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When Industry Was King in Craftsbury

Farming was, of course, the principal occupation, but significant numbers of small industries and other businesses centered on the immediate needs of the farmer and were often run by people who themselves were part-time farmers.

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The traditional view that Americans have of stable and peaceful life in northern New England in the nineteenth century represents in fact a very brief transitional time between the attainment of economic stability after the War of 1812 and the coming of the railroad five decades later. This half century saw the northern hilltowns attain their highest levels of population and diversity of economic activity. Although there was extensive trade with Montreal and southern New England, this region had to be largely self-sufficient in terms of food and the necessities of daily life. The railroad opened northern Vermont to the world, changing the character of the area forever.

Craftsbury in 1840 provides a good model for understanding the region during this era. There were 1,151 residents living in twelve school districts throughout the township. Farmers had begun to diversify their crops and activities and to specialize in various products. The agricultural census for 1840 indicates this variety:

Farm Animals		Crops (bushels)		Crops	
Horses	333	Wheat	1,730	Hay (tons)	3,171
Cattle	1,718	Barley	1,049	Sugar (lbs.)	35,412
Sheep	3,166	Oats	14,398	Wool (lbs.)	7,980
Swine	658	Rye	167		
		Buckwheat	830		
		Indian corn	1,928		
		Potatoes	47,906		

Cattle and sheep became staples of the town's economy following the War of 1812. Cattle produced meat, milk, and butter for home consumption and cheese and butter for export to Montreal and Boston. Vermont became one of the world's major centers for the production of wool in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, when merino sheep were imported from Spain. Sheep outnumbered humans by a ratio of six to one at the height of the wool trade in 1840 in most of Vermont and by a three-to-one ratio in Craftsbury. Although neither Greensboro nor Craftsbury could match other parts of the state in wool production, even the smaller amount of wool provided local farmers with an important secondary income.

Oats, wheat, barley, corn, and potatoes were the leading crops. Potatoes were the basis of many meals, while corn and wheat were ground for meal and flour. Since Montrealers expressed strong demand for oats, 50 tons were exported there each year. In fact, Montreal was the destination and source of most of Craftsbury's external trade. Besides oats, Craftsbury sent beef, pork, mutton, cheese, grain, pearl ashes, and maple sugar. Most of these goods were transported in winter on huge sleds.

Farming was, of course, the principal occupation, but significant numbers of small industries and other businesses centered on the immediate needs of the farmer and were often run by people who themselves were part-time farmers. Craftsbury's industrial prominence between the 1820s and 1870s was made possible in part by its rugged terrain. Its numerous streams were an easy source of waterpower, as evident today by the ruins of many mills. Sawmills met the lumber needs of area residents;

TABLE 1. Industries in Craftsbury

	1840	1860
Gristmills	2	2
Hulling mill	1	1
Carding machines	2	0
Sawmills	10	5
Fulling mills	2	0
Carriage makers	3	0
Oil mill	1	0
Woolen factory	0	1
Blacksmiths	—*	5
Wheelwrights	—	3
Tannery	—	1

* A dash indicates data are not available.

TABLE 2. Craftsbury Population, 1830-1880

Population	
1830	982
1840	1,151
1850	1,223
1860	1,413
1870	1,330
1880	1,381

gristmills and hulling mills ground grain and processed oatmeal. Carding machinery was important for the production of wool but disappeared by 1860 with the rapid decline of the wool industry in Vermont.

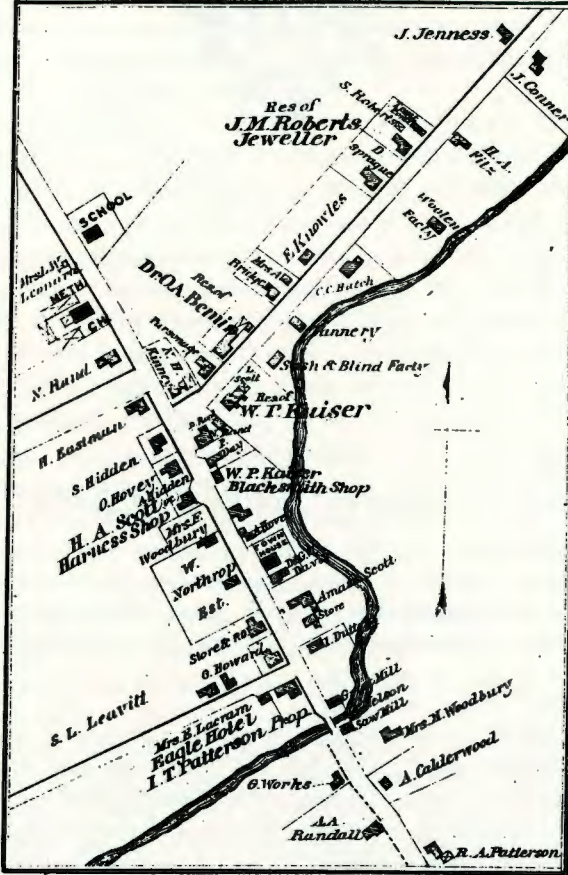
By midcentury the intense farming and industrialization of the area exhausted local resources. The land became less fertile and farm yield began to decline. The Civil War introduced many young Vermonters to better land elsewhere, and the arrival of the railroad gave them an easy avenue of escape. Craftsbury's population peaked in 1860, slipped gradually in the 1860s, held steady in the 1870s, and decreased again after 1880. Although French Canadians took over many farms in Greensboro and Craftsbury in the late nineteenth century, the 1870s saw the start of a slow overall decline in farming, traditional industry, and population that was not reversed until the 1960s with the growth of tourism and other service industries.

The railroads dramatically changed the lives of local residents. The Boston and New York markets brought demand for more specialized production of dairy and meat products and supplied town residents with a wide variety of food, clothing, and other necessities. Large, productive farms thrived, whereas smaller farmers often went out of business (many of the cellar holes still to be found in local woods date from the coming of the railroad). Most local mills shut down when it became cheaper to buy meal or cloth made elsewhere. Lumbering also waned somewhat but remained an important secondary line of work for farmers.

Railroads also made northern Vermont accessible to tourists and vacationers. By the 1880s a traveler could leave Boston early in the morning and arrive in Craftsbury at the end of the day by taking a series of trains to Hardwick or Greensboro Bend and a coach for the final leg of the journey. Boardinghouses and three hotels as well as newer inns in Greensboro catered to the tourist trade.

Tourism helped the local economy, as did increased demand for local dairy products, but the virtual disappearance of local industry and the

CRAFTSBURY
TOWN OF CRAFTSBURY
Scale 20 Rods to the inch.



Map of Craftsbury from Beers's Atlas of the Counties of Lamoille and Orleans, Vermont, 1878. The map records a woolen factory, tannery, sash and blind factory, blacksmith shop, gristmill, and sawmill along the tributary of the Black River.

decline of the small family subsistence farm brought a gradual outward migration of younger people. This trend lasted until the late 1950s and 1960s, when large numbers of residents of New York and Boston began to buy or build homes in the region. One inducement was the low price of land. New inns, a junior college, a major sports center, and a nursing home brought added prosperity to Craftsbury. Like many Vermont towns, Craftsbury now depends on the service sector for its survival.