

CHAPTER III  
 ABOVE THE “OPTIMUM CLIMATIC AREA”<sup>1</sup>

*Vermont is Benign Neglect*<sup>2</sup>

—Charles Morrissey, Director  
 Vermont Historical Society

In the north country of New England town meetings are hidden in the ups and downs and roundabouts of slash and timber, ridge and gully. There are other places in other states where the sledding is worse. But Vermont is the state with the roughest, yet *settled*, landscape.<sup>3</sup> Finding real democracy here is like finding big white tailed deer. You have to go back in.<sup>4</sup> This requires knowing the terrain. The state’s topography is a metaphor for its socio-cultural history. It too disguises pattern and is crisscrossed with complexity. There is no need to know everything about Vermont. Nor even a lot. But there is one question the answer to which anyone who hopes to

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<sup>1</sup> This was Arnold Toynbee’s description of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Morrissey, *Vermont: A Bicentennial History*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1981): 13.

<sup>3</sup> In New Hampshire and Maine for instance there is more wild country. But it is not occupied as it is in Vermont. No state has a more thorough system of back roads than Vermont. The rough places were not set aside. They were settled, used, abandoned and now are being used again.

<sup>4</sup> Vermont’s topography combined with its people’s proclivity for brevity in matters of the tongue has elevated the preposition to a position of high accord. They serve as indigenous road maps. For instance a simple trip from Greensboro to Lyndonville (over Stannard Mountain Road) might be described as follows: “I’m going along up over through down into Lyndonville.” Nine words. Six prepositions. Anyone who *knows* that trip will tell you this sentence is equivalent to pages of detailed topographical insight.

understand how real democracy works must know. What is it about Vermont that makes the contextual variables that frame and, indeed, shape the analysis that follows so important? Put more simply, what separates Vermont from other places and leaves it the one best spot to study real democracy?

The heart of the matter came to me on a summer's night in 1973. I was hitching the 100 miles from Starksboro to my hometown of Newbury and had been left off on a lonely stretch of Route #25 in the town of Corinth, which is just west of Bradford, which is just south of Newbury. Walking along in the dark hoping for headlights is a good time to think. A few days earlier I had finished a short historical essay on Vermont as an introduction to my first book on the state's politics. The chapter was finished. I would not go back to it. Still, I was dissatisfied. There was no thesis, no *pattern* of past events to inform the future. This unsettling notation occupied my thoughts as I walked down the highway, which twists and bends along the Waits River, itself winding among the foothills on its way to the Connecticut.

For several miles there had come from the ridges above the road a dull and distant roar. It rose and fell, this strange thunder, undulating in pitch and ferocity as I walked toward Bradford, the river twinkling; flirting with a shy rustler's moon. The sound came from the groans and strains of racing cars on Bear Ridge, a dirt track speedway for farm boys with big engines. It took me back a decade to when Charlie, Hob, the boys and I had spent many a Saturday night at a similar track up the Connecticut River fifty miles in Waterville. As the melancholy of those memories begun to compete with my craving for a paradigm in which to fit Vermont's past the truth struck.

We'd been lapped! And we were now *ahead*.

Left in the dust by the urban industrial revolution, bypassed on the highway of the American century Vermont emerged unfettered in the 1950s, free of the stultifying consequences of unbridled growth and its ascendant absurdities. But Vermont was not without the wherewithal of the coming paradigm – using technology to make life better. It is our most important secret and it has been hidden by the myth that urbanism was a way station that societies must *pass through* on their way to the future. This I knew in the early seventies.<sup>5</sup> What I misunderstood as I walked along the river that night so long ago was the impact third wave technology would have on America's most rural state. I feared the worst.<sup>6</sup> By 1988 I knew I was wrong:

A close reading of Vermont history will show, however, that while Vermont sat out America's *urban industrial* revolution, it took part in and even led America's *technological* development... [Vermont is] in an enviable position. On the one hand, it is steeped in the prescription of the third wave, post industrial era – a faith in the use of technology to make life better. On the other, Vermont has no mortgage carried over from the industrial age: pollution, burned out cities, corrupt, macro-political institutions and social anomie. Its unique mix of technology and human scale institutions will allow it to *lead* America into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, not follow it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See the last chapter “Political Life in a Rural Technopolity,” in: Frank M. Bryan, *Yankee Politics in Rural Vermont*, (Hanover, New Hampshire: The University Press of New England, 1974): 234-267. See also on the impact of technology on rural life: Bryan, “Rural Renaissance: Is America on the Move Again,” *Public Opinion* (June / July, 1982): 16 – 21.

<sup>6</sup> I was heavily influence by Jacque Ellul's *The Technological Society* (New York: Random House, 1964). The book seemed to fit my personal experience in those days. Here is what I thought of technological innovation then: “In the summer of 1969 a friend and I had driven up from Connecticut where I was in graduate school and were sitting on the back lawn of an abandoned farmhouse in North Pomfret watching the sun set over the White River valley. The lawn was finely manicured. The house was neatly painted, the porches gray, the shutters green. The house, barn and fences were in perfect condition. But did no one live here? We sat wishing together that people could be there to enjoy, as we were, the heavy sent of lilac in a late May twilight. But then, suddenly, a light snapped on in the front room. That was more like it. We got up, thinking to apologize for our intrusion only to realize that a technological device had turned on the light automatically, perhaps to fend off prowlers. Some unseen, scientific gimmick had cut away at the loneliness, creating for all the wrong reasons an artificial warmth. Walking away down the country road, we looked back at the house, its light shining in the growing darkness. The little house looked happy. But we knew better.” Frank Bryan, “The Lonely Villagers: Vermont in the Post-Modern World,” *Vermont Magazine* (Autumn, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> Frank M. Bryan, “Hill Farm with Computer,” *North by Northeast* (June, 1988): 6-7.

It is not necessary to share my enthusiasm for Vermont as a portent for a democratic future in America to understand the claim that the state is the best place on earth to *study* real democracy. But assertion does not sustain understanding. There is evidence to consider. I intend no recapitulation of Vermont history. Needed only is an appreciation of Vermont as first a cradle and then a home-place (a protected enclave) for real democracy. Accordingly what follows is selections from our geo-physical and human past. History has given Vermont three gifts, each bestowing a special capacity. These gifts are community, tolerance and technology. All are brought to life by a single, almighty circumstance. Vermont skipped the American century. In truth Toynbee was not altogether wrong. Vermont was too far north. Thus it is that its story begins in ice.

### BORN COLD

A glacier made Vermont. Called the Laurentide ice sheet its slow retreat back into Canada about 12,500 years ago created the state as it is today.<sup>8</sup> During the journey south and then back north again, its tremendous weight gouged and scattered and piled and spewed, cutting and carving the face of the planet into a thousand wrinkles and dips and swirls. Down the center of the state it left a spine of high peaks. Following Laurentide's departure<sup>9</sup> came the soils and

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<sup>8</sup> For treatments of this phenomenon see: Christopher McGrory Klyza and Stephen C. Trombulak, *The Story of Vermont: A Natural and Cultural History*, (Hanover, New Hampshire: The University Press of New England, 1999) and Harold A. Meeks, *Vermont's Land and Resources*, (Shelburne, Vermont: New England Press, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Vermont hill farmers, me included now and then (mostly thank goodness, then) have spent lifetimes picking up after Laurentide. I was introduced to the glacier by Russell Thompson up in back of his chicken farm in the spring of 1958. The lesson involved a "stone boat," a "crow bar," physics, and parenting. I had walked the eight miles out to his place drawn by the smiles of his youngest daughter, Susan, only to be recruited at the door to pick stone from their garden plot. By dinnertime (noon) my amorous anticipations had been replaced by fatigue. But Russell did throw a compliment in my direction I've never forgotten. When his wife Adeline, a school teacher, mother of three daughters and two sons, and the soul of the family asked brightly over her potatoes and gravy: "How'd it go up on the hill this morning?" he said matter-of-factly: "Well he's not very smart but he works hard." Susan laughed.

with them the tundra and then the forests and the critters (often huge) and finally the people, native Americans and then, much later, Europeans.<sup>10</sup> What they found here was a land with geological underpinning quintessentially natural to the small community.<sup>11</sup>

Vermont is a state of ups and downs. Its people joke that, if flattened, it would be bigger than Texas. There is no grandeur in Vermont, no temptation to pretension. Valleys and hills, twisting ridges, dark gulches and bright slopes create a mosaic of opportunity for little clusters of settlement. They also preclude big ones. Vermont topography offers no wide-open spaces where people may spread out. Nor does it feature vast watersheds that funnel enterprise into great cities. Lacking too are mountain grassland junctures at which large batches of people are wont to gather. No seaports congregate the crowds of commercial enterprise. Everywhere a hill or a valley interrupts. That is why Vermont's largest municipality has only 39,391 people and the state capital has 8,247. It is the smallest in America. No state has a larger percent of its population living in places of under 2500 population. Vermont settlement was defined in terms of the hamlet and the village, the "corner" and the "center." Thus nearly every town has at least one "place" affixed with a directional adjective. West Topsham. East Topsham. North Bennington. South Woodstock. Most towns have more. My home town of Newbury has two

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<sup>10</sup> At about the same time the Greeks began their most celebrated experiment with democracy the "woodland" phase of native American development made its way into Vermont from the Midwest as evidenced by burial ceremonies, pottery and the bow and arrow. Klyza and Trombulak, *The Story of Vermont*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> In this there is yet another similarity between the Greeks and their democratic city-state and Vermont with its democratic towns. Robert Dahl: "One cannot help wondering how much the geography of Greece helped to stimulate this vision [of the small polis] for that land of mountains, valleys, islands and the sea provided magnificent natural boundaries for each community . . . it is only the barest poetic license to say that nature herself suggested the small, autonomous city-state – and with this hint from nature a people to whom Prometheus himself had given the first elements of civilization were bound to elaborate among themselves the ideal form of the harsher and very often uglier reality they knew so intimately." If the rest of us could only write like Dahl political science would take its otherwise proper place at the head of the academic world! Robert A. Dahl, "The City in the Future of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 61 (December 1967): 953-969.

incorporated villages (Newbury Village and Wells River Village) a “West Newbury” a “South Newbury” a “Newbury Center” and a bunch of places like “Boltenville” “Leighton Hill” and “Hebs Corner” – all for less than 1500 people. The ice did it.

### COME THE TOWNS COME THE MEETINGS

When Montcalm fell on the Plains of Abraham outside the old city of Quebec in 1760, the French gave up the new world and Vermont arose from the heart of southern New England and headed north. With the French and their native American allies out of the picture there was nothing to hold back the combination of pent-up anti-Puritanism, a growing secularized ethic of progress (especially in places like western Connecticut and much of southern New Hampshire), and a flat out lust for land. This migration was a planned one based on America’s first great government-sponsored real estate deal. Because it continued during the revolution and after, Vermont became the new Republic’s first frontier,<sup>12</sup> an early manifestation of Frederick Jackson Turner’s celebrated thesis.

In 1777 even as Burgoyne floated down Lake Champlain to his doom at Saratoga and less than fifteen years after the Peace of Paris, Vermont’s 10,000 new citizens declared their independence from the British Empire, the United States, New Hampshire, New York, and everyone else. It became one of two non-native nations headquartered on the North American

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<sup>12</sup> This claim succeeds only because New Hampshire and Maine were once colonies of the Crown. Clearly most of these states after 1776 were as much a wilderness as Vermont. Indeed, during the Revolutionary War towns on the Connecticut River from both New Hampshire and Vermont (then already an independent nation while it awaited with much ambivalence to join the Union) conspired to form their own state. At the “Cornish Convention” of 1778 the “United Towns” (politically and spiritually centered in Hanover at Dartmouth College) from both banks of the Connecticut met, declared their independence and voted to “trust in Providence and defend themselves.” The best treatment of this event is: Jere R. Daniell, *Experiment in Republicanism: New Hampshire Politics and the American Revolution, 1741-1794*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970): 145-162. See also: Frank M. Bryan, “The State that Might Have Been,” *Vermont* (December, 1966): 9-14.

continent.<sup>13</sup> Between 1771 and 1781 population increased over 300 percent from 7,000 to 30,000. By 1791 when the Vermont Republic joined the Union as the 14<sup>th</sup> State, it had almost tripled again to 85,000. There were no wagon trains. There was no collective march north. The people came on foot. Pushing wheelbarrows. Leading milk cows. They brought little with them. Axes. A few guns. Whet stones, flint stones, pots and pans. And towns. With the towns came real democracy.

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century nearly all of Vermont's 246 towns that were to close the 20<sup>th</sup> Century intact and in business had been incorporated and settled. Is there a democrat anywhere who could read the histories of these little wilderness kingdoms and not be intrigued?<sup>14</sup> Too little emphasis, too little understanding, too little appreciation is levied on the *town* half of town meeting.<sup>15</sup> The towns were to builders of democracy what pails are to pickers of wild blueberries. One is not imaginable without the other. The towns that came to Vermont in the last four decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century are without peer as coherent units of local government in America. Two hundred and ten of the original 251 anchor the empirical structure of this volume

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<sup>13</sup> The Vermont Republic was created at the Windsor Convention of 1777 and lasted until 1791. It developed its own currency, coining money under the name of the Republic. It put down internal insurrections. Its legislature incorporated municipalities in its name and bound them by law. It negotiated with foreign powers on its own behalf and in its own interests. In its constitution, its government, its body of law and in actions it was an independent nation. For an eloquent defense of the Vermont Republic see: Vrest Orton, *Some Personal Observations on the Ancestry, Birth & Life of the Republic of Vermont*, (Weston & Rockingham, Republic of Vermont: 1777). An opposing view is: Daniel A. Metraux, "Was Vermont Ever a Republic?" *Vermont History* (Summer 1987): 167-173. For a fanciful scheme for a new Vermont Republic see: Frank Bryan and William Mares, *Out! The Vermont Secession Book*, (Shelburne, Vermont: The New England Press, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Zuckerman called the towns of southern New England of a century earlier "peaceable kingdoms" in his classic work with which all students of the New England town and its democracy must begin their studies. Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms*, (New York: Random House, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> There is strong evidence that the aversion to the county or manor system and support for the town was a strong influence on Vermonters as they weighed the relative merits of New York control of their lands. In fact the calling of a town meeting in Windsor was the "first overt act of consequence against New York authority east of the Green Mountains." Charles Miner Thompson, *Independent Vermont*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942): 96.

(as over 1500 meetings held in them do for Volume II). Deep storied and (best of all) remarkably chronicled are these little republics of the hills.<sup>16</sup>

### COME THE TOWNS

Vermont's towns possess a genealogy that extends (some claim) into the Black Forest of Germany. There, historian John Richard Green finds the origins of British town and borough government in the ancient *tun* and *moot* of the free citizens of Friesland and Schleswig centuries ago. "It was in these tiny knots of farmers that the men from whom Englishmen were to spring learned the worth of public opinion, of public discussion, the worth of the agreement, the 'common sense,' the general conviction to which discussion leads, as of the laws which derive their force from being expressive of that general conviction."<sup>17</sup> Green's thesis was expanded in America for America by Herbert B. Adams's classic essay, "The Germanic Origin of New England Towns,"<sup>18</sup> which was delivered in 1881 in the Johns Hopkins continuing symposium on local government, which remains a landmark event in the history of American thinking on government and democracy.

In any event the town as a particularly New England institution evolved from a maddening mix of causation.<sup>19</sup> Beyond English civic traditions,<sup>20</sup> variables include purely

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<sup>16</sup> The term was first used for Vermont's towns (as far as I know) in the title of the best article on the Republican Party and town government in Vermont prior to the New Deal. See: Samuel B. Hand, Jeffrey Marshall, and D. Gregory Sanford, "'Little Republics' The Structure of State Politics in Vermont, 1854-1920," *Vermont History* (Summer, 1985): 141-166.

<sup>17</sup> John Richard Green, *The History of the English People*, Vol. I (New York: The Bradley Company, undated): 21.

<sup>18</sup> Herbert B. Adams, *The Germanic Origin of the New England Towns*, (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, No. 2, 1882).

<sup>19</sup> The best summary treatment of attendance at and conflict in early New England town meetings is Jane Mansbridge's chapter "Was there a Golden Era?" in *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980): 126-135.

economic transactions, Protestantism, and an ancient custom still practiced in Vermont called “making do.” Economic influences were surely at play at the outset in the structure of the Massachusetts Bay Company. One of the “joint stock enterprises” that helped create the British Empire along with the Hudson Bay Company and the East India Company, it also helped fashion the towns and town meeting. All the towns in the vicinity of Boston Bay are in ways creatures of this body of “Merchant Adventurers” whose members (investors) were given equal rights under law. In 1629 the reestablishment of company headquarters in Boston precipitated expansion of this membership. It was opened to all colonialists present. However, the “fee” was not pecuniary, it was church affiliation.<sup>21</sup> This act marks what some scholars argue is the key to understanding

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<sup>20</sup> See: Joseph Redlich and Francis W. Hirst, *The History of Local Government in England*, (London: Macmillan and Company, 1970) and Lelen M. Jewell, *English Local Administration in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Barnes and Nobel Books, 1972). Jewell finds linkages between the commercial and charitable functions of thirteenth century guilds including the sharing of buildings and officers (guild and town aldermen). *Ibid*, 189. The town meeting in Guildhall, Vermont, is still held in the guildhall. The town is on the Connecticut River in the Northeast Kingdom.

<sup>21</sup> Leaders of the church connection theory were J. S. Clark (town governments “sprang up from that system of church polity which our New England fathers deduced from the Bible.” [J. S. Clark, *A Historical Sketch of the Congregational Churches in Massachusetts*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Congregational Board of Publication, 1858): 13.] and Noah Porter, professor of moral philosophy and President of Yale, (“out of the church grew the town; or rather evolved and developed along with the church.”). [Noah Porter, “The New England Meeting House,” *The New Englander*, (May, 1888): 305. The empirical evidence of a very early church-state overlap is compelling. By the 14<sup>th</sup> Century English churches were heavily involved in what would today be called civil matters in “Vestry” meetings so named because of the building in which they were held. William Doyle and Josephine F. Milburne, “Citizen Participation in New England Politics” in Josephine F. Milburne and Victoria Schuck (eds.), *New England Politics*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc., 1981): 35. My first recollection of any church whatsoever is “Sunday School” activities in the vestry of the First Congregational Church in Newbury (before my mother converted us all to Catholicism when I was nine.) The Vestry today is as much a part of the civic culture of Newbury as it is the church culture. As late as 1959 the high school conducted Baccalaureate services in the church next door, presided over by the local minister, without blinking an eye. Even as Catholics my brother, sister and I went, of course. Without blinking an eye. For a discussion of the linkage between church and state in New England from an architectural perspective see: Edward W. Sinnott, *Meeting House and Church in Early New England*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963). See also: Peter Benes and Phillip D. Zimmerman, *New England Meeting House and Church: 1630 – 1850*, (The Dublin Seminar for New England Folk Life, 1979). Says Carol Christine Wagner, who has studied this relationship in depth in a single Vermont town: “The New England Meeting House melded the functions of ecclesiastical and civic gathering place and symbolized the essentially theocratic nature of traditional New England governance. It was a hybrid institution of a type unknown today; neither “church” (a word that at the time referred only to a body of believers or congregation) nor “town hall,” it was both. Carol Christine Wagner, “Town Growth, Town Controversy: Underhill Meetinghouses to 1840,” *Vermont History* (Summer, 1989): 162 – 179.

the town. Religion and in particular, Puritanism. This is what “bonded” the townsmen, deflected controversy, and generated “community.”<sup>22</sup> In his important book on the genesis and development of the American town Page Smith minces no words:

The American small town found its original and classic form in New England. From this seedbed a multitude of new communities spread out across the nation. By no means do all American towns bear the Puritan imprint; yet here was the archetype and, muted or modified as it might become in every particular re-creation, the earliest New England towns reveal themes which persist to the present day. At the heart of the Puritan community was the church covenant, forming it, binding it, making explicit its hopes and its assumptions.<sup>23</sup>

Page little exaggerates the effect of the church on the very early towns of New England. There is evidence, for instance that even the investment centered Massachusetts Bay “Company” was only a front for what Page calls the “Covenanted Community” of Puritan oligarchy. Moreover churches a century<sup>24</sup> later were still influential enough to play an important role in the formation of some Vermont towns. Unfortunately, Smith lets his thesis carry him too far, arguing (unconvincingly) that the exclusive aristocracy of Puritanism provided the primary influence on settlement patterns across America deep into the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Indeed his debasement of the

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<sup>22</sup> Joseph S. Clark in his early history of the Congregation Church in Massachusetts is explicit about the question of the origins of New England governance and, indeed, the American Republic itself. “It is an unquestionable fact, that the right of popular suffrage found its way to these shores from the north of England, through Holland, in Mr. Robinson’s congregation, and crept into our civil government through the pre-established usage of the Congregational churches. Our great republic owes its origin, not to Greece nor Rome, nor to the immortal George Washington, even; it sprang up spontaneously from that system of church polity which our New England fathers deduced from the Bible...” He defends the church fathers from the charge that they tried to unite church and state with the claim that “it was not the church aligning itself to the state, but a *state growing out of the church...*” that caused all the trouble. Clark, *A Historical Sketch*, 12 – 13.

<sup>23</sup> Page Smith, *As a City Upon a Hill*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966): 3.

<sup>24</sup> It has been my observation that far too many political scientists appreciate far too little the passage of time that preceded the formation of the American Republic. When my parents were born, Americans had spent more time as colonialists of the Crown than as citizens of the Republic. When Vermont became an independent republic in 1777 nearly 150 years of American history had already evolved.

continuing frontier thesis of American democracy emits a distinct odor of theocratic-like exclusivity of its own.<sup>25</sup> Richard Lingeman's analysis published twenty years later is far closer to my own argument. Both the church (theocratic)<sup>26</sup> and proprietorship (economic) arguments by themselves are too clean. Together (filtered by the frontier)<sup>27</sup> they are compelling:

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<sup>25</sup> Smith's attack on the very possibility of communitarianism in a complex world is typical of the liberal position of his time. "For the town there was only one truth – its own. The town in its homogeneity, in its racial and cultural 'purity' was for the most part able to avoid [conflicts] between rival groups and interests out of which modern democratic practice have developed. As soon as alien groups moved in town-meeting 'democracy' began to break down. Nor were the towns 'liberal.' They did not produce liberal political ideals." Thus the liberal argument against real democracy is that there can be no such thing *by definition*. Note that Smith puts the word democracy in quotes. There is only one kind of democracy *possible*, what Mansbridge calls adversary democracy. [Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*.] Note also that Smith is compelled to question the purity of the very institution that supposedly used purity to perpetuate a dictatorship of truth. The fact is that Smith is right in using his quotation marks around the word purity. The trouble is this undermines his argument. It is true that hypocrisy helped drive out (to places like Providence and Narragansett Bay) the early dissidents, which presumably then created their own oligarchies of "purity" somewhere else. But it is equally true that the frontier experience, the harshness of everyday life does not long condone cant and pretension and hypocrisy. The Puritans could not even control their own children (for goodness sake) and instituted the "half covenant" to insure that they would be admitted to the church (and be spared the fires of hell) even though they failed to demonstrate sufficient holiness in their worldly characters. It was proper for Smith to describe the first generation or so of New England towns as "The Covenanted Community." (This was the title of his first chapter.) But these covenants were soon subjected to a "half-life" phenomenon that was execrated by the imperatives of God's blessed creation after the fall. The cold, miserable, bug infested, bone bruising outdoors of the continuing frontier. There is nothing like the random snap of beech across face and lips on a frozen winter morning to make a churchman swear. See: Smith, *As a City*, 110 – 112. The most damning evidence to Smith's hypothesis is Vermont. In 1777 the towns of America's first frontier adopted the most radical constitution on the face of the earth at the time. It was the first constitution to outlaw slavery and the first to grant full political rights to non-property holders. Its founding father, Ethan Allen published the first anti-Christian book ever published on the North American continent. He insisted his funeral services would be conducted with no churchmen present. His brother Ira saw to it. Was Christianity heavily involved in the creation of the Vermont town? Sure. Did it dominate? No. Did its influence quickly wane? Yes. Were there mean spirited majorities in little towns practicing church-based exclusionary politics for all manner of reasons? Sure. Were these towns a small minority? Yes. Did single exclusionary groups in individual towns endure? Almost never.

<sup>26</sup> Another more recent example of the congregational control thesis is: Garry Wills, *A Necessary Evil A History of American Distrust of Government*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999): 42-44. Wills' argument (based on severely selective source material) against town meeting is at best strange. He seems to want us to believe that (A) Its claim on democracy is mythical, (B) It was controlled by hidden church and political elite, (C) Attendance was very poor, (D) Its use is another example of Americans' continuing view of government as a "necessary evil." Given all this one is forced to wonder about the point. If town meeting was as evil as he claims (both with his selected sources and the nuance of his prose) then (A) it is no wonder it was lightly attended, and (B) the lesson is the people were not using town meeting as an alternative to some other form of a (necessarily evil) real government but rather avoiding a government that really was an evil which they found was unnecessary. In any event his argument that town meetings were an alternative to real government is conceptually flawed and empirically wrong. Throughout the revolutionary period formation of town meetings in the towns on the frontier of New England was a clear and indisputable example of a *positive* reaction to public need by citizens desirous of providing services for the commonweal. The very first act of these towns in their very first meeting was to create an executive branch, a board of selectmen, a judiciary (sort of) in justices of the peace, and an administrative apparatus, a list of town officers

The story of the evolution of town meeting is the story of an evolution from oligarchy to democracy. At the earliest meetings voting was confined to freemen, a status determined by property and church membership, or proprietors. But this practice – a clear deviation from the church’s concept of “visible saints” – soon deteriorated, it was simply not feasible to govern with a minority. Eventually only minors, women, tenants, and persons who had not been accepted as inhabitants were excluded.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed the antecedent towns of Massachusetts that fed America’s first continuing frontier northward into Vermont in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century had evolved dramatically from their own theocratic beginnings in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. In his classic study of Dedham, Massachusetts, Kenneth Lockridge argues the shift toward popular democracy in that town may have begun with a “brief political upset” as early as 1660.<sup>29</sup> Robert E. Brown’s paradigm-shifting study on political participation in colonial Massachusetts shows that well before the migration into Vermont began church “control” of the franchise had disappeared and, indeed, even social

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instructed to carry out governmental policies. This latter was, in its ratio of government officials to voting citizens, much larger than the *combination* of federal, state and local officials is to American citizens today. Pulitzer Prize winner or not for Wills to claim that by naming themselves the legislative branch of their town governments they indicated they viewed government itself only a necessary evil is silly. There are, Professor Wills, other forms of government to be had than huge, distant national ones. My mother taught me at an early age that big governments can be good things (she was a Roosevelt Democrat). She did not say little ones are not. Meanwhile the Democracy of Roosevelt and Truman that provided her (a teenager) and her family their only hope during the Depression had abandoned her – and it was not the fault of Reagan – as she fought to keep her wits about her in preparation for her death.

<sup>27</sup> In his discussion of the linkage between church and town in Bradford, Vermont, Harold W. Haskins tells us it was seventeen years after settlement before the town “took any action with respect to church matters. We can understand this,” he says because the early settlers “had all they could do to ‘keep body and soul together.’...then the harsh years of the Revolutionary War came upon them.” Harold W. Haskins, *A History of Bradford, Vermont*, (Bradford, Vermont: Published by the town and printed by Courier Printing Co., Inc., Littleton, New Hampshire, 1966): 123.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Lingeman, *Small Town America: A Narrative History 1620 – The Present*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980). There was still a lot of exclusion going on. But all these categories were a reflection of societal norms that extended (for property qualifications) to the Jacksonian era, (for women) to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and (for newcomers in town) until residency requirements were liberalized still later in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

<sup>29</sup>Kenneth Lockridge, *A New England Town: The first Hundred Years*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977): 56. See also: Kenneth A. Lockridge and Alan Kreider, “The Evolution of Massachusetts Town Government, 1640 to 1740,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 23(1966): 549-574.

class restrictions (property holding) were rapidly dissipating. Although town meeting participation may have been *more* restricted than provincial voting, “neither was very high or difficult to meet.” He argues that interpretations of property-based limitations to the local franchise often depended on local officials and “in practice the qualification excluded few from the franchise.”<sup>30</sup> This more than any other was the common memory that refreshed the consciousness of Vermont settlement.

### THE GODS OF THE HILLS

In the beginning there was capitalism. This is the way nearly all Vermont’s early towns began. It was raw. It was unrestrained. It featured cronyism, greed, politics, and corruption. The process must have even made Adam Smith, who was writing about capitalism at the time, blush. The early settlement of Vermont was driven by dollars not democracy. For the most part (and there were important exceptions) the towns were sold to people who had no intention of living in them.<sup>31</sup> There were no bio-regional considerations applied. The town grid of Vermont towns to this day still reflects these early decisions. (See Figure III-A.)

[FIGURE III-A ABOUT HERE]

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<sup>30</sup> Robert E. Brown, *Middle-Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts 1691-1780*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1955): 99.

<sup>31</sup> The rapidity, however, with which proprietorship was replaced with communal democracy was quite dramatic. The “grants also reserved lands for schools and churches. One can detect vestiges of the ancient tradition of English “town planning” in the system. Vermont’s tradition of town “lease lands” evolved from the proprietorship arrangement and from this came the “town forests.” I have always believed this two hundred year history of the treatment of these communal lands in the context of town meeting democracy would make a fascinating and useful way to test the “tragedy of the commons” thesis. See: Florence M. Woodard, *The Town Proprietors in Vermont: The New England Town Proprietorship in Decline*, (New York: AMS Press, 1968) and Robert L. McCullough, “A Forest in Every Town: Vermont’s History of Communal Woodlands,” *Vermont History* (Winter, 1996): 5 – 35.

fig 3 a

Briefly (and very simply stated) here is how it worked. Benning Wentworth, the Governor of New Hampshire divided the land that is now Vermont into little towns that were generally six miles square.<sup>32</sup> He then sold (“granted”) them to *proprietors* (land speculators) who divided them up into shares (usually by lot – picking marked slips of paper out of a hat) among themselves and then tried to sell them to real settlers. Thus Vermont was first known as “The New Hampshire Grants.”

Consider Dorset. On August 20, 1761, *Benning* Wentworth created (chartered) this *Bennington* County town and five others, three in Bennington County in southwestern Vermont and two (Springfield and Weathersfield) on the eastern side of the Green Mountains in the Connecticut River valley. Dorset’s historian Tyler Resch comments: “It must have been a scene of mass production, carried out with quill pens and parchment, by minions hastily preparing laboriously hand-written documents in overwrought language.”<sup>33</sup> Wentworth named the town (as he was wont to do) after the prominent English politician, Lionel Cranfield Sackville, the first duke of Dorset. The names of sixty-four “grantees” (proprietors) were on the original charter. None of them ever settled in Dorset.<sup>34</sup> But they did meet annually and their meetings were

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<sup>32</sup> Wentworth typically reserved a share for himself (500 acres), a Glebe (money making, one hoped) share for the Church of England, a share for the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (both of these later would please the Crown), a share for the first “settled minister” and one share for a school.

<sup>33</sup> Tyler Resch, *Dorset: In the Shadow of the Marble Mountain*, (West Kennebunk, Maine: Phoenix Publishing, 1989). All references to Dorset are contained in pages 24 – 59 of this Volume.

<sup>34</sup> This was typical. Only two of the original 65 proprietors on the Hyde Park charter ever lived there. [Edward C. Glysson, *et al*, *Hyde Park, Vermont: Shire Town of Lamoille County*, (Hyde Park, Vermont: Town of Hyde Park Bicentennial Committee, 1977): 5. On October 12, 1761, a few months after Dorset was chartered Colonel Ephraim Doolittle and 63 other men mostly from Massachusetts chartered the town of Pittsford, also on the western slope of the mountains about fifty miles north of Dorset. “Of these grantees,” writes A. M. Gaverly in his 1872, 751-page history of Pittsford, “we have but little knowledge...none of them ever had a permanent residence within its bounds.” [A. M. Gaverly, M.D. *History of the town of Pittsford, Vermont, with Biographical Sketches and Family Records*, (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle & Co., Printers, 1872): 23. Wallingford, a town in between Dorset and Pittsford on Otter Creek was also chartered that year. “Only a few of the proprietors came and settled in Vermont. Ownership

“warned” much as town meetings are today, votes were taken on town improvements and taxes were accessed to implement these decisions.<sup>35</sup> The first “town meeting” for Dorset was a proprietors meeting convened in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1769.

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of the land appears to have been sort of speculation with most of them.” [Birney C. Batcheller, *People of Wallingford*, (Brattleboro, Vermont: Stephen Daye Press, 1937): 14. Later after Vermont threw off the control of New Hampshire, New York and the United States Congress and began issuing charters itself it was more likely that proprietors actually lived in town. This happened in the south (for instance in Athens) when for some reason a piece of land had not been chartered by Benning Wentworth (he chartered 129 towns and Vermont did the other 127) and settlement spilled over from other chartered towns and these new settlers applied for a charter. Although signed by the Governor of the Vermont on May 3, 1780, the charter read much like Wentworth’s even down to the saving of pine trees for use (one presumes) in Vermont’s navy – wherever that was. The Vermont charters also required one share of the town to be set aside for the minister and one for a school. The final sentence of Athens’s charter emphasized by capitalization the fact of Vermont’s newly acquired national status: “...we have caused the seal of this State to be affixed ... this 3d day of May 1789 in the fourth year of the INDEPENDENCE of this State.” [Lora M. Wyman, *The History of Athens, Vermont*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edward’s Brothers, Inc., 1963): 5. In the north where settlement came more slowly many grants made by Vermont were for speculation only. The Canadian border town of Norton (in the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century home of *Quimby’s* one of the most popular trout fishing destinations in the East) was issued a charter in 1785. Northeast Kingdom historian, Lydia C. Andrews went to great lengths to trace the origins of several of the towns there. Her prose reflects the kind of crisp down home historicism found in many Vermont town histories. “The grantees of Vermont lands were for the most part speculators. They had no intention of turning a shovelful of earth, of cutting a tree, or even settling on their lands... There are 130 lots for 65 grantees, some getting more than one lot. I would think it would have been rather awkward for David Daggitt to try to farm on Lot 66 (where I live now) and on Lot 106 which is on Averall Stream. It seems these lots were assigned hit or miss and for no other purpose than speculation.” [Lydia C. Andrews, *Three Towns (Averill, Norton, Stanhope)*, (Littleton, New Hampshire: Sherwin/Dodge, 1986): 14-15. This three-town history is unique in that it includes a town in the province of Quebec, Canada (Stanhope). Norton did not *organize* itself as a town until exactly one century had passed (in 1885) even though it had a larger population than many organized towns much earlier. In 1890 Norton’s population was 960 but by 1900 it had dropped to 692. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century it continued to fall. In 1950 it was 279 and in 1990, 163. In 1969 Albie Titcomb and I got turned around bear hunting in early September in the rough country just south of Route #114 which runs across northern Vermont under the Canadian border. We camped near a small pond. Throughout the night when the wind was just right there seemed to be strange sounds trickling out of the woods to the north; nothing to be sure about but strange. The sun came up in the morning and we got our bearings and headed north. About 200 yards later we found we’d camped next to a drive in movie-theater on the highway in cover so thick we saw nothing and heard no traffic in and out – only the whisper of a loudspeaker under the screen next to the forest. We had wanted to surprise some early morning bears coming back from a night at the Norton dump. A few years later they cleaned up the dump and took it away. The theater is gone now too. All that’s left is a flat place showing some gravel and a lot of brush. Lydia Andrews died in the autumn of 1983. Norton’s lonelier than it used to be.

<sup>35</sup> The following is an example of what could happen if a proprietor did not pay taxes levied on his holdings by a properly warned meeting. “THE PROPRIETORS OF TOPSHAM, in the county of Orange, and state of Vermont, are hereby notified, that at a legal meeting of said proprietors, held at Thetford, in said county, on the 28<sup>th</sup> day of August instant, a tax of Five Pounds, lawful money, was assessed on each right, a proprietor’s share in said Topsham, and committed to me to collect: Unless the same is paid to me, at my house in Deerfield, in the county of Rockingham, in the state of New Hampshire within two months from the date, the delinquent rights will be immediately advertised for sale, as the law of the state of Vermont directs.” Richard Jennes, Collector, “The Vermont Journal and the Universal Advertiser,” (August 28, 1783) reprinted in Milli S. Kenney (ed.), *The Knowledge of Mankind: The Vermont Journal and Universal Advertiser 1783-1786*, (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage

In most Vermont towns only a few of the early settlers were proprietors. In a very few towns nearly all were. Charter creation east of the Green Mountains in the Connecticut River Valley tended to have more proprietors as settlers. West of the mountains it tended to feature land speculation. But the prevailing force throughout was economic rather than political. Moreover those whose exit from southern New England was inspired by an ill fit between their lifestyle proclivities and the established theocratic order (like Ethan Allen) were more apt to be the speculators in the West not the community builders of the East. Jacob Bayley and his associate proprietors, who created Newbury on the Connecticut River and remained there to live, was motivated by good land and the bet that its geographical location on the fall line of the Connecticut River was economically advantageous.<sup>36</sup> He was not fleeing religious intolerance. He was seeking a better life in a very nice spot.<sup>37</sup>

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Books, Inc. 1997): 4-5. Note the proprietor's meeting for Topsham was held in Thetford and the tax collector lived in New Hampshire. Kenny has done all students of early New England history a great favor with her work of bringing this old journal into such a useable format. On August 18, 1784, we find an announcement of delinquent proprietors in the town of Fair Haven and a threat to sell "so much of each proprietor's right or share of land...[at the 'dwelling house of Capt. Elazar Dudley']...as will pay the sums annexed to their respective names." [*Ibid*, 62-63.] Published are the names of Ira Allen famous brother of Ethan and founder of the University of Vermont, and many other important public figures of the time including Stephen Fay, future Congressman from Vermont Matthew Lyon and Thomas Chittenden, long serving governor of Vermont. The tradition continues in many Vermont towns today: millionaire or pauper: owe taxes and your name is published in the town report and that's that.

<sup>36</sup> So too did Native Americans. The "Cowas" Intervales (Kowasé, which means "Place of the White Pines") were site of an important Cowasuk villages in Vermont and New Hampshire. William A. Haviland and Marjory W. Power, *The Original Vermonters: Native Inhabitants, Past and Present*, (Hanover and London: The University Press of New England, 1981): 152.

<sup>37</sup> In Newbury, Vermont where proprietor Jacob Bailey was the first to come to live twenty of the original proprietors settled in town. Bailey and a handful of proprietors were already residents when Benning Wentworth issued the charter in 1763. They thereby missed the first few proprietors' meetings which were held at the John Hall's Inn in Plaistow, New Hampshire. Since, as Newbury's early historian Frederick P. Wells tells us, "At that time the only legal residents of Newbury were proprietors...the first legal town meeting of Newbury [was] held more than one hundred miles from it." Frederick P. Wells, *History of Newbury*, (St. Johnsbury, Vermont: The Caledonia Company, 1902): 25-28.

As time passed and the towns filled up with settlers real town meetings began to replace proprietors meetings,<sup>38</sup> which were often held in the towns with the settlers acting as agents for the absentee landlords. But now there came a new complication, the churches. Because majorities in many of the towns belonged to the same church and because the wilderness (and it was that) precluded the building of more than one “meeting house” (actually it would have been considered damn foolishness) the line between church and state was often non-existent and always blurred.<sup>39</sup> Plus the Republic of Vermont (1777-1791) and then the state of Vermont (both chartered towns in much the same way Benning Wentworth did) encouraged by statute a relationship between God and the Citizen. But the churches themselves featured internal democratic processes much like the proprietors’ meetings. A close reading of the dozens of early meetings documented in each of the histories of over one hundred Vermont towns shows the following: whether it is a proprietors’ meeting, a church meeting, or an early town meeting there emerges an underlying theme – faith in democratic *processes*. Decisions are made openly (they are “warned”), under the auspices of accepted rules (for the most part, but not always, carried out

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<sup>38</sup> Here is how Wells describes the transition from proprietorship to town meeting in Newbury, Vermont and its sister town across the Connecticut River in Haverhill, New Hampshire: “For some years the proprietors or grantees under the crown, owned the whole town, and divided the land among themselves, held their own meetings, and raised taxes upon the real estate. The Proprietors’ Book, one of the most valuable of those preserved in the town clerk’s office, records the proceedings of the proprietors’ meetings, and the original divisions of the land among the grantees. These proprietors’ meetings were held only when warned by the clerk at the call of a certain number of members. But when the land was all divided and many of the grantees had died or moved away, the meetings seem to have been held only at long intervals, (the last one recorded was in 1791), and the proprietary seem to have passed out of existence without any special vote to dissolve on the part of its members. But in Haverhill the proprietors seem to have exercised authority in the town, held their meetings regularly, and controlled public affairs. The last meeting of the proprietors of Haverhill was held August 22, 1810, almost twenty years after the Newbury proprietary had ceased to exist.” Wells, *History of Newbury*, 27.

<sup>39</sup> This was especially true early on when meetings were held in people’s homes. In 1778 in Barnard a letter by Dr. Gardner Cox, who seems to have known the actual location of the first town meeting claims: “They held their town meetings at Cheedle’s for three years, and held from six to ten a year. Church and town meetings were one and the same.” William Monroe Newton, *History of Barnard, Vermont*, Vol. I, (Montpelier, Vermont: Vermont Historical Society, 1928): 30.

successfully), using principles of one man one vote and majority rule, often with built in protections for minority concerns.<sup>40</sup>

It is impossible to document the de facto disengagement of church and state in a way that is analytically satisfying.<sup>41</sup> But the behavior of the towns in relation to changes in state law provides some help. Waitsfield, for instance, a town deep in the green mountains of central Vermont and which (accordingly) organized late, voted at its first town meeting to build a meeting house and at the second town meeting in July of 1794 to hire a minister. This meeting house (which was not built until 1809) was to have served a single Church, the Congregational. The only distinction between the town and the church then was that the town records were “the source of information concerning the material side of divine worship and the Church as a distinct religious organization [dealt] only with matters purely ecclesiastical.” Every one in town had to pay the taxes to support “the material side of divine worship.”<sup>42</sup> In 1789 the state passed a new law giving lip service to freedom of religion and providing that religious “societies” could be organized, which could then be supported by town taxes, if at least 25 members of such a society requested it and the town so voted. All the town’s citizens were required to pay taxes to support such a society unless they “contracted out” of the religion. This was very difficult and in some instances impossible to do. Accordingly a Congregational Society was formed in Waitsfield in

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<sup>40</sup> For instance under early Vermont law if a town meeting was requested by at least twenty-five persons for purposes of organizing a town church the town clerk was required to call one. A majority vote of the meeting could then establish a church. But it took a two-thirds vote to approve the site of the church (this was a big concern in those days) or hire a minister or levy taxes to pay for either.

<sup>41</sup> An excellent background article on the subject (with many individual examples provided) is: John C. DeBoer and Carla Merritt DeBoer, “The Formation of Town Churches: Church, Town, and State in Early Vermont,” *Vermont History* (Spring, 1996): 69 – 88.

<sup>42</sup> Matt Bushnell Jones, *History of the Town of Waitsfield, Vermont 1782-1908 with Family Genealogies*, (Boston, Massachusetts: George E. Littlefield, 1909): 98.

1800 and few residents filed certificates to be relieved of paying taxes to support it.<sup>43</sup> In 1801 the state made the process of avoiding church directed taxation much easier by repealing the earlier law and requiring only that a form be filed that read simply: “I do not agree in religious opinion with a majority of the inhabitants of this town.” In 1807 the state repealed all provisions of the Act of 1801 except for the allowance of religious societies. Subsequently any town tax for religion could only be levied on listed church members.<sup>44</sup> This process remained in place in Waitsfield until 1843 when the creation of other religious societies and an increasing annual *town* budget caused the town to abandon any public taxation for religious purposes.<sup>45</sup>

Several contextual notations are significant. First of all religious homogeneity did not trump controversy in Waitsfield. From the very beginning conflicts over the place of worship, for instance precipitated numerous diverse votes. Even local hero, town founder, and church leader

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<sup>43</sup> In Bradford 150 (a huge number given the town’s population filed declarations of religious dissent between 1801 and 1806). Here is an example of a dissenter from the “town church” the Congregational church. “May 5, 1801 To all to whom these presents may come, Greeting – Know ye that I, Thomas Rowell of Bradford, Deacon of the sect or denomination of Christians known and distinguished by the name and appellation of Baptists, do hereby certify that Joshua M. True of Bradford is of the same sect or denomination of the Subscriber, and that I, the said Thomas Rowell am Deacon of the said sect or denomination in the town of Bradford in the County of Orange and State of Vermont. Attest Thos. Rowell, Deacon.” Haskins, *A History of Bradford*, 127.

<sup>44</sup> The process of the central authority backing off on church control of community matters on the Vermont frontier was very similar to what happened in Massachusetts 150 years earlier when the entire colony was a frontier. In 1635 the General Court reaffirmed the celebrated (by those who hold to the church control view) policy that none could vote in the Freeman’s meeting unless “he be a church member among them.” But this did not mean that others could not participate by attending meetings and speaking on a limited number of issues. It also was probably the case that: “This was, at least the legal situation. Just what the practice was, it is difficult to say. It seems probable, however, that even in the early meetings the adult male population assembled, and with little formality disposed of its communal affairs.” [John Fairfield Sly, *Town Government in Massachusetts (1620-1930)*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930): 48.] In any event by 1641 the Body of Liberties liberalized participation and in 1647 the General Court liberalized it still further. Sly comments moreover that the final provisions were made “probably in recognition of conditions already existing. *Ibid*, 49-50.

<sup>45</sup> Jones, *History of the Town of Waitsfield*, 101-102. In Barnard the secularization process seems typical, lasting about twenty-five years. At first despite “sharp” differences in affairs of church and state from time to time “only a few” took advantage of the ability to contract out. Later, when “the Methodists and Universalists organized their work...the old church ceased to be supported by taxation and three separate organizations held the ground where one had been before.” Newton, *History of Barnard*, 28.

General Benjamin Wait lost out on his wish to continue the practice of holding Sunday meetings in his barn. Later the location of the proposed meeting house became very controversial<sup>46</sup> as did the contracting for its construction.<sup>47</sup> Second, even though town taxes were used for church usage in the beginning by the time the first big expense arose, the building of the first meeting house, it was met by the selling of pews to individual church members not by general taxation.<sup>48</sup> Third there is strong evidence that the success and therefore the power of the Congregational church in Waitsfield in the early days when the formal linkage of church and state is seen by many to be potentially subversive, depended on the popularity of the minister. By 1809 the church in Waitsfield was not an influential organization. In fact it was dying. The hiring of one

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<sup>46</sup> In Bradford it took five years and many town (freeman) meetings to decide on a location for a town sponsored meeting house. In the end the town voted to ask a committee from three other towns (one member each from Newbury, Vermont, Haverhill, New Hampshire and Piermont, New Hampshire) to recommend a site. They did and it was accepted. Thus outside mediators (in this case non-paid consultants) have a long history in Vermont. [Haskins, *A History of Bradford*, 124-125.] In Jericho the town meeting ultimately had to vote to ask the County Court to make a recommendation as to the location of the meeting house. The minutes for the meeting of October 2, 1794 say it was voted that “every man write his place for a meeting house and put it into a hat.” That didn’t work. They couldn’t achieve consensus. Thus the town appointed a committee to come up with a recommendation for the next meeting. (Sound familiar?) It was rejected a month later. To avoid further conflict mediators from outside were brought in from Williston, Essex and Burlington. Their recommendation was accepted. Chauncey H. Hayden, Luther C. Stevens, Wilbur LaFayette and Rev. S. H. Barnum (eds.), *The History of Jericho, Vermont*, (Burlington, Vermont: The Free Press Printing Company, 1916): 120.

<sup>47</sup> An excellent treatment of meeting house controversy and, indeed, of the complexity of politics and governance (with a full discussion of communitarian and liberal impulses in New England town government is: Gregory H. Nobles, *Divisions Throughout the Whole Politics and Society in Hampshire County, Massachusetts, 1740-1775*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Both temporally (it features the century preceding the settlement of the Vermont frontier) and geographically (Hampshire County follows the Connecticut River north until it reaches the southern borders of Vermont and New Hampshire) this is required reading for anyone seeking to understand the genesis of Vermont democracy. Most importantly it is balanced and fair minded. “The history of the typical” New England town in the seventeenth century almost invariably reveals change as well as continuity and – no matter what New England Puritans might have written into their initial covenants about unity, harmony and order – conflict as well as consensus.” *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> This was a nearly universal practice. Moreover, I have come on several instances where early Vermont town meetings actually voted to require the town to pay for rum to be served at the auctioning off of the church pews. In her excellent history of Wheelock, Eleanor Jones Hutchinson points that pews auctioned (“venued”) when the town supplied rum went for higher prices than pews auctioned when rum was not supplied. Eleanor Jones Hutchinson, *Town of Wheelock*, (Rochester, Vermont: Emerson Publishing Company, 1961): 43-45.

Reverend Amariah Chandler (“fresh from college and theological studies”) which brought General Wait and other older leaders of the Church back into the fold is credited with saving it. The example of Waitsfield is not uniform but it is typical of the role of churches on the Vermont frontier. It reflects a reality far removed from the stereotypical “covenanted community” whereby Puritanical churchmen levied autocratic judgments upon a populous covered by the might of their godly connections.

Finally, competing churches flourished in Vermont. Quickly. In Ryegate it was the Presbyterians. In Wheelock it was the Free Will Baptists. In Grand Isle it was the Quakers. In Bakersfield and Guildhall it was Methodists. In Morristown, Newfane and Pawlet it was the Baptists. Pawlet also had a Protestant Episcopal church as early as 1790. In Sheldon the Congregationalists came in 1807 and the Methodists in 1813. The Congregationalists organized first in Shoreham in March of 1794. Two months later the Baptists followed suit. In 1805 came the Methodists and in 1806 the Universalists. In Tunbridge the Congregationalists organized in 1792 and the Methodists in 1810. In Weston the Methodists began in 1803, the Baptists in 1815 and the Congregationalists in 1821. Baptists organized their church in Whiting just six days after the Congregationalists. In the Kingdom town of Craftsbury the Congregationalists got started in 1797, the Baptists in 1803 and the Methodists in 1818.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See: For Ryegate and Wheelock, Hutchinson, *Town of Wheelock*, 135-138; for Grand Isle, Allen L. Stratton, *History of the South Hero Island being the towns of South Hero and Grand Isle, Vermont*, Vol. I (Burlington, Vermont: Queen City Printers, Inc., 1980): 330; for Bakersfield, Elsie C. Wells, *Bakersfield, Vermont: The Way It Was, The Way It Is*, (Canaan, New Hampshire: Phoenix Publishing, 1976): 35-43; for Guildhall, Everett Chamberlin Benton, *History of Guildhall, Vermont*, (Guildhall, Vermont: Everett C. Benton, Publisher, 1886): 151-162; for Morristown, Anna L. Mower, *History of Morristown, Vermont*, (Morrisville, Vermont: The Messenger-Sentinel Company, 1935): 39-44; for Newfane, J. J. Green, Rev. Charles Burnham and J. H. Merrifield, *Centennial Proceedings and Other Historical Facts and Incidents Relating to Newfane, The County Seat of Windham County, Vermont*, (Brattleboro, Vermont: D. Leonard, Stearn Printer, 1877): 194-204; for Pawlet, Hiel Hollister, *Pawlet for One Hundred Years*, (Pawlet, Vermont: the Pawlet Historical Society, 1976): 136-152, (originally published in 1867 by J. Munsell in Albany, New York); for Sheldon, Dorothy Hemenway Ashton, *Sheldon, Vermont: The*

And so it went. The Congregationalists were stronger in the East. But even there they were far from monolithic, even in the early days.<sup>50</sup> The use of the meeting house in Tunbridge shows the early decline of the linkage between church and state in Vermont “Work on the meeting house was begun in 1795 and completed in 1797...[It] was used for *all the town’s religious denominations and public meetings* (emphasis my own.) As each denomination erected its own building, the meeting house was used less and less and therefore fell into disrepair.”<sup>51</sup> Or, consider the announcement in Weston calling for the erection of a meeting house:

#### A NOTICE OF MEETING MEETINGHOUSE!

How long, o ye, will ye dwell in your ceiled houses and this house lie waste. The Subscribers respectfully solicit their fellow citizens of Weston of *every religious denomination to cooperate* (emphasis my own) with them in what they deem a laudable object: the building of a meetinghouse for the public worship of God and for Town Meetings.<sup>52</sup>

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*People Who Lived There and Worked There*, (St. Albans, Vermont: Regal Art Press, 1979): 66-79; for Shoreham, The Shoreham Historical Society, *Shoreham the Town and Its People*, (Shoreham, Vermont: The Shoreham Historical Society, 1988): 73-74; for Tunbridge, Euclid Farnham, *Tunbridge Past* (Tunbridge, Vermont: The Tunbridge Historical Society, 1981): 40-48; for Weston, Ernestine Dunaway Panners, *Waters of the Lonely Way: A Chronicle of Weston, Vermont*, (Canaan, New Hampshire: Phoenix Publishing Company, 1982): 140-150; for Whiting, Harold and Elizabeth Webster, *Our Whiting*, (Rutland, Vermont: Academy Books, 1976): 37; for Craftsbury, Daniel A. Metraux, *Craftsbury a Brief Social History*, (Greensboro, Vermont: The Hazen Road Dispatch, 1977): 18.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen A. Marini’s impressive treatment of religion innovation and dynamics in the revolutionary period is supportive. While recognizing that Congregationalism was stronger in the Upper Connecticut River Valley, he notes that even there it was late in coming. Overall, “The failure of Congregationalism to provide intellectual leadership, missionary support, or material aid to fragile rural congregations in the 1770s and 1780s created a religious vacuum that was to be filled whether by family maintenance or by new religious options.” Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982): 37.

<sup>51</sup> Farnham, *Tunbridge Past*, 46.

<sup>52</sup> Pannes, *Waters of the Lonely Way*, 145. Edmund W. Sinnott notes (speaking primarily of southern New England) that between the time when the churches demanded more and more exclusive rights over the meeting house and the towns got around to constructing its own meeting house (or making more or less permanent legal arrangements with churches and/or church societies) “. . . for two or three decades the town meeting became a homeless institution . . . Not until the 1840s did most New England towns build halls exclusively for public purposes.” Edmund W. Sinnott, *Meeting House and Church in Early New England*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963): 72-73.

This is not to say that the *Christian* “religion” was less than the most important *social* force in most Vermont towns in the early years. The Vermont constitution held (and does so to this very day) that everyone has “a natural and unalienable right to worship Almighty God, according to the dictates of their own consciences and understandings.” It says that none “can be compelled to attend any religious worship, or erect or support any place of worship, or maintain any minister.” Nor can any authority “interfere with, or in any manner control the rights of conscience, in the free exercise of religious worship.” Yet it also concludes: “Nevertheless, every sect or denomination of christians (it is not capitalized in the Constitution) ought to observe the sabbath or Lord’s day, and keep up some sort of religious worship, which to them seem most agreeable to the revealed will of God.”<sup>53</sup> And there were cases of religious intolerance. My home town of Newbury publicly whipped a Quaker and drove him out of town for (it is alleged) disrupting church services.<sup>54</sup> But given the parameters of Protestantism (and they were quite wide, indeed) *liberal process* prevailed. Most importantly, compared to the dominant cultural

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<sup>53</sup> Constitution of Vermont (Chapter I, Article 3<sup>rd</sup>).

<sup>54</sup> Wells, *History of Newbury*, 17 and in this case Samuel Sleeper, a Quaker, went to neighboring Bradford where he became an influential citizen who had much to do with obtaining the town’s charter from New York. Sleeper’s Quaker contacts in New York were beneficial in obtaining the charter. This was Bradford’s original charter. [Haskins, *A History of Bradford*, 58-64.] Several towns in Vermont (for various reasons) had their New Hampshire charters superceded by New York charters. Newbury (1773) is an example. At least one town, Ira, has never been issued a charter. S. L. Beck, *History of Ira, Vermont*, (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1926). On the matter of Samuel Sleeper one Isabel Whitney and her daughter Selenda (one of the two girls in my graduating class in high school) still operate a place called “Sleepers Meadow Farm” on the broad meadows along the Connecticut in South Newbury. There I spent five summers of my life helping run Samuel Sleepers farm and (back in the old days) many a winter’s night with Isabel before their huge eighteen-century fireplace talking politics. [We agree on almost nothing] As I write this she has just turned ninety. But there is still a place for me at Sleepers Meadow. For me she calls it “the convent” and whenever we correspond or meet again I call her Mother Superior and she calls me Brother Sebastian. She is an Irish Protestant and I am an Irish Catholic. She worries about my soul. Good woman to have worry about you. At any rate I think I know what Frost was talking about when he wrote in *Death of the Hired Man* “Home is the place that when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” Robert Frost, “Death of the Hired Man,” in Edward Connery Lathem, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969): 34.

ethos throughout America at the time, the towns of Vermont were (in huge proportion) becoming increasingly progressive.<sup>55</sup> Far from being an impediment to this growing tradition of tolerance, church-based democracy (always hedged by procedural safeguards, mind you) was remarkably reinforcing.<sup>56</sup>

### TALL TREES, TOUGH PEOPLE<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps the most important force in shaping the democratic foundations of the towns was the frontier.<sup>58</sup> Scholars seem to forget there was a northern frontier in America before there was a

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<sup>55</sup> By comparison New Hampshire's towns evolved much sooner than Vermont's. But I find that Daniell's history of colonial New Hampshire important because it describes the kind of settler that was ready to come to Vermont (especially the Connecticut River watershed towns) at the beginning of the revolution. Comparing 1776 to the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Daniell says "There was greater flexibility in many households, greater choice in religious life, and greater variety in the kinds of towns they could select as a place of residence. And most individuals, if asked would have thought change had been for the better. Although they found disruption and conflict painful, they became increasingly skilled at solving new problems, grew accustomed to diversity, and began measuring their success in functional rather than ideal terms. The traditional institutions of family, church and community continued to serve them as well as could be expected." The many students of American democracy who treat colonial America as a more or less stagnant, church-based theocracy should read the colonial historians like Daniel. The first century and a half of our life on the continent under the British was more dynamic and complicated than many believe. Jere R. Daniell, *Colonial New Hampshire: A History*, (Millwood, New York: KTO Press, 1981): 188-189.

<sup>56</sup> In one of the rare recordings of the numerical results of an early vote I have managed to uncover over the years it was clear that agreement on even the *need* (or, perhaps better put, the willingness to pay for) a minister to hold services was problematical and contentious. On the question of hiring a preacher (Mr. Timothy Williams) in 1793 the town of South Hero voted "yea 47, nay 31." Stratton, *History of the South Hero Island*, 306.

<sup>57</sup> This title was adapted from Robert Pike's classic account of the great river drives of logs and loggers down the Connecticut River. It is the *Lonesome Dove* of New England. Robert Pike, *Tall Trees, Tough Men*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1967). There were no women in the logging camps or on the high-rolling, springtime Connecticut. But the women who lived in Vermont in those days were in many ways tougher than the men.

<sup>58</sup> I arrived at this thesis over the years reading town histories and prowling around town clerk's offices here and there. First one is struck by the harshness of that first quarter century on the Vermont frontier. The records of the suffering are incredible. I have often been amazed at how soon *any* concern with conceptual matters disappears while trying to hold two wrenches steady under a tractor when it's below zero, your fingers throb with pain and your neck aches unbearably from trying to keep your head from drooping into the snow. I've left fascinating conundrums that had kept me awake nights from Monday through Friday behind in Burlington for the weekend. By Saturday at 10:00 a.m. tailing Charlie Cole's mostly homemade board saw in a January wind up next to the forty-acre swamp in West Newbury I ceased caring about anything but heat. I'd have gladly chucked entire manuscripts into the snow for a hot cup of coffee and the truly orgasmic sensation of pulling off my boots in the warmth and the smells of Nancy's kitchen. Besides, again and again I would find in a town history something like "As has been seen, the difficulty of

western frontier. It was far more rugged, colder, and came when the technologies of survival were less advanced.<sup>59</sup> The life of Suzanne Johnson is by far the most dramatic story of a woman on the frontier in American history. In fact her adventures turn those of most popular “western” male heroes into tales of boy scouts on an overnighter.<sup>60</sup> The exploits of Robert Rogers clearly match those of Kit Carson and Jim Bridger and overshadow those of Davie Crockett and Buffalo Bill. Scholars, even those who give substantial credence to the frontier thesis seem to forget this. Had Ethan Allen the *audience* of the western frontiersmen, his exploits (which included charging

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obtaining subsistence out of the wilderness was so great that time for political activity was severely limited.” Chelsea Historical Society, *A History of Chelsea, Vermont 1784-1984*, (Barre, Vermont: Northlight Studio Press, 1984): 12. The hundreds of local historians who have spent the last century or so trying to piece together the stories of their towns are the kinds of people who know cold. There isn’t a tougher landscape north of Boston for instance (or more beautiful), than Chelsea, Vermont’s. My guess (in academia we get to call it a hypothesis) is that nature itself precluded the undue influence of both church and state in the lives of the citizens – to say nothing of an unholy alliance between the two. This lasted long enough for the forces of what was a relatively diverse socio-economic infrastructure to arrive and trump theocracy once there was enough time for it. Yet the popular and the scholastic literature produced over the last century about these times in America abound with tales of Puritan longevity and Protestant control. I don’t believe it. My argument, which I will develop in the final chapter of Volume II is that contrary to popular and academic assumptions, the town meeting rests on *liberal* principles not communitarian.

<sup>59</sup> I have found recurring references to the frontier influence in the literature on the politics of the settlements of southern New England. Historian Benjamin W. Labaree points out that, for instance, “Men living close together at the edge of the wilderness were bound to disagree and occasionally quarrel about numerous matters large and small.” He claims that by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century grassroots power was shifting from the selectmen to “the town meeting itself.” Benjamin W. Labaree, *Colonial Massachusetts A History*, (New York: KTO Press, 1979): 63 and 129.

<sup>60</sup> Early in the morning of August 29, 1754, a band of Indians snatched Mrs. Johnson and her family out of the log house she and her husband had built 100 yards (too far as it turned out) from Fort Number 4 on the Connecticut River on the New Hampshire side. Soon she they were on the trail back to Montreal to be sold, hurried along by their captors. Walking up the Connecticut River valley, with little food and no fires provoked hardships that are pretty much unexplainable to the modern mind. In what is now Cavendish, the town where Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn delivered his farewell address (see above, page \_\_) Mrs. Johnson was allowed to stop long enough to give birth to a daughter she named Captive, the first European ever born in Vermont. Then she got up and carried on. The story of that trek, the sale of herself and her children into servitude, her subsequent release and search for her scattered family, the death of her husband – all lived out on the bitter frontier – is remarkable. Suzanne Johnson prevailed and lived to write: “My aged mother, before her death, could say to me, arise daughter and go to thy daughter, for thy daughter’s daughter has got a daughter, a command few mothers can make and be obeyed.” Ralph Nading Hill, *Yankee Kingdom: Vermont and New Hampshire*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960): 35. For myself I would hate to be preacher called upon to scare the hell out of Suzanne Johnson with tales of penance and Purgatory and fire and brimstone.

the city of Montreal with less than 200 men) would have placed him high on the list of American folklore heroes. But alas for Ethan (he was an insufferable egotist) there was no mass American reading public available to admire him as they had the heroes of the West.

The history of the settlement of Vermont and the inland reaches of Maine and New Hampshire, read by anyone that understands how the brutalities of nature carve huge chunks out of human resolve, underlines one incandescent fact about the potential of churchmen to control the life of the frontier. It couldn't happen. And it didn't. The frontier controlled the churchmen.<sup>61</sup> No amount of bogus romanticism can becloud, or weak-kneed cynicism explain away the democratizing influences at work when small groups of human beings face the egalitarianism of nature together.<sup>62</sup>

Consider how one might preach hierarchical piety and organizational dictates (as seen in the word of God) to a man like Gideon Cooley. In March of 1770 he was determined to begin making maple sugar on his place in Pittsford. His family (a wife and five children) carved most of what they needed for the process out of wood in their tiny log house during the winter. But Gideon had to go to Bennington for two heavy iron kettles. The snow was too deep for his horse. So he walked by himself – in snow too deep for a horse. It was about seventy miles on a winding

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<sup>61</sup> “Wilderness taught people to do it themselves and not to depend on law to dictate their religion.” T. D. Seymour Bassett, “Cabin Religion in Vermont, 1724 – 1791,” *Vermont History* (Spring, 1994): 69 – 88.

<sup>62</sup> From the very beginning the frontier was the independent variable. The towns themselves were the result of the interplay of nature and human survival. Originally there was only one government provided for in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. But necessity required that the settlers split up in order to survive. Thus the early towns were without legal standing. They were the pragmatic result of the contingencies of geography and the capacity of the land to support human life. The central government, the “Colony,” promoted their development and legitimized their existence by simply approving their activities. In this way town meeting was born at the meeting of the General Court in 1635-1636. In her early and excellent treatise on Massachusetts town government (with a special focus on Cambridge, Dorchester, Roxbury, Salem and Watertown) Anne Bush Maclear puts it this way. “This seems a natural course for men to pursue who were making settlements in an unknown country, under circumstances which required for success harmony and unity of action, where no form of government was prescribed.” Anne Bush Maclear, *Early New England Towns*, (New York: Columbia University, Longmans, Green & Co. Agents, 1980): 107.

path through the woods. When he got to Bennington in found he could only lift one kettle at a time. To get home he carried one kettle a little way up the trail, put it down, returned for the other one, carried it up the trail a short distance past the first kettle, put kettle number two down and returned to repeat the process with kettle number one. In this manner day after day in the cold and the snow (sleeping at night God knows how or where) he moved his two kettles seventy miles through the woods. In my studies of Vermont over four decades I have encountered hundreds of examples of such hardship. The story of Gideon Cooley is *typical* of the times in which he lived.<sup>63</sup> These are the kinds of parishioners with whom the churches had to deal. These are the kinds of citizens with whom the towns had to deal.<sup>64</sup> Smith was wrong. The towns were not what the ministers said they were. Both in their economics and their theology they were in large part what nature required.<sup>65</sup> As Bernard DeVoto said Vermont was a land of “thin, boulder strewn soil in a ferocious climate, where mere survival was success.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Gaverly, *History of the Town of Pittsford*, 30-31.

<sup>64</sup> There is also evidence that national politics so far away from the Vermont frontier added another potential element of pluralist politics even in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. In Barnard, for instance: “The political pot was boiling in town and at the March meeting in 1798 there was a general overturn of town officers. The Federalists were outvoted by the Republicans – followers of Thomas Jefferson – who under this and other designations continued to rule the town from henceforth and for many years.” (Newton, *History of Barnard*, 31.) Such a linkage between local and national politics is unthinkable in the modern period. It emphasizes once again the immediacy of local government in the lives of the people at the time. The town was the first, most important, and perhaps only place in which national political preferences could be expressed.

<sup>65</sup> The town of Whiting provides a model example of the problem. The town voted to build a meeting house in 1899 for the several denominations living in there. They got it started but after three years it was not completed and the town voted to give it to anyone who would finish it, live in it, and let the town hold town meetings in it when necessary. In 1810 land was donated for a church, the building was started but it burned to the ground before it could be completed. In 1811 a church was completed and called the Baptist Meeting House as there were more Baptists in town than “any other denomination.” In 1823 the proprietors of the church met and decided “to apportion the house for occupancy among the different denominations for the ensuing year. The Baptists were given 27 Sundays, the Congregationalists 16 Sundays, the Universalists 8 Sundays and the Episcopalians 1 Sunday...This appointment made no difference as they all came and worshiped together regardless of what denomination the minister belonged to.” Harold and Elizabeth Webster, *Our Whiting*, 37-38. One of the authors of the Whiting history found the following verse in their mother’s scrapbook. “Of course we’re proud of our big church from pulpit up to spire / It is the darling of our hearts, the crown of our desire / But when I see the sisters work to raise the cash it lacks / I

By the time the people of the towns had their *surroundings* under control, and had established an ordered, reasonably safe living place on the Vermont frontier (about the year 1815) – had in effect satisfied the first two levels on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs – the moment had passed.<sup>67</sup> Puritan-like peaceable kingdoms of old were not to be.<sup>68</sup> Vermont had always been a Mecca for the politically incorrect. In the very early days of settlement there was a danger that cohesive religious orders might dominate a town and legitimize Madison’s classic worry about unbridled majorities running amuck in small places. But by the time the settlers had enough *slack* to begin to think seriously about governance and establish broad-based policy controls too much religious diversity had been established to allow monolithic church-state alliances.<sup>69</sup> Town meeting might be thought of as a liberalizing escape valve for a democracy pent up in the churches. Moreover the state government with its one town, one vote unicameral legislature was a textbook example of Federalist No. 10 at work. As a larger, centralized

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somehow feel the church is built on women’s tired backs.” I know a lot of Vermont women in the small towns who would say “Amen!” to that.

<sup>66</sup> Bernard DeVoto, “The Natives and the Summer People,” in T. D. Seymour Bassett (ed.), *Outsiders Inside Vermont*, Canaan, New Hampshire: Phoenix Publishing, 1976). Historian of Vermont Charles Morrissey calls it for many even today “hard living in a hard place.” Morrissey, *Vermont: A Bicentennial History*, 14-26.

<sup>67</sup> Cemeteries can tell you a lot about civilizations. Accordingly I have spent time wandering through the old ones in Vermont to try to get of a sense of things. In the Methodist cemetery in Barnard (I’ve never been to it) there is buried one Thomas Freeman, Jr. who outlived all of the original settlers who arrived in 1775. Of all the things one might have put on one’s headstone, Freeman’s summary statement to the human race was: “He was one of the first who endured the inclemencies of winter in this town.”

<sup>68</sup> In the town of Bakersfield (in northwestern Vermont): “We find that these settlers, far from former religious and governmental pressure, were neglecting former church ordinances and practices. In 1811 a church separate from the town was organized and it seems the town ceased to vote taxes for gospel services, although some officers were elected in town meeting for a time and religious gatherings were held in the North Union Town House.” Wells, *Bakersfield, Vermont*, 11.

<sup>69</sup> “Vermont in its first fifty years had a remarkably homogeneous population, compared to its later diversity. Compared to their places of origin, however – eastern New York, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and towns in southern New England “burnt over” by revivalism – Vermont’s new settlements were remarkably heterogeneous.” T. D. Seymour Bassett, “Vermont’s 19<sup>th</sup> Century Civil Religion,” *Vermont History* (Winter/Spring, 1999): 27-53.

expression of the entire, remarkably diverse Vermont frontier society it required the towns to face up to the Vermont constitution. The swift and liberalizing policy on town taxes for local churches is the best example of this.<sup>70</sup>

Meanwhile separate, secular town meetings were beginning to take over for the proprietors and preclude the influences of the churches when it came to making decisions for the local commonweal. In the crotch of a tree near Paine's Mills in Northfield Vermont in early March 1794 there appeared the following "Warning:"

In consequence of a petition from a number of respectable inhabitants of Northfield, who are legally qualified to vote in Town Meetings, are hereby warned to meet in the dwelling-house of Doctor Nathaniel Robinson, in said township, on Tuesday the 25<sup>th</sup> day of March, inst., at 9 o'clock, forenoon, to choose such Town Officers as the law directs, and transact any other legal business.<sup>71</sup>

This is how real democracy got started in Northfield. In Ira the first meeting was held March 29, 1792, at the house of George Sherman.<sup>72</sup> The first meeting in Guildhall was warned by the selectmen of Maidstone on March 1, 1785. Another meeting called by the Maidstone men on the 14<sup>th</sup> immediately adjourned to the "House that Abraham Gilds now dwells in, in Guildhall on the 25 day of this Instant march at one o'clock in the afternoon – by order of us – Selectmen Jacob Shuff. John Rich. Abijah Larned."<sup>73</sup> Throughout the last two decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century

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<sup>70</sup> There is a general correlation between the age of the town and the ease of life within it. The settlers came to the best places first – good bottom land, water power, communication networks and climate. The most egregious examples of early church-based intolerance tend to be found in these more stable towns, especially along the Connecticut River. Newbury and its ousting of the Quaker, Sleeper, is an example.

<sup>71</sup> Northfield Town History Committee, *Green Mountain Heritage: the Chronicle of Northfield, Vermont*, (Canaan, New Hampshire: Phoenix Publishing, 1974): 61. Even with less than twenty voters at this first meeting they used a special ballot box that is often displayed at Northfield town meetings.

<sup>72</sup> Beck, *History of Ira*, 11.

<sup>73</sup> Benton, *History of Guildhall*, 81-82.

town after town “organized itself.” The warnings were very similar and meetings were held in the “dwelling house” of one of the organizers.

It is very difficult to know how many attended these meetings. Few towns have records that tell us. From those that do and from a great deal of painstaking work by local historians rough estimates can be made.<sup>74</sup> My guess is it was seldom over fifty and often under ten. Perhaps twenty-five might be an average.<sup>75</sup> This would be close to fifty percent of those eligible, however, and in some cases it is probable that nearly all the freemen attended. It is also known that meetings were often held several times a year in the early days. The first meeting in Jericho, for instance, took place on March 22, 1786. Five other meetings were held that year, the last on November 29<sup>th</sup> when the town chose Jedediah Lane as their representative to the Vermont General Assembly.<sup>76</sup>

While the first meeting almost always concentrated on the election of officers, soon a wide range of critical matters appeared on the warnings. It would be a mistake to consider these towns legally “independent” of the state.<sup>77</sup> But functionally they were very close to it. Reading

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<sup>74</sup> Elsie Wells says in her history of Bakersfield, for instance that the first meeting was held on March 30, 1795 “with less than twenty freemen present.” Besides the election of officers the only business was, “Voted to keep swine shut up from the 20<sup>th</sup> of May to 20<sup>th</sup> of October.” Wells, *Bakersfield, Vermont*, 8.

<sup>75</sup> The Chelsea town history reports, for instance, that “The gubernatorial election in 1796 saw nine votes cast for Thomas Chittenden and two for Isaac Tichenor. A town meeting held the following year to debate whether to hire preaching attracted fifty-one votes (45 yea, 6 no) indicating the issue to have been of more concern to the inhabitants of the town than the selection of leaders of state government.” Chelsea Historical Society, *A History of Chelsea*, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Hayden, *et al*, *The History of Jericho*, 114-115.

<sup>77</sup> From the beginning until the legislative session of 1966 every Vermont town was representative by a single, lone legislator in the House of Representatives in Montpelier. More importantly for well into the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Vermont was governed by a unicameral legislature featuring the one town one vote principle. It is not surprising, therefore, that the towns were receptive to direction from the state. Vermont is unique in that its towns did indeed create the state, but it is also true that they accepted the role of “creatures” of the state very early on. With the creation of the Vermont Republic in 1777 towns received their life from the state under the chartering process. See: Frank M. Bryan, “Reapportionment and the Vermont Town,” *Rural Vermonter*, (Spring, 1964).

the warnings of hundreds of early town meetings is like reading the agendas of hundreds of completed polities. The citizenry was in charge – totally – of every matter of cooperative concern. In Guildhall’s first meeting they elected twelve officers including “Sealer of Weights and Measures” and Hog Reeve and Fence Viewer. They also: “Voted to raise forty Pounds Lawful money to make and mend highways, to “give six Shillings pr. man by day of highwaywork,” and to “give three Shillings for one pair of Oxen per day on highwaywork.”<sup>78</sup> In one of Newfane’s first meetings they voted to “grant the sum of four pounds, silver money,” to pay Luke Knowlton for a book he had acquired to register deeds. In April they voted to accept it as a gift.<sup>79</sup>

In Bradford the town elected two “overseers of the poor” at its first meeting in 1773. This prompted historian Harold W. Haskins to wonder: “The need for two Overseers of the Poor in that small community seems a little strange. In 1770 there are said to have been thirty families there. Three years later in 1773 there likely would not be more than fifty or so. By our standards today, weren’t all of these settlers poor? What could most of the people spare for others? It is to their great credit that from the beginning they had the poor in mind and made provision for them.”<sup>80</sup> Two years later and less than two weeks after Lexington and Concord (about what it would take to walk the distance between Boston and Bradford) the town voted a *progressive* tax to be laid on each man as the assessors “shall judge right.” The purpose was to arm and store provisions for all men “between the ages of sixteen and eighty.” In light of this kind of early

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<sup>78</sup> Benton, *History of Guildhall*, 82-83.

<sup>79</sup> Green, *et al*, *Centennial Proceedings*, 188.

<sup>80</sup> Haskins, *A History of Bradford*, 237.

activity in the towns, the term “little republics” seems an apt descriptor.<sup>81</sup> Here is how Haskins put it:

Early Bradford was going to war, and on each man an assessment, as should be judged right, was being laid, and men from sixteen to eighty were counted on to be their town’s defense. There was no state or nation then to take charge and direct operations – no federal or state aid was available. It was up to this little settlement to take the initiative and get the job done.<sup>82</sup>

In Wheelock the first town meeting was held on the last Tuesday in March in 1794 at the “Dudley Sweasey’s dwelling house” at “10 o’clock forenoon.”<sup>83</sup> After Dudley Sweasey was elected town moderator the meeting filled 17 other offices with 11 other men and Sweasey who was elected selectman and member of the road committee as well. The only other substantive achievement was to elect a committee “to lookout a Road through Said Town of Wheelock and to say where and on which Road Abraham Morrill (he had just been elected town clerk and a selectman) shall do the work that he is to do agreeable to the Obligation he gave the Hon. John Whellock, Esq. President of Dartmouth College...” The historian Hutchinson says (almost in passing) “Through the years the routine business of town meeting was the election of town officers, the care of the roads, the provision for schooling, support of the poor and ill, etc. Education, welfare, health care, roads were routine in those days.”

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<sup>81</sup> Hand, *et al.*, “Little Republics.”

<sup>82</sup> Haskins, *A History of Bradford*, 238. The claim of town independence is advanced by the notation that opinion on a war with England was divided in Vermont by the mountains. Even much later during the War of 1812 (which many Vermonters ignored) some individual towns *took it upon themselves* to prepare for war at their own expense. In Bakersfield the second story of the North Union Town House was used to store grain and ammunition for the war because towns outfitted their own soldiers and helped support their families. Wells, *Bakersfield, Vermont*, 11.

<sup>83</sup> Hutchinson, *Town of Wheelock*, 40.

On March 10, 1829, the people of Wheelock voted to “restrain dogs from running at large in this town.” They also:

Voted, that every man’s dog that shall go into the Meetinghouse now occupied for public worship within this town may be killed by any person whomsoever thereafter. [But five years later the town relented somewhat and...] Voted, that every man’s dog that goes to a meeting of religious worship sd. dogs shall be forfeited unless the owner immediately takes care of him.<sup>84</sup>

The following are a representative sample of town meeting items in Wheelock (reflecting events in the other towns) from 1794 to 1822.

- 1794 Twenty pounds was raised for the schools. Nine pounds was raised for “town charges” (the poor).
- 1795 The first time “To see how much Money the Town will raise to hire Preaching” was on the warning. No vote was recorded.
- 1797 15 pounds for “schooling,” 12 pounds for “town charges,” and no money for “Preaching” was approved.
- 1799 Voted, to choose a committee to erect guideposts in town.
- 1803 Voted, that those persons who have, or shall have the kind Pox have the liberty to be inoculated with the small pox...provided they do not do it till after the first day of November next.
- 1806 Voted, that Hogs be Restrained from running at large the whole year.
- 1809 Voted, that Every one Should be Warned out of Town that Moved in with his family, or otherwise.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Animal rights had come to Wheelock. Hutchinson, *Town of Wheelock*, 41.

<sup>85</sup> Being “warned out of town” was a way for the town to legally relieve itself from the burden of taking care of the poor. It is a favorite object of ridicule by those seeking to make 19<sup>th</sup> Century towns look bad. In this instance it was a blanket provision meant to cover all newcomers “just in case.” Actually, since each town was *totally* responsible for caring for “its” poor, often the practice, although in fact seemingly harsh, indicated a certain seriousness of purpose on the part of the town to take care of its own. From time to time truly draconian measures were employed which by today’s standards are offensive. The lesson was don’t migrate to Vermont in the winter unless you have a job for sure or a relative that will keep you. I suspect that given what the commonweal honestly believed it *ought to do* for the poor and the relative depravation experienced by even the richest people in town, the people of early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Vermont did a better job in caring for the poor than we do. In short the gap between what we think we

- 1817 Voted, \$400 for the care of the poor.
- 50 cents a day for the time Spent in town service. 1822, Voted that the town officers shall serve the town the ensuing year at the rate of .50 cents a day.<sup>86</sup>

This is a most representative list. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Vermont's towns, these little republics, were up and running, governing themselves. Most importantly they had already put their shoulder to their most difficult political problem; how to square liberty with community. In this the Vermont experience provides America with its first, clearest, most controlled experiment involving the two political philosophies that have dominated the thinking of political philosophers of the American experience, liberalism and communitarianism. The issue was joined metaphorically and literally in the meeting house. First was confronted the question could liberty (which by that time was considered both a theoretical and empirical necessity) survive the community of God? No, it was quickly said. It is not that God was abandoned. But she was (for all intents and purposes) banned from the meeting house.<sup>87</sup> It turned out God had too many voices clamoring for attention and none of them could put food on the table. Secularization had (more contemporary historians are now telling us) been on going ever

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ought to do and what we actually say we are doing on the one hand and what we actually do on the other hand is wider now than it was then. This would be especially true for the aged. Most careful students of the process are more sympathetic than critical. As an example see: Alden M. Rolins, *Vermont Warnings Out (Vol. I: Northern Vermont)*, (Camden, Maine: Picton Press, 1995). He says "In Vermont many were warned, few were expelled...To say that the laws were never bent ever so slightly for local advantage would be naive, but there was everywhere a real effort to apply the law and accept the consequences." By this he means taking care of the poor if it was found to be the town's duty to do so. The author gives specific examples of town meeting debate and votes that called for careful review of the law resulting in the town's accepting responsibility for someone previously warned out.

<sup>86</sup> Hutchinson, *Town of Wheelock*, 41.

<sup>87</sup> This was not a literal banishment. And it happened slowly. On a scale of one to ten (where ten equals the ACLU's fondest dream) by 1825 the scale was at six, by the turn of the century it was eight, and now it rests at nine and a half.

since the Mayflower landed. It is tempting to credit Edward Channing's claim that the New England town grew simply out of "...commonsense and the circumstances of the place" as especially relevant in the north country. The Vermont frontier was a catalyst that awakened and profoundly intensified a process grown dormant as the British and the French fought for control of the continent.<sup>88</sup> So much for God's threat to liberty. The next question is what about the Town?

### COCOON FOR A CONTINUING DEMOCRACY

The question could liberty live in harmony with the community of Town turned out to be more complex. It is still under consideration as I write. This is not the case in the rest of the Republic. Why is it still *possible* to undertake over three decades a comparative study of post modern, real democracy in over 200 American municipalities? After all have we not assumed for two centuries that the communitarian axioms so essential to real democracy could not prosper within the individualistic imperatives of liberal society? Yet for better or worse (we shall see) real democracy still operates in Vermont's towns through town meeting. The answer is that Vermont has managed to *avoid* a knock down-drag out battle between liberty and community. In this two paradigms are involved: (1) The political pragmatism of hard sledding, and (2) The radicalism of early statehood development.

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<sup>88</sup> There is no better treatment of this process than: Randolph A. Roth, *The Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont 1791-1850*, (New York: The Cambridge University Press, 1987). Some of his reviewers didn't like his quantitative methodology (I did) but none disagree on the importance of this book as it advances our understanding of America's earliest frontier and what it tells us about how the world's original liberal democracy (the American Republic) first began to grow.

### The Political Pragmatism of Hard Sledding: Community

Here we talk about the osmosis between the individual human will as it confronts the planet and human judgment as it (in the aggregate) confronts itself. Its earliest manifestation was the subordination of questions of the spirit (the word of God) to deeds of survival. This provided the grounding for secularism. Now the question became was it possible and if so desirable to subordinate individual will to needs of the community (the word of the Meeting)? I think the answer goes as follows: The absolute non-negotiability of nature was engrained in the human psyche by seasons of harvests gone sour or springtime brooks gone haywire or cattle lain dead by disease. This in turn begot a capacity for tolerance that transfers itself to human interactions. Vermonters learned to *work around* their problems, to *put up* with them. This attitude is the antithesis of Ellul's search for perfection, the quest for *la technique* that hamstring the modern mind. As one learns to plow around the glacier's huge boulder left in the middle of one's best meadow one learns to sit quietly while some jackass makes a fool of themselves at town meeting. Similarly, even though a term like "communal liberty" may seem like an oxymoron, it is better to plow around the contradiction than abandon the meadow completely; that is, it is better to tolerate fools than to lose the commonweal.

I argue that for its first 180 years of life the raw toughness of Vermont's topography had a *direct* and positive impact on the capacity of its citizens to tolerate one another. Understand this. Northern New England seldom kills outright like a twister in Oklahoma or an earthquake in California or a flashflood in Texas. It hounds you to death. The only way to survive is through the kind of hard wood stoicism manifest in the region's humor and civic culture.<sup>89</sup> I have seen it

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<sup>89</sup> Bill Mares and I in *Real Vermonters Don't Milk Goats* came as close as we got to seriousness in the last chapter about real Vermonters, religion. We recounted the following parable: "The quintessential real Vermont parable goes

a hundred times in the eyes of farmers suffering disappointment *at the hands of nature* that would make most of us bawl.<sup>90</sup> Yet they plow again. They rebuild. They dump the milk and hope the mastitis is gone tomorrow. In town meeting they accept the same kind of unfairness as an unavoidable part of keeping something good working. “Live with it” is a recurring theme in the art and the literature and the history of rural northern New England.<sup>91</sup> To Vermonters, for instance, enshrining “freedom and unity” as the state motto does not seem strange. It is a contradiction worth tolerating.

But Vermont’s particular *form* of New England hardship did even more to promote the tolerance it takes to sustain communal democracy in the context of social diversity. Vermont perpetuated a system of clustered pain. Consider the state motto of Vermont’s northern New England yoke-mate, New Hampshire – “Live Free or Die.” How did such a completely different conception of political life emerge from states cloned from the same marrow, two states (as Frost said) that were like a pair of oxen under the same yoke? The answer is delightfully complex. One of the reasons, however, is found in the pattern of settlement caused by a twitch in the glacier’s retreat north. It built New Hampshire’s mountains high, massive and magnificent. It built

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like this: ‘A farmer has just finished the morning milking. On his way back to the house for breakfast, he pauses to look at the sunrise. In a handful of minutes the eastern sky passes from pink to salmon to orange and finally to blazing white as the sun heaves over the mountains. Sure is beautiful, murmurs his wife, who has joined him. The farmer says nothing. He remains silent throughout breakfast. Halfway through his second cup of coffee, he looks at her and says: YUP AND WE’LL PAY FOR IT, TOO.’ For us, that says it all.” Frank Bryan and Bill Mares, *Real Vermonters Don’t Milk Goats*, (Shelburne, Vermont: The New England Press, 1983): 86-88.

<sup>90</sup> I keep oxen and do a considerable amount of work with them. In their profound dumbness there is a certain mysticism. For they never make a mistake. They have absolutely no tolerance. When you work with them you become their slave, a slave to their “stupidity.” If you don’t learn tolerance, patience with a nature that gives not a sweet damn for you, you can’t work with cattle. Skid out a half dozen cord of firewood with a team of oxen and the frailties of the human spirit and, indeed, the public order, are a piece of cake.

<sup>91</sup> One could cite dozens of sources on the character of northern New Englanders and on Vermont in particular.

Vermont's small and cuddly.<sup>92</sup> Another is New Hampshire's seaport and its proximity to Boston. While its northern ruggedness was like the negative pole of a magnet pushing settlers away, commercial centers like Durham and Boston were the positive pole pulling the people southward and providing them options unavailable to those living in the state across the river. Vermont's southern border abuts the Berkshire Hills not Boston.<sup>93</sup>

Vermont was settled totally and in tiny parts, a mosaic of little places that lay up and down. Ira Allen noted this early on. "I know of no country that abounds in a greater diversity of

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<sup>92</sup> The glacier also did more. It kicked up a lot more granite in New Hampshire which causes acidity in the soil and reduces fertility. Vermont's soils feature rocks that sweeten (and actually green) the land. Morrissey, *Vermont: A Bicentennial History*, 51.

<sup>93</sup> In his classic study of comparative state political cultures Daniel J. Elazar types all of northern New England as dominated by "M" culture politics, his most communitarian (government as guardian of the *commonwealth*) of a tripartite classification. But he also identifies an "I" culture formation (government as guardian of the economic and political *marketplace*) in the Boston magnetic center area (Concord south) section of New Hampshire. This fits my expectation. It is clear that much of small town New Hampshire shares the same political pedigree as Vermont – especially in the Connecticut River Valley. See: Daniel J. Elazar, *American Federalism: A View from the States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1984). Elazar traces origins of political culture across America to their colonial origins. These are then carried westward by settlement. It is a fascinating and provocative analysis. "M" he contends began with the Puritans and was carried west by the Yankees where in some states it was reinforced by waves of Scandinavian immigration. My argument is that neither Elazar nor the many excellent studies that have spun off from his work paid enough attention to the *scale* of human interaction. At the aggregate level states outside the South, which are dominated by "M" cultures, are much more apt to be rural. There are exceptions (California) for example. But the overall pattern is clear. More importantly Elazar's sub-state classifications tend to reinforce this relationship. "I" cultures are associated with cities and "M" cultures with rural places within states. My work on single states in three different regions (and thus variants of ruralism) in America (Vermont, Mississippi and Montana) led me to this caveat. Had Vermont developed an urban industrial infrastructure like those of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut (where Puritanism was far more deeply seeded after all) it would be as clearly "I" culture today as they are. Frank M. Bryan, *Politics in the Rural States: People, Parties and Processes*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1981): 53-54. See also Jody L. Fitzpatrick and Rodney E. Hero, "Political Culture and Political Characteristics of the American States: A Consideration of Some Old and New Questions," *Western Political Quarterly* 41 (1988): 145-153; Charles A. Johnson, "Political Culture in American States: Elazar's Formulations Examined," *American Federalism: A View from the States*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), chap. 4; Russell L. Hanson, "The Political Acculturation of Migrants in the American States," *Western Political Quarterly* 45 (1992): 355-384; Peter F. Nardulli, "Political Subcultures in the American States," *American Politics Quarterly* 18 (1990): 287-315; for an important treatment of the linkage between local political culture and political attitudes see: Robert S. Erikson, Gerald C. Wright, and John P. McIver, *Statehouse Democracy: Public Opinion and Policy in the American States*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

hill and dale,” he said.<sup>94</sup> These incessant undulations fed hundreds of little brooks, streams and small rivers. Each of these in turn built up *patches* of bottom-land. These were good for little farms. But in their disconnections, bad for big ones. Even to this day driving from New Hampshire into Vermont one can immediately see the difference this created.<sup>95</sup> It is in the face of the land, especially the high land. Bernard DeVoto said it as well as anyone as early as 1936. “Drive up one side of the Connecticut River and down the other side. The New Hampshire side has been shrewdly developed with all known devices to attract the tourist trade. The Vermont side is barren of them: it is not only a different landscape, *it is a different organization of society*.<sup>96</sup> (Emphasis my own.) Much of this difference, of course, was caused by the politics of the last fifty years and the divergent public policies (especially in taxes) it created. Vermont has become the most liberal of American states, New Hampshire, arguably, one of the most conservative.<sup>97</sup>

Yet even in this a string of causation leads back to small farms in little towns and ultimately to the ice. The two states have long been different. For instance, in what Richard McCormick called a “conundrum for political analysts” Vermont voted two to one for Harrison

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<sup>94</sup> James Bryce said Vermont was the “Switzerland of North America” because its politics resembled those of people who live among the mountains.

<sup>95</sup> One New Hampshire historian, Elizabeth Forbes is quoted as saying: “I’m always surprised when I cross the Connecticut River into Vermont, to see the differences in look between the states. New Hampshire looks beat and tired and bedraggled in places, while Vermont is neat and well tended.” Quoted by Jeanne Paul in *Humanities* 6 (1976): 4-5 and found in Morrissey, *Vermont: A Bicentennial History*, 51.

<sup>96</sup> DeVoto, “The Natives and the Summer People,” 111-114.

<sup>97</sup> The best single treatment of Vermont, New Hampshire differences in the modern period is: Richard Winters, “Political Choice and Expenditure Changes in New Hampshire and Vermont,” *Polity* (Summer, 1980).

in 1840 while New Hampshire went three to one for Van Buren.<sup>98</sup> The key is this. Vermonters found themselves in a relationship with nature that demanded compromise and there was no escape from it *within the state*. A remarkably large proportion of its population (the largest in America) remained trapped together in little places where the natural tyranny of making do instilled a natural habit of tolerance. This tolerance, it is critical to understand, did not preclude conflict on what we would call today matters of public policy.<sup>99</sup> But Vermont had early on cut its umbilical cord to southern New England. To this day New Hampshire has not.

The glacier had a more direct influence. By creating a habitat of small places even within small places (villages, corners, gulches and gores) it forced people to deal with each other much as they were forced to deal with the planet. Nowhere to my knowledge are the results of this phenomenon better explained than in Daniel Kemmis' brilliant extended essay, *Community and the Politics of Place*. Listen to his words as he begins to explain the relationship between size

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<sup>98</sup> Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1966): 102.

<sup>99</sup> In his work on Ethan Allen (which also contains the most original and complete analysis of the growth of community in frontier Vermont) Michael A. Bellesiles notes that in their poverty the early Vermont settlers were roughly economically equal. "The distribution of wealth in the Grants did not prove a source of social and political cleavage...The uncertainties surrounding subsistence created tensions, but not the sort that set one group against another." But this did not, he argues prevent people from distrusting (and even despising) one another. Disputes arose over *issues* that confronted the commonweal and the "actual process of building communities evoked conflict more often than consensus." Michael A. Bellesiles, *Revolutionary Outlaws: Ethan Allen and the Struggle for Independence on the Early American Frontier*, (Charlottesville and London: The University Press of Virginia, 1993): 59 – 65. How could it be otherwise? When the town laid out its first road it was a critical matter. How near the proposed road would your place be? Road issues are still conflict builders in small Vermont towns. In my youth the issue of the school bus route was not only a matter of convenience, in some cases it decided whether or not your kid went to high school. The *order* of snow plowing back roads by the town could decide when and even if your milk got to the creamery on time. Yet critics of town meeting and by extension the communitarian ideal seem surprised by this and they use it to argue that town meetings "don't work." I suspect they would understand better if they themselves had to live with some of the truly hurtful decisions town meetings have to make. Importantly, for the communitarian position is the fact that this anger cannot be siphoned off by reference to some distant bureaucracy. The people that denied you important benefits from the town are there in the same room with you. You can *see* how the outcome could be different. Victory is palatable. Thus victory denied is more bitter still. Those who hold communitarianism to a no conflict ideal where people voluntarily give up critical benefits without a fight are

and civic virtue: “By the time I was eight or nine years old, the wind that blew almost incessantly across the high plains of Eastern Montana had taken its toll on our barn.” The lesson this man of the Great Plains imparts is that of playwright Jonathan Miller who once said that in order for a human relationship to be truly humane it must be “complicated and dutiful.” The complication in this case was a barn raising, a neighbor named Albert who used bad language and told “bawdy jokes” and his youngest daughter who liked dirty stories.

## WITNESS

### The Democracy of Getting Along

Though my mother did not know the exact wording of the stories the Volbrecht girl was entertaining us with, she did know the kind of language the child used under other circumstances, and she heartily disapproved. She would have done anything in her power to deny my brother and me that part of our education. But there was nothing she could do about it. The Volbrechts had to be at the barn raising, just as they had to be there when we branded calves. They were neighbors, and that was that. Albert's presence loomed large on the scene no matter the situation. His hat was the biggest in the corral, his voice the loudest, his language the foulest, his intake of beer the most prodigious. . . Like his children, Albert was too fond of off-color stories for my mother's taste. The simplest event became colorful, wild, when Albert retold it. My mother accused him of being unable to open his mouth without storying. And Albert, for his part, delighted in watching my mother squirm at his bawdy jokes.

In another time and place, Albert and Lilly would have had nothing to do with one another. But on those Montana plains, life was still harsh enough that they had no choice. Avoiding people you did not like was not an option. Everyone was needed by everyone else in one capacity or another. If Albert and Lily could have snubbed one another, our barn might not have been built, and neither our calves nor Albert's branded. Lily and Albert didn't like each other much better at the end of the barn raising than at the beginning. But that day, and many others like it, taught them something important. They learned, whether they liked it or not, a certain tolerance for another slant on the world, another way of going at things that needed doing. They found in themselves an unsuspected capacity to accept one another. This acceptance, I believe, broadened them beyond the boundaries of their own likes and dislikes and made these personal

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wishing for the city of God, something no political system can deliver. The only benefit pluralism offers is a deferment, or a concealment, of conflict. This can be a very real and important benefit, of course.

idiosyncrasies seem less important. In addition, they learned that they could count on one another.<sup>100</sup>

I have been lecturing on similar incidents in a Vermont Politics class at the University of Vermont for almost a quarter century. With seven students in my high school graduating class the link between forced familiarity and Kemmis' "unsuspected capacity to accept one another" was driven home on many occasions. And this forbearance<sup>101</sup> *did* expand to people's faith that they could (even if they personally didn't *like* each other all that much) *count* on each other.<sup>102</sup> Mind you, this does not mean Jefferson was right when he said that those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God. In fact it means he was wrong. Rural people have been sinning

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<sup>100</sup> Daniel Kemmis, *Community and the Politics of Place*, (Norman, Oklahoma: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1990): 70-71.

<sup>101</sup> Russell Hanson makes an important distinction between tolerance and forbearance that marks (in my view) a critical intersection along the way to a theory of communalist democracy. It forces us to come to grips with a clear (yet overlooked) empirical reality. People who harbor intolerant views do not often act on them. Why? This question leads it seems to me directly to the question of structure and institutional arrangements and thus to the notion of scale. See Russell L. Hanson, "Deliberation, Tolerance, and Democracy," in George E. Marcus and Russell L. Hanson (eds.), *Reconsidering the Democratic Public*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993): 273-286.

<sup>102</sup> Richard Lanham, in his remarkable book, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*, argues for a new curriculum in the liberal arts based on the Greek notion of the two-sided argument as a heuristic device, that is, the same person is forced to make both cases (for and against) a proposition. He says "civility requires the acceptance of imposture. That necessary lesson in toleration and self-understanding undergirds civic education in a secular democracy. It is the lesson that Americans are asking us once again to teach them." True enough. I would propose that much the same thing occurs in real, face-to-face democracy—especially: (1) When you have been made aware of the "formal" exchange of "both sides of the story"—even though *you* may not be making either. Or both. I have often seen both sides of an issue explained by the same speaker at town meeting, (2) these exchanges take place in public, (3) they are often made by people you know quite well, (4) they are on issues that cosmopolitans scoff at—the purchase of a town truck, the width of a culvert, operating hours for a daycare center, whether or not to allow the community to use the school gym in the evening. This isn't exactly what Lanham has in mind, but it's close and it has the special advantage of being conducted *by* a polity *in* a polity and *for* a polity, rather than a classroom. See: Richard A. Lanham, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 111-112.

with gusto ever since the first transgression, which took place, after all, between a couple of rural yahoos who lived in a garden.<sup>103</sup>

Then why do rural people often seem to act in many ways as if they *are* the keepers of their brothers and sisters? Why do they seem to behave under the auspices of a “golden rule”—do unto others—and all that? Clearly it has nothing to do with being chosen by God. It does, however, have everything to do with *necessity*. I am apt to stop and help a neighbor out of a ditch on Big Hollow Road in Starksboro, Vermont, where I live not because I’m one of the chosen. I do it because I am as evil as the next person and I want to spare myself the embarrassment of having to explain to her or him why I didn’t stop if I happen to bump into them down at the village store. My selfishness also directs me to insure reciprocity in case I end up off the road and *they* come along. (Let them have to say to themselves on seeing me sideways in a ditch, “Well, Bryan is a jerk but he did stop and help us last winter, remember?”)<sup>104</sup> Give this kind of behavior a decade or so and it slowly becomes habit. Add a couple of generations

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<sup>103</sup> James Kuklinski and his colleagues put it this way, “Few aspects of political life so directly and immediately touch upon the daily lives of common citizens as their willingness to put up with each other’s behavior.” James H. Kuklinski, Ellen Riggle, Victor Ottati, Norman Schwarz and Robert S. Wyer, Jr., “Thinking about Political Tolerance, More or Less, with More or Less Information,” in George E. Marcus and Russell L. Hanson (eds.) *Reconsidering The Democratic Public*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993): 226.

<sup>104</sup> Most of us who live in Starksboro, which is in the foothills between Lake Champlain and the Green Mountains, *do*, of course, like each other. But it is in the *knowing* that even those who do not like us can still be counted on to help that the comfort lies.

and it gets pretty close to culture.<sup>105</sup> After a century or two people really begin to believe we rural people are “the chosen.”<sup>106</sup>

More importantly these individual acts of cooperation impelled by conditions of human scale lead to a culture of *civic* duty.<sup>107</sup> This was joined by the habit of *civic* tolerance spawned by the complexity of human interaction, itself a product of smallness. Nature’s non-negotiability served as a catalyst and a communal ethic was soon fashioned. In short, while it may do them no good on judgment day and for whatever its worth, people in small places under the gun of planetary imperatives tend to get along.<sup>108</sup> All this was caused, ultimately, by the ice. John

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<sup>105</sup> In a list of 11 biographical correlates of helping behavior (including father’s occupation, number of siblings, age, education, birth order, etc.) “size of the community in which a respondent grew up” produced the strongest correlation with helping behavior, -.26. Bibb Latané and John M. Darley, *The Unresponsive Bystander*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1970): 116-117.

<sup>106</sup> Which is okay with us. Up here in Vermont we’ve been making millions on this benign misconception from good-hearted flatlanders from “away” for about a hundred years. Richard Lingeman, chronicler extraordinaire of small town life, puts it this way: “It is curious that the media, in playing up the story of small-time crime, sometimes portrayed it as a city malaise spreading to the innocent country—as though the countryside had never known depravity.” Lingeman, *Small-town America*, 474. Pamela Conover and her colleagues at the University of North Carolina put it this way in 1989 at a symposium at Williams College: “Duty is a four-letter word.” [Pamela Conover, Stephan T. Leonard, and Donald D. Searing, “Duty is a Four-Letter Word: Responsibility, Rights and Identity in Democratic Citizenship,” (Paper delivered at the Symposium on Democratic Theory and Practice, Williams College, July 31-August 4, 1989) reprinted in Marcus and Hanson, *Reconsidering the Democratic Public*. They conclude (after a careful analysis of focus group data on liberal and communitarian citizens that, indeed, as Michael J. Sandel so perceptively pointed out in 1984, a full democracy of civic virtue does involve a certain “incumbency.” [Michael J. Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” *Political Theory* 12 (1984): 81-96.] Not helping out in a crisis was, for the communitarian citizens interviewed by Conover and her colleagues, unthinkable. It was not an option. The authors also note these values were more apt to be held by citizens of a small, rural town in distinction to the large community from which their other respondents came, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

<sup>107</sup> David P. Szatmary points out that although the New England yeomanry of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century prided themselves on their autonomy they “lived in a community-oriented culture. The independent status of yeomen, then, resulted neither from self-sufficiency nor a basically competitive system but led, rather, to cooperative, community-oriented interchanges.” David P. Szatmary, *Shays’ Rebellion*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980): 7.

<sup>108</sup> One of the earliest interpretations of the relationship between tolerance and the rural life of hardship on the frontier was a begrudging notation by a very intolerant man, the Reverend Nathan Perkins. During his trip through Vermont in 1887 he noted begrudgingly in his diary that, although he had not seen a church for a hundred miles and Vermonters lived in miserable, flea-bitten squalor that “woods make people love one another and kind and obliging and good natured. They set much more store by one another than in the older settlements.” Rev. Nathan Perkins, A

McClaghry and I summed it up this way in 1989: “So Vermonters, harkening to human kind’s basic need for cooperation, came to huddle together like the Swiss in small communities, mountain towns and villages. They sought the safety of unity, of Congregationalism, of neighbor, church and town. Their spirits craved liberty, but the land compelled union.”<sup>109</sup> This lesson was driven home in the first fifty years of Vermont life and there it remained throughout the dark age.<sup>110</sup>

### The Liberalism of Early Statehood Development: Liberty

Their spirits did indeed crave liberty. But it was the higher ordered liberty of the retreat of self into the interests of an ordered civil society they sought. This craving led to the second paradigm that defines the cocoon for a continuing democracy, the radical liberalism of early statehood development. This in fact is the state’s birthright. For Vermont was America’s rascal

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*Narrative of a Tour Through the State of Vermont from April 27 to June 12, 1789*, (Woodstock, Vermont: The Elm Tree Press, 1920).

<sup>109</sup> Bryan and McClaghry, *Vermont Papers*, 30-31. The mix of church, town and frontier in southern New England leavened a breed of the new settlers who found in Vermont a near-perfect setting for communitarianism. By reducing humanity to its bare essentials orders of life and divisions of labor grew up naturally, liberating Vermonters from the *tyranny* of nature. It was in the town hall (usually someone’s barn or cabin) that the most sophisticated of these orders and divisions were made manifest. And it is from here that the *secular* came to dominate the communitarian thesis – that civic humanism emerged. These orders and divisions demanded the most liberating of all capacities; the willingness to tolerate damn fools in the name of a civil society that was too *precious* to abandon (it meant life itself, after all) for something as silly as self-interest. Selfishness and conflict were always present to be sure. But it was apparent to any sensible person that there were no rights in a real (as opposed to romanticized) state of nature. If there were to be rights they had to come from civil society. Town meetings were called not to protect rights ordained by either God or the state. They were called to *create* liberty, the freedom, for instance, to travel by the laying out of a town road. The only “rights” nature endowed were similar to the right to die in a snow bank. While Vermont’s state motto was “freedom *and* unity,” it might better have read, “freedom *through* unity.”

<sup>110</sup> Benjamin Barber emphasizes the same phenomenon for Switzerland. “thus, as the hardness of life molded a man’s sense of autonomy, it also compelled him to cooperation and collective action.” Benjamin Barber, *The Death of Communal Liberty*, (Princeton, New Jersey: The Princeton University Press, 1974): 100. Barber notes Georg Ragaz’ earlier work on Swiss democracy: “A separate existence for men in the mountains at the time of settlement and initial cultivation of the land was unthinkable.” Georg Ragaz, *Die Entstehung der Politischen Gemeinden im*

child. It was the first state to join the union as a nation. Its constitution was the first to abolish slavery and to provide for universal manhood suffrage. Its greatest hero was a hard drinking, blasphemous, outcast from civilized New England named Ethan Allen. Vermont also produced America's most daring radical Congressman, Mathew Lyons. From his journal, *The Scourge of Aristocracy* ill-tempered broadsides slammed the Adam's administration and the Federalists. They landed him in jail. It was from his cell in Vergennes that he campaigned for reelection and won overwhelmingly. Burgoyne said that Vermont "abounds with the most active and most rebellious race on the continent and hangs like a gathering storm on my left." Timothy Dwight, the renowned Yale professor, said the Vermont's unicameral legislature was no more than "...an organized mob. Its deliberations are necessarily tumultuous, violent and indecent." So it went.

Nowhere in North America could sinners and adventurers and churchmen alike go in 1789 and be more assured of a benign (or at least mostly neutral) reception. Vermont was marked by pockets of intolerance for this or that creed, point of view or political allegiance, of course. But overall it was a haven for diversity. One could find a place to act as you pleased in Vermont as long as long as you respected the rights of others. "Be a damned fool if it suits you but don't question my right to be a damned fool too." This has always been the Vermont creed. Walter Coates, a Vermont "hill-town writer" perhaps put it best says Ralph Nading Hill in his book, *Contrary Country*:<sup>111</sup>

Is there a 'lost cause'? Then I am for it. Is there a philosophy of life and destiny weak and rejected of men? Then will I examine and tolerate and, if needs

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*Schamertal*, (Disentis, 1934): cited in Benjamin Barber, *The Death of Communal Liberty: A History of Freedom in a Swiss Mountain Canton*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974).

<sup>111</sup> Ralph Nading Hill, *Contrary Country: A Chronicle of Vermont*, (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1950): 291.

be, defend that philosophy in its extremity...Yes write me down for one who abhors a sham, one who resists limitations, who despises cant; as one who will condemn repression and intolerance of every sort ...who for these reasons, and because of an inherent tendency of personality, was ever and will ever be, ONE OF THE MINORITY.<sup>112</sup>

Or perhaps it was Walter Hard's "straight-backed" Grandma Westcott who went to a revival meeting one night to see what it was like. When "...the evangelist stopped by her seat and said in a sepulchral tone:"

‘Sister, are you a Christian?’  
She gave herself a twist and sat up more  
straight than ever.  
‘Not in this church, I ain’t.’<sup>113</sup>

Three empirical sets of evidence sustain the artists and “chroniclers” of the real Vermont.<sup>114</sup> First is Vermont’s early experience with radicalism in matters of the soul. It led New England in the array of radical religions that appeared during the “great awakening” of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It had begun with Ethan Allen, who promoted his Deism both in words and action to the horror of established New England Protestantism. But that was only the beginning. To Guilford came a group from Leyden, Massachusetts, called the “Dorrilites,” called by the well known Bay State minister Joseph Lathrop “a company of beings who discard the principles of religion and obligations of morality, trample on the bonds of civil society, spend the Sabbath

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<sup>112</sup> Walter J. Coates, *The Free Soul, A Journal of Personal Liberation and Eternal Youth.*” found in Hill, *Contrary Country.*

<sup>113</sup> Walter Hard, *Some Vermonters,*( Boston: R. G. Badger, 1928).

<sup>114</sup> I have no term for Vermont’s unique brand of liberalism. Paul Goodman once described it as “a modest anarchism and plenty of decentralization.” Bill Schubert said of our politics was “a fascinating mix of superficially Republican but innately humanistic and radical politics.” Judson Hale has perhaps the best five pages on it. Judson Hale, *Inside New England,* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982). Keith Jennison did the best essay on the Vermont character in all its complexity. Keith Jennison, *Vermont is Where You Find It,* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1941).

in labor or diversion, as fancy dictates, and the nights in riotous excess and promiscuous concubinage as lust impels.”<sup>115</sup>

In Sharon Joseph Smith was born and raised. While defending the Mormons in Missouri he appealed to his Vermont upbringing where the blessings of the rights and privileges established by the Green Mountain Boys allowed him to live “unmolested and to enjoy life and religion according to the enlightened nineteenth century.” Down from Canada came a group called “Pilgrims” looking for the promised land. Holding their property in common they adopted Biblical lifestyles and settled in Woodstock, leaving that town for New York State in 1817. Later in the century (1837) a group called the “New Lights” was formed further north in the town of Hardwick. Not to be confused with the New Light divines (of which Eleazar Wheelock of Dartmouth was a member) the new group substituted fervor for the intellect. A few years after this another cult, the Millerites, formed and made headway predicting the end of the world. Their more serious following later created the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

I live just under the peak of Shaker Mountain in Starksboro. High on the ridges behind the house my son and I hunt deer across the disappeared homesteads of one of the many Shaker colonies that settled in Vermont in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The Shakers themselves were admired by perhaps Vermont’s most famous radical religious sect, the Perfectionists, whose early development in Putney is a good example of the struggle between these new societies (which practiced by even modern standards quite outrageous behaviors) and the community. Controversy often was present.<sup>116</sup> What is true, however, is that they generally made out better in

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<sup>115</sup> As quoted in: Hill, *Contrary Country*, 103-104.

<sup>116</sup> In 1835 the town meeting in Woodstock met and passed a resolution branding “New Measure” revivalist preacher Jedidiah Burchard as a “public nuisance.” H. N. Muller III and John J. Duffy “Jedidiah Burchard and

Vermont than they did or would have in most other places. Considering the gap between their activities and those of the established orthodoxy what is remarkable is the tolerance with which they were received, not the hostility. Were most town residents happy to see the “Pilgrims” leave Woodstock or the New Lights blink out in Hardwick? Most likely. But a careful look at John Humphrey Noyes’ Perfectionists Colony in Putnam reveals that local hostility was more or less muted. It was not until the group’s pursuit and attempted recruitment of a fifteen-year-old girl into the system of “complex marriage” by which the Perfectionists separated themselves from “free love societies” (many save quite honestly) that patience ran thin enough to prompt legal action. A fair reading of the situation in Putney in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century must conclude that Noyes’ behavior there clearly was better received than it would be in almost any other place in America today.<sup>117</sup> Frederick F. Van DeWater put it this way in 1941:

No people to this day are more liberal, more philosophical in their attitudes toward the wrong doer. It may be because in her formative years Vermont and all her works were so thoroughly denounced by propriety, she cherished then and still maintains in her heart a sympathy for the erring.<sup>118</sup>

The second element of early statehood development was experience with radical liberalism in matters of politics. Minority parties have always done well in Vermont, especially

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Vermont’s ‘New Measure’ Revivals; Social Adjustment and the Quest for Unity,” *Vermont History* (Winter, 1978): 5-20. See also: Erik Barnouw, “The Benson Exodus of 1833: Mormon Converts and the Westward Movement,” *Vermont History* (Summer, 1986): 133 – 148.

<sup>117</sup> Noyes’ critics emphasize practices like “stirpiculture,” which called for the matching of the best men and women in the colony for purposes of procreation while supporters argue that Noyes conducted a profoundly important experiment in communal life sometimes called “religious socialism” or communism. For treatments of revivalism in Vermont see: David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont 1791 – 1850*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939); Walter H. Crockett, *Vermont, The Green Mountain State*, (New York: Century History Company, 1921) and Donal Ward, *Religious Enthusiasm in Vermont*, (Dissertation: Department of Religion, Notre Dame University, 1980). See also “Heaven On Earth” a chapter in: Hill, *Contrary Country*, 99-131.

<sup>118</sup> Frederick F. Van de Water, *The Reluctant Republic 1724-1791*, (New York: John Day Co., 1941).

prior to the Civil War. The best example of this in any period, however, is the state's fascination with anti-masonry. The movement is a powerful litmus test for liberal ideals because it was a single-issue phenomenon directed precisely against secrecy and elitism in politics. In 1831 Vermonters elected the Anti-Mason candidate, William Palmer of Danville, governor of the state. They reelected him three times. They did this even though a great number of Vermont's leading public figures at the state level and in the towns were Masons. In 1832 Vermont became the only state in the Nation to cast its electoral votes for William Wirt, the Anti-Mason candidate for President. Vermonters put their votes where their principles were, against closed, hierarchical power in the civic order. More. With the election of Palmer for four terms, they had put their state's *governance* where their principles were.

But indicators of a robust state ethic of independence and support for minority causes abound throughout the period. For the most part Vermont chose to ignore the second war with England. It carried on a brisk trade with Canada throughout even supplying beef to the British army north of the border.<sup>119</sup> On one occasion the governor ordered a contingent of Vermont Militia serving in the American army in northern New York to cease fighting and return to Vermont – a treasonous order to be sure from the perspective of the United States. The Vermont troops, being Vermonters, promptly held a meeting and voted to disobey the Governor. In 1850 the Vermont legislature demonstrated its support for minority causes by passing the following resolution: “The brave and patriotic people of Hungary are entitled to our warmest sympathy in their unsuccessful struggle for their liberty against the despots of Austria and Russia.” In 1870 Vermont condoned and supported a training and staging camp for an army of 2000 Irish Fenians

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<sup>119</sup> H. N. Muller, “Smuggling Into Canada: How the Champlain Valley Defied Jefferson's Embargo,” *Vermont History* (Winter, 1970): 5-21.

who later attacked Canada from Franklin, Vermont. Earlier, when another disruption involving the Irish question arose President Van Buren sent General Winfield Scott as his emissary to warn Vermonters not to violate American neutrality laws. At a town meeting in St. Albans Scott's warning was treated rudely. The assembly resolved: "...as friends of liberty and human rights we cannot restrain the expression of our sympathy when we behold an oppressed and heroic people unfurl the banner of freedom."

With this in mind consider the following statement by James G. Barney, organizer and national presidential candidate of the Liberty Party who said he had "never seen our cause stand on such high ground among political men as it does among those of the Vermont legislature." The success of the Liberty Party (and then the Free Soil Party) represents a bridge between Vermont's independence of political mind and proclivity to support minority causes and the third element of its early statehood development, opposition to slavery. It was unequaled by any other American state. Lincoln may have been willing to accept slavery in the South as the price for saving the Union. It is not at all clear Vermont was. The state leading America on the proportion of its citizens making the most important governmental decisions in their lives face to face in communal assemblies in tiny little villages had the highest proportion of its citizens finding slavery abhorrent.<sup>120</sup> Unity at the town level, freedom at the state level, perhaps Vermont's motto "freedom and unity" is not an oxymoron after all.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> It was in the smaller hill towns and among farmers that anti-slavery sentiment was strongest. The Reverend John Gleed, editor of *The Vermont Freeman* in Norwich, (a town that appears often in this book), who collected money for the Liberty Party said he was most successful in districts populated by "honest and industrious farmers. These are the men who feel for the oppressed and will save their country from slavery." Voting results confirmed that the Liberty party did better in farming towns. T. D. Seymour Bassett, "Vermont Politics and Press in the 1840s," *Vermont History* (Summer, 1979): 196-213. Moreover anti-slavery sentiment was compromised more by political leadership and championed more by the rank and file indicating again that it was strongest at the grassroots. Members of the Vermont legislature, for instance, were "disgusted" to learn that a member of Congress from Vermont felt obliged to apologize for the state to the Virginia delegation for the harshness of a resolution passed by

There is cause for Vermont's reputation as the strongest anti-slavery state in the union.<sup>122</sup>

It adopted, after all, the first written constitution in the history of western civilization to outlaw slavery. But Vermont's deeds matched its words. In the early 1800s a Vermont Supreme Court judge, one Theophilus Harrington, ruled that a southerner in Vermont applying for a return of a fugitive slave he "owned" could certainly have his slave back if he produced "a bill of sale from the almighty." No slave was returned from Vermont that day. In 1843 the Vermont legislature actually passed a law making it illegal to recapture runaway slaves. In both instances Vermont

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the state legislature on the Missouri compromise. Edward P. Brynn, "Vermont's Political Vacuum of 1843-1856 and the Emergence of the Republican Party," *Vermont History* (Spring, 1970): 113-123.

<sup>121</sup> On the origins of the anti-slavery movement in Vermont see; John L. Meyers, "The Beginnings of Antislavery agencies in Vermont, 1832-1836," *Vermont History* (Summer, 1958): 126-141 and John L. Meyers, "The Major Efforts of Ant-Slavery Agents in Vermont 1836 – 1838," *Vermont History* (Fall, 1968): 214-229. For a general review of evidence from the formation of the Vermont Republic until the beginning of the civil war see: John A. McNall, "Anti-Slavery sentiment in Vermont, 1777 – 1861," (M.A. Dissertation, The University of Vermont, 1938). The best review of politics in general during the period (with its inevitable focus on the interplay of abolitionism and party politics is T. D. Seymour Bassett, "Urban Penetration in Rural Vermont, 1840 – 1880," (Dissertation, Harvard University, 1952). Bassett describes events surrounding the pivotal passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act as "a time when a state that was overwhelmingly anti-slavery but 75 percent in favor of subordinating the issue to matters nearer home became 75 percent in favor of submitting matters nearer home to the slavery issue." (*Ibid*, 433-434). On Vermont's commitment to anti-slavery there has been some recent revisionism. But it hasn't made much of a dent. In fact it pretty much establishes only that there were exceptions in Vermont that clearly proved the rule. However, these are important to note in order to avoid the kind of exaggerated claims that doom any truth to ridicule. See: J. Kevin Graffagnino, "Vermont Attitudes Toward Slavery: The Need for a Closer Look," *Vermont History* (Winter, 1977): 31-34 and Marshall True, "Slavery in Burlington: An Historical Note," *Vermont History* (Fall, 1982): 227-230. Ralph Nading Hill said "there was nothing like agreement on the question of slavery in the Green Mountains." Hill, *Yankee Kingdom*, 111. No doubt. Still, no one contends there was no stronger, vociferous and enduring *majority* against slavery in any American state. In my view the most important "critique" of Vermont's anti-slavery stance is it may have been inspired by economic license not moral commitment. Vermont had practically no commercial dealings with the South. Of all the New England states it would suffer least by any economic disruptions caused by abolition of slavery or the loss of the southern states to the Union. One of the more fascinating accounts of hostility to abolitionism is the account of the passage of John Brown's body through Vermont. The reception was not wholly positive. Once again the hostility seems linked to larger communities. In the largest town in Vermont, Burlington, the Unitarian church dismissed its pastor, Reverend Joshua Young, for officiating at the funeral of Brown in North Elba. John Parker Lee, *Uncommon Vermont*, (Rutland, Vermont: The Tuttle Company, 1926): 45.

<sup>122</sup> Reinhard O. Johnson, "The Liberty Party in Vermont, 1840 – 1848: The Forgotten Abolitionists," *Vermont History* (Fall, 1979): 258-276.

was openly defying federal law.<sup>123</sup> The freeing of slaves had an impressive and popular pedigree in Vermont. When the Green Mountain Boys captured Fort Ticonderoga they found and set free a slave of a British officer, Captain Ebenezer Allen (Ethan's brother) with much public fanfare documenting the event with a certificate of freedom. It well might be claimed that this was the first official act of the abolitionist (now called the civil rights) movement of the United States of America.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> Century developed Vermont became a hot bed of abolitionism. In 1828 William Lloyd Garrison began lambasting slavery in his *Journal of the Times* from Vermont's first town, Bennington. In the 1830s when the United States Congress passed a gag order requiring petitions from the states opposing slavery be automatically tabled it was leading abolitionist and Vermonter William Slade (who delivered the first abolitionist speech heard in Congress) that led the fight against it. The Governor of Virginia responded: "We cannot reason with the heads of fanatics, nor touch hearts fatally bent upon treason." The Georgia House of Representatives passed the following resolution:

That His Excellence the Governor be and is hereby requested to transmit the Vermont resolutions to the deep, dark, and fetid sink of social and political iniquity from whence they emanated, with the following unequivocal declaration inscribed thereon: Resolved, That Georgia standing on her constitutional palladium, heeds not the maniac ravings of hellborn fanaticism, nor stoops from her lofty position to hold terms with perjured traitors.

The Vermont legislature, which over-represented the small towns, was extremely hostile to any act that promoted the interests of slavery. They roundly condemned the annexation of

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<sup>123</sup> For general comments on these and other events in Vermont's struggle with the slavery question see: William Doyle, *The Vermont Political Tradition*, (Montpelier, Vermont: William Doyle, 1984): 110-116; and Elise A. Guyette, *Vermont: A Cultural Patchwork*, (Peterborough, New Hampshire: Cobblestone Publishing, Inc. 1986): 78-82.

Texas, a slave state. In 1849 a resolution pronounced slavery a “crime against humanity.” In 1856 they appropriated \$20,000 for the free-state forces in Kansas. In 1860 when native son Stephen Douglas campaigned for the presidency in Vermont the people listened politely and then cast 76 percent of their votes for Lincoln, 19 percent for Douglas and 5 percent for the pro slavery candidates. Meanwhile the state operated the most trusted “underground railroad in the East.” After the Civil War ended Thaddeus Stevens from the beautiful hill town of Danville in the Northeast Kingdom became Congress’ leading advocate of harsh treatment for the South. His will requested he be buried in a black cemetery. He was, in Philadelphia.

During the Civil War Vermont backed up these principles with their bodies. In proportion to its population the state had more dead and wounded than any other in the North. One out of every two able-bodied men joined the cause. Casualty rates were far above the Union average, at Antietam, Gettysburg and The Wilderness. Nearly every family in the state lost someone. Vermont also contributed more of its state wealth to the conflict. On the outbreak of the war the legislature immediately appropriated \$1,000,000 to raise and train a militia, a fair sum in those days. By the end of the conflict the state had spent an amount equal to over 10 percent of the total value of all property within its borders. Vermont was the object of the Confederacy’s most northern penetration and the only state north of Pennsylvania to suffer death and destruction on its own soil. The St. Albans raid was a very minor affair – much like one of John Mosby’s forays into Maryland. Still a troop of Confederates did burn buildings, rob banks and take temporary control of one of Vermont’s largest and most important towns before hightailing it back to Canada from whence they came. As one can imagine in the days that followed the whole state pretty much went berserk.

Taken in its totality the Civil War was the metaphorical “big bang” of Vermont politics, an astronomical explosion in the polity that was to govern the magnetic center of its governance for over a century. This is why the Republican Party in Vermont enjoyed the success it did for a hundred years. Vermont was the closest thing the North had to a “Solid South.” No Democrat won *any* statewide race until 1958. This is why Vermont has always been thought of as conservative. Wrong. We were poor, thus frugal. We were bound by the cold, not tradition. Our “progress” was stymied by circumstance not desire. But most of all was our peculiar blend of lust for liberty, attention to community, tolerance in human interactions and the pragmatism of hard sledding. No one has put it better than T. D. Seymour Bassett in an article describing what he calls “Vermont’s Nineteenth-Century Civil Religion:”

Toleration had to mean more than accepting the principle that other people’s creeds made no difference or that heresy must be allowed but restricted. ...Those who favored this kind of toleration wanted a level playing field, where people who believed passionately could evangelize and those who did not care could be left to mind their own business.<sup>124</sup>

This was the legacy of our early statehood development that our own battle to free the slaves (unequaled in any other state) so energized and pounded deep into the bedrock of our civic culture. And there it remained throughout the dark age.

### The Promise of the Passing Dark Age: Democracy

It began on the Indonesian Island of Tampora half way around the world in Indonesia. The largest volcanic explosion in modern history beclouded the globe with ash and soot. To a

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<sup>124</sup> Bassett, “Vermont’s Nineteenth-Century Civil Religion,” 29. In the same paragraph Bassett quotes Samuel Williams: “It is not barely *toleration* but *equality* which the people aim at.” [Samuel Williams, *The Natural and Civil History of Vermont*, (Walpole, New Hampshire: Isiah, Thomas and David Carlisle, Jr., 1794): 336.

land like Vermont, where the balance between life and death perches on a fulcrum governed by the sun, it was too much to take. During the year 1816, called “nineteen hundred and froze to death” snow came every month.<sup>125</sup> The growing season was destroyed. As the wind and dust closed out the sun in the Okalahoma hills a century later Tampora did so Vermont in 1816. That is when the people began to decide to leave. Perhaps Tampora was not *the* prime cause of the dark age that was to follow. But it was clearly an important, reinforcing cause. It established a generational memory that recalled: “No matter how hard things are – and they were usually very hard in Vermont – it can get worse.”<sup>126</sup> They had seen it. Besides Vermont was filled up. Since by tradition the oldest son got the farm what were the other sons to do? They left. Thus housewife positions were limited. One young woman in Vermont lamented: “I can never be happy there in among so many mountains.”<sup>127</sup> The young got out; men to the West to farm, mine and build, women to southern New England and the mills.<sup>128</sup>

By the 1830s Vermont was America’s leading producer of wool. Sheep were more important to Vermont’s economy than cotton was to the south<sup>129</sup> and they literally ate the place

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<sup>125</sup>See: S. L. Vigilante, “Eighteen-Hundred-and-Froze-to-Death: The Cold Summer of 1816 and the Westward Migration from New England,” *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 12 (Summer, 1948).

<sup>126</sup> It was the baby boom of 1800 to 1810 and its subsequent bubble that kept the population on the increase between 1820 and 1850. In the first ten years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century over half the population of Vermont was under sixteen.

<sup>127</sup> Neil W. Kull, “‘I Can Never be Happy There In Among So Many Mountains,’ – The Letters of Sally Rice,” *Vermont History* (Winter, 1970): 49-57. See also: Loriman S. Brighman, “An Independent Voive: A Mill Girl from Vermont Speaks Her Mind,” *Vermont History* (Summer, 1973): 142-146.

<sup>128</sup> In 1845 2000 Vermont women (that is a *lot* from such a small state) were working in the textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts alone. Thomas Dublin (ed.), “The Letters of Mary Paul,” *Vermont History* (Spring, 1980): 77-88.

<sup>129</sup> Lewis D. Stillwell, “*Migration from Vermont*, (Montpelier, Vermont: The Vermont Historical Society, 1948): 172. By 1840 there were six sheep in Vermont for every citizen. *Ibid.*

up, right down to its roots. Moreover Vermont slaughtered its forests. First for potash<sup>130</sup> and pasture and then for sale. By the mid-nineteenth century Burlington was the third most active lumber port in the country. It rains a lot in the summer in Vermont. In the winter there is deep snow cover that builds and builds and then is washed down hill in the spring. Both caused serious erosion. By mid century much of Vermont had been cut down, grazed over and washed up. The state had to import deer in railroad cars by 1870. Beaver were gone by mid century. Bear and fisher cats and lynx had disappeared. The rivers, streams and brooks, dammed up at every opportunity to provide waterpower had grown sickly. Suckers and bullheads replaced the trout.<sup>131</sup> It is no wonder Vermont produced America's first and perhaps greatest *ecologist*, George Perkins Marsh, whose words are sacred in the lexicon of modern environmentalism: "Man is everywhere a disturbing agent."<sup>132</sup>

### WITNESS

#### Rowland Robinson's Town Meeting<sup>133</sup>

Vermont Quaker Rowland Robinson (1833-1900) is the last of the nineteenth-century writers of New England sketches, essays, and tales as distinguished from those authors who wrote fiction almost exclusively. . . Like William Faulkner, though in no way comparable to him in artistic genius or psychological insight, Robinson staked out a literary territory corresponding to an actual geographical area in its culture and physical features. . .

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<sup>130</sup> Potash was Vermont's first great industry. It is made by burning wood, the ash of which produced lye, which when boiled away left potash. It took 100,000 pounds of wood to make 39 pounds of potash. In the 1790s Vermont exported over a hundred tons of potash a year. Guyette, *Vermont: A Cultural Patchwork*, 55.

<sup>131</sup> Actually there is nothing wrong with bullheads (also called horn pout). In fact in the spring I'd just as soon eat them as trout.

<sup>132</sup> It was Marsh who published *in 1864* (from Burlington, Vermont) what Lewis Mumford would later call the "fountain-head of the conservation movement." Marsh wanted to call it "Man the Disturber of Nature's Harmonies" but his editor Charles Scribner convinced him to entitle it instead, *Man and Nature; or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*. David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Versatile Vermonter*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).

<sup>133</sup>Perry D. Westbrook, *The New England Town in Fact and Fiction*, (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982): 126-128.

In a piece titled "An Old-Time March Meeting," published posthumously in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1902, Robinson presents with humor and realism the workings of town democracy . . . [on the election of haywards or hog-howards] the mood of the meeting shifts from seriousness to humor. Let Robinson tell of it in his own words:

It was a common custom in Vermont, in the first half of this century, to permit all kinds of stock to run at large in the highways, which made it necessary to appoint several poundkeepers and as many haywards, or hog-howards, as they were commonly called, whose duty was to keep road-ranging swine within the limits of the highways. Six poundkeepers were now elected, and their barnyards constituted pounds. There was a merry custom, of ancient usage, of electing the most recently married widower to the office of hayward, and it then chanced that Parson Nehemiah Doty, the worthy pastor of the Congregationalists, had been but a fortnight married to his second wife. So an irreverent member of his own flock nominated him for hayward. The nomination was warmly seconded, and he was almost unanimously elected, even the deacons responding very faintly when the negative vote was called; for the parson was a man of caustic humor, and each of its many victims realized that this was a rare opportunity for retaliation. Laughter and applause subsided to decorous silence when the venerable man arose to acknowledge the doubtful honor which had been conferred upon him; and he spoke in the solemn and measured tones that marked the delivery of his sermons, but the clerical austerity of his face was lightened a little by a twinkle of his cold gray eyes:—

"Mr. Moderator and fellow townsmen, in the more than a score of years that I have labored among you, I have endeavored faithfully to perform, so far as in me lay, the duties of a shepherd; to keep within the fold the sheep which were committed to my care, to watch vigilantly that none strayed from it, and to be the humble means of leading some into its shelter. Thus while you were my sheep I have acted as your shepherd, but since you are no longer sheep I will endeavor to perform as faithfully the office of your hayward."

One recalls that Emerson, newly arrived in Concord and newly remarried, was elected hogreeve at his first town meeting. The joke was standard, and in these two instances, at least, the victims were clergymen—though this is probably coincidence. . .

In his introductory note to *Danvis Folks* (1894)—highly typical of his output—he states that he had written "with less purpose of telling any story than of recording the manners, customs, and speech in vogue fifty or sixty years ago in certain parts of New England. Manners have changed, many customs have become obsolete, and though the dialect is yet spoken . . . it is passing away." But elsewhere he states that beneath the superficial changes "the Vermonter of to-day [1892], when brought to the test, proves to be of the same tough fibre as were his ancestors." Nor had surface things changed as much as Robinson feared. Even today, eighty years after he wrote *Danvis Folks*, the rural New England he described is still recognizable in parts of the three northern states.

By 1850 the tariff on wool was lifted and the railroads were opening the West. These things did in the sheep industry. More reason to leave. By providing new vistas for anxious farm boys the Civil War didn't help. In 1850 Vermont's population was 314,120. In 1950 it was 377,747 a 20 percent increase. Meantime the nation grew 560 percent. Marginal hill farms began to die. Many people came down into the villages and the "depot towns." No one took their place. Ever so slowly Vermont began to return to the wilderness.<sup>134</sup> While the rest of the country cleared the land, industrializing and building massive cities and sprawling suburbs, Vermont drifted into shade. The deer came back (happily browsing on the new growth), the meadows grew up, the streams began to flow more swiftly again. For the people who lived in Vermont in the century between 1830 and 1940 Harold Fisher Wilson in his *Hill Country of Northern New England* described life as a "protracted autumn [and] severe winter."<sup>135</sup> One thing is clear. Vermont led the country in "getting out."<sup>136</sup>

Figure III-B describes the pattern with examples of several towns that appear often in this book and a summary for the entire sample of 210 towns. The town Jane Manbridge calls "Shelby" turns out to be a model of the dark-age thesis; remarkable growth until 1830, steady

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<sup>134</sup> See: John R. Stilgoe, "The Wildering of New England 1850-1950," in Timothy R. Richard (ed.), *Settlement in New England: The Last 100 Years*, (Storrs, Connecticut, The University of Connecticut, 1980): 1-6.

<sup>135</sup> Harold F. Wilson, *The Hill Country of Northern New England: Its Social and Economic History 1790-1930*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

<sup>136</sup> It was a Vermonter, Horace Greeley, who grew up and came of age in East Poultney, Vermont, who is credited with the famous quote "Go west, young man, go west." Actually it was John L. B. Soule who said it in an editorial in the *Terre Haute (Indiana) Express*. Greeley said, "Go west, young man, and grow up with the country." Greeley's Vermont youth (he was born in 1811 and was five years old when *Tampora* hit) taught him well. He prefaced his "go west" dictum with the following prophetic passage from his essay "To Aspiring Young Men": "The best business you can get into you will find on your father's farm or in his workshop." If you can't do that, he advised, "turn your face to the great West." When Greeley was growing up in Vermont young men (and women too) couldn't and did. In one of those fascinating turns of history that seem to happen to people from small places Greeley's fellow apprentice in a tiny print shop in East Poultney, Vermont, turned out to be Greeley's chief competitor later in life in the nation's largest city. They were editors of the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Times*.

decline until 1950 (when the population was almost 20 percent lower than in 1790) and then a rocket like takeoff after 1970. Other towns peaked later. Newbury had nearly 3,000 people in 1850 and declined to about 1450 in 1970. Newark dropped from its 1800 high of almost 700 to 150 in 1970. Both took off after that. These variations in apogee and in town size tend to flatten the curve for the entire sample. But the pattern holds. It is especially consistent at either end. While the trough varies, the waves (early and late) do not. This book is about towns that were just waking up after a long winter's nap.

[FIGURE III-B ABOUT HERE]

The importance of this cannot be overestimated. Vermont has always felt left behind. We covered it up with the assertion that, well, we “liked” it that way. But in fact we did not. The state, as a state, tried to bring in new people. But they would not come. There was created in Vermont a profound “we *must* catch up” ethic as the 20<sup>th</sup> Century unfolded. By contrast the summer people early saw and early warned about the evils of growth. But they had the advantage of getting out on a seasonal basis.<sup>137</sup> My generation was told, for instance as late as 1960, that Vermont's first in the nation bottle ban law (passed in 1952) was a symbol of the old ways of the small farmer, a silly anachronism perpetuated by those the world had long passed by. It was repealed in 1961. Progressives (Democrats and liberal Republicans) from larger towns tended to support the repeal. “Conservatives” (Republicans from the smaller towns) tended to support its retention. In an amazing turn around of political sensibilities within 15 years the Progressives

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<sup>137</sup> In fact it was a summer person, Dorothy Thompson, who was one of the first (in the 1930s) to warn Vermont on the evils of billboards on the highways. About twenty-five years later Vermont passed the first law in America prohibiting billboards.

fig 3b

had called for and then passed a new one. The point is that Vermont's "dark age" was not voluntary. It was fortuitous.<sup>138</sup>

Yet the dark age was in many ways not what it was thought to be, especially to those who viewed it from afar.<sup>139</sup> The assumption was that since Vermont did not *urbanize* it bypassed many of the elements associated with city and "big" and disassociated from rural and "small." A nation's intelligentsia is not always immune from a nation's bias. The dominant thesis in the American century was urban industrialism. Big cities supporting big industry and the concomitant lifestyles associated with the mass society they necessarily produced. We called this the "modern age." Rural places would need to pass through this older paradigm on their way to the post-modern future. This rural people believed. They were urged on by those (relatively few) academics and policy elite who gave rural places much thought.<sup>140</sup> But in many rural places and especially in Vermont several critical qualities always associated with "big" had been present all along. Thus there was no need to urbanize in order to establish them. The dark age in Vermont primarily meant isolation from the *scale* of urban life.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> In the 1960s I joined with a leading Vermont conservative (Senator Herb Ogden of Hartford) to oppose the extension of the interstate highway system. We did so in the name of small town life and a cleaner environment. I became to nearly everyone who knew me not only a weirdo but one who was about to dive off the extreme, lunatic right end of the ideological spectrum. As a young graduate student at the University of Vermont I was known as one who manifested all the symptoms of the backward, conservative "set in their ways" hayseed mentality that (if allowed to continue) would keep Vermont from adopting the social infrastructure (big roads, big cars, big schools, big business) that any damn fool knew was necessary if we were to ever move "forward" into the future.

<sup>139</sup> The best revisionist treatment of the dark age thesis is: Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth Century Rural New England*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>140</sup> One can name the political scientists who made a career of studying rural America on one hand. If it were not for sociology (which has a band of dedicated ruralists and a journal, *Rural Sociology*) we would know almost nothing at all.

<sup>141</sup> This is not to say that living in Vermont denied many of the positive attributes that only a city could provide. There is no Fenway Park in Vermont or Yankee Stadium. There are no Broadway plays. These cultural amenities were denied Vermonters much as barn dances and hayrides and sugar on snow parties were denied city folks. Which cohort suffered the most is open to question.

Vermont for instance had a strong industrial base. This seems odd only if you think of industry as big. There has always been a multiplicity of little shops, factories and mills scattered throughout the state.<sup>142</sup> As the hill farms died a larger and larger and sometimes even dominant percentage of the work force was employed in manufacturing. These little concerns spawned little unions (or chapters of larger unions) working for the rights of workers. Vermonters shared fully in the American productive experience and experienced the politics of the labor movement. It was the *scale* of this involvement that was different. There are no Birminghams or Pittsburghs or Detroits in Vermont and clearly no San Franciscos, Seattles or Chicagos.<sup>143</sup> But relative to its population and to its topography (which tended to break up industry as it did society) Vermont abounded in manufacturing, industrial enterprises, and the socio-cultural institutions that go with them. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century more people were employed in manufacturing in Vermont than in farming. Yet at the end of the century the state had only one SMSA and that had to be created (earlier) as a political artifact to make sure Vermont got federal aid.

Even the very small towns contained a diversity of activity that the modern mind finds difficult to comprehend. In 1840 there were 1151 people of all ages living in the Kingdom town of Craftsbury. So difficult was transportation over and through its rocky hillsides it took twelve separately constituted school districts to educate the children. The majority of the people farmed. They kept 333 horses, 1718 cattle, 3166 sheep and 658 swine. They produced 47,906 bushels of potatoes and 14,398 bushels of oats along with 5705 bushels of other crops, 3171 tons of hay and

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<sup>142</sup> I worked my first full time summer job when I was twelve at a silk-screening enterprise in Newbury with two full time employees and two summer help. After my freshman year in college I worked at Adam's Paper Company in Well's River (itself only an incorporated village in the town of Newbury). It employed about 25 at the time. In the summer of 1963 I worked in a quarry that had about 20 employees. Both the mill and the quarry were unionized.

<sup>143</sup> Sometimes, however, Vermont firms got quite large. During the Civil War it took 5000 men to operate the gun shops of Windsor. Morrissey, *Vermont: A Bicentennial History*, 159.

35,412 pounds of sugar. Meantime they ran two gristmills, a hulling mill, two carding machine operations, ten sawmills, two fulling mills, three carriage makers and one oil mill. Although the data are lost it is probably certain there were several blacksmiths and wheelwrights. All this was accomplished by less than 1200 men, women and children. And yet we think of this time as one of bucolic simplicity. If you've ever worked on small farms and in the woods you know that these people not only worked hard, they worked smart. My suspicion is that life for them was fully as complex as it is today and that citizen for citizen these people at that time were more concerned with science (or at least engineering) than their urban counterparts.

Also (and in some ways related) Vermont has always had a far more diverse population than the urban model would predict. First of note is the French Canadian population which, of course, is also Catholic. At various times in the state's history it has represented anywhere from 10 to 20 percent of the state's population. Currently it is the most traditional ethnic group in Vermont. People with names like Francis LeClair are more apt to have been born and raised in Vermont than people with names like Bradford Smith.<sup>144</sup> In Barre there is a very large Italian cohort brought there by the granite quarries. To Fair Haven came a community of Welsh to work in the slate mines. The towns of southwestern Vermont saw considerable Dutch settlement.<sup>145</sup> In

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<sup>144</sup> When I began my teaching career in a small Vermont high school in the Northeast Kingdom I had more students with heavy French Canadian accents than heavy Yankee accents. There were several who spoke French better than English. Our neighbor in Brownington was French Canadian, a devout Catholic who road with me to work every day (she was a housekeeper), and always brought along a little box of delicious homemade pastries. The owner of the tiny little country store across the green was also French Canadian. I watched one of the Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960 in a bar in Winooski, Vermont where 90 percent of the reactions of the patrons were for Kennedy and 10 percent were for Nixon. Eighty percent of both were in French. Winooski was then known as the most Democratic "city" in America. Winooski had 7420 people and no town meeting. For a bibliography on the literature of the French influence in Vermont see: Ann Tholen Stauffer, "The French Americans and the French Canadians: A Select Bibliography of Materials in the Library of the Vermont Historical Society," *Vermont History* (Spring: 1976): 110-114.

<sup>145</sup> Stewart G. McHenry "Vermont's Sleepy Hollow: The Colonial Dutch Landscape Legacy," *Vermont History* 47(fall, 1979) pp.279-285.

Ryegate and Craftsbury and the surrounding towns of Caledonia and Orleans Counties there is an enduring and self-conscious Scott settlement.<sup>146</sup> Poles came to Bellows Falls, Swedes to Proctor, Russians to Springfield, Lithuanians to Arlington<sup>147</sup> and the Irish to Fairfield. A community of Rusyn-Carpathians arrived in Proctor to quarry marble and in Brattleboro a Russian Orthodox Church had to be built to serve the arrivals from Minsk.<sup>148</sup> It would be silliness to compare the effect of ethnic politics in the typical Vermont town to that of the typical American industrial city. Still the number and variety of ethnic groups in Vermont (small in absolute terms, much larger in relative terms) does not fit the stereotypical view of small town America. It is clear that the assimilation of peoples of different tongues and ethnic backgrounds into Vermont society was a substantial and recurring process throughout the great dark age.

Of all the so-called “urban” phenomena found in Vermont during the dark age, technology and inventiveness was substantively most important to the state’s development. It is also heuristically most significant to the study of post-modern real democracy as I treat it in this book. Whether or not real democracy has ever worked well in Vermont is open to question. But either way a backward, tradition-bound, “common sense” equipped social structure was not involved, even though I have heard both defenses *of* and attacks *on* town meeting based on it.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Bruce P. Shields, “Scots Among the Yankees: The Settlement of Craftsbury East Hill,” *Vermont History* (Summer, 1996): 174-184.

<sup>147</sup> William Wolkovich-Valkavičius, “The Lithuanians of Arlington,” *Vermont History* (Summer, 1986): 164-174.

<sup>148</sup> Morrissey, *Vermont: A Bicentennial History*, 115.

<sup>149</sup> The notion that Vermont farmers, for instance, were so tied to “their grandfathers” way of doing things they refused to accept science and technology as a way to better their lives is wrong. Precisely the opposite is true. It is the modern “play farmers” who like doing it the old fashioned way. Farming for a living puts a whole new perspective on efficiency. I can honestly say I have *never* seen or heard of a real farmer do work the hard way because of tradition. Many refused to “modernize” with this or that technique. But it was the salesperson or Extension Service incapacity to convince them it would work that was causal. And indeed, like as not it was the

It does not take a wild-eyed Vermont patriot to make the claim that Vermont has always been ahead of the curve on technology, that if other places provided the brawn of the American century, Vermont provided a relative huge proportion of the brains.

For starters consider the fact that the first patent ever issued by the U.S. Patent Office was given to a Vermonter to process potash. It was a portent of things to come and what was to come almost always involved measurement, motion, energy and communication – in a word technology. In 1793 Samuel Morey of Fairlee propelled a steamboat across the Connecticut. He was kind enough to share his work with Robert Fulton who came all the way to Vermont to look it over. He then returned to southern New York and “invented” it in 1807. At about the same time and just upriver from Fairlee in Bradford, James Wilson began making the first globes on the North American Continent. Over across the green mountains in Shaftsbury, Silas Howe began producing the first steel carpenter’s square, with which geometric formulations can be figured on the fly. It was a slide rule for early builders.

Later in the century the concept and first use of interchangeable parts in North America was innovated, the rotary pump was invented, and one of the world’s leaders in micro-photography, Wilson Bentley, produced the first photomicrographs of snow crystals. Bentley milked Jersey cows up in Jericho, Vermont. The first charter to build a canal was issued in Vermont as was the first express rail service. Both before 1825. By 1853 four-fifths of all horses employed on New York’s Sixth Avenue Railroad were Mogans, the product of one of America’s earliest and most successful experiments in the science of animal husbandry. Meanwhile in 1826 back in Fairlee Morey had invented the first internal-combustion engine with a carburetor

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farmer who was right in the end. The adoption of new (and risky) technology to ease one’s life was beyond *present* in Vermont. It was a *theme* of country life.

attached. “Epoch making” was how Charles Duryea, the man who invented the first road worthy car described it. A decade later Thomas Davenport, a blacksmith from Brandon created a telegraph system. He shared his success with Samuel Morse, who received the patent from the government and the credit from history.

These were all cutting edge developments in the technology of the time, better called high engineering. But of all Vermont’s contributions the electric motor was the most significant. Invented by Davenport in 1837, Professor Benjamin of Yale said of it: “science has most unexpectedly placed in our hands a new power of great but unknown energy,” the most important breakthrough “since the discovery of the structure of the celestial system.” The *New York Herald* called it a “most extraordinary discovery, probably the greatest of ancient and modern times, the greatest the world has ever seen, the greatest the world will ever see.” Inflated, no doubt. Still, a Vermont blacksmith had invented the power source that replaced steam and made the industrial revolution possible.

It was a Vermonter from St. Johnsbury who invented a device, the platform scale that made the *marketing* of the industrial revolution’s products possible. In 1830 Thaddeus Fairbanks needed a way to sell a strange but useful grass called hemp.<sup>150</sup> He began to build and then marketed the platform scale. Now measurement was possible by weight, not bulk. The implications were enormous. In this little Kingdom town far, far above the “optimum climatic area” of America Fairbanks Scales were soon dominating the world market, the weights for their

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<sup>150</sup> Yes. Marijuana. Thus one of the many minor parties to find success in Vermont in recent decades is called the “Grassroots” Party. They’ve been trying like crazy to legalize the stuff. But the Governor, Howard Dean, will have none of it. (So he says.)

use translated into five languages. Not only did the company lead in inventiveness, it also led in the science of modern marketing.<sup>151</sup>

The industry for which Vermont has historically been most famous is the machine tool industry. This is a metaphor for Vermont's role in the industrial revolution. Known as "precision valley" the area around Springfield and Windsor, Vermont became the world's leader in building the most highly calibrated, tolerance reducing measuring and cutting devices to build the machines that operated the industrial revolution. "Here in this quiet Vermont valley, through the manufacture of interchangeable parts and precision tools... began the American system of mass production," said historian Earle Newton.<sup>152</sup> The value of all this to a proper understanding of Vermont today is not necessarily to believe that the state was the "silicon valley" of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It is to appreciate the counterintuitive truth that this coldest, most isolated, rural and agricultural of American states was an integral part of the industrial revolution – even a leader. Vermont's role, however, was technological not mechanical. It contributed a significant amount (impressive in absolute terms, amazing in relative terms) of the science and almost none of the size.

The post 1950s situation in Vermont is best summarized by a paradigm familiar to historians and loggers alike; out of the bad news comes the good, out of despair comes hope, out of the winter comes spring. In the 1970s L. S. Stavrianos saw western civilization slipping into a new dark age and urged us to get ahead of the curve in his book, *The Promise of the Coming*

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<sup>151</sup> David Yale, "The Fairbanks of St. Johnsbury: Industrialism and Technology in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Vermont," (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Connecticut, 1994).

<sup>152</sup> Earle Newton, *The Story of Vermont*, (Montpelier, Vermont: Vermont Historical Society, 1949).

*Dark Age*.<sup>153</sup> I believe Vermont's dark age carried its own promise and the agenda that has controlled the state's public life since the end of World War II is the subconscious struggle to either act on the promise or ignore it. Town meeting is both the symbolic manifestation and the practical battleground of this struggle. The field of conflict is a high-tech, fundamentally liberal and profoundly decentralized society that (because it bypassed the urban-industrial revolution) has an opportunity to commit its energy to the fashioning of a humane and civil society. It can do this through the creative nexus of technology with human scale community life. Less than nearly any other state, Vermont need not spend its time cleaning up after the old pattern. Its time may be spent establishing the new.

Vermont by all common measures is one of the most high-tech states in the union. If the agricultural sector (which may be the most high-tech of all) were considered it well might lead. Its early heritage of talented tinkerers has served the state well in the computer era. In a profound catalogue of events and actions Vermont has demonstrated that the great dark age preserved its liberalism intact and in order. Evidence stretches from its leadership in the fight against McCarthyism<sup>154</sup> in the 1950s to its more contemporary support for unpopular causes from gays

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<sup>153</sup> L.S. Stavrianos, *The Promise of the Coming Dark Age*, (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1976).

<sup>154</sup> A former Vermont Congressperson in Vermont got nervous about the communism in the McCarthy era and talked a neighbor into introducing a bill into the legislature to create a state board to review textbooks to be sure they were free of subversive material. The proposal caused considerable hoopla in the state. Every town had one and only one member in the House of Representative. Each represented about 1500 men, women and children. There were 84 farmers (real ones), 35 housewives, and 20 blue-collar workers, again real ones, along with shopkeepers, small businessmen and others. Only 25 of the 246 were Democrats. Over three-quarters were native-born Vermonters and a good portion of the rest had been raised in Vermont. John McClaughry and I put it this way in 1989: "If ever there was a legislature which... would exhibit the pathologies [assumed to be] festering in the rural backwaters of the nation, this was it. Yet when the time for voting came, the roll call was: McCarthy 11, Hillbillies 202. Bryan and McClaughry, *The Vermont Papers: Recreating Democracy on a Human Scale*, 16-17. In Washington Vermont's "conservative" Senator, Ralph Flanders, a Republican naturally, nevertheless bucked his party and went out on point against McCarthy, leading the fight for censure. Historian Robert Griffith, author of the prize winning (Frederick Jackson Turner Award in American History, 1970) *The Politics of Fear: Joseph McCarthy and the Senate*, (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1970), said this of Flanders' performance: "Ralph Flanders lifted 'the

to gun owners and its support for political independents like John Anderson, Ross Perrot and most importantly Bernie Sanders. Above all it emerged from the great dark age with its little communities intact, its little governments in place, its institutions still functioning on a human scale.

### WITNESS

*Vicki Johnson returned home to West Windsor, Vermont, to attend the 1982 town meeting there. Her family had moved up from Boston when she was ten years old.*

The culture shock I felt when we moved from outside Boston to Brownsville [a little settlement in the town of West Windsor] was non-existent [when I returned to town for the 1982 town meeting]. I was thrilled to receive the special attention of my teacher who had taught me in grades 5 and 6. It had been quite easy to learn the names of all eleven of my classmates! Soon I began to recognize the important faces in the town, the men who were always at the counter of the general store every Saturday and the women who always ran our famous bean suppers.

On the first Tuesday of March our principal would lead us down to the Story Memorial Hall where we would sit up in the balcony and distract our parents who were engaged in something we didn't understand.

Well times change and now I am a Sophomore at the University of Vermont supposedly knowledgeable in government and politics, attending what is the purist form of democracy in the United States today, the town meeting. Now, when I sit up in the balcony and look down on the people in my town I realize how important a town meeting is. The faces really haven't changed much since I sat there seven years ago. A few new outsiders stand to speak, voice their opinions and sit down. Someone in the back whispers to his friend "Who's that?" and is informed that "he lives up on the Brook Road near the Ely place." Mr. Denyon a life-long resident of the town asks thirty questions ranging from the new grader to the mini-computer for the grade school. Selectman Ed Cyr answers each question patiently. Mr. Benn the town moderator for the last ten years pulls out his procedure rule book and answers a question from the floor. The town speeds through the big money items and spends half an hour trying to decide whether to buy a smoke or heat detector for the school. It has been decided that we definitely need something to protect "our kids." It is this feeling of oneness by the townspeople that is exciting to be a part of.

Perhaps the most important question that was raised was the question of nuclear disarmament. Rev. Gottenburg a retired Lutheran minister began passing out literature during the town meeting. The question of whether he could legally do this was raised. He must wait until lunch break. The Rev. was disappointed at this and one could tell he was extremely moved by this cause. He spent his entire lunch hour asking for support of

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curse of partisanship' which had for so long paralyzed all attempts to restrain McCarthy, and forced his fellow senators, Republicans and Democrats alike, to face the issue squarely. 'You have done a fine job,' wrote J. William Fulbright to Flanders in September, 'and we all owe you a debt of gratitude.'" Robert Griffith, "Ralph Flanders and the Censure of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy," *Vermont History* (Winter, 1971): 5-20.

the question. The nuclear question was the last to be discussed and after ten minutes it was passed unanimously. The Rev. felt so moved by this that he stood up and began singing "God Bless America." The entire floor stood up and sang along. At first I thought that the act was silly and senseless, something I could not and would not take part in. Reflecting on that past moment I can honestly say that I am disappointed in myself for not joining in and professing my love for my country. Our society has become apathetic in dealing with government duties. We rarely vote and when we do we don't know the candidate or what he stands for.<sup>155</sup>

This is no utopic dream. This is how it was as the 1950s began and the dark age offered its promise. It is still the controlling condition.<sup>156</sup> Unfortunately, I can think of no significant statewide public officials in my lifetime willing to try to keep it. Instead amid much pious lip service to the contrary, Republicans and Democrats, progressives and liberals (Vermont does not elect conservatives) have consistently acted as though democracy were a thorn in the side of the body politic. Those state legislators who think in human scale terms are considered hopeless romantics or kooks. Yet throughout the last fifty years the towns and their town meetings have toughed it out, fighting back when they can but fundamentally relying on the state's incapacity to govern (at the local level) and more importantly the power of tradition. In short the governing elite, taught by second wave academics, have their noses glued to the straight line thesis. They are still trying to catch up with urban-industrialism. But the flag is still waving over fortress town meeting. There is plenty of water, food and ammunition left inside.

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<sup>155</sup> Vicki Johnson, "1982 West Windsor Town Meeting," (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, March 1982). Craig Morley, who accompanied Vicki (along with another friend who helped with the counting procedures), had a slightly different take on the same meeting. "Coming originally from the city to Vermont seven years ago and learning about town meeting, I thought the whole town would show up for it. This didn't come true. In West Windsor only about twenty percent of the registered voters attended the meeting. The people of the town must have lost their sense of community and responsibility for the town. I see the loss of participation as a product of two things. One is the nationwide decline in voter participation. The second reason stems from the loss of power the towns are witnessing now." Craig Morely, "1982 West Windsor Town Meeting," (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, March 1982).

Thus the strategic *design* of the conflict pits those who think history travels on a linear trajectory between small and large, mass and humane, democratic and authoritarian and those who see a more complicated, curvilinear pattern. In this alternative vision centralism is replaced by diffusion, hierarchy is subsumed by network, authority by democracy, symmetry by diversity and conservatism by creativity. It is within this conflictual design that the town meeting, the real democracy described in this book, has been conducted. Town meetings are by *their very nature* anathema to the centralist model. Therefore they have been under constant attack both by local governmental officials, especially school officials, who are loath to place issues before meetings as warning items, and by the state which has consistently chipped away at town authority to *act*, the lifeblood of real democracy.<sup>157</sup>

Three other dynamics are at work. The first was the tremendous influx of new people to Vermont. Figure III-B demonstrates that the thirty-year time span of this study encompasses the most dramatic increase in population Vermont has experienced since the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. They came not to the largest towns and Vermont's few little cities, but to the small towns, the places where town meeting is most vital. The newcomers' relationship to town meeting is complicated,

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<sup>156</sup> I do not claim it will last. In fact as the century turns the linear model at this point is dominant. It is ascendant. It may come down to whether or not the paradigm shift (which is more and more evident in the private sector and in the population at large) will find its way into *politics* soon enough.

<sup>157</sup> I will say more about this in the chapters on attendance at town meeting. For now understand that beginning in the late 1950s and ending about the time this study began no state save Alaska removed more power from its localities than Vermont. J. Ross Stephens, "State Centralization and the Erosion of Local Autonomy," *Journal of Politics* (February, 1974): 44-76. See also Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, 127-130. Mansbridge argues that given the loss of power towns like "Selby" have suffered it is surprising the decline in attendance has not been greater. *Ibid.*, 130. E. B. White got the causation about right when he commented from Maine "We have accepted money for our schools our libraries, our winter roads. Now we face the inescapable consequence, the benefactor wants to call the tunes." (Referenced on page 473 of Richard Lingeman's, *Small Town America* and documented in footnote 43 of the chapter "Town and Community.")

a recurrent conundrum throughout the pages that follow. But overall their presence (especially the first wave inspired by the 1960s and the energy crisis) has been positive for town meeting.

The second change is the continued decline of the small farm and the family farm culture that it generated. These abandoned farms became a prime destination for newcomers who bought them up in droves beginning in the 1930s and accelerating in the 1960s. Since they are no longer farmed the face of Vermont continues to close in with brush and new growth. Thus wildlife habitat has *increased* for many species with rural population growth. In my day every farm boy had a shotgun at twelve and knew how to use it. The “transplants” from “away” don’t shoot stuff the way we did. All this means that not since the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century has the culture of Vermont changed as radically.

Finally, the partisan politics of Vermont shifted more swiftly and more completely after 1950 than in any other state in America save, perhaps, Florida. The most Republican State in America became a competitive two-party state by 1980—right down to its roots in the legislature—with the Democrats favored to win instead of Republicans. This remarkable turnaround began in 1952 and by 1962 Vermonters had sent a Democrat to Congress and elected one Governor. In 1964 Vermont’s percentage for Lyndon Johnson was higher than the average state. Thus by the time the major in migration was underway native old stock Vermonters had demonstrated they were willing to abandon the GOP.

It would be difficult to name an American state with a more dynamic physical, social, economic and political environment (in the last four decades of this century) than Vermont’s. In the landscape of this study the foreground’s commanding feature is movement. Change, dramatic change, has occurred in nearly every aspect of life. Yet in the background the bedrock features of

Vermont's history remained intact. Small towns still dominate the demographic structure, small firms the economic, and small institutions the social. The acceptance and use of technology to make life better continues to prevail. A political culture of tolerance, independence and participation still rules. Town meetings remain the soul of the commonwealth. They are not as powerful as they once were. But it is their continued relevance and capacities after decades of fighting off state encroachments on their policy-making prerogatives that surprises, not their weaknesses. In all but a handful of little cities Vermont citizens are still *legislators*, every one.

The promise of the passing dark age is thus opportunity; the chance to become the new century's demonstration model of human scale democracy. A place where real democracy at the base flourishes; rearing, nurturing and sustaining the kind of democrats it takes to successfully operate a liberal and representative democracy at the center, whether that center be in Montpelier or Washington. Vermont came out of its dark age unfettered by the residues of the past (urban-industrialism), imbued with the elixir of the new age (technology) and in full possession of its liberal faculties and its democratic facilities.