

FACES OF THE LAND

by Dawn Andrews and Philip Elwert (1988)

These days Vermonters are planning for the future, thinking about how to manage growth and development in the state. We often talk about **preserving** the landscape. But what do we mean when we speak of the “landscape?” What changes have taken place since human beings first lived on the land 12,000 years ago? How have different groups of people used the land and how has that affected the way the land looks today?

PHYSICAL REGIONS

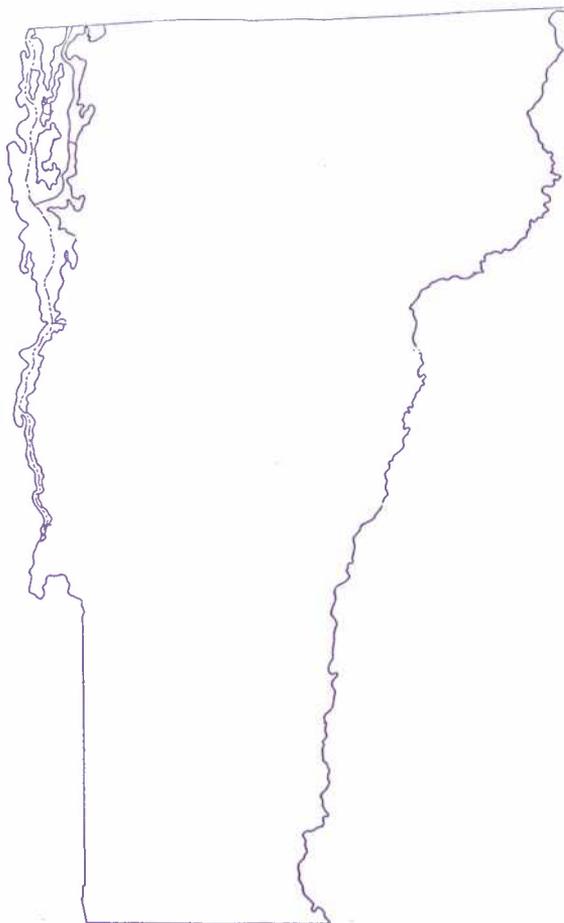
Geographers divide Vermont into six regions. Draw them on the map at right:

1. The *Green Mountains* consist of two parallel mountain ranges separated by a narrow valley through which Vermont Route 100 runs. The steep slopes and narrow valleys are not good for farming, and recreation is now the main industry.

2. The hilly region east of the Green Mountains, the *Vermont Piedmont*, is the largest of Vermont’s six geographic regions. There are only a few areas suitable for commercial dairy farming, and many of the old hill farms are now summer homes.

3. The *Northeast Highlands* of Essex County have high hills, large tracts of woodland, and thin, rocky soil. The Highlands are an extension of the neighboring White Mountains.

4. More than 10,000 years ago the *Champlain Lowlands* were covered by a glacial lake whose **tributary rivers** deposited the sand, silt, and clay that make the region’s soils ideal for agriculture. The lowlands are gently rolling or flat and have five months or more each year without frost.



5. The narrow *Valley of Vermont* follows the southern section of present U.S. Highway Route 7. The valley was a major route for early settlers moving up the west side of the state.

6. The *Taconic Mountains* on the west provide most of Vermont’s marble and slate. The Taconics form Vermont’s other north-south mountain range.

NATIVE PEOPLES

Native Americans have lived in Vermont for 12,000 years. Archeological research at sites in the state tells us that the Indians continuously used Vermont's lakes, rivers, streams, valleys, and mountainsides. Sometimes they burned parts of the forest to make new pasture for deer, but otherwise they changed the face of the land very little.

THE FRONTIER

The first settlers saw only miles upon miles of unbroken forests when they began moving to Vermont from 1760 to 1810. They used the same trails and waterways as the Indians. Two military roads, the Crown Point Road across the center of the state, and the Bayley-Hazen Road northward from Newbury on the Connecticut River, became important land routes, which ran parallel to Indian paths. Many men who first saw Vermont as soldiers marching along these roads returned as settlers.

The pioneers cleared the forests by hand in a short time. With the trees they built houses and heated them. Other trees were cut down, piled, and burned to produce potash, which was used in making soap, glass, and cloth. So much burning meant that travelers in early Vermont saw a strange landscape of blackened earth, dead trees, and charred trunks.

Once the land was cleared it did not hold water well, and heavy rainstorms caused landslides and destroyed fields, dams, and mills. Few settlers thought much about the problems caused by their land-clearing practices.

“Most of the country is still unsubdued by the plow. Innumerable stumps, the remains of the pristine forests, deform the fields. Pines, scorched and blackened by fire, or piled in confusion in fields cleared half by axe, half by burning, indicate a country in some parts, at least, imperfectly subdued by man.” — *Benjamin Silliman, 1819*



GENERAL FARMING

The settlers lived off the land by raising their own food and trading the products they made for others that they needed. They believed that they should “never buy what can be produced at home,” and so their farms included many kinds of crops and livestock. An early Vermont farm might have cropland where wheat, oats, barley, and corn grew, as well as orchards, sugar woods, pasture, hay fields, gardens, and woodlands. As more and more farms were established, the landscape became a patchwork of fields, buildings, and woodlands.

Vermont became an important center for wool production. Because sheep raising promised a good profit when conditions were right, farmers throughout Vermont established large flocks. By 1840, Vermont had 1,618,819 sheep, which produced over three million pounds of wool. Much of the wool was woven into cloth in Vermont's ninety-six woolen mills.

RAILROADS AND INDUSTRY

By 1850 private industry was building railroads across the state. To make the tracks as level as possible, work crews constructed many bridges and cut deeply into hills, causing more erosion. Noise and smoke were not far behind, as the great steam engines puffed and hustled along the rails.

After the Civil War, many Vermont farms were **abandoned**, as Vermonters went west to settle new lands or found city jobs in factories and mills. Some farmers turned to dairying to make more money. At first they produced cheese to sell, because it kept well. In the late 1860s butter became the chief product, since it could be shipped quickly by rail to cities in the northeast. Finally, when refrigerated railcars were introduced, most farmers shifted to the production of fluid milk.

Dairy farming changed the Vermont landscape in its own way. Dairy barns, silos, hay fields, and pastureland became common features of the countryside, along with herds of Jersey cows. The beautiful landscape attracted visitors as well, and farmers began to offer services and housing to summer guests in the Green Mountains. The extra income helped farmers when they lost crops or the price of their farm products declined.

ROADS

The automobile led to another major change in Vermont's landscape. By 1920 Vermont had begun to build hundreds of miles of cement roads for the use of farmers on their way to market and for tourists visiting the state. After the disastrous flood of 1927, Vermont built bigger roads and put in wider bridges. Businesses that helped drivers, such as gas stations, tourist cabins and other services, sprouted along the roadside, soon followed by many advertising signs to catch the attention of travelers. Picnic groves, swimming areas, and hiking trails attracted more and more visitors, making larger and better recreation facilities necessary. Housing developments located away from village centers came next, and businesses multiplied along busy roads and highways.

THE FUTURE

Vermont's population is growing rapidly now, and citizens are meeting to plan carefully for the future. At town meeting, in city hall, and in the legislature, we are making choices about growth and development that will affect Vermont for years to come. How the landscape will change is something we can all help to decide. If we do a good job, Vermonters of the next century will thank us.

VOCABULARY

preserving – defending, protecting

tributary rivers – those which flow into a larger river

abandoned – given up, deserted, left behind

