

VERMONT HISTORY DAY

Theme Introduction 2027



VERMONT
HISTORY
EXPLORER

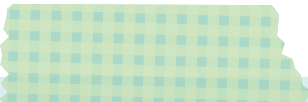
Why a Yearly Theme?



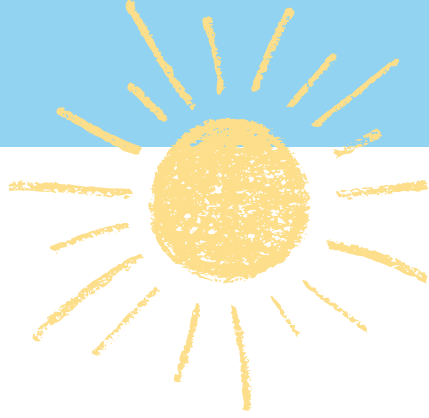
National History Day presents a unique theme each year.



Students connect their specific research topics to this overarching idea.



Think of the theme as a lens, guiding you to delve into the complexities of historical events and figures.



The Theme's Purpose

- #1** The theme is a foundational guideline that unites all NHD participants.
- #2** Through process of inquiry related to the theme, you practice critical thinking and research skills.
- #3** A broad theme allows you to connect your project to a wide array of historical contexts, giving you a topic choice.



NATIONAL HISTORY DAY 2027

**INNOVATION
IN HISTORY**

IMPACT, INFLUENCE, CHANGE

Change is the Still the Heart of this Theme



People have found new ways of doing things throughout all of history. You can pick a topic from your own community or from anywhere in the world.



Innovation isn't only focused on technology. It can be a new law, or a new way of farming, teaching, or organizing.



Your job is to identify the innovation and what changed because of it.

- What problem or need led to it?
- Who benefited, and who did not?
- What was different after this change happened?

Think of it like this...



Photo by André Kertész in Paris, 1927. Courtesy of the [Ministère de la Culture](#).

Invention is like creating the first oil lamp. One new thing exists.

Then, it is improved.

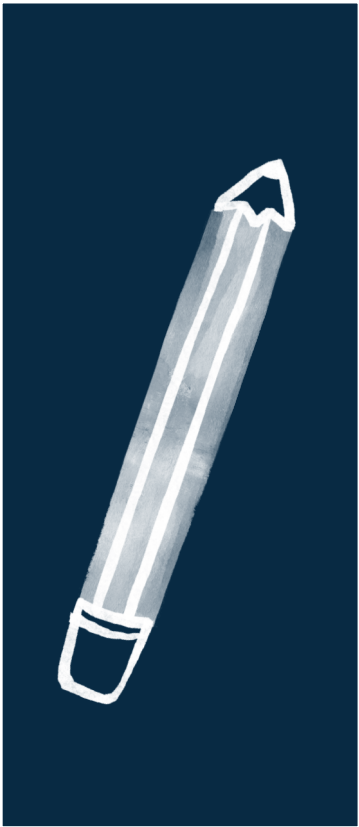
Innovation is like illuminating an entire town. People put the idea into wide-spread use. It may be improved, still.

Regardless, **daily life changes as a result.**



Incandescent Lamp Made by Thomas Edison, 1929. Photo courtesy of [Henry Ford Museum](#).

Your Theme Connection is Unique

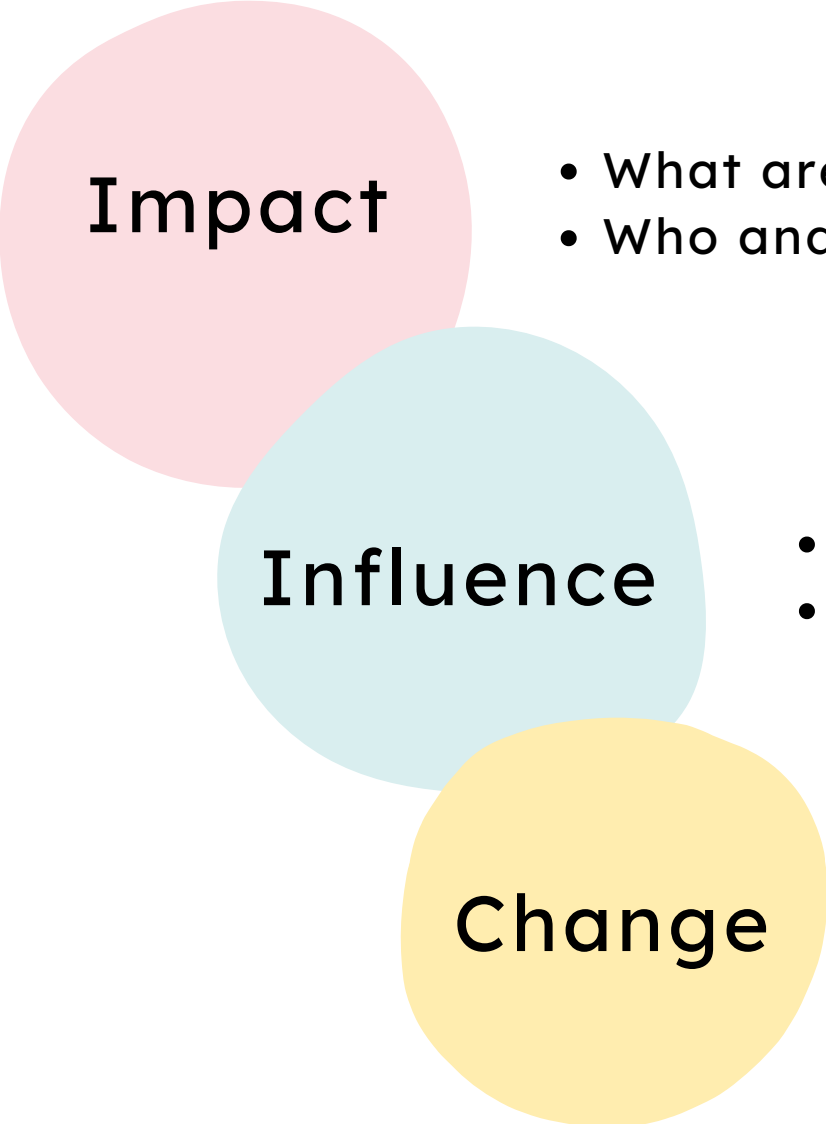


Each topic connects to the theme in its own way.

Look for impact, influence, and change at different stages of your topic:

- Before: what problem or need existed?
- During: how did people react?
- After: what was different, both right away and long after the innovation?

Look for Topic Connections



Impact

- What are the direct effects?
- Who and what did it affect?

Influence

- What did the innovation lead to?
- What did it inspire or make possible?

Change

- What was different because of the innovation?
- Compare what came before and after.

Example

Thaddeus Fairbanks of St. Johnsbury built a platform scale that could weigh a loaded wagon in the year 1830.



Courtesy of Vermont Historical Society.

Impact

Farmers and merchants could trade using accurate weights.

Influence

Fairbanks scales were sold and used worldwide.

Change

Once a village, St. Johnsbury grew into a factory town.

Innovation: More Than an Invention

What comes to mind when you think of the word innovation?

An innovation is a new idea, method, or device that people use. It can change how people live, work, and think.

A new invention, of any kind, is just the starting point. Innovation is what happens as people adapt, improve, or spread it.

Photo courtesy of [Library of Congress](#).



What impact did the sewing machine have on the lives of women?

Thomas Davenport's Electric Motor



Copyright held by the [Smithsonian](#).

In 1834, Thomas Davenport, a blacksmith in Brandon, Vermont, built an electric motor. Working with his wife, Emily, he improved it and in 1837 received the first U.S. patent for an electric motor.



What do you think happened next?

Answer



Not much



(at first)



Batteries were the only power source, and they cost too much to compete with steam.



Davenport died in 1851 without profiting from his motor.



Decades later, once power plants and power lines existed, electric motors ran factories, streetcars, and home appliances.

An invention becomes an innovation when people can put it to use.



Innovation: Think Beyond Invention



What new ideas have changed how people live together?



When people try a new approach to any type of problem.

That is innovation!

Innovation can happen in many different areas of life.



Government



Communities



Workplaces



Schools



Health & Medicine

Civil Union Law

Vermont's Civil Union law (2000) granted same-sex couples legal rights and protections similar to marriage.

This included rights pertaining to:

- Medical decisions
- Health insurance
- Parenting rights
- Inheritance rights
- Taxes and finances



Rutland Herald. Accessed via newspapers.com.

This is an example of a legal innovation. Vermont was the first state to create civil unions, and other states later followed its example.

Full marriage equality came in 2009.

What does it mean to you?

Impact

Impact is the direct effect an innovation has on people and places.



The First Ski Tow

In 1934, a rope tow powered by a Model T car engine began pulling skiers up a hill in Woodstock, Vermont. It was the first ski tow in the United States. Skiers could make many runs in a day, and ski areas soon opened across the state.

What does it mean to you?

Influence

Influence is how an innovation shapes what other people think, do, or create next.

Precision Valley

In the 1840s, the Robbins & Lawrence Armory in Windsor, Vermont made rifles with interchangeable parts. After the company showed its rifles in London in 1851, British officials bought its machines. Its methods spread to factories making sewing machines, bicycles, and cars.



Photo of armory courtesy of [Library of Congress](#).

What does it mean to you?

Change

Change is what was different after the innovation. Think about short-term and long-term effects.

Land-Grant Colleges

In 1862, a law written by Justin Morrill of Strafford, Vermont gave states federal land to fund colleges teaching agriculture and engineering. College had mostly served the wealthy. Over time, public universities opened higher education to millions of working families.



The nation's first Land-Grant University was Kansas State University. Painting by Allyn Coc, 1994.

Innovations Bring Responses



New ideas are not always welcomed. People may embrace, resist, or fear them.

- How was your innovation received?
- Did everyone respond the same? Why or why not?

Rachel Carson and DDT



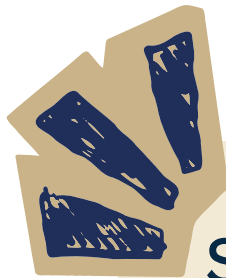
Courtesy of [Associated Press](#).

Innovations can have unintended consequences.

DDT was praised as a breakthrough pesticide in the 1940s. By the 1960s, evidence of harm to wildlife and human health led to a backlash. Carson, a scientist, wrote a book called *Silent Spring* which warned people about chemical pesticides. It helped inspire a national environmental movement, and a ban in 1972.

Impact. Influence. Change.

One aspect may matter more to your topic. That's okay!
Your project doesn't need to cover parts equally.



Spend more time on the part(s)
that matter the most.

What matters most?

- theme connection
- claim
- evidence



The Creation of Act 250

Before 1970, big land development projects were allowed even if the state hadn't looked closely at their impact.



Act 250 was a new approach to land use. It set new rules to make sure building projects were safe for the environment.

It also created groups to review projects and listen to what communities wanted. The new way of planning focused on protecting nature and thinking about the future.

The project should consider how different people responded to the innovation. Some developers and residents didn't like the law because they felt it hurt business, while others were glad it helped protect Vermont's land.

Historical Context

What was life like on a Vermont farm before electricity?

- In the mid-1930s, most American farms had NO electricity.
- Farm families used kerosene lamps, pumped water and milked by hand.

INNOVATION

- Federal loans helped farmers form electric cooperatives to build their own powerline.
- Electric lights, pumps, and milking machines changed daily work.



Courtesy of [Vermont Electric Cooperative](#).

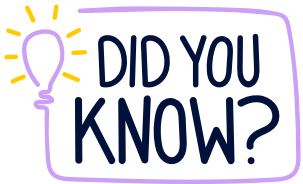
Observe these Photos

Why would someone build a stone wall in the middle of a forest?



Innovation's Impact: Positive, Negative, or Both

Introduction of Merino Sheep to Vermont



Many stone walls in Vermont's woods once fenced sheep pastures.

Positive Impacts



WRINKLEY.
BREED AND OWNED BY FRANKLIN HOOKER, CORNWALL, VT.

Vermont Historical Society

Courtesy of [Vermont History Explorer](#).

In 1811, William Jarvis brought Merino sheep from Spain to Weathersfield, Vermont. By 1840, Vermont had far more sheep than people. Their high-quality wool became very valuable and helped Vermont farmers earn money. Sheep could also graze on Vermont's rocky hillsides, where growing crops was difficult. As sheep farming grew, it created jobs and helped Vermont become an important producer of wool.

Innovation's Impact: Positive, Negative, or Both

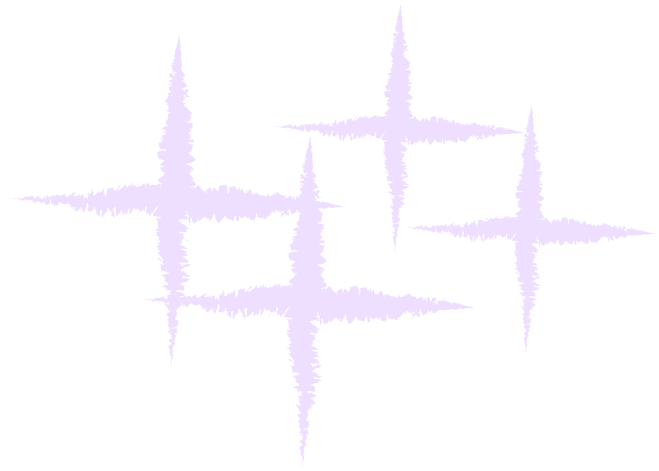
Introduction of Merino Sheep to Vermont

Negative Impacts

To create pastures, hillsides were cleared. Rapid deforestation had negative effects. As forests were cleared, animals lost their habitats. Catamounts and wolves disappeared, and deer became so scarce that hunting them was banned from 1865 to 1897. Without enough trees to hold the soil in place, soil washed into streams, harming fish populations. Flooding also became a growing problem.



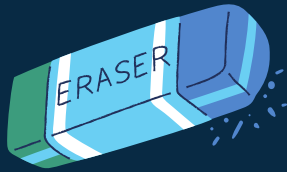
Log drive near Sharon, Vermont, ca. 1910. Courtesy of [Vermont Historical Society](#).



Tips



Did you know that NHD has an AI policy?



They do!
It has been **revised**.



Students **may not use generative AI** for research, analysis, design, or creation of their projects.

All aspects of student work must be their own.

AI: what is allowed?



- Spelling and grammar-checking programs
- Bibliography generators like EasyBib and NoodleTools
- Using Canva to design text and adjust an existing image for brightness and clarity. Students may use Canva fonts for project text or adding decorative designs, such as borders.
 - Students **may not ask Canva's AI tool** to create new images, generate text, or modify historical images.

AI: what is NOT allowed?



- Asking ChatGPT or other Gen AI platforms to brainstorm topic ideas
- Using Gemini or other platforms to find potential sources, archives, or libraries
- Creating text, images, videos, or audio for a project
- Using Gen AI tools to revise or rewrite text
- Requesting feedback from companion chatbots

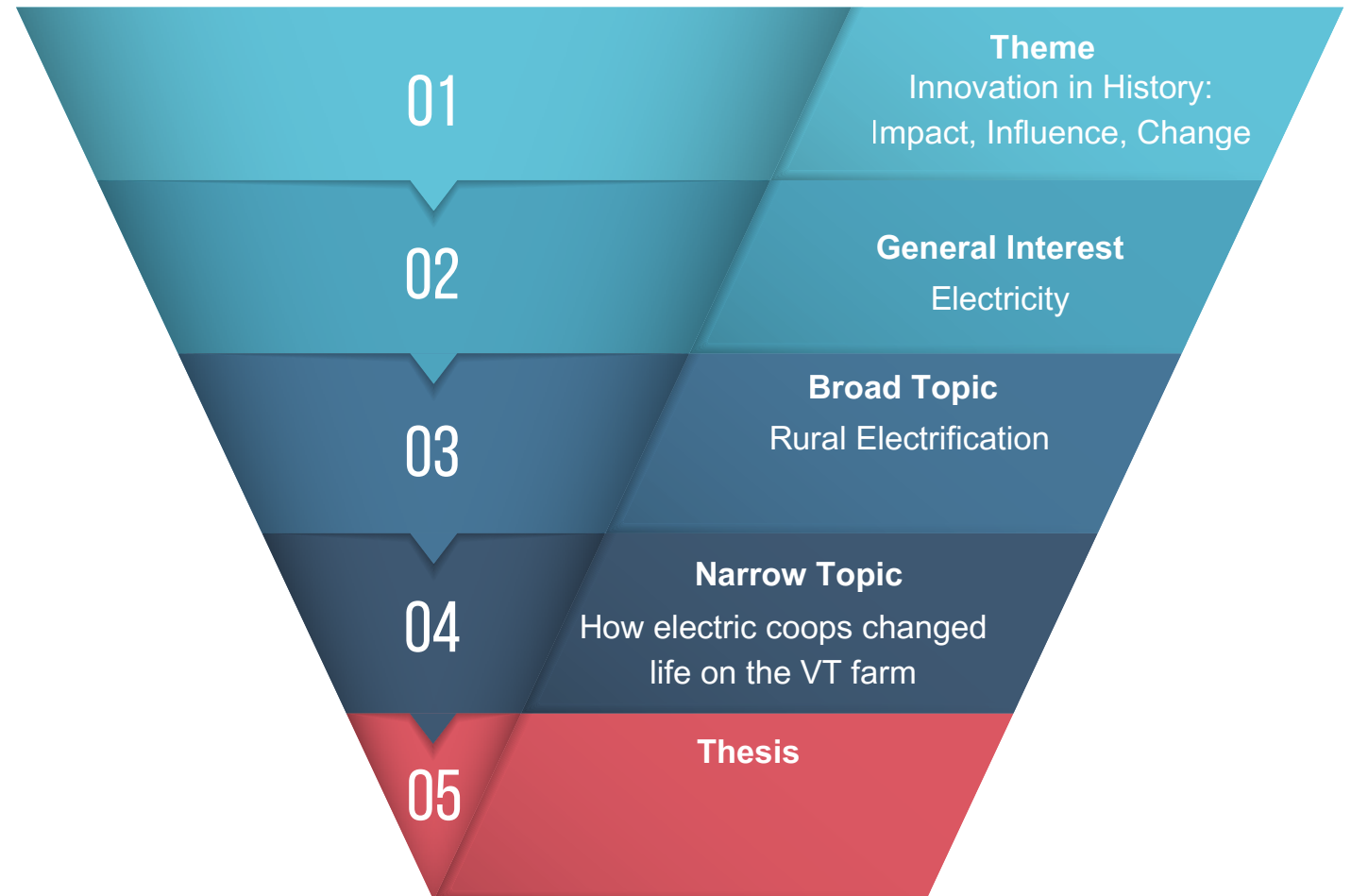
IMPORTANT!

Using AI in this manner will cause your project to be disqualified at the Vermont History Day

Topic Size

Projects work best when the topic is focused.

- Begin with a big idea you're interested in, then zoom in on a smaller part to study.
- A smaller topic is usually easier to research and explain.



Try the SPARK Test to Select a Topic

S

Did it SHIFT behaviour?

P

Did it solve an important PROBLEM?

A

Was it ADOPTED widely?

R

Did it RESHAPE a larger system?

K

Did it KEEP influencing over time?



If you answer “Yes” for most of these questions, then likely you have landed on an appropriate topic!

Word Choice Can Help with Clarity



Using theme words in your project, over and over, may confuse judges. Our suggestion? State your claim in the clearest, most direct way possible. Then, select other related words to show your understanding of the theme.

Use synonyms like:

- Innovation

- innovative
- pioneered
- breakthrough
- new approach

- Impact

- affected
- effect
- consequence

- Change

- transformed
- shifted
- reshaped



Finding Sources

Google and Wikipedia are starting points; they are not sources.

Collect names, dates, and keywords from these starting points.

Then, use that information to FIND sources in collections.

Remember, generative AI cannot be used to find sources this year.

Need help? Ask a librarian or an archivist. Finding sources is their specialty.

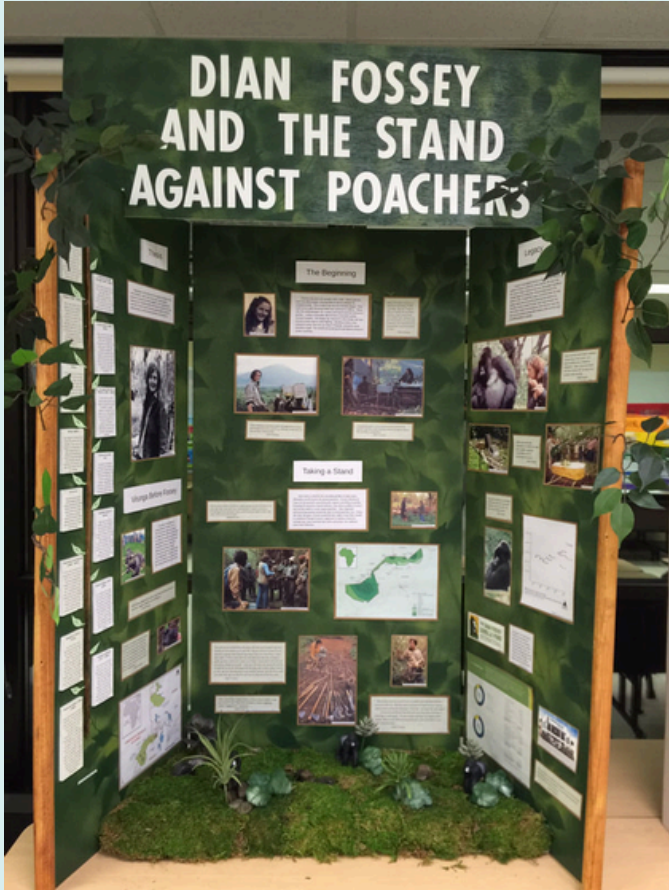


[Click here](#) to learn more about the difference between primary and secondary sources. You will also find links to different archives and collections in the U.S. and abroad.

Looking to visit and explore collections in Vermont? Scroll down to the bottom of [this page](#) to learn about more collecting institutions throughout the state.



Clear Theme Communication



- The theme connection should be clearly stated within the project itself.
- The connection shouldn't depend on you explaining it in-person.
- There's no formula/specification for where the connection has to be within the project. It just has to be present.
- Can you include it in your thesis or title?

Courtesy of Wisconsin History Day

Focus on What *Actually* Happened

Vermont Interstates



Courtesy of The Vermont Historical Society

Instead of **what-if** history:

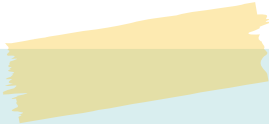
If the interstates had never been built, Vermont would still be a state of small farms.

Try conveying what **actually** happened:

Starting in the 1950s, Interstates 89 and 91 cut travel times to Boston and New York. Tourists and new residents arrived in growing numbers. The development that followed helped lead to Act 250 in 1970.

Consider Multiple Perspectives

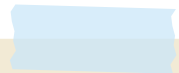
Vermont Interstates



Some farm families lost land due to highway construction.



Some village stores lost traffic when drivers no longer pass through town centers.



Some businesses and tourist areas gained new customers due to increased access.



Interstate development made it easier for VT manufacturers and farmers to ship goods more quickly.

Uncover Multiple Perspectives

Formulate Supporting Questions

- Which landowners were affected by interstate construction?
 - How were they affected?
 - Did it affect longtime residents differently than newcomers?
- What were the economic benefits of interstate construction?
 - Who profited?
 - How many new jobs were created?
 - How did businesses near the exits benefit versus those who weren't nearby?

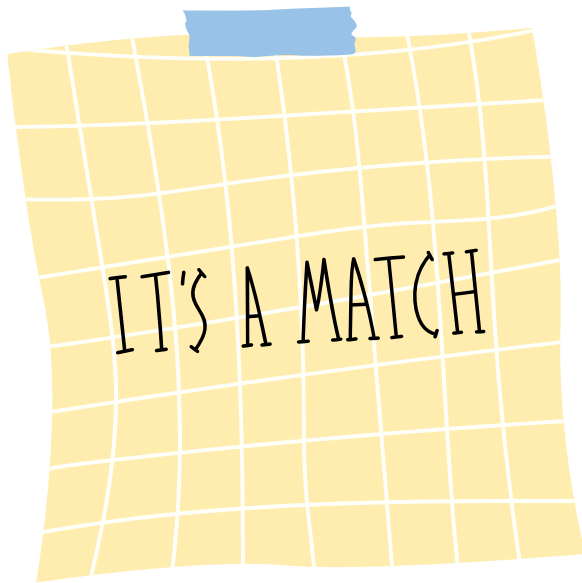


Courtesy of The Weathersfield Historical Society

Read how interstate construction of I-91 affected farmer Romaine Tenney. Trigger warning: this article deals with topics of self-harm.

<https://newengland.com/yankee/eminent-domain-romaine-tenney-farm/>

Be Consistent



Make the theme connection obvious in your thesis.



Make sure that the contents of your process paper reflect what is presented in your project.

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<https://vermonthistoryexplorer.org/vermonthistoryday/>