

LIVES TIED TO THE LAND

VERMONT WORKERS, VERMONT RESOURCES

When settlers first moved to the state we now call Vermont their lives were closely tied to the land. The building materials they used, the kinds of food they grew, the animals they raised, and the types of occupations they had were all connected to their environment. Persons living in forested areas would likely build their homes of wood whereas those who settled in rocky areas, like Chester, might build their homes of stone. Residents of land rich in clay might learn brick-making or pottery. Those living near mineral deposits would learn to mine.

Most early settlers were farmers. They raised crops and livestock and when free time permitted they used their skills to make furniture, barrels, cloth or tools. These items were as valuable as money since they could be traded or bartered with neighbors or peddlers for items the farmer needed. If Farmer Jones needed nails with which to build his barn he might trade a cord of wood or ten pounds of maple sugar with his neighbor, Farmer Smith, who was a blacksmith. A farmer who did nothing but farm was rare.

By the 1840s more and more Vermonters began making their livings away from the farm. Men worked in granite and marble quarries and soapstone, slate and talc mines. They logged in the forests and spent long days in the mills that sprung up in towns along the rivers. Women and girls worked too. Most worked in the home but many others labored alongside men in businesses and industry.

Today in a state once famous for having more sheep and cows than people, only about five per cent of all Vermonters still make a living from farming. Many jobs are similar

to those of our grandparents and great-grandparents. But others, like those in the computer and electronics industries, could not have even been imagined by our ancestors. Other things are different as well. Our work week is shorter - an average of forty hours instead of the seventy-two hours that many Vermonters used to work. Wages are higher. Unsafe and unhealthy working conditions like those that caused many miners to die early deaths from breathing granite dust have greatly improved. Laws forbidding child labor are strictly enforced. More and more women work outside the home.

