



Story by Paul Carnahan/  
Photos courtesy of the  
Vermont Historical Society

## VERMONT HISTORY

# Advocate for an Improved Vermont

*James P. Taylor, tireless advocate of Vermont tourism and advances in infrastructure and environmental conservation, was eulogized as a “prophet, dreamer, crusader, and champion of clean waters.”*

JAMES P. TAYLOR WAS A FORCE OF NATURE, BOTH literally and figuratively. Most frequently recognized today as the founder of the Long Trail, James had his hand in so many Vermont improvement projects it is a wonder that he

had time for them all. Among the items on his “to do” list were paved roads, a gasoline tax to support those roads, the Green Mountain Parkway, beautiful roadsides, and clean water.

James spent most of his adult life working as the secretary or executive secretary of the Vermont State Chamber of Commerce, a position that today would be called the executive director. In other words, he ran the place. His position was perfectly suited for his temperament; it gave him a platform from which to launch his many ideas for marketing Vermont.

James Taylor was not a native of the state he worked so hard to promote. The son of a college professor, he grew up and was educated in upstate New York. He went to Colgate College and Harvard and Columbia Universities. Education was his chosen field. In 1908, at age 36, he became an instructor at Vermont Academy, a preparatory school in Saxtons River with an emphasis on “life in the open.” While he was there he organized an outing club; he was frustrated by inadequate trails when he took his students on hiking trips. These personal experiences and a 1909 speech by British Ambassador and mountain climber James Bryce on the 300th anniversary of Samuel de Champlain’s arrival in the area motivated James to form the Green Mountain Club. He drew a map of a hiking trail running the length of Vermont and called a meeting of prominent Vermonters that was held on March 11, 1910. The Green Mountain Club (GMC) with a mission to build the Long Trail was born.

Two years later, in 1912, James joined the staff of the Vermont State Chamber of Commerce and spent the rest of his life there. His interest in the GMC, the Long Trail, and the benefits of a rigorous life, however, did not wane. In 1919, for example, he wrote to the state commissioner of education “that a winter’s out of door life is a Vermont asset and a school asset that we have no right to neglect. ... I feel very strongly that Vermont



A bemused-looking James P. Taylor, during his time as a publicist, faces the camera circa 1934. He later came to be regarded by the media as one of the most progressive men in Vermont.



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Roadside "raw slopes" (above) where construction and then erosion had taken place, and was likely to continue, were to Taylor "sins" that spoiled "perfect new roads." An old flyer (below) captures his sentiments on the subject perfectly.

# RAW

MAJOR JAMES C. FITZMAURICE of the BREMEN  
when he was flying over Vermont on his way from  
Quebec to New York must have seen

## THE NINE RAW SLOPES

bordering the diamond-necklace cement road between  
Windsor and Ascutneyville.

For in comparing our geography with the scenery of  
his native Ireland he speaks of ours as

**"So Raw and New," "Not artistic as my country is."**

Now as for old Windsor and Weathersfield the only "RAW" things that are left are those nine raw slopes bordering the perfect highway, the perfect highway the state has given us.

From some of those slopes a mud slush was washed down by the spring rains, so that this slush covered part of the highway. Think of it, a supposedly mud-proof highway covered with mud, because the soil of the slope was not anchored by grass and shrubs and trees to stay where it belonged. Then others of these slopes in the GREEN Mountain State are far from GREEN

## JUST DIRT-COLOR, DEAD-BROWN, UGLY AS SIN

No wonder Fitzmaurice's comment spoken in most friendly fashion was, "You will understand me when I say it is not yet artistic, as is our old country."

NOW, LET'S MEET THIS CHALLENGE FROM THE SKIES  
PLANT GRASS and SHRUBS and TREES  
ON THESE NINE RAW SLOPES

## Protect the Road Protect the Scenery

Yours for the most finished and artistic landscape in the United States,

Herbert Austin  
Charles Tuxbury  
Robert R. Maxham  
Every Man, Woman, Child  
in Windsor and Weathersfield  
Committee Appointed by the  
Windsor Business Men's Association





These snapshots, taken by Taylor in the late 1920s and early '30s, represent some of the things he wished to change (several are listed on this flyer). Among them are the blight of billboards (above, left; along Route 7 near Burlington); unpaved, all-but-impassible muddy roads (above, right; near Bolton on present-day Route 2); roadside clutter (below, in West Bridgewater); and dead trees and "raw slopes" seen near Richmond (bottom).



*Thom Forester Merrill.*  
**AND NOW!!!**

TO VERMONTERS AND VERMONT ORGANIZATIONS:

We hope that you and your Roadside Improvement Committee will busy yourselves about, and get others along the routes in which you are interested to busy themselves about, the following problems on the roadside and on adjoining properties:—

1. Dead trees and dead branches visible from the road, which give the view a funereal aspect. Also wastes and discards. *Should be removed as an aid to better forest fire protection.*
2. Drunken tipsy fence-posts, which, like drunken men, make one forget everything and everybody else.
3. Barren, No Man's Land triangles, where roads meet, which, by planting, can be made spots of neatness and attraction and beauty.
4. Raw slopes whose soil and sand and gravel and rocks spill down or are washed down upon the road surface, because there is no grass or shrubbery or trees to hold them in place. Then, too, the raw slopes are ugly. People do not expect them in the Green Mountain State.
5. Mechanical cadavers. Forsaken or wrecked automobiles by the roadside or within view of the road make it seem as if a murder had been committed and affairs left "as they were."
6. Signs that ought to resign.
7. Gaunt open vacant uninteresting barren stretches of roadside where there are needed trees and shrubs and flowers.

MAKE A SURVEY, WITH PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORDS, IF POSSIBLE, OF THE ROADSIDES THAT CONCERN YOU. THEN BEGIN DOING SOMETHING ABOUT SOME OF THESE PROBLEMS.

Please send us the names of the members of your roadside improvement committee.

VERMONT STATE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE,  
 80 West Street,  
 Rutland, Vermont.

March 21, 1930.

**Roadside Series No. 3**



schoolmasters throughout the state ought to go into this kind of business.”

His love of the outdoors led him to support the Green Mountain Parkway, a motorway that was proposed to run the length of the state not far from his beloved Long Trail. James’s support of the Green Mountain Parkway and the Long Trail seem contradictory today, but to him they seemed complementary. He and other promoters saw the parkway as a way to get more people out into the mountains they so admired. They did not see the roadway as a desecration of the mountains, but as a way to share the benefits of mountain air and views with all. “All this will mean the enrichment of life for every community in Vermont,” James wrote. In September 1934 he wrote in the *Free Press*: “The state-long Green Mountain Parkway will ‘make the mountains play a larger part in the life of the people,’ of all the people.”

However, not everyone saw the advantages of a federally funded highway running the length of the state. A cartoon in the *Rutland Herald*, preserved in James Taylor’s papers at the Vermont Historical Society, shows the Long Trail experience in two panels: “now” and “then.” The “then” image shows three hikers (perhaps the three women end-to-end hikers of 1927 promoted by James as “The Three Musketeers”) hiking in the wilderness. The “now” panel shows a solitary hiker trying to cross a steady stream of traffic in order to continue his trek. James, despite his marketing prowess, was unable to carry the day. Vermonters turned down the Green Mountain Parkway at town meeting day in 1936.

James’s plan to bring tourists to Vermont was not limited to one scenic parkway; he had long wanted to improve Vermont roads of all types. Hard surface roads were a rare commodity in Vermont in the late 1920s, and the state’s reputation for having poor roads was seen as an impediment to expanded tourism and business growth. James and his Chamber of Commerce friends were quick to act on reports of people disparaging Vermont’s improving roads. For example, in August 1927 a Vermont business leader told the chamber that a friend from Indiana was staying at the Hotel Vermont and asked for directions to Montpelier. According to the secondhand report, “The lady in charge was quite surprised to think that there was anyone who did not know that



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*Carolyn Bates* PHOTOGRAPHY



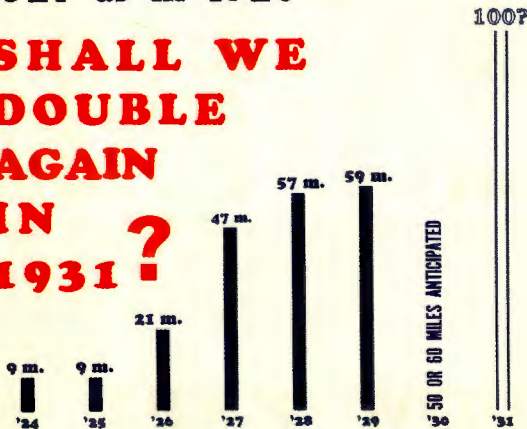
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Twice as many miles of Hard Surfaced Roads constructed in 1926 as in 1925

Twice as many miles of Hard Surfaced Roads constructed in 1927 as in 1926

**SHALL WE  
DOUBLE  
AGAIN  
IN  
1931?**



Note: It is expected that between 50 and 60 miles will be constructed in 1930. Decimals in mileages not shown.

Typical of Taylor's promotional efforts was this publicity piece (above) that pitched highway improvements despite the onset of the Great Depression. The PR piece below (showing Lt. Governor Stanley Wilson wielding an ax) was part of a campaign to remove unsightly dead trees from roadsides.



A Lieutenant-Governor, representing a Governor, wields a Roadside Ax



Why not, then, All of Us



the Vermont roads were in terrible condition and that the state of Vermont was too poor to maintain decent highways. She informed him that the road to Montpelier was perfectly horrible and that the bus driver had just arrived completely exhausted because of road conditions." She then asked the visitor, "What in the world do you want to go to Montpelier for, anyway?"

The devastating floods of November 1927 provided the opening that the paved road proponents needed to bring progress to Vermont. In December 1927, James, on Vermont State Chamber of Commerce letterhead, gleefully told the governors and state highway engineers of the other states that "The most remarkable event in the recent history of High Finance is that a state which seemed consciously dead set against bonding for any reason, save in the case of war emergency, has just voted an \$8,000,000 bond issue for highways and bridges...the bond issue is one phase of the Vermont comeback to the Flood, providing for repairing what was damaged and for replacing what was destroyed."

As executive secretary of the state chamber, working out of an office in St. Albans, James kept careful tabs on highway financing in other states. He sent frequent circulars to other state governments, inquiring about the status of what he called the "Gasoline Tax Movement" in their states. This was a movement, backed by business interests, to raise the gasoline tax in states to finance the improvement of roads. The state chamber advocated for the increase of the gasoline tax from 3 cents to 4 cents in the late 1920s. By 1948, the tax had increased only ½ cent and the state's highway chairman was touting Vermont's good roads and low debt. "Yankee thrift and ingenuity" were credited with Vermont's progress.

James did not stop his efforts at paving roads; he also worked to make sure that roadsides were attractive, too. He organized roadside improvement committees in various towns and, working in concert with the state highway department, organized a Community Roadside Improvement Day in October 1931. Ever the promoter, he arranged for Lt. Governor Stanley Wilson to "strike a blow for Vermont highway beautification" by taking an axe to a dead tree along the Connecticut Valley Turnpike between White River Junction and Ascutneyville and then put out a flyer with Wilson's smiling image. Dead trees were just the first of James's "seven deadly roadside sins." Others included tipsy fence posts, barren triangles where roads met, and junked cars.

His interests didn't end at the roadside. He promoted agriculture and aviation, bridges and banking, sports and signs. Under his leadership the chamber sponsored a contest in 1927-1928 to select a state song and worked tirelessly to improve the appearance and financial content of the annual reports produced by Vermont's cities and towns. James also took a special interest in promoting the state's history. In conjunction with the Public Relations and Education Committee of the Vermont State Chamber of Commerce he developed a concept they called the Mansion of History, a four-story building, to be duplicated at colleges and schools throughout the state, with interactive displays, collections of objects and printed sources, and conference and study rooms.

James's last advocacy effort was for clean water. He and the state chamber took an active role in the abatement of pollution flowing into Vermont's rivers and streams in the 1940s. They



organized business leaders to advance legislation at the statehouse, sponsored sanitary engineers from other states to come to Vermont as guest speakers, and organized annual River Purification Conferences at which towns displayed sketches of their sewage treatment plants. A typical James Taylor touch was to distribute a flyer entitled "River Rhymes" that encouraged "Every Vermonter...to send us his rhymes about his brook, his stream, his river, his lake." Inside were sample poems, including this one:

*Streams are born mid mountain lure.  
They sing their song  
"We're Pure. We're Pure."  
But when they run through cities mean  
They change their song:  
"Unclean! Unclean!"*

James Taylor's life came to an abrupt end in September 1949 when he disappeared from a small rowboat in Lake Champlain. His brother reported that he had been "an excellent boatman and had often rowed about in canoes and other one-man craft." He had set out alone

from the Sandbar Inn on South Hero on Tuesday, September 6, but only his rowboat containing his cane and few cigars returned to shore. His body was found floating in the lake five days later.

At his memorial service, James was called a "prophet, dreamer, crusader, and champion of clean waters." The Springfield (Vermont) *Reporter* called him "one of the most progressive men in the state...in addition to boosting Vermont, he helped the state toward progressive development in many lines." According to the Montpelier *Argus*, "As Gov. Ernest W. Gibson said, 'Jim' Taylor was one of the most colorful figures in Vermont and was ever industrious in crusades for the betterment of the state. He was a most unselfish man, who sought only the advancement of the state and never sought anything for himself." James, the great publicist, according to an uncredited article in a scrapbook about his death, "died a poor man financially" but he had friends in almost every town in the state. ♣

## JUST THE FACTS

The papers of James P. Taylor are at the Leahy Library of the Vermont Historical Society. A description of the collection can be seen online at [vermonthistory.org/documents/findaid/taylor.pdf](http://vermonthistory.org/documents/findaid/taylor.pdf). Photographs taken by James as part of his many crusades can be seen online at [vermonthistory.org/virtual-vhs/photographs/james-p-taylor-photos](http://vermonthistory.org/virtual-vhs/photographs/james-p-taylor-photos).

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Paul Carnahan is the librarian of the Vermont Historical Society.



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