

Autumn 1969

VOL. XXXVII No. 4



The PROCEEDINGS of the
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Travel in Vermont, from the 1780's to the 1840's, was usually hazardous . . .

Early Roads and Taverns of the Champlain Valley

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WHEN the campaigns of the Revolutionary War ended in the early 1780's, hundreds of settlers returned to reclaim their farms, while thousands of new pioneers flocked northward from southern New England and the Hudson Valley. In addition, many settlers heading for northern New York travelled on the Vermont side of the lake and ferried across at convenient points. Consequently, the towns hacked out segments of routes north from Rutland, Castleton and Fair Haven. But these were primitive roads indeed, and remained so for years. They were rarely more than cleared ways through the woods, unimproved and so almost impassable in wet weather. Only an occasional tavern appeared in the 1780's to ease the traveller's journey. Examples are Marshall's Stand on the old Crown Point Road in Whiting, and the Chimney Point Tavern in Addison, both of which are still standing.

One of the earliest "free-lance" travellers of this early period, the Reverend Nathan Perkins, thought he would never survive the hardships of his journey in 1789. A Connecticut preacher, he wanted to bring God's word to the unchurched settlements of western Vermont. Although he found people receptive to his message, he saw little else to

praise about the land or its people. He lodged at "Mr. Flints in Brandon, —meanest of all lodging,—dirty,—fleas without number." In New Haven he "slept in an open log house, where it rained on me, in ye night, & no keeping for my horse." He frequently got lost in the woods, shivered at "ye horrible howling of ye wolves," and particularly condemned the absence of "comfortable victuals. . . . I suffer as much for ye want of drink as anything. Brook-water is my chief drink. The maple cyder is horrible stuff—no malt in ye Country.—Their beer poor bran beer."

Even after turning southward toward home he wondered if he would ever see his family again:

From Burlington Bay I set out alone unaccompanied to Shelburn through ye wilderness on ye Lake Champlain—next to no rode—mud up to my horse's belly—roots thick as they could be, no house for 4 miles.—I got lost. My horse nearly gave out. . . . Night come on—I could travel no farther—I found a little log hut & put up there. Could get no supper—my horse no feed—Slept on a Chaff-bed without covering—a man, his wife & 3 children all in ye same nasty stinking room.

This civilized man was obviously not prepared for travel on the raw frontier, and all he saw was "log-huts—people nasty—poor—low-lived—indecate—and miserable cooks."¹

Facilities had apparently not improved greatly by 1796 when the young Englishman, Isaac Weld, reached Whitehall from the south. The carriage, although advertised as the best obtainable in Albany, rented for \$35, had no springs or doors, and was, Weld said, little better than a common wagon. All the passengers walked over the decaying log road between Fort Edward and Fort Anne, the four horses proving incapable of moving the loaded cart. From Fort Anne to Whitehall the tired animals could be stirred only if ridden by the driver and one of the passengers.

At Whitehall, Weld and a travelling companion hired a small boat in which to descend Lake Champlain. They were assured that the shores were dotted with inns and houses where meals and overnight accommodations could be obtained. Yet Weld found the houses along the Vermont shore so crowded with large, poor families that he did not have the heart to ask for a bed, and could scarcely get a few scraps to eat. When he could find taverns, he did not regard their accommodations highly.

All the strangers that happen to be in the house sit down to these meals promiscuously, and, excepting in the large towns, the family of the house also forms a part of the company. . . . If a single bedroom can be procured,

1. Rev. Nathan Perkins, *A Narrative of a Tour through the State of Vermont*, Woodstock, Vt., 1920, pp. 15-21, *passim*.

more ought not to be looked for; but it is not always that even this is to be had, and those who travel through the country must often submit to be crammed into rooms where there is scarcely sufficient space to walk between the beds.²

In 1798 Timothy Dwight, president of Yale, travelled extensively in Vermont. He found the clay of Middlebury and vicinity especially disagreeable:

In wet seasons every rain converts it into mud. Whenever the weather is dry, it is pulverized wherever mankind live and move; and the dust, being very fine and light, rises with every wind, fills the air with clouds, covers the houses, and soils the clothes with a dingy, dirty appearance. When the surface of well-made roads has become hard, a slight rain makes them so slippery as to be impassable with safety, unless with horses coked in the same manner as when they are to travel on ice.³

John Russell Davis, the probable diarist of 1800, also complained of the clay. Approaching Hinesburg from the north on horseback, he recorded: "We have had extremely bad road this last 7 miles mirey knee deep in some places in clay." Next day he briefly put his horse out to grass at Bristol's inn in Panton. While there he hived a swarm of bees for the landlady. He then rode over an excellent highway, perhaps the Basin Harbor Road, to Thomas Rowley's tavern in Shoreham, which is still standing and about which he commented:

The Landlord did tolerable the landlady is not very delicate She is a large fleshy woman

We had good housekeeping & extraordinary good lodging the best beds I ever slept in and its a reasonable Tavern. . . . We have rode but 36 miles since ¼ before 7 this morning.⁴

In 1807 the roads were still the chief complaint of the Englishman, John Lambert:

We set out from Vergennes the next morning at three o'clock for Burlington, a distance of only twenty-two miles; yet the road was so very rough, that we did not arrive in that town till noon. . . . For the most part the road lay through woods, where it required all the skill and dexterity of the driver to avoid deep ruts, huge stones, logs of wood, felled timber, and stumps of trees. The road was very narrow, and these obstructions continually obliged us to run in a serpentine direction.⁵

2. Isaac Weld, Jr., *Travels through the States of North America and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada during the Years 1795, 1796, and 1797*, London, 1800, p. 35.

3. Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New-England and New-York*, 4 vols., London, 1823, vol II, p. 396.

4. John Russell Davis (prob.), "Diary of a Journey through Massachusetts, Vermont & Eastern New York in the Summer of 1800," *Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society for the Years 1919-20*, Montpelier, 1921, pp. 168-70.

5. John Lambert, *Travels through Canada and the United States of North America in the Years 1806, 1807 & 1808*, 2 vols, London, 1814, vol. II, pp. 508-09.

On his travels Lambert found some reasonably good stagecoaches. He described them as having open sides and front, with leather curtains for cold or wet weather. However, the buttons and straps were often broken, so that the passengers were not always protected from wind or rain. He wondered why Americans had not started to use the closed English stage with glass windows, and decided that it was probably because of the hot weather and the poor roads which prevailed in many parts of the country.⁶

Lambert discovered a few good taverns. Invariably they had a public table where everyone dined together. The meals were excellent and varied—if anything, too heavy for good health. He concluded that many American illnesses were caused by gross diet, especially animal food at every meal. In Shelburne he stayed not in a tavern but with Farmer O'Grady, and there he breakfasted with the family on eggs, fried pork, beefsteaks, apple-tarts, pickles, cheese, cider, tea and toast dipped in melted butter and milk! O'Grady asked only seven pence, but Lambert paid him a quarter of a dollar, the current tavern price for breakfast.⁷

Lambert found the taverns generally equipped with one large room upstairs containing more than a dozen beds,

so that we each had a separate one; a thing not always to be met with at every tavern in the States. But the practice of putting two or three in a bed is now little exercised, except at very indifferent taverns, and they are chiefly confined to the back parts of the country. Within the last twenty years the States have been so much improved, that good inns are established in almost every town and village along the principal roads, and the accommodations of many of them are equal to those of England. Travellers are not, therefore, liable to have a strange man step into their bed, as was the case formerly. During the whole of my tour through the States I never had occasion to *bundle*, though I have been sometimes asked if I wished to have a *single* bed.⁸

Despite the tolerant observations of John Lambert, Thomas Price had a difficult time travelling from Plattsburgh to Montreal in 1808. The high price of rented horses and vehicles forced him and others to walk much of the way, carrying saddle bags, great coat and portman-teaux in the heat of the summer. At one inn they were to be charged extra unless they were willing to sleep three in a bed. A compromise price was finally arrived at for two in one bed and one in another.⁹

6. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

7. Marie C. Harding, *The History of Shelburne*, Shelburne, Vt., 1963, p. 14.

8. Lambert, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

9. Thomas Price to Henri Delord, June 21, 1808, Kent-Delord Papers, State University College, Plattsburgh, New York.

In the meantime, the improvement of roads was under way. In 1797 the Vermont Legislature authorized county committees to lay out public highways connecting some of the larger towns. The result was an improvement over the existing haphazard local roads, but they still left much to be desired. Consequently, the turnpike filled an important need after 1800. A group of enterprising citizens petitioned the Legislature for a charter to build a road along a designated route and to collect tolls. The Fairhaven and Winooski companies might place their tollgates no less than eleven miles apart. The provision was usually inserted that "no toll shall be demanded at any turnpike gate of any person being a citizen of this State, and living within eight miles of such gate; but such person shall at all times pass free with his horse, carriage or team; also at any greater distance, when going to or from public worship, or on military duty, or to or from any grist or saw mill." It was further provided that the roads were to be begun within one year and completed within five years.¹⁰ The Legislature had to act on numerous petitions for extensions of time.

Rates were fixed in the charter for the entire length of the road, collectible in part at each tollgate. For example, the through charge for sheep and pigs might be one cent, and for horses, oxen and cattle six-cents. The turnpikes quickly became busy highways for driving livestock to the Montreal and Boston markets, and taverns appeared for the special accommodation of drovers, with pens for their animals. During the winter of 1808 the inns of Burlington and St. Albans were crowded with teamsters illegally taking their produce to Canada in defiance of Jefferson's embargo on all such trade.¹¹

The first turnpike with at least one terminus in the Champlain Valley was chartered in 1800 for a road between Middlebury and Woodstock. The Hubbardton Turnpike of 1802 authorized a road from Hubbardton to Castleton; the Poultney Turnpike of 1805, from Castleton to the New York line in Poultney; the Fairhaven Turnpike, also of 1805, from Fair Haven to Bridport; the Waltham Turnpike of the same year from Middlebury to Vergennes, which Levi Woodbury found an "intolerable road of dried mud" in 1819;¹² and the Winooski Turnpike from Burlington to Montpelier. In the subsequent two decades others were chartered, many of which were never constructed. The average life of a Vermont turnpike seems to have been about 30 years. Then, either by mutual

10. W. S. Rann (ed.), *History of Chittenden County, Vermont*, Syracuse, 1886, p. 188.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

12. Levi Woodbury, "Journal," ed. by H. B. Fant, *Vermont History*, vol. 34 (Jan. 1966), p. 48.

agreement or by legislative or judicial action, the road became the property of the towns "when the public good requires a public highway." Since the roads were expensive to build and maintain, and since the tolls rarely produced the profits expected, the builders were often eager to get out from under a heavy financial burden. The Waltham Turnpike lasted as a private road only from 1805 to 1828; the Fairhaven until 1833; the Poultney until 1834. The Hubbardton and Winooski lasted longer than most—until 1851 and 1852 respectively.¹³

Improvement of the roads brought a corresponding increase in the number and quality of taverns to serve the post riders and stage coaches. The taverns served a dual role—that of an inn for travellers and of a social center for the neighborhood. Many of them had a ballroom on the second floor. It is difficult to imagine how the two functions of the taverns were performed simultaneously—how the weary traveller got any sleep with a dance going on under the same roof, when he must be up and off on the stage before dawn. There was a degree of specialization among the taverns—some were public houses with dance floors and bars chiefly for local patronage; others catered to the drovers and their herds; while still others were best known as stops on a regular stage route. Nevertheless, the uses of the tavern *did* conflict, as Levi Woodbury tells us after a stop in Brandon in 1819:

The crowd in the Hall above was so great, that the landlord persuaded me to occupy a bed below in the most remote part of the House. . . . The Hall was soon emptied and in a few minutes refilled and actual dancing commenced and continued till I sank asleep from the music of the mere shaking of the building. My slumbers were interrupted about every half hour till 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning by some lady looking for an estray shawl, some waiter after a pitcher or my landlady in search of matters and things in general.¹⁴

That some towns were either more convivial, hospitable or alcoholic than others is suggested by the records of the town of Charlotte, which had eight taverns in its early years; Shoreham with probably as many, since six still survive; and Cornwall, where at least four survive and are matched by as many more in the early accounts. However, not all of them operated simultaneously. Hospitality was the hallmark of every good inn, whose reputation often rose or fell with the personality of the landlord. A pail of whiskey was to be found at the inevitable bar, and a dipperful could be had for a few cents. But hospitality could not be taken for granted, and the licensing and regulation of taverns was early undertaken by the state, perhaps with an eye on the tourist trade.

13. Frederic J. Wood, *The Turnpikes of New England*, Boston, 1919, pp. 257-80, *passim*.
14. Woodbury, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

The act of 1798 included the admonition that “every person shall *at all times* be furnished with suitable refreshments, provisions, and accommodations for travellers, their cattle and horses; on penalty of forfeiting the sum of *three dollars*, to the use of any person who will sue for the same.”

Intemperance was dealt with in many laws, including one of 1821 requiring selectmen to post the names of common tipplers, who were not to be sold liquor. But the rigors of the act were then softened by the provision that “nothing in this act shall prevent any person from administering, as medicine, to the person whose name shall be posted up such spirituous liquors, and in such quantities, and at such periods as some regular practising physician shall certify to be necessary for the health of such person.” The owner of a tavern who did not keep “a regular and orderly house” was in serious difficulty, for he might have to go to court, pay a fine and lose his license for the rest of the year.¹⁵

An innkeeper often carried on other work, while his wife and daughters ran the tavern. He was most likely to be a farmer, but he and his wagon might be for hire, as was his boat if he lived along the lake. Innkeepers who took passengers out to the lake steamers were allowed twelve cents a person.¹⁶ The innkeeper was often a person of some importance in the town, and many of the early taverns were used for town meetings, church services, or sessions of county court. Deacon Sam Buell’s inn at Butler’s Corners in Essex was used for both church and town meetings.¹⁷ So was that of Zuriel Tupper in Ferrisburg.¹⁸ The Jonah Case public house in West Addison was the meeting place of Addison County court in the 1780’s and 1790’s, when Addison expected to be selected as the permanent county seat.¹⁹

Improved roads made possible the careful scheduling of stagecoach departures and arrivals. The stage from Albany to Montreal via Middlebury and Burlington covered 220 miles and cost \$11.25 a person.²⁰ A typical trip of the period was that of Erastus Root in 1815. He left Brattleboro by stage at 3 a.m. and had breakfast at Walpole, New Hampshire at 7:30. He spent the night in Rutland, which he left at 2:30 the next morning. He breakfasted at 7 in Brandon, dined at 12 in Mid-

15. John Hull Brown, *Early American Beverages*, Rutland, Vt., 1966, p. 136.

16. H. Walworth, *Four Eras in the History of Travelling between Montreal and New York from 1793 to 1892*, Plattsburgh, 1892, p. 5.

17. Frank R. Bent (ed.), *The History of the Town of Essex*, Essex, Vt., 1963, pp. 63–70, *passim*.

18. Hamilton Child (comp.), *Gazetteer and Business Directory of Addison County, Vermont for 1881–82*, Syracuse, 1882, p. 104.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

20. Robert B. Thomas, *The Farmer’s Almanack for 1826*, Boston, 1826.

dlebury, and arrived in Burlington at 8 p.m.²¹ The average stage time on cross roads of the day was about 40 miles in a 24-hour period. The fastest mail stages between the great commercial towns along the sea-coast travelled from 60 to 120 miles in 24 hours.²² Root's time thus compared favorably with the fast schedules out of New York and Philadelphia, for he stopped to sleep at night and still travelled about 75 miles over the Green Mountains on one day, and 67 miles more the next.²³ Levi Woodbury in 1819 confirmed Root's schedule by asserting that the stages from Whitehall to Boston and from Middlebury to Boston both required but two days to go 200 miles.²⁴

This was speedy but strenuous travel. The coaches were strongly built, with heavy leather straps for springs. But they were subjected to tremendous strain from the deep mud, holes, rocks and stumps, and often they broke down. Although the coaches were not swung high, there was weight on top and they sometimes overturned. Not every stream had a bridge, and fording was dangerous, especially when the stream was swollen by rain.

John Palmer of Lynn, England travelled from Vergennes to Fair Haven in 1817, apparently on horseback with a Vermont travelling companion. He described the Yankee thriftiness which limited the cost of a horse to 50 or 60 cents a day. At each stop his fellow-traveller ordered four cents' worth of hay and six or eight cents' worth of oats. Palmer found the tavern accommodations good, with charges of 25 and 37½ cents a meal, and a dollar overnight. He invariably found two New England dishes on the table—toast dipped in cream, and pumpkin pie. He was usually waited on by the landlord's daughter or other member of the household, neatly dressed and blooming with health and beauty. "Indeed," he wrote, "I think the ladies of New England are positively *almost* as handsome and have *nearly* as clear red and white as our English fair."²⁵

A British retired naval captain and inveterate traveller, Frederick Marryat, wrote entertainingly of his stagecoach trip south from Burlington in 1837:

It was still dark when we started, and off we went, up hill and down hill—short steep *pitches*, as they term them here—at a furious rate. There was no

21. Erastus Root, *A Journal of the Most Remarkable Proceedings, Studies & Observations*, Ms at Bailey Library, University of Vermont, Burlington, pp. 15–18.

22. Gaillard Hunt, *Life in America One Hundred Years Ago*, New York, 1914, p. 52.

23. For stage distances see Robert B. Thomas, *The Farmer's Almanack for 1830*, Boston, 1830.

24. Woodbury, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

25. John Palmer, *Journal of Travels in the United States and in Lower Canada, Performed in the Year 1817*, London, 1818, pp. 238, 241.

level ground; it was all undulating, and very trying to the springs. But an American driver stops at nothing; he will flog away with six horses in hand; and it is wonderful how few accidents happen; but it is very fatiguing, and one hundred miles of American travelling by stage is equal to four hundred in England.²⁶

Marryat, like other foreign travellers, became accustomed to the democratic strain in American life so that he was not surprised, at one change of coaches, to be asked by his slightly built driver to lift four heavy trunks up on the carriage.

On the other hand another Englishman, James Buckingham, observed a quite different treatment of horses. Travelling from Shoreham to Danville in 1838, he described his driver, like all others he had seen in America, as "remarkably kind to his horses. Though he drove faster and steadier than any who had yet driven us, he never used his whip to touch the horses, but merely smacked it in the air, and talked to the animals as though he believed they understood every word he said."²⁷

Along his route he noted that the signs of the inns were hung on hinges so as to swing, after the English fashion, while in New York they were fixed, as on a target. In both states, however, he noted the ample verandas running around the house. The ground level was generally crowded with men smoking cigars, which he thought gave an air of dissipation to the scene. Buckingham was describing the type of tavern which evolved in Vermont during the 1820's, with a characteristic two-decker veranda.

And so in the 50 years after 1790, Vermont's wilderness was tamed, turnpiked and toured. Probably foreign visitors are the best source of information about the development of roads and accommodations. Most of these travellers wrote for publication and were intrigued if not always pleased by their experiences. From their references to facilities in other states and in England, it seems reasonable to conclude that travel in Vermont at the height of the turnpike era, despite its obvious hazards, was as convenient and rapid as that prevailing elsewhere at the time.

26. Captain Frederick Marryat, *Diary in America*, Bloomington, Ind., 1960, p. 143.

27. James S. Buckingham, *America, Historical, Statistic, and Descriptive*, 3 vols., London, 1841. Quoted in T. D. Seymour Bassett (ed.), *Outsiders Inside Vermont*, Brattleboro, Vt., 1967, pp. 73-75.