

FROM POTASH TO READY CASH:
VERMONT'S FIRST CASH CROP

Take one good-sized elm or maple tree. Chop it down. Cut it into pieces, dry thoroughly, and then burn. Repeat as necessary until only ashes remain. Scoop them into a hollow log or wooden box and keep covered with water. Boil the resulting liquid in a large iron pot until *evaporated*. Scrape out and break up the brownish crust that remains. Carry to the nearest store and exchange for cash money, wheat, salt, gunpowder, etc.

This is a recipe, but it is not for making a cake. It is for a brown powder called potash. If you were a girl or boy living two hundred years ago, making potash might have been one of your jobs. To Vermont's early settlers, potash was **essential**. It provided the first and best way of making money while they cleared their land. A hundred pounds of potash was worth six or seven dollars.

The settlers wanted open land for fields and pasture. They were glad to cut down trees and make them into potash. With it they could buy things they needed—tools, wheat, seeds. They could even pay for their land. The potash from the trees on one **acre** of land could pay for that land. Then, as now, many farmers were land-rich and cash-poor. Thanks to potash, they could buy their land. Each year they sold **tons** of potash to England, where it was used to make soap.



Burning woodpiles were common in the 1790s. The settlers made potash from the ashes.

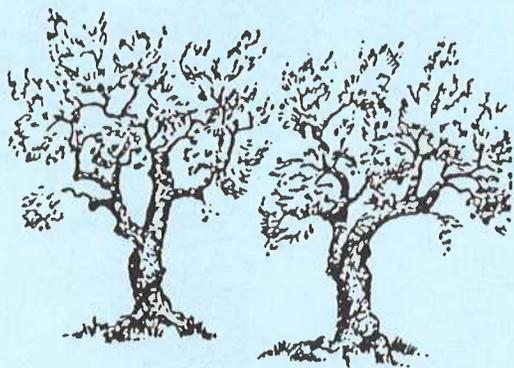
VOCABULARY

evaporate - take water out of

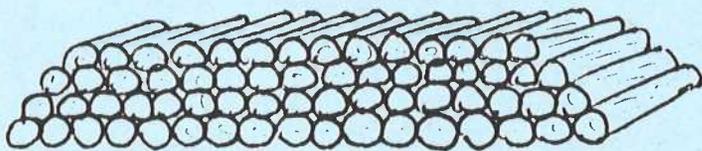
essential - very important

acre - 43,560 square foot plot of land

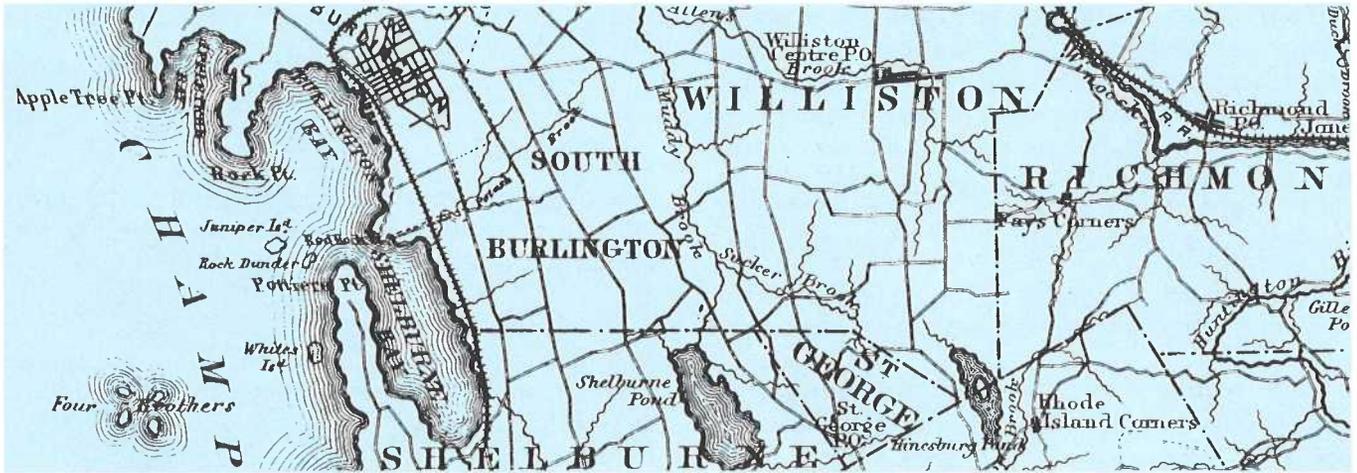
ton - 2,000 pounds



Hardwood trees



30 cords of wood



Find Potash Brook on this map of Chittenden County.

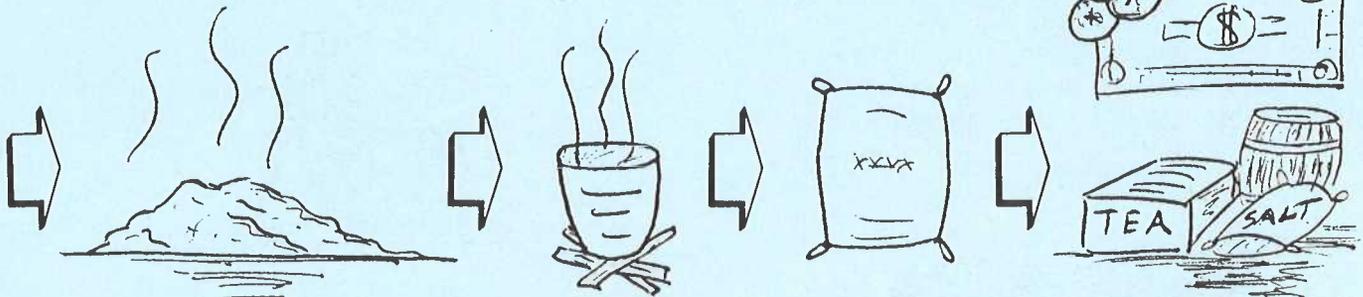
When Vermont joined the United States in 1791, potash sales were still booming. Then, in 1810, someone discovered how to make soap out of salt. Manufacturers no longer needed Vermont potash and the potash industry came to an end.

The making of potash took an important mineral, potassium, from the soil. Later, Vermont farmers learned that wood ashes made good fertilizer. They also bought potassium from out west to **enrich** their

fields. Few people have heard of potash today. But the name of this brown powder, so important to early Vermonters, survives in towns that have a Potash Hill or Potash Brook. Does your town have any names like this?

VOCABULARY

enrich - make more fertile



1 ton of ashes

300 pounds of potash

10 to 25 dollars
in money
or store goods