

Before settlement

In 1741 George III of England established the crown colony of New Hampshire, fixed its present-day boundaries and installed one Benning Wentworth at its head. Wentworth, as governor, was put in charge of Fort Dummer, then a remote outpost planted on the opposite (west) bank of the Connecticut River. Using this miniscule toehold, Wentworth proclaimed jurisdiction over the vast, largely unexplored “no man’s land” beyond the Connecticut recently gained in the historic ceding of French Canada to Britain. Actually, New York was first promised this territory. But Wentworth embarked upon an aggressive campaign, chartering townships from Massachusetts northward, thereby sowing an enduring legacy of land-grabbing and real estate controversies that would characterize the original settlement of Vermont, known then as the Hampshire Grants.

Within twenty years all the prime agricultural soils right up through the Champlain Valley were bought up by wholesale land developers (Ira and Ethan Allen, notably, among them) looking for a tidy return off a burgeoning colonial population. Remaining marginal farmland lay in hill country. Records show that on June 8, 1763, Wentworth issued a charter containing thirty-six square miles (23,040 acres) of virgin wilderness to a group of sixty-five investors, one of whom was named Benjamin Underhill. This land went for exactly one cent per acre. On this same day Westford, Stowe and the now extinct township of Mansfield were chartered in different syndicates comprising many of the same shareholders. Jericho had been born the day before. These original owners never intended personally to clear this frontier. They were land speculators. Most joined several standard sixty-five-member coalitions purchasing thirty-six square miles at a penny an acre. Likely none ever physically visited their holdings any more than a contemporary market trader would bother inspecting some corporate plant. In this New World exploitable wilderness was everywhere just over the perceived horizon. It was a brisk commodity—parcelled up, shuffled about and horse-traded off to young, hardy, gullible frontierspeople desperate for a new beginning someplace.

In the following year of 1764 the Hampshire Grants, now a gridwork of 131 separate townships, were mostly all sold off, though few settlers had actually arrived. But by year’s end, following decades of dispute, King George himself finally ruled that this whole (literal) shooting match west of the Connecticut River had all along belonged to New York, not New Hampshire. Benning Wentworth’s scheme swiftly unravelled and he eventually resigned under scandal. New York began selling its own charters directly adverse to the so-called “Wentworthless” claims. In fact, in 1776 New York sold a tract of land to one Frederick Rhineland of New York City, which included parts of Milton, Westford and Underhill. But in the tempestuous months preceding the outbreak of revolution, entrenched Hampshire Grantees in first-settled areas like Guilford and Bennington (named after you-know-who) fended off arriving homesteaders armed under New York authority. In fact, the Green Mountain Boys of Revolutionary legend originally banded to fight not British soldiers, but Yorkers—fellow settlers.

Thus, for pioneers contemplating “going into the Grants” during the 1760s and 1770s migration north offered the terrifying prospect of colonizing territory ravaged by dispute and revolution. A breed apart, those lost souls who dared stepping into this wilderness faced a pantheon of nemeses: native Abnaki, French trappers, British soldiers, New York militia, Green Mountain vigilantes, not to mention starvation, wild animals and brutal cold. [1] Needless to say, Benjamin Underhill and his peers never saw much quick profit. It would take decades more for this hill country to start populating.

On September 12, 1785, a group of landed gentry gathered at the home of one Abraham Underhill (presumably a relative of Benjamin) in Dorset, Vermont. This was the first formal meeting of these sixty-five original shareholders—or their survivors—who twenty-two years earlier had speculated, sight unseen, on a chunk of uninhabited wilderness lying somewhere nine days’ walk north of them. Much had transpired over those intervening years. New York, Massachusetts and New Hampshire were now constituents in the new, thirteen-member federation. Although the Green Mountain Boys had valiantly supported the War of Independence, the Continental Congress snubbed their membership mainly out of deference to the powerful New York delegation still smarting from rivalry and the loss of substantial charter fees to Wentworth. But residents of the Grants stood defiant, proclaimed themselves a sovereign nation, drafted their own Declaration of Independence and Constitution, and even minted their own currency. Eventually they adopted the name: Vermont. Finally, in 1785 they laid to rest the quarter-century of antagonism by paying off New York and legitimizing Wentworth’s

originally bogus charters. In that year the ruggedly self-reliant Republic of Vermont was finally poised for prosperity—and for inevitable admission, six years later, into the Union as the fourteenth State.

There was certainly some urgency to the 1785 shareholders meeting at Mr. Underhill's home in Dorset. Now that the great feud was finally over, a land rush was on and civilization was swiftly pushing back the frontier. Pioneers had already settled on the Browns and Lamoille River flatlands. So a committee of three was appointed to dispatch a surveyor posthaste. "Surveying" the Vermont wilderness in 1785 entailed nothing of today's professionalism. It was a combination of bush-whacking, dead reckoning, eye-balling and much bare-fisted negotiation with sundry squatters, neighbors and adverse claimants in a conspicuous grab for the best cropland. By the time this surveying team arrived, the choicest alluvial pickings had already been staked by surrounding townships.^[12]

Early settlement

The earliest settlers in Underhill proper arrived the following spring of 1786. Their lots encompassed the gateway area we now call the Flats. More folks gradually filtered in and cleared along the foot trail to Cambridge. This path became a wagon road following the line of least resistance up the route we now call Poker Hill Road. In 1791 Vermont became a State, and the first official U.S. Census records Vermont as having a population of 85,000. Guilford, the largest town, had 2,400; Underhill had 65. By the next census of 1800, nine years later, Underhill's population nearly quadrupled.

From the turn of the nineteenth century onward the stream of homesteaders to Underhill increased. From the start the primary industry was logging.^[13] The virgin forest was cleared, lumber was cut for homes, schools, churches, taverns, barns, fences, etc. Saw mills clustered around every available stream site and ran day and night during Spring thaw. People were dispersed across a multitude of logging camps and small, subsistence farms. Travel was minimal and always on foot; life was mind-numbingly parochial. These scattered homesteads typically revolved around a local neighborhood or "settlement," featuring a meeting house with shipping post and cemetery, perhaps a mill, store, or tavern, always a one-room schoolhouse.

Potato starch and potash refineries, grain mills, tanneries, stores and blacksmiths sprang up, first along Poker Hill, then up the Browns River and Pleasant Valley. In 1839 the sparsely inhabited logging township of Mansfield straddling the mountain was dissolved by State legislation, and the summit with the entire western slope (12 square miles or exactly one-third) was given to Underhill, the eastern two-thirds to Stowe.

The Civil War

The war between the States was a cataclysmic event in the history of Vermont and Underhill. Chroniclers agree the most rabid abolitionism flourished in the deep north. Vermonters enlisted in droves to eradicate Southern slavery and preserve the Union. More men and resources per capita were expended from Vermont than any other State. Families of twenty children were not uncommon back then; the population base was exploding. But by that time Vermont was nearly devoid of its forests; the wilderness gone, available decent farmland confining. The Civil War accelerated the opening of the American West, like a huge plug releasing restless masses out across the fruited plain toward the next expanse of wilderness and the distant lure of gold. One local yarn explains how Nebraska Notch was named: residents of parts east streaming through the pass would announce their destination, Nebrasky.

We look back upon our forbears with nostalgia. But in reality scratching out a hardscrabble existence during those times was insufferable, especially for the upland inhabitants of Underhill. Though by the 1860s seventy-five per cent of Vermont was treeless, logging was still underway on the less accessible slopes of Mansfield and her foothills. Once the timber fell, the rough ground was left for recent arrivals to work. Today, in the remotest backwoods of Underhill we are amazed to discover rock piles, stone walls, cellar holes and other evidence of unimaginable labor. Sheep-raising was the dominant agricultural industry of the Civil War period, and Vermont was regarded as the wool capital of the world. But from that very first survey a hundred years earlier, Underhill was somehow muscled out of its proportion of rich bottomland. The remaining thin, stony, sloped, poor-draining soils were never meant for efficient production. From its inception, Underhill had always been—relative to other towns—an unwealthy and rather itinerant place. Many, many families simply gave up, gathered everything and

headed west. The Census of 1870 records Underhill's highest pre-modern population at 1,655 residents. From then on it was all downhill.

A village across towns

At this population crest came an event which would influence the modern predicament of Underhill. 1877 saw the coming of the Burlington-and-Lamoille Railway, from Essex to Cambridge. Railroads are not particular respecters of town lines, and back then, municipal boundaries had not the significance of today. So, to no one's concern at the time, this station was positioned almost directly on the Underhill-Jericho town line. Though another station was built at the opposite end of Underhill, it was the Flatts depot which germinated and took on a life of its own. Here a true "population center"—a mini-metropolis! -- spread out right across the town boundary. So while the population of Underhill township as a whole declined, the Flatts on both sides of the dividing line ballooned. Churches, stores of every variety, mills, hotels, taverns, a theater, a private boarding school, stockyards, livery stables, paved streets and a public common arose just west of the train stop. Blacksmiths, barbers, wheelwrights, a doctor, a druggist and a lawyer set up shop. As the far-flung upland settlements were losing people and importance as social, residential and economic nuclei, Underhill Flatts as the focal point of local life grew. Fifteen years after the coming of the B & L Railway the Vermont legislature granted this boomtown unique authorization to unify into one single school district the Flatts settlement on the Underhill side with the adjacent Riverside Settlement on the Jericho side. Thus was born the Underhill Incorporated District (Underhill I. D.) straddling parts of Jericho and Underhill and the source of so much frustration today. Underhill at the turn of the century was a transforming place. As the hillside populations drained, farms and logging businesses consolidated into bigger, intensive, more efficient operations. Dairy cows supplanted sheep as Vermont soon became (and remains) the Holstein capital of the world. B & L boxcars carried in fertilizer, grain and manufactured goods and carried out lumber, leather, maple sugar, potatoes, butter and cheese.

A place for recreation

The railway helped to make Underhill an attractive vacation destination. The Halfway House, a hotel built near the current site of Underhill State Park camping area, cultivated a flourishing business. From there guests would often hike or wagon-ride up a narrow road for an overnight at the Summit House Hotel situated on the nose of Mt. Mansfield. Several other resort hotels existed in Underhill Center. In the early part of the century many of the small mountain farms were purchased for vacation homes and Underhill Center was for many decades essentially a 'summer colony'. The 19th century grand hotels with ballrooms went into decline, replaced by simpler summer 'boarding houses'. In 1924 the first alpine ski trail on Mt. Mansfield (The Teardrop) was cleared on the Underhill side. In 1935 the Underhill Ski Bowl was started on the Egan farm with a primitive rope tow and was used by the newly formed Winter Sports Club. The ski operation thrived from 1946- 1982 under the ownership of the Dubrow family and the Underhill Ski Bowl was shown on all the maps of Vermont. It certainly was the place for the children in Underhill to enjoy the cold winters and become expert skiers -- and with an improved ski tow and lighted night skiing, it became popular with the Burlington crowd, too. It was a great community loss when the facility closed (largely due to exorbitant increases in the cost of insurance.)

The sport of cross country skiing in Vermont actually began in Underhill Center. A group of enthusiasts started clearing trails in the mid '60s and the Edgemont races were popular for many years. A longer trail was cleared all the way to Smugglers' Notch and was used for the annual 'Madonna Vasa' race. The races were discontinued in late '70s because of excess popularity; they became just too big to handle. Meanwhile, many local trails have been cleared and the sport is now highly popular all over Underhill.

From the mid '40s to the mid '60s Underhill Center was a mecca for country dances held Saturday nights at the 'Hen House' (now Wells apartments) in Underhill Center. It was entertainment for all ages and was popular with dancers from all around the area.

In the early '70s the Town bought land in Underhill Center for a recreation area and with the help of a State grant established tennis courts and a small swimming pond. A volunteer Recreation Committee was formed to oversee

the facility and there are annual tennis and swimming lessons. From 1982-1998 the Connells operated an international youth hostel in their handsome barn in Underhill Center, attracting visitors from many countries. In 1970, the time of the first Town Plan, vacation property accounted for nearly 13% of the Grand List. Over the last 30 years nearly all the seasonal homes have been converted to year-round residences. Now only 2.4% of houses is listed as vacation house.

Population decline

The flush of prosperity lasted two generations before competition from America's heartland ushered the agricultural economy of the Northeast into decline. Inexorably, from the hilly regions, dairy farm after farm fell out of production. And Vermont's worked-over timber stands could scarcely vie with the expansive virgin resources of the great Northwest.

Loss of land

Two factors exacerbated the population decline in Underhill as the 20th century unfolded: the establishment of the Mt Mansfield State Forest and Park and the Federal Underhill Artillery Range. As early as 1859 UVM had acquired stewardship of the crest of Mt Mansfield with its unique glacial leftover of tundra. In 1914, with the logging of the mountain virtually complete, Vermont began the acquisition of land on Mount Mansfield for a State Forest and Park and the initiation of programs for reforestation and recreation, absorbing some homesteads in the process. Expansion of the State Forest has continued throughout the years as land has become available through purchase from lumber companies and private gifts. In 1926 the Federal government purchased land in Underhill, Jericho and Bolton to use as an artillery range for the Fort Ethan Allen military base in Essex Junction and summer training for college reserve officers. 1153 acres of Underhill were taken off of the tax rolls; the neighborhood called 'Hutchville' disappeared. In 1946 more land was added to the 'Range' bringing the Underhill total to 3,292 acres.

Loss of income

When the Depression hit, commercial rail evaporated, and by 1939 the B & L stopped running. Farms were abandoned or sold off as vacation homes or hunting camps to cityfolk attracted by firesale prices, the unspoiled environment and the absence of people. Underhill became a second-home haven. The 1950 census recorded Underhill's lowest population since 1820 at less than 700 residents.

By the 50s Underhill's fifteen separate "settlement" school districts had dwindled to five, apart from the "I.D." With so few inhabitants, even five was too much. So in 1953 the five remaining districts consolidated into one, which headquartered itself in Underhill Center, thus completing the current school district configuration that some residents now regard as geographically absurd.

As the town population declined, the many churches in town were hard pressed to maintain viable congregations and began to share facilities with churches in Jericho. The 'Union Church' in Underhill Center, shared by Methodist and Baptist denominations, was given up and in 1950 the building was purchased by the town of Underhill for use as a Town Hall and renovated by civic volunteers. (The new facility replaced the former Green Mountain Academy in Underhill Center, which had served as Town Hall for many years.)

Meanwhile, Chittenden County's population had been growing all the time; between 1850 and 1940 at a steady rate of 1% per year and after World War 2 at 2% per year. Between 1940 and 1980 the population doubled. Moreover, the freedom of transportation provided by the automobile liberated people from the need to build close to railroads where real estate prices were high. Dirt roads became paved highways. Renewed prosperity was around the corner.

Life in the early 20th century

Although a telephone exchange had been started in the 1890s, electricity was not introduced until 1933. Many country homes were connected much later. A trip to Burlington was an excursion and not everyone made it that far. People made their own entertainment and classic Vermont humor is evident in the chronicle of events. For many years The Mansfield Women's Club provided intellectual stimulus for the ladies with book reviews and special reports. It was responsible for the Waters Library and made many other contributions to the civic life of

the community. 4H was popular with the young people providing domestic and farm-life skills. Exchange of services was the rule and most civic needs were addressed by volunteers.

The Civilian Conservation Corps

During the depression years of 1933- 1942, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)^[4] was active in Underhill. From their camp on Range Road, the young men were driven to the mountain where they built a campsite for the Underhill State Park and created more hiking trails. (A large segment of the Appalachian Long Trail passes through Underhill and had been cleared earlier.) During the historic blizzard of 1940, their camp almost blew away, but they turned out to help people all over town. When the program ended with the advent of WWII, the Corps was in the process of constructing a road across the Underhill side of the mountain, destination Nebraska Notch; traces of the road can still be seen on the mountainside. (The young men had created quite a social stir in the area, competing with local boys for the attention of the girls; the situation was not without some interaction...)

The Firing Range

In 1948 the General Electric Company in Burlington began the manufacture of armaments and used the Range to test large guns. The whooping noise of the high tech artillery became a familiar sound in Underhill. Part of the Range was set up for training of the Vermont National Guard and units from other states as well. The sounds of small arms fire, 155mm howitzers and helicopter observation planes also became familiar. As the role of the Guard and Reserves has become more important in military strategy, the use of the range for training activities has expanded year round.

Renewed prosperity

In 1957 IBM set up a manufacturing plant in Essex Junction with tenuous roots. The venture turned out to be successful and as the years went by the commitment became more resolute. By 1968, with the expansion of manufacturing and the opening of a new engineering building, the company had completely changed the economic landscape of Chittenden County.

The completion of Interstate 89 further fueled an upturn in the economy. High-tech manufacturing and service industries blossomed, and the population suddenly soared. In the mid 60s Underhill started to grow again and to grow fast. Open land subdivided into house sites; summer homes and hunting camps converted into year-round residences.

Town Planning started

Although Underhill lay on the outskirts of the immediate effected area, some of the far- sighted town citizens saw the future coming and took steps to try to control possible ill-planned housing developments. In 1961, the town authorized the appointment of a Zoning Board to write a zoning ordinance; the minimal regulations were adopted in 1963. The following year a Planning Commission was appointed. The VT Planning and Development Act (Act 250) was passed in 1968 in response to the disastrous consequences of unregulated development in the state. The legislation required the writing of a Town Plan on which to base zoning ordinances. In preparation the Underhill Planning Commission initiated a 'land use' study by the U.S. Soil Conservation Service in Essex Junction and were fortunate to have the expertise of soil scientist , Robert Towne, to do the work. The first Underhill Town Plan was adopted in 1970 , along with subdivision regulations to curb the proliferation of poorly planned housing developments , which the early zoning regulations had not been able to prevent.

(Some of the early subdivisions established in the late '60s had road problems which became historical legacies). In 1973 the revised Zoning Ordinance was passed, based upon the SCCS Land Use Map using 'Critical Area Zoning' criteria. The fundamental, unchanging natural basis for the regulations has stood for 30 years, so far.

Town Hall was renovated

In 1967 the population of Underhill still hovered around 700, but rapid change was coming. The Town Hall had suffered structural damage from an untended roof leak and the Town Office in the basement was woefully inadequate. A bond vote to pay for remodeling of the building was first passed and then rescinded. In desperation the Selectboard even contemplated the possibility of sharing a Town Hall and Town Manager with Jericho. Then a project to renovate the building with volunteer workers emerged and the newly formed Historical Society undertook fund raising projects to pay for the materials. It was a two- year project of Saturday workdays with

citizens of all ages participating. The project was highly successful and even received recognition from the State Historical Society. In 1970 a grand town party celebrated the building rejuvenation.

Property taxes soared

About the same time as the passage of Act 250, the VT Supreme Court decreed that the historical basis for tax appraisal which evaluated land use for agricultural usefulness was now unfair and appraisal would henceforth be based upon something called "Fair Market Value". This was an average number derived from recent property sales and was used to evaluate land by total acreage. In 1970 the Underhill Town listers reappraised land on this basis and the result was disastrous. Land appraisals soared, some even quadrupling. The Civil Board was overwhelmed by appraisal challenges and just about every lawyer in Burlington had a job in Underhill.... The Board revoked many of the changes and the listers took the Town to court. (The Town taxpayers had to pay for legal costs on both sides of the issue.) The upshot was that the court threw the challenge into the hands of the State Board of Appraisal, which had pressured the listers in the first place. A compromise was finally reached which allowed modifying factors to be applied to the land values, depending on location and viability for housing. But lasting damage had been done. Underhill was essentially up for sale. The Selectboard responded by setting up the first town 'Land Use Contract', which abated taxes on lands which were set aside from development for 10 years. (Although an important purpose was to protect some of the few remaining farmers from excessive taxation, several independents refused to participate.) Subsequently the State set up similar contracts. The huge pressure on land sales somewhat diminished, but the pressure of population growth in Chittenden county spread inexorably to Underhill, with a rapid expansion of housing and the need for one school addition after another.

The 21st century

As we enter the new century, the population of Underhill is about 3000, five times more than its lowest number of 600 in the early '60s. But the population is no longer rapidly growing and the school population has experienced decline. With excess school facilities in both Underhill and Jericho, the opportunity to redress the historical legacy of the Underhill ID school problem may be at hand.

Meanwhile, Underhill enters the new era with a refurbished Town Hall, a new Town Garage, a new Town Park, a Conservation District, many fine new bridges and improved roads. It shares with Jericho a thriving new memorial library and a new, well-appointed building for the Underhill-Jericho Volunteer Fire Department (which celebrated its 90th anniversary in 2003) . The Mills Riverside Park , also shared by the two towns, is a splendid addition to the communities and is used for all manner of activities: picnicking ,camping, concerts, sports practice, farmers' market , bird watching. It is soon to have a useful covered pavilion, courtesy of the local Lions Club. In spite of the great increase in town population, the pressures of commuting and the social draw of Burlington, Underhill has managed to preserve a sense of community. There is good attendance at Town Meeting and volunteer service, long a town tradition, continues to thrive. The projections for future population growth in the county are alarming for Underhill as it carries its role as steward of the gateway to Mt Mansfield. Needless to say, the challenges ahead are many.