Early Vermont Winter Skating  
A Pantry Staple: Common Crackers  
Montpelier’s Clothespin Factory
In The Galleries

History Museum Special Exhibits

A New American Globe: James Wilson of Vermont
James Wilson of Bradford created the first commercially available globes in America. Beginning in 1810, he produced and sold terrestrial and celestial globes for home and classroom use, advertising them as superior American-made products. Wilson's path to globemaking was far from obvious, and he has been celebrated as a unique Vermont genius. How much of what we know about him is anecdotal and hearsay, and how much is based on close examination of quality archival sources? On view through June 2023

The Common Cracker
For about the entire 19th century the simple common cracker was an important staple of the northern New England diet. Common Cracker: The Exhibit explores the fascinating history of just what a common cracker is, how they were made, advertised, and sold, and the many Vermont bakeries that produced them. Created by the Montpelier Historical Society, the exhibit is on view at the Vermont History Museum in Montpelier. On view through January 2023.

History Center Special Exhibits

Icons and Oddities
This exhibit features items related to "Visiting Vermont": tourism advertisements and brochures, souvenirs, bicentennial and other anniversary celebrations, and advertising of Vermont products. Visit the gallery during Library open hours.

Winter Speaker Series

December 7: The Great Monopolist of Books: Henry Stevens, Jr., of Vermont with Denise Gigante
February 15: African-Americans in Vermont, 1790-1870 with Jane Williamson
March 15: Bringing Geography Home: Genie Lamson and the Vermont Commission on Country Life with Tom Anderson-Montesroso
April 19: A New American Globe: James Wilson of Vermont with Amanda Kay Gustin

VHS WILL BE CLOSED ON THE FOLLOWING DATES:
- Thursday, November 24, 2022
- Tuesday, December 6, 2022
- Saturday, December 31, 2022
- Tuesday, January 10, 2023
- Saturday, December 24, 2022

Check our website for updates.

Events

Want to learn more about upcoming events and programs? Visit the calendar at vermonthistory.org/calendar

Help Us Tell Vermont’s Story

Well, here we go with another Vermont winter. I contemplate, as I always do, if I put enough wood up to get me through the cold weather. Not only do my wood stoves keep me warm and occasionally cook my food, but they also provide a type of warmth that connects me to my past while encouraging the consumption of piles of books.

As you all know, one of the core functions of the Vermont Historical Society is the promotion of new scholarship on our state and the propagation of that scholarship through publication, exhibition, and the production of film and audio content. What better time of year than winter to curl up with a VHS book, journal, podcast, or video production. No matter your medium of choice, we have you covered with traditional paper, eBooks, commercial tv, and your favorite audio and video platforms. This edition of History Connections includes our member-favorite booklist. Whether purchasing for yourself or for holiday giving, these publications will provide joy and knowledge while supporting the further work of VHS. Recent publications include the Rebel and the Tory; an insightful exploration of our state’s early history with fresh evidence and new conclusions. The second edition, with new forward, of Discovering Black Vermont tells a multi-generational story of a black community in Hinesburg. Repeopling Vermont takes on the 20th century in our state with an exploration of what it means to be a Vermonter and how our state tried to define and recruit specific populations as new residents. Popular titles such as We Go As Captives, Moses Robinson and the Founding of Vermont, Secrets of Mount Philo, and The Problem of Slavery in Early Vermont are all in new printings and available for purchase.

You’ll see in the pages of this newsletter articles by both staff and community members. Montpelier Historical Society member, George Edson, provides insight into, and nostalgia for, the cracker industry in Vermont. His, and others’, independent research resulted in an exhibition at the History Museum and this article. You don’t need to be a credentialed academic to contribute to the telling of Vermont’s story. We welcome your research, your articles, and your book ideas with open arms. Do you have the next great Vermont history book in you? Have you been researching a topic that is just right for our journal, Vermont History? Please reach out and let us help you get your work in front of the public.

Have a wonderful winter and I look forward to seeing all of you soon.

Steve Perkins, Executive Director

Design: Laughing Bear Associates
Printing: Accura Printing
Cover: Winter Scene from Carbon Plant: a turnhouse stands off in the distance in a snowy field. Image by Edmund Royce.
Family Archaeology

Anyone who has a farm knows that it is a treasure trove of days gone past

By Eileen P. Corcoran

What’s better on a summer day than digging around in the dirt? It was a joy for me this summer when my nieces and nephews, visiting from outside Vermont, wanted to do a little “archaeology” in the backyard. Not only is my degree in anthropology, but I happen to be from one of those multi-generational Vermont farm families. Anyone who has a farm knows that it is a treasure trove of days gone past, containing everything from kitchen trash piles to items lost in the barnyard, to what we affectionately call the “farmer’s graveyard” of old tools, building materials, and what is probably best described as junk that got tossed “down back.” All of this offered opportunities for the younger kids, and perhaps some of us who are not the youngest generation anymore, to explore the past and uncover memories to share.

We got our galoshes and tick spray and headed out to find treasure both more and less buried. Though my young relatives did not have the patience for real archaeological methods, we managed to unearth items sure to make Indiana Jones jealous, such as old nails and rusty tin. Realizing the treasures in the ground were not nearly as exciting as those seen on TV, we continued by looking through some of the trove of antiques we have in the house. It was amazing to see my mom, my nieces and nephews, and myself, three generations, talking and learning about history in a very personal way.

The artifacts we found brought back stories, provided a chance to educate on how things used to be, and were a reminder that history is just yesterday. Who would have thought that the old Atari and toy cars from my youth would be just as amazing to the kids as the items from the late 19th century.

Our rummaging in the dirt and dresser drawers served as inspiration beyond just that day. We collected pocket watches and took them to the annual Watch & Clock Afternoon at Chimney Point State Historic Site with the Green Mountain Timekeepers, and we made a trip to the local cemetery to find relatives and make gravestone rubbings.

While genealogy can be a wonderful gateway into family history, there’s something tangible about exploring places, objects, and memorabilia that adds a sense of depth and understanding to the past and the individuals within it. While it can help, you don’t need to have a long connection to a specific place to share family “archeology.” Consider doing some of these inter-generational activities to preserve and share family history:

• Interviews & writing prompts
What was everyone’s favorite subject in school? How about the most important historical event you witnessed? Create a set of questions or writing prompts that feature family or personal history and compare answers among the generations.

• Home memory cafes or “share & compare”
Memory cafes are usually group programs that use objects to prompt memories. Grab something older from your home, or pictures from online, and have older generations share the memories they bring up. You can also use a prompt to share the objects or materials different generations used to do similar things. Such as “how did you talk to your friends?”

• “At this age” photo share
Find photos of relatives of different ages at the same age. Compare what they were doing, what they were wearing, or where they were. Don’t have photographs of different generations? Write down what you know or remember or look online for examples from the same time.

• Look at the land
Even if you haven’t lived in the same place for many generations, what can the clues on the land (or the buildings) tell you about who, or what, was there before you? What do you think will remain from your presence on the land for future generations to find?

While genealogy can be a wonderful gateway into family history, there’s something tangible about exploring places, objects, and memorabilia that adds a sense of depth and understanding to the past and the individuals within it.
Each year the Vermont Historical Society presents the League of Local Historical Societies & Museums (LLHSM) Achievement Awards. These awards recognize the excellent work being done by individuals and community history organizations throughout the state to collect, preserve, and share Vermont’s rich history. Awards are presented annually in the fall. This year, VHS presented six awards. These projects and individuals are exceptional in advancing local history and adding nuance and depth to the tapestry of Vermont’s story.

Bruce Yelton
East Middlebury Historical Society

Bruce Yelton’s arrival at a meeting of the East Middlebury Historical Society immediately moved the organization into the digital era. One of his first projects was to set up a website for the Society. Working with another new arrival, both the website and the digital files are now extensive, including a listing of all the paper files the Society has available. Bruce’s expertise greatly expanded programming, as he assisted speakers with technology, and shared his own studies of Carlton’s Raid on Middlebury, General Crook, and petroglyphs and pictographs.

Bruce’s activities extend beyond the computer. In 2021, he assembled an East Middlebury Walking Tour brochure and then expanded it into a booklet. He also assembled photos/postcards for an exhibit titled “Then and Now,” arranged excursions, and at the East Middlebury Community Picnic in June, he set up an historical themed scavenger hunt for the children. Currently, he is negotiating the hurdles of erecting a historic marker at the site of the Manchester Depot.

Bruce Yelton's contributions to the East Middlebury Historical Society have allowed them to spread information about their community and take pride in their accomplishments.

Manchester Historical Society
with special recognition to Shawn Harrington

Manchester TravelStorys App

For many years, the Manchester Historical Society, through the work of curator Shawn Harrington, has expanded the outreach and presence of the society through its use of social media and online collections. To date, this includes digitizing over 15,000 photos showcasing the variety of stories within Manchester’s history. Building on this work, Shawn recently supplied the text, the narration, and over 100 photos and captions to build a TravelStorys app, a free walking tour of Manchester that is available on cellphones and online. The tour includes many interesting places in Manchester’s three main neighborhoods: Manchester Village, Manchester Center, and Manchester Depot.

The TravelStorys app provides history “on-the-go” for visitors in–town and highlights special locations accessible to anyone online. The use of images, oral narration, and GPS technology offers a promising new direction for traditional history tours about town.

Shawn Harrington

Manchester Historical Society

Danville Historical Society

Book: West Danville Vermont, Then and Now, 1781–2021

The book West Danville, Vermont: Then and Now, 1781–2021 is a comprehensive history of the area surrounding West Danville and Joe’s Pond. Arranged in chronological order, this book covers the history of the area from when Jesse Leavenworth established the first mills at Joe’s Pond to the present-day recreational trail built on the old railroad bed. The book’s authors cover nearly every aspect of daily life (e.g., the weather and mail service, schools and the church, employment and recreation) and describe how the inhabitants of the region overcame hardships and built a thriving community. This book has nearly 400 pages of well-researched and footnoted stories, gathered from town documents, newspapers, internet sources, personal diaries, and interviews. The book includes over 300 images, many that have never been published. It is visually appealing, easy to understand, and covers a wide range of topics, making it an excellent text for anyone interested in knowing more about the community’s collective history. It is a high-quality publication completed by an all-volunteer organization, showing the potential of what local historical research and writing can be.

Authors Jane Bolton Brown and Patty Houghton Conly at a recent book signing.

Landgrove Historical Society

Video: The Story of Monk and Lester

The Landgrove Historical Society wanted to creatively expand on its program of collecting oral histories. They were fortunate to receive many documents and photographs from Duncan (Monk) Ogden that told the story of his upbringing on Stony Hill Farm (one of the few farms left in Landgrove) in the middle of the twentieth century. The Society convinced Monk, now nearly ninety, to take part in a film to create an oral and visual record of not one, but two individuals whose shared lives offer a window into everyday life in Landgrove during that era. The Society was able to work with filmmaker MacPherson Christopher to create a portrait of Landgrove through Monk’s story of life with Lester Cody, a man so closely identified with the town that “He was the town of Landgrove.”

The film premiered at the Society, accompanied by an extensive photographic display showing Lester as a dairy farmer, hunter, fisherman, logger, and sugarer. This new approach to recording the town’s history has the advantage of linking past and present through personal accounts and remembrance. The film is poignant, well-crafted, and accessible, and it serves as an outstanding example of how local historical societies can share the stories of their people and their places.

Members of the Landgrove Historical Society accepting award.

Article continued on p. 8
A humble pantry staple: The Vermont Common Cracker

By Robert Mills and George Edson

In a 1980s Jeff Danziger cartoon, a man with a hammer sits in front of a bowl full of soup and crackers. That image sums up the foodstuff in question, the humble Common Cracker. No doubt about it, if anything, common crackers are hard.

Danziger’s image is part of a new exhibit from the Montpelier Historical Society, Common Cracker: The Exhibit, which opened at The Vermont History Museum in Montpelier the first week of August. A staple of the Vermont diet throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, common crackers can still be found in Vermont’s culinary landscape, with some diehards continuing to enjoy them to this day. Danziger’s cartoon captures today’s prevailing attitude toward the ancient food artifact.

But it wasn’t always so. Ironically, common crackers came about as an alternative to their tasteless and hard predecessors. Prior to 1800, the only crackers known to Americans were made simply of flour and water. Known as pilot bread or sea biscuits, they were produced along the coast and were sold mainly to sailors who used them as a sea-going staple.

They kept well without refrigeration, but were bland, extremely hard, and had to be soaked in some sort of liquid to be made edible. As such, their popularity ebbed the further you went from the coastline.

Bakers of the day learned that by adding a shortening to the mix (butter, followed later by lard) their product wasn’t as hard and it had some taste. Others incorporated the tried-and-true method used in bread baking, adding a little salt, yeast, and baking soda, and the butter cracker, or soft cracker, was born. This new cracker became known as the Boston cracker.

At about the same time, machinists in Boston and New York City began to manufacture machines that would change cracker production forever.

A wide variety of crackers could be made on these machines, but the two most often mentioned early machine-made crackers were the round common cracker (as they quickly became known) and the square soda cracker. Both were identical, except for the shape.

By the mid-1840s, these machines were widely available and any baker with $1,500 could get into the cracker manufacturing business. By 1885, at least ten steam-powered bakeries appeared throughout Vermont, most notably in Montpelier, St. Johnsbury, and in White River, while others began production in Burlington and Lamoille.

The crackers were simple to make. Bakers would take the dough, fold it multiple times to produce layers, and would feed the dough into a cutting machine, which punched out the individual crackers. Those crackers would then move to the oven, where they’d bake until finished. Once cool, they’d be packaged, often in boxes or barrels, where they’d be shipped off to the vast network of general stores throughout the state.

There were plenty of ways to eat the crackers, but one dish remained popular among old-time Vermonters, eating them with milk. In days of old, it was common to go to church on Sunday morning and then enjoy a big meal after church. Since Sunday evening was mother’s turn to rest, a simple meal was needed, and the tradition of crackers and milk was born. As the times changed, the common cracker fell out of favor in many households, but they can still be found in some pantries throughout the state.

Common Cracker: The Exhibit is on view at the Vermont History Museum in Montpelier through January 2023. If you visit the Museum store, you can even purchase your own tin of common crackers.
The Capitol City’s National Clothespin Company

The factory once featured a giant working clothespin on its roof

By Andrew Liptak

For hundreds of years, the humble clothespin has been a staple of households all over the country and world. I’d wager that you likely have at least one in your home. If they aren’t being used to hang your laundry, you might have some tucked away in a junk drawer as a handy way to keep a bag of chips closed, or to hang a child’s artwork on a refrigerator.

Clothespins are a relatively recent invention. They appear to have first been used in the 1700s and were simply a peg of wood that was split in such a way that you could secure laundry to a wash line. The Economist notes that their invention likely came about as people packed into densely populated cities, and where room to spread one’s clothes was limited to the lines strung between buildings.

It was in the middle of the 19th century that Springfield, Vermont inventor David M. Smith applied for a patent for a more advanced clothespin. His invention was a “spring-clamp for clothes-lines”, which he filed in October 1853. It called for a small spring that levered two pieces of wood together to clasp one’s clothes on a line.

Two decades later, another Vermont inventor, Solon E. Moore of Swanton, filed another patent in March 1887 for an improvement over Smith’s invention, a “Clothes Pin”, which used a “coiled wire spring to close the jaws,” made up of two pieces of shaped wood. The modern clothespin was born.

Montpelier, Vermont became the home to the nation’s clothespin industry. Factories like the U.S. Clothespin Company and the National Clothespin Company took in waste lumber and milled the components of the clothespin into the right shape. Located on the bank of the Winooski River along Memorial Drive, the U.S. Clothespin Company’s factory used an array of high-tech saws and wood-working machines to produce tens of thousands of units each day. The factory was distinctive, featuring a giant working model of its product on its roof.

The National Clothespin Company originally occupied a factory right across the river from their rival (along Main Street), but in 1918, its owners relocated upriver to set up shop along Granite Street and Stonecutter’s Way, likely to take advantage of the placement of new electric wires. The wood-frame factory building is still standing today, and is now on the National Register of Historic Places. According to its National Register application, the factories played a major role in the economic health of the region: they were an important source of revenue for “timberland owners, saw mill operators, and carriers.”

Montpelier’s clothespin industry eventually waned. While the industry hit its stride in the 1930s with 15 clothespin factories throughout the Northeast, a confluence of factors eventually took hold. The introduction of electric clothes dryers reduced the demand for the products, while increased competition from cheaper alternatives (wood and plastic) from overseas also ate away at the demand for domestically-produced clothespins.

While most of those companies went out of business, the National Clothespin Company remained in operation for decades, eventually closing shop in 2003, the last survivor of what was once a bustling industry for the city.

There are still some reminders around town: in 2020, local artists Ben Cheney, Jesse Cooper, and Chris Eaton from Flywheel Industrial Arts created a trio of massive clothespin sculptures that have since gone on display in Calais and Greensboro. According to Montpelier Alive, those sculptures might soon find a new home in Montpelier: just a stone’s throw from where their diminutive predecessors were originally manufactured.

Facing Page: The sign for the National Clothes Pin Company is one small reminder of the industry that was once a driving force in Montpelier.

Above: (Top) The former home of the National Clothes Pin Company on the corner of Stonecutter’s Way and Granite Street in Montpelier, now listed on the Register of Historic Places. (Bottom) A package of Klos-Klips from the National Clothes Pin Company, manufactured in 1976 in Montpelier.
“SKATES! SKATES!”

The shift of skating from a child’s activity to one that could be enjoyed by all people was, unsurprisingly, led by women.

By Teresa Teixeira Greene

To outsiders, Vermont winters bring forth idyllic images of winter sports—skating, sledding, and ice skating. To Vermonters, the dark days of winter necessitate outdoor activities, both for enjoyment and in desperate attempts to see some sunlight. So, one might think that a relaxing, yet invigorating, winter sport such as ice skating has deep roots in Vermont.

Except, it doesn’t.

The history of ice skates is written in broad sweeps. The oldest known skates date to 1000 BCE and were made of animal bones. They were flat on the bottom and used with poles, like cross-country skiing. Sometime before the 16th century, the bones were replaced with metal runners, and then skates stayed largely the same until the adjustable sole base was invented in the mid-19th century.

In early Vermont, ice skating was largely relegated to an activity for young boys, particularly associated with young scamps skipping school in favor of outdoor play. While the activity was not completely demonized—dry goods stores in the state listed skates among their myriad of metal goods as early as 1815—written mentions of the sport were almost exclusively tales of people falling through the ice and drowning, followed by pleas to mothers not to let their sons onto the ice. Fiction stories used ice skating as an indicator of a boy’s innocence, a man’s slothfulness, and on rare occasions a woman’s “low standing.”

Skating became a more mainstream activity in the mid-19th century. In 1844, Williston & Tyler of Brattleboro was the first store to prominently feature skates in an advertisement, leading their list of available goods with the words, “SKATES! SKATES!” in large print. However, it remained the only store to feature the goods for the next decade. The shift of skating from a child’s activity to one that could be enjoyed by all people was, unsurprisingly, led by women. In 1832, Vermont newspapers reported that a group of Bloomerites, suffragists who fought for women’s rights by challenging gender norms, were spotted skating in Boston.

Stories of women skating in Boston, and advertisements from Boston firms selling Ladies’ Skates began trickling into Vermont, often accompanied by teasing editorial responses. In March 1858, Skating Fever, as it was termed by some newspapers, finally hit Vermont when a group of women in Montpelier formed a beginner ice-skating class. (The editor of the St. Johnsbury Caledonian gleefully offered his thoughts on what that said about the morals of the women in Montpelier.)

By the winters of 1858 and 1859, Vermont was for skaters. Vergennes maintained a rink on Otter Creek, where skating parties and clubs became a regular occurrence. Demand for ice skates was higher than ever, with stores prominently advertising the number of the ladies’ skates they had in stock and marking the appearance of skating-specific clothing. Romanticized historical stories of Vermont began incorporating ice skating into the biographies of the earliest Europeans in Vermont, cementing its place in our collective identity.

There were mixed reactions to this change. Newspaper commentators delighted in the healthy exercise and socializing it brought, often writing about the charm of watching a poised person falter their first time on the ice and how skating brought young and old together. Many of the papers who initially wrote against the idea of women skating quickly changed their point of view as it became clear that it wasn’t just a passing fad. After all, as printed by The Middlebury Register, The Vermont Watchman and State Journal, and The Vermont Patriot and State Gazette, at least the women who were skating weren’t “gorging themselves with literary poison.”

By the winters of 1858 and 1859, Vermont was for skaters.
Valcour: The 1776 Campaign that Saved the Cause of Liberty
By Tim Traver
When one thinks of the Revolutionary War, an image of the actions in Massachusetts, New York, and Virginia often comes to mind, but Vermont played its own, critical role in the fight for the country’s independence. Jack Kelly’s recent history of the Battle of Valcour Island puts the naval engagement in the Northwestern corner of Lake Champlain into the war’s context, arguing that it was one of the most critical fights in the early years of the conflict, demonstrating Vermont’s vital role in holding the line against Britain’s attempts to invade from the North.
Hardcover, 285 pages, 2021, $14.95

When the Irish Invaded Canada: The Incredible True Story of the Civil War Veterans Who Fought for Ireland’s Freedom
By Christopher Kline
In the years following the Civil War, a group of Irish republicans began conducting a series of raids against British Canada in an effort to try and get the country to withdraw from Ireland. In his book, Christopher Kline explores how this movement grew, and the role that Vermont played in this series of conflicts.
Hardcover, 384 pages, 2019, $14.95

A New Century in Waterbury: Stories of Resilience, Growth & Community
By The Waterbury Historical Society
When Tropical Storm Irene washed over Vermont in 2011, it left behind ruined homes, roads, and towns. Waterbury, Vermont particularly felt those pains, and in the years since, has worked to rebuild its downtown through a major revitalization project that has transformed it into a major tourist and dining destination. This new book features dozens of chapters that cover every part of the town’s major institutions: from restaurants to breweries, to solar installers to radio stations to public events to the COVID-19 pandemic. It’s an exhaustive, fascinating overview of the town.
Paperback, 287 pages, 2022, $23.99

Those Turbulent Sons of Freedom: Ethan Allen’s Green Mountain Boys and the American Revolution
By Christopher Wren
It seems that almost every Vermonter knows the name Ethan Allen, but the details of his exploits and life have become something of a mythology here in Vermont. Journalist and historian Christopher Wren takes a look at Allen’s life and work before, during, and after the American Revolution, painting a compelling picture of a complicated figure who was dedicated to carving out a home in the Green Mountains.
Paperback, 301 pages, 2019, $18.00

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