

Where in Vermont Are We?

Working for the Vermont League of Cities and Towns has provided me the opportunity to learn much about my adopted state and about the communities that comprise it. One of the best sources at my disposal has been “Vermont Place Names: Footprints of History” by Esther Munroe Swift, published in 1977. It took 20 years for Esther to research Vermont to write her monumental tome, traveling to all of the state’s 255 civil entities, plus mountains and rivers. She discovered there’s a town named after an original settler’s dog and one whose name was decided in a wrestling match.

Esther Munroe Swift, was a sixth generation Vermonter, but was born in 1923 in New York by accident when her very pregnant mother took a day trip across the border and gave birth. She grew up in Montpelier, and can be forgiven that small lapse of her birthplace, as she devoted her adult life to studying and archiving Vermontiana in many forms. Esther attended the University of Vermont and then proceeded to earn degrees from Columbia University, the University of Utah, and ultimately a doctorate from the University of Chicago. She worked for the United Nations, where she developed libraries in remote corners of the world, and independently helped a number of international students attend college in the United States.

Though she lived in and traveled to many other places, she returned to Vermont for the last three decades of her life, restoring a 1782 farmhouse in South Royalton as her home, originally owned by General Elias Stevens, the hero of the Royalton Raid of 1780. She served as a lister in Royalton, and she made a contemporary contribution to Vermont municipal administration, designing the first computer program for listers.

She served for 19 years as librarian and archivist for the Billings Farm and Museum in Woodstock, collecting information on Vermont Yankee farm techniques and organizing old photos so they were accessible to the public. In 2007, she received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Center for Research on Vermont. Esther died just last March 10th.

Vermont place names are derived from several sources. First, obviously, are those derived, however tortured by the white man, from the natives. Interestingly, not only are we the recipients of names from the Abnaki and other Algonquin tribes passing through and the Iroquois who mainly stayed to the west of Lake Champlain, we also inherited native names brought to Vermont by white settlers from the south and east of New England. There are 200 place names from Indian sources, almost half from the Abnaki. Another 50 are from the Mohawk tribe of the Iroquois Nation, a dozen from the Mahican who were located mainly in the Albany area and western Massachusetts. From VLCT’s perspective, though, Indian names aren’t mentioned much as only one town and one city carry native names today. Windham County’s Jamaica’s name is the Natick Indian’s word for “beaver” and it is not clear whether this name was borrowed from the Jamaicas of Massachusetts or New York or whether it is indigenous. The city should be known to everyone: Winooski, or “wild onion.”

Speaking of which, what makes up the political subdivisions that form the basis of the “251 Club”? Nine cities (Barre, Burlington, Montpelier, Newport, Rutland, St. Albans, South Burlington, Vergennes, Winooski), 237 incorporated towns and five unincorporated towns (Averill, Ferdinand, Glastonbury, Lewis, and Somerset).

There are three settlements with post offices that have Indian-based names:

- Bomoseen, which is either derived from the Abnaki for “keeper of the ceremonial fire” or from “Obam Saween,” the name of what Esther believed to be the last male Abnaki in Vermont whose Anglicized name was William Simon, who died in 1959;
- Passumpsic (in Barnet) from the river named such by the Abnaki meaning “over clear sandy bottom”; and
- Quechee from the Ottaquechee River meaning “swift mountain stream.”

The French were the second chronologically of the Vermont place namers, as with their broader colonial endeavors, there is little to remember with some exceptions, including what became the name of our state. Our lake is named after our first white explorer (Champlain) and several of our rivers were named by him. He explored “*La Riviere aux Loutres*,” our longest river, but it lost its French name to our English translation, Otter Creek. Champlain also discovered our third longest river following the gulls or “*la mouette*” that flocked there. A map engraver forgot to cross the “t’s”, creating the “La Mouelle” and then, forevermore, Champlain’s river became the “Lamoille.” Champlain also named “*Le Lion Couchant*” which many still prefer to its official name: Camel’s Hump.

Two of Grande Isle’s five towns have colonial French names: Grand Isle and Isle la Motte. Isle la Motte was named after the commander of a French fort built there in 1666, Pierre de St. Paul, Sieur de la Motte. More French names were added during the Republic including two that would become cities: Montpelier and Vergennes.

Speaking of which, where did our cities come from? Vergennes is our only city that was not originally chartered as a town or a village and is the third oldest city in America (after New Haven and Hartford, Connecticut). Vergennes is named after Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, France’s minister of foreign affairs during the American Revolution. America received nearly 80 percent of its military supplies necessary to defeat the British through a dummy corporation Vergennes established

(think Iran Contra Affair). Barre, Burlington, Montpelier, Rutland, and St. Albans were all created as descendants of villages created in towns of the same name. Winooski had been an incorporated village within the town of Colchester and South Burlington, feeling slighted at being left a town after Burlington split off as a city; it is the last city created in 1971.

Our English rulers and settlers have had the largest impact on our place names. These names fall generally into three categories: those from the royal governors of New York and New Hampshire that were chosen to honor or influence members of the peerage of England to curry favor, those from the communities in the colonies from which the settlers of Vermont originated, and a small group are named for the people who bought the “grants” from the New Hampshire governor or the “patents” of the New York governor.

A side note: most of Vermont’s early history lessons focus on the New Hampshire-New York dispute, but part of Vermont was actually part of Massachusetts and Connecticut for a short time. Massachusetts erroneously claimed about 110,000 acres of what was Connecticut’s royal grant, presumably along its northern border. In order to keep that land as it was already settled by Massachusetts Bay colonists, Massachusetts swapped equal acreage in what was to become Vermont, including what is now Dummerston, Putney, and Brattleboro. Connecticut, being of sound mind, quickly auctioned off the land and donated the proceeds to the then-12-year-old Yale College of New Haven to a Boston group of land speculators, including William Dummer and William Brattle.

But I digress from the matter at hand. New Hampshire’s royal governor, Benning Wentworth, issued 129 town grants – mostly the six-square mile areas we now see for most of our towns – between 1749 and 1764. The first of those was Bennington. Vermont now has 113 towns that can trace their history and their names to a Benning Wentworth grant. Three of the original 128 towns (Dunbar, the 129th grant, was canceled when surveying showed it overlapped with another grant) were merged into

other towns and 12 have had their names changed. Wentworth granted about three million acres in the state, about half our landmass.

The New York governors issued the bulk of their competing 107 patents between 1765 and late 1775, with the last being issued in January 1776, overlaying the New Hampshire grant of the town of Topsham. Only five of Vermont's present towns derive from the New York patents: Bradford (originally named Mooretown), Londonderry (part of which was originally named Kent), Readsboro, Whitingham, and Royalton. The other 102 patents fall into two groups: those patents which were given to single individuals, and hence did not have town names assigned; and 58 patents for what have become known as "paper towns," as no one ever settled in them, so no one associated their names with their places. New York (the state) even issued a grant for Isle la Motte as late as 1786.

The Republic of New Connecticut was founded at a meeting in Windsor on January 17, 1777. This was actually an adjourned meeting that had begun the previous summer at a convention called in Dorset where the delegates voted to "take suitable measures to declare the New Hampshire Grants a free and independent district." Later in 1777, someone realized that there was already a "New Connecticut" in Pennsylvania, so they scratched out "New Connecticut" and inserted the new name "Vermont." The place name "Vermont" is most likely owed to Pennsylvania as well, as lore has it that Dr. Thomas Young, a Pennsylvania statesman who also suggested that Vermont use the Pennsylvania constitution as the basis of its own. It is said that he suggested the name to perpetuate the memory of the Green Mountain Boys, originally coined by a New York colonial official bedeviled by the boys. The name of our state, based on the literal translation from the French, should be "*Les Monts Verts*," but, fortunately, grammatical shorthand prevailed and we are Vermont.

The Republic of Vermont began issuing charters in 1779, the first to the town of Bethel. It started by issuing charters to the 128 New Hampshire grants and the five remaining New York grants,

most for full-sized towns of about 30,000 acres and the rest for the leftover scraps of land between towns called gores or grants. James Whitelaw, the second state Surveyor General, described gores as "the result of man's frustrating attempt to lay our right-angled plots of land upon a spherical earth's surface." The surviving grants and gores are Buel's Gore, Avery's Gore, Warren Gore, and Warren's Grant. Gores continue to pop up as modern day surveying continues to find fault with that used more than 200 years ago to lay out the boundaries of the towns chartered by meets and bounds. Take, for example, Perley's Gore. It came into being in 1986 when a survey of the town boundaries of Bakersfield, Enosburg, and Montgomery was redone. The towns, which border the gore, each had tried to claim its 350 acres as its own. After a parade of local and state officials made their way to the spot in December 1985 in foot-deep snow, an agreement was reached to divide the land and its tax revenue between two of the three towns.

The town of Bakersfield had been collecting taxes on the land until 1982. That's when its owner, Peter Watson, informed officials that his survey showed the land was not part of any town and that he would not pay taxes on it. At the request of the three bordering towns, state Rep. Merrill Perley took the land dispute under his wing. In 1985, the Legislature dubbed the area Perley's Gore and appropriated \$10,000 to survey it.

Officials decided to split the land along a mountain ridgeline between Bakersfield and Montgomery. Enosburg, the third town, was left with no land from the gore. Perley was quoted as saying he was pleased "his" gore was given to the towns, but added, "It would be nice to keep the name."

Vermont now is left with three official gores – places that belong to no towns because they were missed by surveyors – which are administered by appointees of the governor.

By the time of statehood in 1791, there were only six town-sized pieces of land left to be chartered. The towns existing today that were chartered after statehood are Belvidere, Goshen,

Jay, Lowell, Newport, Sheffield, and Stannard. Now, you say, “Wait a minute. You just named *seven* towns.” Note that I said, there were only six town-sized pieces of land left. Goshen has only 11,000 acres and is the smallest town in land mass of Addison County. Stannard, too, is only 6,499 acres and wasn’t incorporated until August of 1867. I am not sure to which Esther was referring when she differentiated between town-sized pieces and those that were not.

Unlike the names of cities and towns, which have legal standing from their articles of incorporation – or the names of post offices or railroad stations – the names that are used for most villages, hamlets, areas, rivers, mountains, and lakes in Vermont are often assigned fairly casually by people living in a given area and gain status through usage. This is certainly the case with most of Vermont’s nearly 10,000 place-names, and it is in this body of names that one most clearly sees the footprints of history on the Green Mountain state.

And, oh, by the way, the town named after a dog? According to Hamilton Child’s *Gazetter* of Windham County, published in 1884, an oft-repeated story is that Amos Hayward got up at a meeting of the town incorporators and said, “Name it after my dog, Dover!” More likely the Windham County town was named after the Dover of New Hampshire. And everyone in Washington County has had to listen at least once to the story of the re-naming of Wildersburgh. Originally named after a town in Massachusetts, two other ne’er-do-wells from that state – one from Holden and one from Barre – supposedly duked it out for naming rights. Interestingly, Barre, Massachusetts, was not its original name either. It had been Hutchinson after the hated royal governor who served during the Stamp Act hostilities and the Boston massacre. Post-revolutionary Massachusetts thought better of the original name, changing it to Barre after a Huguenot descendant who served with Wolfe in the conquest of Canada and was in Parliament as an outspoken supporter of the colonies.

Steven Jeffrey
Executive Director