpelier in 1900. Downtown had parking meters by 1963.

Poles


State Street, during the installation of trolley tracks, late 1890s. Here we see utility poles crossing over the street, and the thick canopy of State Street’s elms in the distance. UVM Landscape Change Program, LS05358: Vermont State Archives.

Elm Trees

Elms dominated the American village and small-town landscape from as early as the mid-1800s until about 1960. It has been said many New England towns were actually settled around particularly grand elm trees—though soil conditions probably killed most of those. Later, the need to widen roads, install sewer and water lines, and build bigger buildings did in many of the remaining first elms. Of those that remained, most all would die from the devastating Dutch elm disease, which spread from the 1940s through the early 1970s, absolutely balding towns across the country that had once had lush green canopies sprinkling a dappled shade over every street and park. Today, some elms still survive (like the one just east of the State House, but towns and tree planters plant a variety of species and in some settings use shorter trees to avoid conflicts with utility lines and storm hazards. In 1972, a group of tree lovers and the town created the Montpelier Tree Board, in conjunction with the appointment of a tree warden. They built a nursery for the city to grow whips (baby trees) until they’re old enough to survive the rigors of being a street tree. Among their many deeds, they chose and planted the new harmony elm that grows in front of City Hall a few years ago. The variety has been bred for disease resistance.


2006: Close-up of the French Block. Photo by Grimm.

The French Block, Main Street, after 1875 (left) and today (above). Some things don’t change much. We like it like that. In the 1970s, gaudy signs and vinyl siding were common downtown, but when the nation’s bicentennial was celebrated a bicentennial train coming through town, an infusion of grant funding made it possible to research, restore, and celebrate downtown.
The Face of a Place
a photo tour through time

Likely after 1886: A metal streetlight post, no utility wires, young elm trees are visible past the downtown block. The Unitarian Church and 136 Main are on the left. A large tree lives close to the same spot our library maple lives now. Wide dirt street, one visible horse-drawn carriage, pedestrians crowded around what is now Yankee Spirits. UVM Landscape Change Program, IS09737: UVM Bailey-House Library Special Collections.

Late 1950s: A towering elm grows at the site of the (rebuilt) Bethany Church. Where are those utility poles and wires? Buried out of view. Plenty of parking, but no horses in sight. The Unitarian spire marks its spot, but the others are not visible. Decorative streetlights are the only visible poles, and what appears to be an antenna is atop the roof of what is now Main Street Bar and Grill. The Langdon Block is cut out of the frame of this photo. Notice the buildings on the left are taller than today and most of the buildings on the right are gone; fire is responsible for most of these changes. Today’s crosswalks and signage have not yet been installed. UVM Landscape Change Program, IS08925: Vermont State Archives.

August 2006: A mixed canopy of street trees (ash, maple), no utility lines, black metal street light poles, a traffic light mounted at the corner, colorful banners decorating the street, and a delivery van parked near the intersection in the right-turn-only lane. The spires of the rebuilt Bethany Church and Methodist Church (right) and the Unitarian Church (left) can be seen behind the roof lines. Photo by Loona Brogan.

Montpelier Timeline
Montpelier Chartered, 1787
Montpelier becomes state capital, 1805
Tremendous flood, 1850
Telegraph poles, 1849
First trains (not passenger), 1849
First streetlights (gas), 1853
First electric streetlights, 1866
Catastrophic fires, 1875
Passenger rail service to Barre, 1875
Telephone service, 1880
Unitarian Church, 1886
Electricity service to homes, 1886
Catholic Church, 1882
First fire station installed, 1893 or 1894
Montpelier becomes a city, 1895
Electric trolley, 1896
City Hall construction, 1909
Trough: hovel fire/Lawrence block, 1924
Fire department modernized, 1924
Tremendous flood, 1927
Tremendous flood, 1992

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To contribute to the Landscape Change Program’s archives, visit their website at www.uvm.edu/perkins/landscape/submittting/submittting.htm or the archive website at www.uvm.edu/perkins/landscape/maea.html.

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