



Vermont's Changing Rural Landscape: Paradise Lost?

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By THOMAS D. VISSER

Farewel happy Fields
Where Joy for ever dwells

—John Milton, 1667

Perhaps the greatest intangible asset of the state of Vermont is its historic rural landscape. In this rapidly changing world many seek the comfortable knowledge that here one may still find places where time seems to pass more slowly and evidence of our heritage dwells longer. For those with a sharp eye and bit of wanderlust, hints that “we are not in Kansas anymore” may first appear on the Vermont landscape as odd anachronisms—things that are chronologically out of place. But with a little persistence, travelers may soon discover winding roads that take them through places where the sense of the past so overwhelms that of the present, that they are drawn to explore Vermont as they would watch a wonderful movie that they hope will never end.

In *The Experience of Place*, his study of how people experience a rapidly changing environment, Tony Hiss observes that “Until recently, when people spoke about a vivid experience of a place, it would usually be a wonderful memory. . . . These days people often tell me that some of their most unforgettable experiences of places are disturbingly painful and have to do with unanticipated loss.”¹ And in describing how people feel when faced with the accelerating pace of destruction of their familiar surroundings, David Lowenthal notes in *The Past Is a*

Foreign Country, “Prevailing disaffection with the present and pessimism about the future fuel nostalgia.”² In his essay on symbolic landscapes, D. W. Meinig also observes that, “Every mature nation has its symbolic landscapes. They are part of the iconography of nationhood, part of a shared set of ideas and memories and feelings which bind people together.”³

But it is more than escapism, nostalgia, and symbolism that attract people to historic places like Vermont. It is also hope. For generations, travelers have come to Vermont hoping for wonderful memories.

In 1949 my recently wed Bostonian parents took their first summer vacation together on a road trip to Vermont. Throughout my early childhood, that “Trip to Vermont” was one of those tales so frequently retold that it became part of our family legend. Although it would be more than fifteen years before I first witnessed the lush landscape of the Green Mountain State, by a very young age I had developed a strong impression of Vermont through my parents’ enthusiastic recollections. As generations pass, however, so do the stories that first shape our impressions of the great world beyond, and with the passing of my father, I inherited a box of Kodachrome slides chronicling my parents’ legendary trip of a half-century ago. Reflecting on the rich tapestry of feelings that this collection of images conveys, these questions come to mind:

What hopes drew these urban newlyweds to Vermont for their first summer vacation?

What places so satisfied their hopes that they recorded them on film?

How has the character of these places changed in the past half century?

Certainly the hope of still finding places like these continue to attract thousands of visitors to Vermont annually. One only needs to leaf through the pages of *Vermont Life* magazine, or to spin a display of scenic Vermont postcards to see wonderful timeless views that reinforce the mythic image of the state. But let us carefully consider what these visitors actually see when they arrive here today. How do these places now make them feel? What impressions and memories are now being shaped?

At the same time that the Vermont myth was being polished to the delight of a generation of post-World War II vacation travelers, so too was our modern culture becoming obsessed with the future and with change. “Construction makes America strong,” the country was told through the Cold War years, and soon millions of dollars of federal funds were invested in the nation’s transportation infrastructure. With

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Photo 1. Stowe, Vermont, circa 1949. Photo by William W. Visser.



Photo 2. Summit of Mount Mansfield, view looking south, circa 1949. Photo by William W. Visser.

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Photo 3. Cambridge, Vermont covered bridge, circa 1949. Photo by William W. Visser.

the start of the interstate highway system in Vermont in 1958, the pace of change of Vermont's landscape accelerated. As the scale of projects increased in size and complexity, and as decision making became more fragmented and farther removed from the places affected, the "form follows function" mantra became a convenient excuse for *ad hoc* design. From exposed wires and transformers to pumps and meters to vent stacks and mechanical boxes, what before had been buried, hidden, or discreetly sited, now so often is left to stand naked in full view. Moreover, due to budget limitations this piecemeal decision making often dismisses or ignores considerations over how these changes make observers feel.

But people resent changes that destroy the character of symbolic places. Much of the joy of being on the summit of Mount Mansfield, for example, is now spoiled by the array of radio, television, and communication towers and their shabby equipment structures scattered across Vermont's highest mountain ridge amidst signs that warn visitors to keep away from the hazards of radiation and high voltages.

Until it was recently demolished, the trim red brick 1930s Colonial Revival style border station in Highgate provided a simple, tasteful greeting to those entering Vermont from Canada. The jarring design of the new United States Immigration and Naturalization Border Station complex, however, is so out of character with what is expected of Ver-

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Photo 4. Summit of Mount Mansfield, 1999, with communications equipment punctuating the view to the south. Photo by Thomas Visser.



Photo 5. United States Immigration and Naturalization Border Station, Highgate, Vermont, 2001. How was it decided that the sewage-handling equipment in the foreground should first greet travelers entering Vermont? Photo by Thomas Visser.

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Photo 6. Welcome to Vermont. Route 2, Alburg, Vermont, 2001. Photo by Thomas Visser.

mont that some Canadian vacationers now opt to enter through New York State. And those who cross into Vermont via the Rouses Point Bridge are met with the image of canopied corporate gas stations anxiously crowding toward the shore of Lake Champlain.

Even Route 2 through the Champlain Islands, long regarded as one of the most beautiful rural landscapes in North America, has been assaulted by the chainsaws of utility companies felling the majestic century-old shade trees that marked the southern entrance to North Hero village and lined some of the few remaining wire-free stretches of the Theodore Roosevelt Highway.

There is some good news, however. Certainly the recent relocation of the power lines below the surface of Lake Champlain between South Hero and Milton is to be applauded, as is a new rule of Act 250, Vermont's statewide land-use review legislation, that calls for new and relocated utility lines to be installed underground wherever feasible.

Vermont's utility companies should be encouraged to follow the leadership of HydroQuebec by voluntarily burying power lines both to strengthen the reliability of their electrical distribution networks and to improve the appearance of villages and rural landscapes.

Some Vermont communities are also recognizing the importance of protecting their nighttime environments from becoming dominated by the harsh pall of yellow high-pressure sodium street lights and security lights, by requiring that outdoor lighting fixtures limit glare and use energy-efficient white light bulbs.

A few Vermont communities have taken the lead in holistic environmental planning. In 1988, the Mad River Valley Planning District developed and published the *Mad River Valley Rural Resource Protection Plan* in collaboration with the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation and the Vermont Land Trust. The plan has served as the foundation for additional planning efforts to protect the distinctive character and feeling of the Mad River Valley that supports much of the local economy.

The Vermont Forum on Sprawl, Preservation Trust Vermont, Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, Vermont Natural Resources Council, Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development, Vermont Agency of Transportation, regional planning commissions, local communities, and other groups are also working together on the issues of sprawl and compatible design through various innovative initiatives to help protect the state's rural landscape.

If we continue to ignore the fragility and vulnerability of Vermont's remarkable vistas and roadways and the impressions they create, then many more favorite places may soon become painful memories. But by systematically documenting these special locations through local and statewide landscape surveys, and by using this knowledge to carefully assess the impacts that proposed changes may have on the character and feeling of these places, we can hope to sharpen our judgments and make wiser decisions about how we care for Vermont.

NOTES

¹ Tony Hiss, *The Experience of Place* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), xiii.

² David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 396.

³ D. W. Meinig, "Symbolic Landscapes," *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 164.