



The Burleigh Brothers: Nineteenth Century Titans of the Champlain Basin

Active in the lower Champlain Basin in both New York and Vermont from 1880 to 1900, the Burleigh brothers held dominant positions in the social, political, and economic life of the region.

By STEPHEN K. ASTMANN, RONALD F. KINGSLEY,
AND VIRGINIA BURLEIGH LAPOINTE

The tumultuous onrush into the late nineteenth century industrial era was captained by extraordinary men who shook loose from strictly agrarian roots and sought wealth in raw, bold, commercial ventures. Two such men were the brothers Henry Gordon Burleigh and Brackett Weeks Burleigh. Active in the lower Champlain Basin in both New York and Vermont from 1880 to 1900, the Burleigh brothers held dominant positions in the social, political, and economic life of the region. They played powerful roles in the development of its industries: rail and water transportation, lumber and ship building, manufacturing, mining, and finance and real estate. They were also active in philanthropy and state and national politics.

The visionary Burleighs insinuated themselves into the region with genius. They recognized the potential of the conjunction of the geographical resources of the lower Champlain basin, with its existing railroads, canals, bridges, hotels, and mercantile facilities. They dovetailed these natural and man-made resources into commercial systems, and established a persistent demand for their products and services by pursuing risky, largely successful initiatives in a scope well beyond the region. As a result the area around Ticonderoga, Whitehall, Larabee's Point, and other lakeside communities became, for a time, prosperous, financially stable, and critically important as staging locations for their other financial undertakings.

The Burleigh brothers were descended from New Hampshire sol-



Henry Gordon Burleigh. Courtesy of the Burleigh family, Ticonderoga, New York.

diers, legislators, farmers, merchants, and tavern keepers. Their father, Gordon, operated a major lumber business.¹

Henry Gordon Burleigh, the elder brother, was born on June 2, 1832. His formal education ended when he left Grafton County, New Hampshire, at the age of fourteen and settled in Ticonderoga.

Henry's career in commerce began when he became a clerk with the firm of Wilson & Calkins located in Ticonderoga's "Old Brick Store." During his clerkship he studied on his own and sharpened his business sense. When Wilson & Calkins failed in 1850 Henry became one of its assignees and from that point continued as an entrepreneur on his own in the emerging industrial center of Ticonderoga. His general supply business gradually shifted to the business of shipping lumber and provi-

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sioning boatmen who worked and lived on the canal system. In 1859 he created the firm of Burleighs and Marshall and a year later began building canal boats. His business expanded until he had approximately 150 canal boats and steamers to carry lumber, iron ore, and coal between Ottawa and Montreal to the north and New York and Philadelphia to the south. His company had become the hub of the canal system and one of the largest transportation concerns in the country, and was to provide the foundation for Henry's productive career.²

In 1860 Henry moved to Whitehall while maintaining a residence in Ticonderoga. Because of its strategic location on the Champlain Canal, Whitehall then became the principal site for the expansion of his business, political, and personal pursuits. He acquired large tracts of timber land, which were largely supplemental to his lumber business, the Whitehall Lumber Company (incorporated in 1881). He also maintained a major interest in the Robert M. Cook Towing Company, which was a major towing and transportation concern on Lake Champlain headed by his son Charles R. Burleigh. Land transportation, however, between Whitehall and Ticonderoga was difficult and precarious. On one occasion, Henry's stagecoach became so bogged down that he walked the remaining distance and arrived before the stagecoach.

Henry held the positions of president of the Old National Bank of Whitehall and of the First National Bank of Ticonderoga. He was a director of the Commercial Insurance Company of Albany, the International Paper Company, Ticonderoga Pulp and Paper Company,³ and the St. Maurice Lumber Company, and he held a controlling interest in at least a score of other corporations. His interest in real estate included ownership of many valuable pieces of land in New York City, Vermont, and Canada.

He was also, at various times, interested in the iron ore mining business. He owned and operated the Smith Mine in Port Henry, New York, and had many thousands of acres around Lake George, including at one time over fourteen miles of lake front property. In the early 1890s he acquired the title to approximately 75,000 acres of land in Canada. In addition to business and industrial interests, he owned at his death at least five large farms.⁴

An uncompromising Republican, Henry was elected supervisor of the town of Ticonderoga in 1861. In this capacity he always raised the full quota of volunteer troops for the Civil War. This was a substantial achievement because it eliminated the unpopular alternative of conscription. His contributions to the Civil War effort were acknowledged with the publication of the "Burleigh March," which was played by musicians of the Burleigh Corps. Elected to the New York Assembly in

1875, he promoted numerous bills that benefitted the canal system of the state. In 1884 he was elected to two terms in Congress from the Rennselaer County District and promoted bills that championed the commercial activity of the region including the elimination of the burdensome tonnage tax on northern frontier boats. During his congressional service he became a personal friend of Chester A. Arthur.

When Henry died of appendicitis in 1900, one obituary in the *Fort Ann Republic* noted that “he bordered on being one of the Nation’s greatest men” and that “in business he was the very life and soul of this northern country.”⁵ A separate supplement in the *Whitehall Times* included brief biographical notes from newspapers in Troy, Fort Ann, Glens Falls, and Albany. Acknowledging that it was virtually impossible to define a central focus of Henry’s complex life, the *Glens Falls Star* noted that:

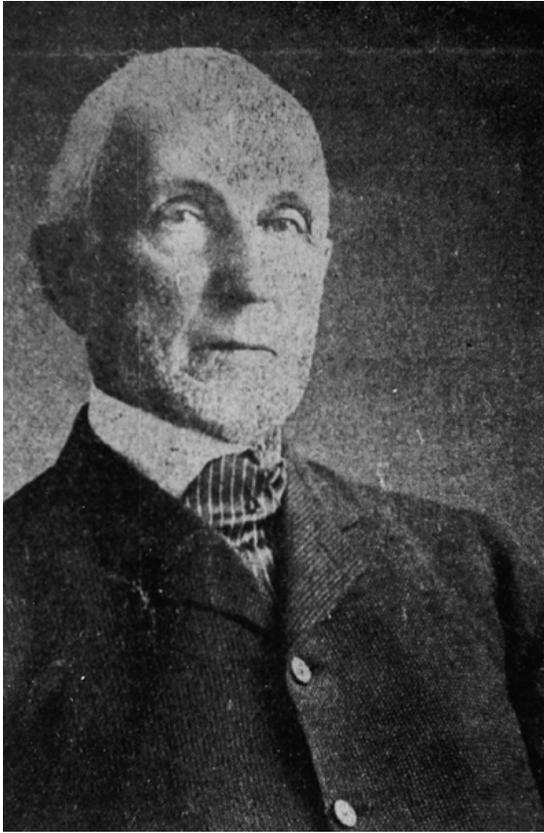
. . . while [he was] known principally as a politician . . . the greatest achievement of his long and useful life was the great transportation system of the Hudson and Champlain Valleys, and in doing this so earned the gratitude of this entire community regardless of political affiliations.⁶

Upon the death of Henry Gordon I, his son Henry Gordon II carried on the business and became president and the major share holder of the Ticonderoga Electric Light and Power Company. He married Susan Tisdale Sanborn of Whitehall, New York, and had three children. Tragedy struck the family in 1903 when Henry Gordon II took his life, a week after the birth of his third child. With his death the commercial empire of the Burleighs began to unravel.

Brackett Weeks Burleigh was two years younger than Henry and was often perceived to be Henry’s shadow. When Brackett died his obituary in the Ticonderoga newspaper identified him as, “an only brother of the Late Hon. Henry Gordon Burleigh whose career as a statesman and financier was of national interest.”⁷ Even the partnership the brothers formed in 1858, to conduct “a general mercantile business” was named “H.G. Burleigh & Brother,”⁸ thereby suggesting a lesser role for the younger brother.

Brackett was, however, an equal partner in virtually all of Henry’s commercial affairs. Though he did not share his brother’s national prominence he was active in Essex County, New York, politics, serving as a delegate to state conventions and an advisor to political leaders.

Brackett began his business career in what was known as “the Old Brick Store” in Ticonderoga, where he formed the partnership with Henry. This partnership evolved into a mercantile and transportation company that dominated the commercial life of the region. Brackett Weeks always



Brackett Weeks Burleigh. This picture appears on the front page of the Ticonderogian, 7 July 1910. Courtesy of the Ticonderoga Historical Society and the Burleigh family, Ticonderoga, New York.

maintained a major financial stake in the partnership, which further bound the brothers to their commercial enterprises. He represented the company in New York City from 1890 to 1897 and later became a director and president of the Whitehall Lumber Co., a further testimony to his independence as an entrepreneur and commercial force.

Brackett was known as “The Vermont Brother,” and his decision to establish a Vermont base of operation was prompted by a need to supply the east shore of Lake Champlain and further inland regions with goods being transhipped up and down the lake between the destination ports of New York City and Montreal. In order to accomplish the transi-

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One of several docks of the Burleigh brothers' commercial enterprises at Larrabee's Point, Vermont. Courtesy of James Bullard, Larrabee's Point, Vermont.

tion between water and land routes, he established storage yards, boat docks, and railroad tracks and trestles at and around strategically located Larrabee's Point in the Town of Shoreham, Vermont.⁹

His facilities were linked to Vermont's Addison Railroad, which handled lumber, coal, explosive powders, and food stuffs and crossed Lake Champlain about a mile south of Larrabee's Point. Between 1879 and 1881 the Burleigh brothers built one-hundred-ton canal boats at Larrabee's Point, employing a large sawmill erected there to cut timber into planking.¹⁰



Brackett Weeks Burleigh's mansion at Larrabee's Point, Vermont. Courtesy of James Bullard, Larrabee's Point, Vermont.

Brackett's commercial commitment to Vermont was reflected in his construction of a summer residence known as the "Burleigh Mansion" and buildings and structures associated with his business. His house was a classic Victorian, built on the natural terrace overlooking Lake Champlain at Larrabee's Point, with a spectacular view of the Adirondacks to the north and west. One of the two barns is still used and features a cupola that serves as an architectural symbol of the Burleigh fortunes.¹¹ The house itself, however, was dismantled after Brackett died of cancer in 1910. Along the shoreline only earthen outlines of foundations remain to mark the location of the former commercial buildings.¹²

Brackett Weeks Burleigh's mansion and his extensive business operations at Larrabee's Point had allowed both brothers to straddle lower Lake Champlain and thereby exercise substantial control over the rapidly developing commercial activities of the region.

After Brackett's death, his son, Sheridan Locke Burleigh, assumed responsibility for the business enterprises of his father and uncle until these were dissolved and absorbed into other larger enterprises that typified the burgeoning industrial era. Currently Larrabee's Point is



Stone warehouse (circa 1823), currently Teachout's store, located at the ferry landing at Larrabee's Point. Courtesy of the Shoreham Historical Society, Shoreham, Vermont.

pleasant and pastoral but unspectacular and most notable as the terminus for the historic Ticonderoga Ferry. The Burleigh's barn, the ferry landing, and the stone storehouse (circa 1823), now Teachout's store, remain as markers of Vermont's connection to its basin neighbors and friends across the lake.

Just to the south of Larrabee's Point, at Beadles Cove, was the commercially important black marble quarry.¹³ The elegant United States Hotel, established at Larrabee's Point circa 1840 and lost to fire in 1917, was a major adjunct to and symbol of the once flourishing commercial and popular recreational enterprises along the Vermont lakeshore.

The marble quarry and the popular hotel were no doubt some of the resources that encouraged the Burleigh brothers to invest further in this region of Vermont during the latter half of the twentieth century.

In his 1861 *A History of the Town of Shoreham*, Rev. Josiah F. Goodhue, describes other resources:

The opening of the Lake Champlain Canal, from Whitehall to Albany, gave a great impulse to mercantile business in the town, especially to that portion of it done [down] on the lake shore. The merchants received large quantities of grain in exchange for goods, and sold the



A popular resort, The United States Hotel, 1847–1919, located along the shoreline at Larrabee’s Point. The hotel was destroyed by fire. Courtesy of the Shoreham Historical Society, Shoreham, Vermont.

leading heavy articles, such as flour, salt, and iron for cash or its equivalent, at a small advance from cost and transportation.¹⁴

For a short time Larrabee’s Point emerged as a major crossroads of the north-south Montreal-New York canal and the east-west Addison Railroad between Whiting, Vermont, and Ticonderoga, New York, via the causeway and floating swing bridge across Lake Champlain. In 1923 the bridge was abandoned, however. The abandonment of the bridge due to the advent of commercial trucking had a devastating impact on Larrabee’s Point. Even before that, however, a series of calamities in the 1800s befell the Burleighs’ business and signalled the close of the commercial era at Larrabee’s Point. Among them were the collapse of the engine tender when crossing the trestle at the coal yard and an extensive fire and explosion of 125 barrels of powder at the wharf and warehouse.¹⁵ A once vital eastern Vermont crossroads settled down to its current sedate condition.

It is worthwhile to speculate what would have happened if New York, with its ties to industry, and Vermont, with its agricultural and rural flavor had been chosen by the Burleighs to further develop their formida-

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The landing dock at Larrabee's Point during the 19th century. Courtesy of James Bullard, Larrabee's Point, Vermont.

ble commerical empire along the eastern shore of Lake Champlain. Larrabee's Point might have served as the southern anchor of a substantial industrial corridor, adjacent to the Champlain canal and beginning at Burlington to the north. Their decision to let the railroads, piers, warehouses, and other commerical entities lapse into disuse and decay might have been a factor in the creation of two distinct realms on either side of the Champlain basin.



The Burleigh Hotel or House, Ticonderoga, New York. Courtesy of the Ticonderoga Historical Society, Ticonderoga, New York.

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A notable reminder of the partnership between the Burleigh brothers and their flourishing communities is the Burleigh House, which was among the joint ventures of the brothers. An elegant four-story hotel on the southwest corner of the intersection of Main and Exchange Streets in Ticonderoga, The Burleigh House opened in 1880 and served the rapidly developing community. Despite an innovative system of fire protection installed on every floor, the hotel was destroyed by fire in 1953.¹⁶

Henry Gordon and Brackett Weeks Burleigh, brought their formidable New Hampshire commercial and political expertise to the Champlain Basin and seeded the valley corridor with commercial ventures. The Burleighs had caught the colonial mercantile spirit. This spirit followed opportunities out of New Hampshire and into Vermont and eastern New York and then, ultimately, to the Pacific Coast. The 1860 census had classified five out of every six Americans as rural, but between Appomattox and World War I, during the working lifetimes of the Burleigh brothers, all of this changed.¹⁷ The Jeffersonian “republic of farmers” dissolved into an industrialized, urbanized, hugely rich, productive, and populous nation with a rapidly evolving manufacturing technology. The Burleigh brothers, by virtue of their domination of the Champlain region at the turn of the century, were principals in the dramatic commercial, industrial, and political maturation of this country.

NOTES

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¹ Charles Burleigh, *The Genealogy of the Burley or Burleigh Family* (Portland: Press of B. Thurston & Company, 1880), 9, 112; William R. Cutter, ed., *Genealogical and Family History of Northern New York*, vol. 1 (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1910), 345–348; *Ticonderoga, Patches and Patterns from Its Past* (Ticonderoga, New York: Ticonderoga Historical Society, 1969); Eleanor Murray, “Historical Facts and Fiction from around the Area,” *Ticonderoga Sentinel*, 23 May 1968; Henry Gordon Burleigh, *The Whitehall Chronicle*, 17 August 1900.

² Russell P. Bellico, *Sails and Steam in the Mountains: A Maritime and Military History of Lake George and Lake Champlain* (Fleischmanns, New York: Purple Mountain Press, 1992), 245, 302; Hon. Henry G. Burleigh, *Washington County, New York; Its History to the Close of the 19th Century*, William Stone and A. Dallas Wait, eds. (New York: New York History Co., 1901), 201–203; Jennie Versteeg, “Aspects of the Vermont-Canada Forest Products Relation in the Twentieth Century,” *Vermont History* 58 (Summer 1990), 164–178.

³ *Generations of Pride. A Centennial History of International Paper* (Purchase, New York: International Paper, 1998), 203. In 1878 Ticonderoga Pulp & Paper Company first built and operated the Lower Falls mill. The mill produced soda pulp and fine papers. A second plant, referred to as the Island mill, was built in 1891 by the Lake George Paper Company. In 1898 this mill joined with other mills in the northeast to form International Paper. The Lower Falls mill was acquired by International Paper in 1929. A third mill was built along the shores of Lake Champlain in 1968 to replace the Lower Falls mill.

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⁴ Clarence Holden, "Hon. H.G. Burleigh" in *Material Concerning the History of Whitehall, New York*. Unpublished manuscript (Albany, New York: New York State Library Archives, 1910), 248–252.

⁵ "Honored in Death Hon. Henry Gordon Burleigh Now At Rest: A Useful Career Ended." *Whitehall Times, Supplement*, 23 August 1900.

⁶ *Glens Falls Star*, quoted in the *The Whitehall Times, Supplement*, 23 August 1900.

⁷ "Hon. B.W. Burleigh, Whose Long and Honorable Life Came to an End June 28th." *Ticonderoga*, 7 July 1910.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Middlebury Register*, 25 August 1874; *Ticonderoga Sentinel*, 19 September 1874; *ibid.* 3 October 1874; *ibid.* 9 June 1882; *ibid.* 25 August 1882; A. Peter Barranco, Jr. "Ticonderoga's Floating Drawbridge; 1871–1920," Paper presented as part of Lake Champlain Basin Program, Demonstration Report no.4E at the Lake Champlain Management Conference in May 1995.

¹⁰ *Plattsburgh Republican*, 20 December 1879; According to A. Peter Barranco, Jr., seven canal boats were built and launched at Larrabee's Point between 1880–1881 (personal correspondence, May 12, 1997).

¹¹ "The Burleigh Mansion at Larrabee's Point, Vt." *Ticonderoga Sentinel*, 2 March 1883.

¹² Ronald F. Kingsley, "The Braunschweig and Hesse-Hanau Auxiliaries in the Champlain Valley, 1777: An Archaeological Survey of the Shoreline of Shoreham, Orwell, and Bridport Townships, Vermont, 1987–1999." Unpublished study. The German Auxiliaries Project (GAP) is an independent research project which focuses on the participation of the the German auxiliaries who served General John Burgoyne during his invasion from Canada in 1777. The project is being conducted in collaboration with the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation and Fort Ticonderoga; Ronald F. Kingsley, "An archaeological survey of the land approach to Mount Independence, 1776–1777, Orwell, Addison County, Vermont," *The Journal of Vermont Archaeology*, 2:1997, 57–71; Ronald F. Kingsley, "A German Perspective on the American Attempt to Recapture the British Forts at Ticonderoga and Mount Independence on September 18, 1777," *Vermont History*, 67 (Winter-Spring 1999), 5–26.

¹³ *Shoreham, The Town and Its People* (Shoreham, Vermont: Shoreham Historical Society, 1988), 52–58, 61–62; Josiah F. Goodhue, *History of the Town of Shoreham, Vermont* (Middlebury, Vermont: A. H. Copeland, 1861), 38; Robert Hagerman "Two Centuries of Ferryboating," *Vermont Life* (Summer 1976), 24–26.

¹⁴ Goodhue, *History*, 68–69.

¹⁵ "Terrible Explosion, \$25,000 worth of Property destroyed on Larrabee's Point, opposite Fort Ticonderoga." *Ticonderoga Sentinel* 28 September 1877; *St. Albans (Vermont) Weekly Newspaper*, 5 October 1877.

¹⁶ The Burleigh House was recognized as one of the best hotels in northern New York. It served primarily businessmen and tourists and offered many features. *Ticonderoga, Patches and Patterns, 270–271*; *Ter-Centenary of Lake Champlain, 1609–1909* (Ticonderoga, New York: n.d.), 7.

¹⁷ Sidney Lens, *The Forging of the American Empire* (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, 1971), 125.