



The Rise and Fall of Vermont City, Dakota Territory

Lured west with promises of fertile, cheap land that only needed their muscle and sweat to make them prosper, the settlers of Vermont City soon found that the environmental limitations of many of their farms guaranteed failure, especially in the arid lands of the Dakota Territory.

By PAUL HELLER

On May 28, 1885, an adventurous party of Vermonters arrived in the town of Ipswich in the Dakota Territory (now in South Dakota) to begin a new life on the Great Plains. The 1,500-mile train journey had taken just four days from St. Albans, with stops in Chicago and Minneapolis. The June 11, 1885, *Rutland Herald* reprinted a report from The *Ipswich (Dakota) Tribune's* afternoon edition:

Attached to the usual morning train this morning were three passenger cars, containing some 76 persons, the advance guard of the Vermont Colony, which quite recently filed on a large tract of land 12 miles southwest of this town in Edmunds County. Being apprised of their arrival, 200 of our citizens, including many of our prominent businessmen, met them at the depot with our cornet band, and gave them a most cordial welcome.¹

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A greeting was delivered by Master of Ceremonies Major Burke, and a response on behalf of the Vermonters was given by Captain L. M. Hutchinson of Worcester, Vermont. "After the speeches, the whole party, escorted by the band, marched to the Prior House where an elegant dinner had been prepared for them."² Ipswich was described by the newly arrived Dr. Thomas Jefferson Holbrook from Morrystown, Vermont, as "53 buildings from the size of a smokehouse to an ordinary cottage, six things called hotels, and as many groceries, restaurants, and offices of land agents or sharks too numerous to mention."³ From there, the Vermonters rode wagons to the town of Roscoe, where they slept at the local hotel. The next morning, with some in wagons and some on foot, the settlers made their way to their new home, a six-mile patch of virgin prairie they called "Vermont City."

Following the Civil War, Horace Greeley had urged America's youth to "Go west, and grow up with the country," and for many Vermonters this seemed to be opportune advice. A steady stream of out-migration characterized Vermont demographics for most of the nineteenth century. In *Freedom and Unity: A History of Vermont*, Michael Sherman, et al. note, "The long period of migration from Vermont and no growth in its total population has long mystified and concerned Vermont historians."⁴ That being said, it is not difficult to speculate on the reasons Vermonters abandoned their homes. In a small farming state, productive land was at a premium, and the lure of inexpensive acreage in the west may have proven irresistible to young men who could not afford to share the family farm with one or more siblings. Also, there was a national restlessness after a war in which farmers were taken from their homes and sent a thousand miles away to fight for a noble proposition. Many of these Union Army veterans had little trepidation about marching into the unknown. Charles Morrissey's *Vermont: A History* elaborates.

Of the 34,000 Vermonters who served Vermont regiments in the Union Army it is estimated that fewer than one-half returned to Vermont as permanent residents after 1865. Many who acted on this opportunity...left towns which had saddled themselves with huge debts because of taxes raised to support the Union cause. Fifty-four percent of all Vermonters were living outside Vermont by 1880; no other state in the nation was losing such a large proportion of its native-born.⁵

In 1883, Benjamin Franklin Bowman, a Civil War veteran and adventurer from Royalton, Vermont, formulated a plan to move west, where government lands were relatively inexpensive and broad expanses of prairie could be turned with a moldboard plow.⁶ Inadequate railroad infrastructure had stymied many Vermont farmers, and the promise of

almost limitless grasslands to the west captured their fancy—especially among those discouraged by the rocky hillsides of the Green Mountains. The *Pioneer*, a newspaper in the town of Hope, north of the Vermont Colony, observed, “they are all thrifty New Englanders, who have become dissatisfied with that section and decided to try their fortunes in the northwest.”⁷

Harvey Bruce from Pomfret was an early and eager member of the westward movement. He observed in a letter to the *Landmark* (White River Junction) in January 1887:

It is wonderful how many Vermonters are in the west. One might think as he traveled here that the people in Vermont could do nothing else than raise men and women to people the west. Hardly a town can be found in the ten great western states in which you can not find a born Vermonter, and nearly all well to do.⁸

B. F. Bowman envisioned a “Vermont Colony of Soldiers and Citizens” somewhere in the west and organized a meeting in his native Royalton on February 14, 1885, to gauge interest in such an endeavor.⁹ Initially, he conceived of a community of Civil War veterans from the Green Mountain state, but there was sufficient interest from non-veterans, so he opened recruitment to them, as well.¹⁰ Capt. Lemuel M. Hutchinson of Worcester chaired the meeting, M. J. Sargent of South Royalton was elected secretary, and an advisory committee comprised of Gen. Stephen Thomas (Montpelier), Capt. Hutchinson, and Lieut. L. D. Leavitt (East Barnard) was appointed. The advisory committee was charged with selecting a location for the colony in concert with Bowman, who was given power-of-attorney to “locate the claims of those who have joined the colony.”¹¹ Another committee was charged to organize schools, a church, and contract for rail passage.



Benjamin Bowman



Lemuel Hutchinson

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On April 6, 1885, the Locating Committee left Vermont for the Dakota Territory. Gen. Thomas's health prevented his participation, but A. P. Folsom from Greensboro and Harvey Bruce joined the group seeking a suitable place for the settlement. According to Bruce's account in *A History of Loyalton, South Dakota* (1983), the railroad corporations vied for the colony and hoped to entice them to settle near their lines.¹² Bruce noted:

They finally settled on the south center township in Edmunds County, which lies a little south of the center of the Territory. Their reasons for this location are as follows: There the corn and wheat belts are, and good crops of either are quite sure. The cyclones, tornados, grasshoppers, and blizzards seldom come. Seeding can be commenced the first of March and can be continued into May and June and after the first plowing is the easiest to work as any on the continent, seldom lumpy or sticky and of great and lasting strength.

The location is a fine rolling prairie with a good chance on nearly every claim for a fine basement to a barn, with stone enough near by to stone it, also enough to underpin houses and stone up wells—a township in which there be no waste land and where there is as good water as can be found in Vermont.¹³

VERMONT CITY.
 To the Public - To Shippers - To Correspondents - To all whom These Presents may Come!

To Wit:-
 There is no place in Dakota by the name of LOYALTON. The Post-office and recorded Townsite is VERMONT CITY. Make a note of it, and don't address letters to Loyalton hereafter. This "Loyalton" business is simply the result of a little mental aberration of the C. M. & St. Paul Ry. mismanagement and they will become sober one of these days, and then you won't hear any more about the "barn-looking" structure at Vermont City, which has the idiotic legend above displayed on it.

Groceries, Hardware, Crockery, &c.
A New Departure at
VERMONT CITY.
 Farmers, Countrymen and Travelers! I have the finest and most complete stock of Groceries, Hardware, Glass and Crockery-ware, ever opened to the public in Edmunds county, and shall sell STRICTLY FOR CASH at lowest prices at which goods bought for cash and paid for, can be sold. Quality, Weight and Measure guaranteed. The trade of the farmers of the surrounding country is respectfully invited.
 Fair dealing will rule the hour.
J. A. BOWMAN, Jr.

The committee returned to Vermont and shortly thereafter more than seventy people boarded a train to make the journey to the "Promised Land."

The *Jamestown Weekly Alert* (Dakota Territory) reported: "The project seems very flattering for a prosperous, thrifty and enterprising settlement. Nearly all are in middle-age of life, and are a sturdy, enterprising, capable class of men. Suffice it to say, they are Vermonters."¹⁴

Upon arrival, the Vermont Colony lived in tents, but the settlers immediately began

"Vermont City" broadside, *History of Loyalton, South Dakota (Loyalton, SD: Loyalton Patrons, 1983), p. 12.*

building houses. The settlers named their community for their Green Mountain home, calling it “Vermont City.” The railroad, ever mindful of the power of marketing, insisted on calling it Loyalton. In July 1885 a Barnard man returned home with a favorable report printed in the *Burlington Free Press*: “Good crops have been planted and they are looking full as well as the crops in this state. They went to work with a will, in preparing for themselves suitable homes. Some ten or twelve houses have been put up on different claims. Near the center of the town are two stores, one hotel, one livery stable, two offices and one dwelling house.”¹⁵

Resident Stella Stevenson described the first houses in the Vermont Colony as being fabricated from stone, boards, and sod: “there was no timber in the area so the buildings had to be made of material at hand—sod or rough lumber.” For a sod house, she notes, the sod for the walls was about two feet thick. “The first floors were the native sod. Some added board floors later. The roof was made of rough boards and covered with blocks of sod.”¹⁶

To Vermonters accustomed to the tidy Cape Cod-style farmhouses of the Green Mountains, the homes made of earth seemed unbearably primitive. An anonymous pioneer observed in a letter to the Montpelier *Watchman*, “dugouts are not so numerous as one might suppose. They furnish the best protection from the cold and wind, but are an of-



Vermont City (and later, Loyalton) Town Hall. This house, said to be the town hall of Vermont City, was later moved one mile south and three miles east of Loyalton. History of Loyalton, South Dakota (Loyalton, SD: Loyalton Patrons, 1983), p. 8.

fense to the eye.” He went on to explain how the “wind blows almost constantly in a very aggravating way. Sometimes weights are placed in the bottoms of skirts to prevent their ascending balloon style over the head. Women with big bustles and flowing drapery are anything but graceful when exposed to the fantastic tricks of Dakota winds.”¹⁷

Almost from the first, the Vermonters established a school, according to Stevenson, building a two-story structure for thirty-one children. The upper floor was never finished. On Sunday it served for church services, until a tornado leveled the building. The second year of the settlement a Post Office was established, but the hoped-for railroad line never came closer than one mile from town.¹⁸ Interestingly, the issue of licensure of dram houses was of immediate concern to the colony. The strait-laced Vermonters were shocked by the rough saloons of the west and proscribed alcohol in their settlements. A letter writer known only by the initials C. M. J. noted in the *Vermont Journal* in September 1886, “A temperance society has been organized here to take the place of the cursed saloon which is found so common in many parts of the west. We are to have a temperance meeting every Wednesday evening, and do all we can to keep this man-killer and soul-punisher from entering our borders. Our young men are too precious to be led away by such a curse.”¹⁹

With enthusiasm for the colony still waxing, another contingent of Vermonters joined it in September, with reports of a third party making preparations for the trip in the spring of 1886.

John Adams Bowman, brother of Benjamin Franklin Bowman (both from Royalton), was a famous land speculator, and it was he who held title to the land that became Vermont City, a happenstance that agrieved some of the pioneers who had sacrificed everything to begin life anew on the western plains. T. J. Holbrook of Morrystown felt abused by the process. He wrote a letter about the Vermont Colony land deals to the Montpelier *Argus* published June 24, 1885.

This tract of land has been shunned by the emigrants going west, some passing upon one side and some passing upon the other, waiting for the good Samaritans to come along in the shape of the committee of the Vermont colony.

The tract is very uneven, called rolling, with many gravelly knolls, and the land is thickly strewn with cobblestones from the size of a marble to that of an ordinary Vermont haycock.²⁰

The problem, according to Holbrook (a Lamoille County physician who abandoned his medical practice for this western adventure), was that the stones would damage the plowshare, disabling it until it could

be dismantled and sharpened. He had further complaints about the additional charges levied to pay the administrative costs of the venture.²¹

In rebuttal, Lemuel Hutchinson from Worcester defended the leadership of the colony and alleged that Dr. Holbrook intended “to breed mischief and contention and before we had got out of state he began to ‘kick.’ It was obviously his intention to be the biggest toad in the puddle and not being successful, he became somewhat angry.”²² Capt. Hutchinson ran the only hotel in town and was a strong proponent of the colony, but by 1889 he had returned to central Vermont. He died in Montpelier in 1910.

One might ascribe Holbrook’s complaints to the griping that accompanies many difficult ventures, but it is a fact that the Vermont Colony did not survive for any length of time. A report in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* reveals the problems that the settlers encountered.

Vermont City is a settlement in Edmunds County, made 18 months ago by a colony from Vermont. “It is too hot. It is too cold. The malls are behind the times, prices are exorbitant,” are some of the lamentations heard daily, often to be accounted for from the fact that so many come here simply for purposes of speculation. In July a severe hail storm seriously injured the crops, and the drought which followed rendered sod crops scarcely worth harvesting. Discouragement and gloom took the place of hope. This is a fair sample of the early experiences of new settlements in Dakota.²³

Benjamin Franklin Bowman’s granddaughter also described the difficulties that plagued the venture.

Droughts, prairie fires, blizzards, illnesses and hardships were some of the causes that the city did not succeed. Then when the railroad was a mile away that finished the town. Other possible reasons were that the settlers had not been farmers in Vermont. Many of them were clerks, teachers and professional people. Many of them went back to Vermont, others went to Roscoe, Ipswich and Aberdeen. Many of them went to New England City, North Dakota and started a town there. The people that stayed have descendants here yet.²⁴

Willard W. Cochrane’s *Development of American Agriculture* paints a bleak view of farm life on the Great Plains in the late nineteenth century. “Prairie fires, hail, drought and, worst of all, grasshoppers plagued the pioneer settlers in these areas throughout the 1870s. Widespread drought in the late 1880s caused great hardships on the plains.”²⁵ Furthermore, the agricultural techniques of the New Englanders presumed an abundance of water—a feature noticeably absent in the arid grasslands of the Dakota Territory.



Loyalton [Dakota Territory/South Dakota] Population chart, 1883-1983. History of Loyalton, South Dakota (Loyalton, SD: Loyalton Patrons, 1983), p. 22.

The *Sifter*, a Londonderry, Vermont, newspaper, described the naivete of the settlers which had apparently passed into folklore: “The colonists soon found out that the west they knew about wasn’t quite as gilt-edged as the west they had dreamed about. They hadn’t dreamed of dried grass to bake their beans with. They were dangerously homesick right off. The first one to turn his toes Vermontward exclaimed, ‘I’m going home and, by God, won’t I hug the stumps of Worcester!’”²⁶

The colonists abandoned their homes almost as fast as they had built them. From a high of 125 in 1885, the population dropped to 30 in 1890. It fell even more in the following decade to a low point of 15 in 1900.²⁷ Many from the Vermont colony returned to their

home state, some moved further west to California, and a handful stayed in the Dakotas. And there was no shortage of second-guessers ready to say, “I told you so.” A Montpelier newspaper for June 24, 1885, was among the first:

The *Argus and Patriot* has all along claimed that the scheme of a Vermont colony of soldiers to locate in Dakota was a hare-brained one, and that any one who embarked in it would be sorry, which seems to be proving true. Dr. T. J. Holbrook, Morrisville, who was one of the colony, returned to Vermont evidently thoroughly disgusted. We have received letters of similar import from others who are still with the colony, and where there is so much smoke, there must be some fire.²⁸

The drought-ravaged land was soon all but deserted. An observer noted in the *Pecos Valley Argus* (Carlsbad, New Mexico) in 1890, “the territory is in a bad condition. Everyone who can is moving away. The Vermont Colony is all played out.”²⁹

An anonymous letter to the *Vermont Phoenix* (Brattleboro, VT) in 1887 offered this sad commentary:

A Vermont-bred woman writes, "John has no work now and will fix up things the best he can. I don't know what I can do only to freeze. The house is in such shape it cannot be sodded. John and the boys need every cent he has earned to buy shoes and flannels. I think I have got down pretty low when I have to go out over the prairies and pull weeds and pick up cow manure to burn to save my coal. Our wells are entirely dry and Jimmy brings water half a mile to drink. We have every indication of a severe winter and you know people do freeze to death trusting in Providence.

In another letter she writes:

Our land will be in the market as soon as we have proved up on it, and if there is a fool left in Vermont or any other state we want him to come out here and purchase it. Like all the rest, it won't do to publish the truth. John brought home a lot of circulars published by the Vermont Colony which is coming out soon. It made me so mad when I read them, I could not sleep last night thinking of the victims. It is worse than a dog's life and very few enjoy it.³⁰

The tragedy of Vermont City stands in contrast to the ultimate disposition of other intentional communities involving Vermonters. Fifty years earlier, a group from East Poultney settled Vermontville in Michigan. To be accepted for membership in the colony, "one had to be definitely and thoroughly opposed to the use of liquor in any form."³¹ Under the guidance of Congregational minister Sylvester Cochrane, just over forty settlers made their way west on the Erie Canal and erected the first frame house in their new town in 1837.³² While never regarded as a thriving or prosperous community, Vermontville still exists, and is famous in Michigan for hosting the state's first maple festival. More than a century later, the local newspaper described the festival's origins: "The former Vermonters found the Indians each spring engaged in one of Vermont's most common practices, that of making maple syrup from the sap of the hard maple. The sugar season in 1837 was excellent and the following year found some of the colonists taking maple sugar to Battle Creek for sale."³³ Vermontville's population was 759 at the 2010 census, and the town continues to host Michigan's annual maple festival.

For reasons already put forth, after the Civil War, many Vermonters migrated to the west. One popular destination was the new settlement of Greeley, Colorado, named for the aforementioned editor who urged his countrymen to find their fortunes in the west. This colony was also committed to temperance and considered Horace Greeley to be its guiding spirit. A prospectus for the Union Colony at Greeley asserted:

“The colony is composed of first-class men from all parts of the country... The majority are from New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Massachusetts.”³⁴

From the outset, the proprietors of Greeley had the foresight to institute a robust irrigation system for the town. “Within sixty days of determining the location of the town, an irrigating canal had been constructed, nine miles, at an expense of \$5,000, and about 2,000 acres placed under cultivation.”³⁵ Most accounts of Greeley suggest that the abundance of water was the key to the town’s success. One satisfied transplant wrote a letter to the *Brandon Union* (VT) on April 8, 1877:

Seven weeks in the Centennial State, and seven as pleasant weeks in succession in Vermont I never saw, especially in this season of the year... When I left the Green Mountain State it was covered with an avalanche of the “beautiful” snow and it was odd enough to get, in a few short hours, where not a flake could be seen... I was not sorry for I had seen enough of rough weather and the almost impassible roads. Greeley boasts a population of 2,500. A more quiet and orderly town could not be found.³⁶

A railroad survey guaranteed immediate viability for Greeley, and today its population exceeds 100,000 and its future is, apparently, assured.

While many Vermonters sacrificed everything they had for a chance at a better life in the west, many worked their modest claims beyond what could have been reasonably expected. Lured west with promises of fertile, cheap land that only needed their muscle and sweat to make them prosper, they soon found that the environmental limitations of many of their farms guaranteed failure, especially in the arid lands of the Dakota Territory. Some returned to the Green Mountains and a life of penury or modest success, but many remained in the west and helped build the nation. Even a booster like Harvey Bruce from Pomfret left Vermont City to start a competing community, New England City, about three hundred miles to the northwest. But after a few years Bruce returned to Vermont to live the remainder of his days at the Bruce homestead in South Pomfret.³⁷

One class of adventurer, however, was able to make a handsome return on his investment. Land speculators and real estate agents reaped the bounties that were promised to the settlers. John Adams Bowman, for example, became a millionaire in South America. He owned a ranch in Venezuela that covered 18,000 square miles. He was known as “a millionaire many times over.”³⁸ Bowman’s long and prosperous life stands in stark contrast to those who, for good or ill, risked

all for a life on the plains, some to prosper, and others to return to the familiar hills of home.

NOTES

- ¹ "Vermont Colony," *Rutland Herald*, 11 June 1885.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ T. J. Holbrook, "The Vermont Colony," *Argus and Patriot* (Montpelier, VT), 24 June 1885.
- ⁴ Michael Sherman, Gene Sessions, and P. Jeffrey Potash, *Freedom and Unity: A History of Vermont* (Barre: Vermont Historical Society, 2004), 289.
- ⁵ Charles T. Morrissey, *Vermont: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 123.
- ⁶ Loyalton Patrons [Clyde and Marcella Allbee, et al.], *History of Loyalton, South Dakota, from Its Proposal to Its End* (Loyalton, SD: Loyalton Patrons, 1983), 4.
- ⁷ "Coming Vermonters" *Hope Pioneer* (Hope, ND), 8 May 1885.
- ⁸ "Dakota Notes," *Landmark* (White River Junction, VT), 1 January 1887.
- ⁹ Letterhead, "Vermont Colony," 28 April 1885. Author's collection.
- ¹⁰ *History of Loyalton, South Dakota*, 4.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ "Vermont Colony of Soldiers," *Jamestown Weekly Alert* (Jamestown, ND), 26 February 1885.
- ¹⁵ "Vermont Colony in Dakota," *Burlington Free Press*, 13 July 1885.
- ¹⁶ *History of Loyalton, South Dakota*, 6.
- ¹⁷ "A Vermont Colony in Dakota," *Vermont Watchman and State Journal* [Montpelier], 6 July 1887.
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- ¹⁹ "The Vermont Colony in Dakota," *Vermont Journal* (Windsor, VT), 18 September 1886.
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- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² L. M. Hutchinson, "Dakota Colony; the Other Side," *Argus and Patriot*, 22 July 1885.
- ²³ "Dakota Pioneers," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 7 July 1887.
- ²⁴ *History of Loyalton South Dakota*, 10
- ²⁵ Willard W. Cochrane, *The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 94.
- ²⁶ *Londonderry [VT] Sifter*, 7 August 1890.
- ²⁷ *History of Loyalton, South Dakota*, 22.
- ²⁸ *Argus and Patriot*, 24 June 1885.
- ²⁹ "Drouth-Driver," *Pecos Valley Argus* (Carlsbad, NM), 8 November 1890.
- ³⁰ "Shall We All Go West?" *Vermont Phoenix* (Brattleboro, VT), 10 June 1887.
- ³¹ "History of Vermontville: Eaton County, Michigan." http://www.eaton.migenweb.org/hist_vermontville.htm.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ "Town founded by Vermont Colony in 1837," *Vermontville Echo*, (Vermontville, MI), 22 April 1954.
- ³⁴ James F. Willard, ed., *The Union Colony at Greeley Colorado 1869-1871*. University of Colorado Historical Collections, vol. 1, Colony Series, vol. 1 (Boulder: University of Colorado, 1918), 184.
- ³⁵ "The Greeley Temperance Colony," *St. Albans Messenger*, 16 March 1878.
- ³⁶ "Letter from Colorado," *Brandon [VT] Union*, 20 April 1877.
- ³⁷ "Capt. H. N. Bruce," *St. Albans Messenger*, 5 December 1903.
- ³⁸ "A Millionaire," *Aberdeen Daily News* (Aberdeen, SD), 8 June 1898.