

HISTORIC ROOTS

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IMAGINING HISTORY

Some people think history is boring. They think it's all about dates and kings and wars. But history also tells us how ordinary people lived and how they made things happen. The Green Mountain Boys, for instance, were Vermonters from around Bennington who fought under Ethan Allen during the Revolution. They were plain people, farmers and woodsmen who wanted to defend their land. And yet they helped make history. To learn about them and how they lived is to learn about what they believed and why they came together to fight.

How do we learn such things? David Hall, a historian, calls the study of history, "the struggle to re-imagine a lost world." He's right about the imagining, but not about the struggle. Old letters and diaries you might find in your grandmother's closet or attic give you the writers' own words and a look into their lives. Old pictures and photographs that may have been hidden away in a drawer can tell you how places and people looked in the past. Visits to old houses and places where important events happened put us in the world of the past and help us imagine what that world was like.

The articles in this issue use some of these ways to tell you about history and help you use your imagination.

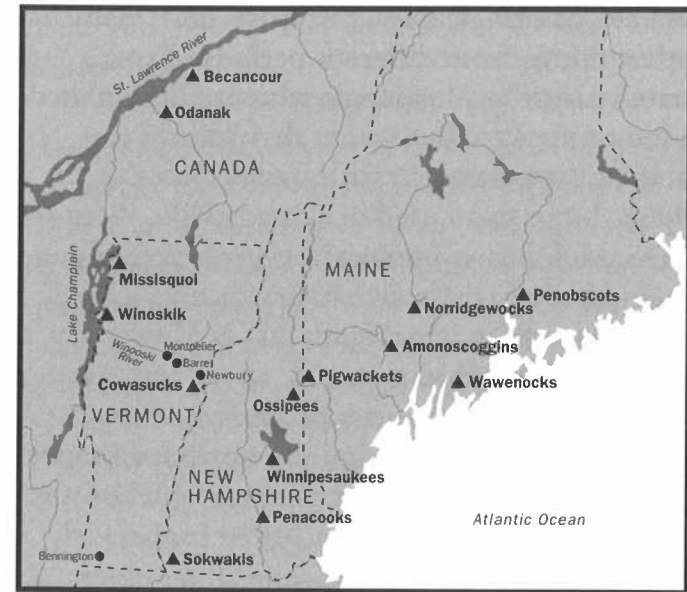


*A view of Chartres Cathedral in France. For almost 300 years
Abenaki wampum weavings have hung in its crypt underground.*

The first article contains a letter home from Henry Dunbar, an ordinary man from Vermont. The letter is about the battle of Lee's Mills in Virginia during the Civil War. Books can tell you many things about a war. They can tell you who won, the number of people killed and wounded, and what, if any, difference the war made. But unless those books were written by someone who was there, they can't tell you what the war itself was like. Even generals who describe the wars they've fought often don't know what really happened on the battlefield. Most of the time generals are at headquarters, far away, when the fighting is going on.

Henry Dunbar's wife, Mary, must have been happy to get the letter, but the letter itself is not a happy one. Henry writes that he was wounded and tells her how he feels. He tells her what the battle was like. From what he says you can imagine what it looked and felt like to be there, how it must have sounded and smelled. You learn how brave were all the men who fought there that day, the men on both sides. And maybe you think about how hard it must have been for Dunbar to write the letter, after a losing fight and feeling as poorly as he did.

On the second floor of the State House, in Montpelier, is a special room where you can see things that belonged to Vermonters who fought



On this map, Abenaki settlements are shown by triangles. You can see that most of them were in New Hampshire and Maine, with some in Vermont and a few in Canada as well. The location of other towns mentioned in this issue are shown by dots.

Adapted with permission from *The Burlington Free Press*, January 7, 1996.

in the Civil War. On one wall of the room is a painting of another battle in Virginia, the battle of Cedar Creek in 1864. The man who painted that picture, Julian Scott, was at Lee's Mills too, as a 16-year-old drummer boy. We don't know if he knew Henry Dunbar, but we do know that later in the war he became the first Vermont soldier to earn the Congressional Medal of Honor for bravery.

The second article in this issue is about the State House, home of a lot of Vermont's history. Our laws are made there, and there you

can see paintings, flags, furniture, and many other things from different periods of our state's history. The people who used them died a long time ago. But seeing their things can help put you in touch with them. Some of these things were used in everyday life. Some were used during important events. Imagining them in use in their own time can start a kind of time travel in your mind, just as Henry Dunbar's letter does.

For hundreds of years people who have visited Chartres Cathedral ¹ in northern France have felt the same kind of time travel. The cathedral as it is today was started in the 12th century (the 1100s) on the ruins of an older one. It took about 100 years to finish it. The cathedral is large and very beautiful and has always been famous. Even while it was being built kings and queens came from all over Europe to pray there, a long, hard trip in those days. It is easy to stand in front of the cathedral and imagine them praying in the half-built church.

The stained glass windows in the cathedral are a deep, rich blue. No one has yet figured out how the glassmakers of so long ago made that wonderful color. During World War II the French government took all the windows out of the cathedral so that they would not be broken in the air raids. Now they are back in

¹ Cathedral (cath-ee-dral), a large and important church.

place and people once again come from all over to see them.

What does this have to do with Vermont? History sometimes connects things in surprising ways. On the walls in the lowest level of this famous cathedral are two bead belts made by Abenaki Indians. Vermonters and others may be very surprised to see them and wonder why they are there. The third article in this issue will tell you. It will also tell you about the Abenaki, the Dawn People, who were the first Vermonters and who used beads to record some of their history.

A letter, a building, beads—all are history teachers. And others are all around you. By looking around and by using your imagination you will find that “the lost world” of the past is not so lost after all.

ANN E. COOPER, *Editor*

Rooting Around

Since the Revolution, Vermont soldiers have often been called “Green Mountain Boys.” Today it is the Vermont Air National Guard's nickname. See if you can find other ways this name has been used and is used today.