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Why Are We Still Vermonters? Vermont's Identity Crisis and the Founding of the Vermont Historical Society

*Perhaps the most important impetus
to the Society's founding was a search
for a new identity for Vermont, a
new rationale for its existence.*

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Today few Vermonters, or at least few affluent Vermonters, wonder who they are or why they live in Vermont. They may complain, as Vermonters always have, about winter, mud season, and the state's proximity to Massachusetts. They may also argue about who the real Vermonters are. But they are generally sure of their place in the world and of their reasons for living in Vermont. Indeed, it is hard to find Vermonters with good jobs or retirement incomes who do not believe they reside in the right state; and it is easy to find people outside Vermont, particularly among the nation's elite, who admire it.

In the 1830s and 1840s, however, Vermont did not enjoy such confidence or prestige. Vermonters doubted their accomplishments as a people and feared that their once-vaunted independence was gone. Some worried that rural poverty, domestic violence, emigration, and poor schools had already ruined the state. Others believed that the industrial revolution, the construction of the Erie Canal, and the rise of the national Whig and Democratic parties would soon leave Vermont's fate in the hands of others. As for the world's opinion of Vermont, outsiders

increasingly ignored or bypassed it. It appeared to most observers that the state no longer stood at the cutting edge of progress.¹

The founders of the Vermont Historical Society recognized that Vermont was in trouble. As James Davie Butler, a professor at Norwich University, complained to one of the first gatherings of the Society, Vermont had not kept pace culturally or materially with Great Britain, Massachusetts, New York, New Hampshire, Connecticut, or "even Georgia." Vermont had fallen behind places their forebears had forsaken, rebelled against, or despised. The "deficiencies" of Vermont's history that concerned the Society's first members were thus not exclusively archival or historiographical.² Something had to be done to improve Vermont's performance and restore its prestige and self-esteem.

The founders of the Vermont Historical Society supported a host of measures to address Vermont's practical problems and to reassert its leadership in national and international affairs: educational reform, temperance, spiritual renewal, economic development, scientific agriculture, environmentalism, and the antislavery crusade. But above all the founders supported history, because they realized that Vermont needed a new image and self-image if other initiatives were to succeed. The identity they helped fashion for Vermont endured through the 1950s and remains an important element of Vermont's identity today.

As Weston Cate observes in his eloquent history, *Up and Doing*, the Vermont Historical Society would not have been organized were it not for the unusual interests and personalities of its founders.³ As a young man, Henry Stevens, the Society's first president, seemed unlikely to found anything. He was a precocious reader and diarist, but somewhat wild. He cut his teeth as a businessman keeping a raucous tavern in Barnet that he inherited from his father, a former Tory who fled to Canada during the Revolution. Henry pursued young women with abandon and got as drunk as his customers on patriotic occasions. But with the help and settling influence of his devout wife Candace, whom he married in 1815, Henry accumulated a small fortune and became a pillar of the community. By 1838, the year the Society was founded, he was a prominent landowner and woolen manufacturer, a major benefactor of the Whig Party and the Congregational church, and president of the Caledonia County Temperance Society. He also had enough money to support his hobby, book collecting. Preserving Vermont imprints became his passion. When Stevens learned that every other state in New England had a historical society to assist preservationists like himself, he launched a successful campaign to establish the Vermont Historical and Antiquarian Society.⁴

The Society's first secretary, Daniel Thompson, a Middlebury graduate

who became a lawyer, probate judge, and clerk of the state legislature, was eccentric even by Montpelier standards. Thompson's wife, nineteen years his junior, cared for their children and his needs while Thompson wandered about the town's streets shod in his bedroom slippers, "dretful sloven" in the opinion of one neighbor. He chewed tobacco and chatted up everyone in sight. For all his indifference to appearances and household chores, Thompson cared deeply about people, which is why he was so much loved by his family and friends and why he wrote down his acquaintances' memories of the Revolution and pioneer days. As he put the finishing touches on his third novel, *The Green Mountain Boys*, Thompson was eager to create a society to preserve Vermont folklore and oral traditions.⁵

George Mansur, the Society's third founder, was in the throws of a mid-life crisis. Through his thirties, Mansur showed every sign of pursuing a secular career. A lawyer and Dartmouth graduate, he married the daughter of a prominent Antimasonic politician and served in succession as a town clerk, registrar of probate, Secretary of the Governor and Council, Secretary of Civil and Military Affairs, and state treasurer. By 1838, however, he had already begun to doubt the primacy of politics and to worry that his inherited faith, Congregationalism, had become too sectarian and preoccupied with emotionally convulsive revivals to lead Christians to redemption. Between 1837 and 1840, he became the editor of the *Vermont Temperance Star*, a director of the Montpelier Community Sunday School, an abolitionist, and an incorporator of the Montpelier Female Seminary. He also became an Episcopalian. He studied theology with Bishop John Hopkins and in 1842 gave up politics for the ministry. As a Christian moralist and educator, Mansur was eager to preserve Vermont's more uplifting traditions. Founding a historical society was an important step.⁶

It is thus true, as Weston Cate argues, that the Society would not have been founded in 1838 had it not been for the ability and enthusiasm of Stevens, Thompson, and Mansur. It is also true that the founders' efforts might have failed were it not for the surge of interest in local and regional history that swept New England from the 1820s through the 1880s. As historians of New England observe, the region's historical societies drew support primarily from life-long residents of Yankee stock who felt an acute sense of discontinuity with the past. The migration of old families to the West, the influx of Irish and French immigrants, the loss of old customs, and the rapid pace of economic change made many members of venerable Yankee families eager to sustain what earlier generations had begun and accomplished. History and historical societies provided a means of doing just that.⁷

We must not, however, overlook perhaps the most important impetus

to the Society's founding—a search for a new identity for Vermont, a new rationale for its existence. Unlike other states in New England, Vermont had not been shaped by the colonial experience, but by the revolutionary experience; not by battles against the French and Native Americans, but against the British and Yorkers. Vermont did not represent a triumph of Protestantism over Catholicism, or of “civilization” over “savagery,” but of democratic republicanism over aristocratic and theocratic corruption and tyranny. Vermonters thus took pride in the egalitarianism of their revolutionary frontier society and in the heroic deeds of the Green Mountain Boys.

Samuel Williams's *Natural and Civil History of Vermont* (1794) embodied that pride. Williams, pastor of the Congregational church in Rutland, had few peers as a patriot or evangelical Calvinist. His “Discourse on the Love of Our Country” (1774) had stirred revolutionary feeling throughout New England. The world therefore took note when he pronounced Vermont the apotheosis of democratic civilization: a place where equality, industry, economy, virtue, tolerance, and freedom prevailed; where prosperity had been wrung from a barren wilderness. Vermont's exemplary laws and institutions, as well as its high rates of self-employment, literacy, church membership, voter participation, and patented inventions, supported Williams's claims. So did the fact that the state's prior inhabitants, the Abenaki and the French, had largely disappeared by the time Yankee settlers arrived, leaving the impression that revolutionary New Englanders alone were capable of settling Vermont.⁸ Many outsiders agreed that Vermonters, in the course of taming a wilderness and winning independence from Great Britain and New York, had established the world's preeminent democratic civilization. Williams's history, because it endorsed that view, reigned for four decades as the premiere history of Vermont.⁹

By the late-1830s, however, the Vermont of pioneers, rebel clerics, and Green Mountain Boys was disappearing. Opportunity appeared greater elsewhere. Vermonters received letters from relatives in the Midwest who claimed Vermont's soil was not one-tenth as good as theirs. James Vaughn, a farmer from Pomfret, swore that he would leave Vermont or die. “We will go somewhere else if it is even Hell or Texas. We will not stop where God has never ironed or even took his rolling pin across the mountains to smooth them.” The world praised southern New England's burgeoning cities and factories. Zadock Thompson, Vermont's famous gazetteer, complained that farmers' daughters returned from Lowell and Manchester with a taste for “fine clothing” and “playing the piano” instead of for the simplicity and hard work Vermont had to offer.¹⁰

Vermonters could not find consolation in their egalitarian social order,

for that, too, was eroding. Self-employment declined as population, land prices, and capital costs increased. Class tensions grew sharp in the late-1830s and early 1840s as the nation fell into a depression. Hostility toward politicians, colleges, capitalists, and capitalist institutions was intense. The failure of the Bank of Windsor caused a near riot against the bank's president, Thomas Emerson, once the wealthiest man in Vermont. Cooperative stores sprang up in the countryside as farmers sought goods and credit on more favorable terms than profit-minded storekeepers provided. Members of the Paine family, who owned a woolen mill in the factory village in Northfield, were jeered by rowdies whenever they passed through Center Village, where many resented their wealth and power. Ira Hoffman, a frustrated young farm laborer in Sutton who was destined for a migratory existence, characterized his employer as "meaner than cat piss." Harriet Robinson, the young daughter of a farmer in East Braintree, complained that some of her neighbors felt "big" or "smart" whenever they received "visits from a college educated person." Political insurgents called for new leaders who would create an egalitarian system of higher education and restrict the power and profits of private corporations. Such angry words and deeds had not been heard or seen in Vermont since the days of the Revolution.¹¹

Vermont's tradition of tolerant, reasoned piety was also in jeopardy. The great revivals of the early 1830s left Vermonters the most church-going people in the Protestant world. But revivals soon encountered resistance from those who resented the evangelicals' growing power. In Wilmington, a band of young men threw eggs and stones at the Baptist church and smeared its pastor's carriage with manure. In Woodstock, the voters barred a leading revivalist, Jedediah Burchard, from entering town on the grounds that his prayer meetings were a public nuisance. In Strafford, the town's tithingman, Abel Rich, marred services by answering, when asked by a revivalist whether he had got religion, "Not any to boast of, I tell y-e-e-e."¹²

The revival also spawned enthusiasts whose beliefs shocked orthodox church members. Most important were the Adventists, who believed that the world would end in 1843. Their leader, William Miller, arrived at that date through Biblical exegesis. But he noted that the anger and selfishness of the times had been foretold by the Book of Revelations. Rich men had laid up unprecedented treasures for themselves through banks, corporations, monopolies, and insurance companies, and had ground down the poor. Some of Miller's followers, most of whom came from the families of farmers and rural craftsmen, expressed their opposition to the materialism and inequity of the times by giving away their possessions as the anticipated end grew near.¹³ The rise of enthusiasm and of anti-

evangelicalism clearly imperiled Vermont's reputation for harmony and circumspection.

National and international events also turned against Vermont. The Napoleonic Wars and the failure of representative governments in Europe and Latin America diminished the prestige of democratic revolutions. Vermont's commitment in the early 1830s to the short-lived Antimasonic party left it with little influence in the national Whig or Democratic parties. The nation's foremost politician, Andrew Jackson, stood for causes that even most Vermont Jacksonians could not stomach: slavery, drinking, sabbath-breaking, dueling, and fighting. Most galling, New York and southern New England were in the midst of an economic and literary renaissance that would bring them international renown.

So Vermont no longer stood on the cutting edge of progress. Its traditions and institutions were in decline. Its inhabitants were moving away in droves. Vermonters needed to find a new place in the world and new reasons for staying in Vermont. That is why civic leaders made an effort in the late 1830s and 1840s to define and preserve the essence of Vermont's civilization and to restore its leading role in the nation. Writers like Elizabeth Allen, Lucia Barton, and Charles Eastman, scholars like James Davie Butler, Abby Hemenway, George Perkins Marsh, and Zadock Thompson, and politicians like Carlos Coolidge and William Slade produced sheaves of fiction, poetry, history, and public pronouncements trying to give Vermonters a clear identity and renewed purpose. Henry Stevens, Daniel Thompson, and George Mansur contributed to that effort by organizing the Vermont Historical and Antiquarian Society.

Vermont's leading citizens did not agree who Vermonters were or where they should go. Yet they concurred with the message of Daniel Thompson's historical novel *Green Mountain Boys* (1839) that Vermont's greatest asset had been the character of its people—industrious, decent, courageous, independent, enlightened, compassionate. It was the duty of present-day Vermonters to safeguard that character and fight for the values it represented. Vermonters might never achieve “a high degree of pecuniary prosperity, or political influence,” George Perkins Marsh, Vermont's most famous scientist, wrote in 1843, but they would never cease trying to enlighten the rest of humanity. “In every good and noble undertaking,” proclaimed Marsh, Vermonters would bring “their influence for good” to bear “not only on the rest of the United States, but upon the world.”¹⁴

That was no mean task, because changes in Vermont's social fabric—particularly the decline in self-employment—convinced leading Vermonters that the society would no longer engender that kind of character of its own accord. They no longer lived in the world of the Reverend Samuel Williams, whose inhabitants had been shaped by the revolution

and the frontier. Temperance, education, history, and a reasoned yet passionate form of Christianity would have to instill discipline, compassion, and moral probity in future generations.

These were the causes the founders of the Vermont Historical Society supported. They rejected the emotionalism and sectarianism that marked Vermont's great evangelical revivals of the 1830s in favor of a genteel, sentimental Christianity, nurtured not by hell-fire sermons and born-again experiences, but by the careful cultivation of sensibilities and sensitivities, particularly on the issue of slavery. The founders supported educational reform, including improved training and certification of teachers. They hoped students would gain the economic skills and industrial discipline needed to overcome Vermont's economic crisis. They supported temperance as a panacea to rid Vermont of evils they associated with drink — crime, domestic violence, poverty, indolence. And they supported history as a means of inculcating proper values. Daniel Thompson published *The Green Mountain Boys*, probably the most widely read and admired work on the history of Vermont, not simply to recapture the passion and adventure of Vermont's revolution, but to encourage young people to embrace the values of Vermont's founders.

Temperance was the favorite cause of Henry Stevens. As president of the Caledonia County Temperance Society, he warned a large audience on January 1, 1836 (at a meeting scheduled deliberately to dampen the spirits of New Year's revellers) of the evils of drink, which he believed had harmed the character of Vermonters. He told members of the audience that he could determine their character from the kind of beverages they drank, or from the contents of their pockets or dinner satchels. Any observer could tell from such evidence whether they were "kind" to their neighbors, "neat and economical" in domestic affairs, whether the family had "a barnyard gate or whether the pigs geese & turkeys are in the entry." He could read "your faults, your natural disposition, better than a phrenologist can by feeling the lumps upon your head." Stevens warned citizens that if they had any regard for their reputations or their loved ones they had best stop drinking.¹⁵

Stevens was playing hardball. As the major employer and creditor in his hometown, he warned his neighbors that there were telltale signs of character that men like him could read in a flash. Bad character would show. Stevens hinted that men like himself would use their powers in the cause of morality and industry by favoring those who committed themselves to temperance and by proscribing those who refused to do so. He would use every legal means at his disposal, including no small measure of discrimination, intimidation, and emotional manipulation, to save Vermont.

Daniel Thompson stood foremost among the Society's incorporators

in his devotion to educational reform. Indeed, he served as secretary of the State Education Society in 1846. In his third novel, *Locke Amsden, or the School Teacher* (1847), Thompson assailed rural zealots who were reluctant to embrace modern educational ideas and methods, satirizing them as primitive eccentrics who believed their talented new teacher had come to practice witchcraft on them. It was a measure of Thompson's seriousness that he, too, played hardball. He had never held country people up to ridicule before—indeed, Thompson admired Vermont's farmers and woodsmen. As noted before, he spent hours recording their thoughts and personal experiences for his novels. But he realized most opposition to educational reform came from the countryside and he was desperate to use the schools and historical instruction to save Vermont. He satirized the very people who had made Vermont the most literate and well-read society on earth in the hope that he could shame them into supporting his initiative for moral and economic renewal.¹⁶

George Mansur was preeminent among the founders in his devotion to sentimental Christianity. As rector of the Episcopalian church in Montpelier and later in Bennington, Mansur promulgated the calm, tolerant, compassionate faith that he embraced in his late thirties. Like his mentor, Bishop John Hopkins of the Diocese of Vermont, he believed that Christians could fulfill themselves only by helping others and by being sympathetic to those in need. That capacity flowed not from the crusading zeal that characterized born-again evangelicals or from the detachment and rationality of genteel Christians, but from a sentimental sensibility that responded with thought and feeling to the plight of others. Mansur asked that Vermonters stand on a religious middle ground between Christians who could be cold and unfeeling and Christians who could be frenzied and dogmatic. Only sentimental Christianity could lead to unity and renewal in Vermont.¹⁷

Sentimentalists aimed, of course, at ending spiritual strife between rationalists and evangelicals, which in their opinion had led to irrational beliefs and unseemly conduct among Vermont's Christians. But sentimentalists also proffered their faith as a remedy for class antagonism. As Zadock Thompson, a minister and early member of the Society, warned in his *History of Vermont* (1842), "growing inequalities and distinctions" threatened "the exercise of the social virtues and the friendly feelings" in Vermont. The intensifying struggle for "rank and property" was already "beginning to throw a chill over those gushing feelings of philanthropy, which warmed the hearts, animated the countenances and blended the sympathies of the earlier inhabitants of our land." "Hospitality to strangers" and "benevolence to the suffering and needy" and social peace would endure only if Vermonters experienced a sentimental rebirth.¹⁸

The Society's founders supported all three movements. George Mansur

served as secretary of the Vermont Temperance Society and as editor of its newspaper. Daniel Thompson, though not a teetotaler, was also temperate. In his novels, even villains did not drink—plain meanness motivated them. Mansur and Henry Stevens served on school reform committees and academy boards in the 1840s. And both Stevens and Thompson shared Mansur's latitudinarian, nonevangelical faith. Neither had a conversion experience, even though both attended church regularly; and their writings from the 1840s embraced sentimentalism's mannered, compassionate style.

Given the seriousness of the crisis of the late 1830s and 1840s, it is not surprising that Stevens, Thompson, and Mansur shaded the truth of the historical record so that it better served temperance, education, and sentiment. Stevens did not reveal, as his diary does, that he had been, like most of his contemporaries, a wayward youth, who had "some fine stories" to tell of his amorous exploits with "some Lyman [New Hampshire] ladies" and who had celebrated July 4, 1812, by getting rip-roaring drunk. Stevens and several young friends drank grog all morning, offering seventeen patriotic toasts to their country "in less than an hour," and marched to the town's Liberty Pole to offer seventeen more "in presence of a Large company. Done well." Thompson did not reveal that Ethan Allen and some of his men were truculent, hard-drinking, law-breaking spirits who probably would have gotten on better in the 1830s with Thompson's political nemesis, Andrew Jackson, than with Vermont's leading citizens. Thompson fashioned a new myth of Vermont's history, in which Vermont's founders were people much like the Historical Society's founders—and then asked that their contemporaries grow up in their image. Mansur did not reveal that he had acquired his devotion to God and learning from devout evangelicals, nor that he had been intolerant of "liberal" views well into his maturity. The founders of the Vermont Historical Society had no desire to bring Vermont's rough-and-ready patriots or fundamentalist pioneers back to life. Times were tough. They required sobriety and restraint, not bravado or zeal.¹⁹

In short, the founders of the Society approached their task with a strong sense of purpose. They founded the historical society as part of a broader movement to draw Vermonters together in support of moral values and spiritual principles that they believed defined Vermont's character. Inequality, poverty, party politics, and international economic competition could not defeat Vermonters as long as they remained true Vermonters.

The campaign to preserve Vermont's character dovetailed neatly with practical initiatives designed to revive Vermont's economic and political fortunes. Governors John Mattocks, William Slade, and Carlos Coolidge, whenever they asked entrepreneurs and financiers to invest in Vermont's

flagging economy, extolled the virtues of the state's population — its time-honored industry, inventiveness, and integrity.²⁰ George Perkins Marsh, the famed ecologist, and Charles Adams, the state geologist, spoke rapturously about the Vermont landscape and the ways it had enriched and ennobled the people who inhabited it. They supported scientific agriculture, conservation forestry, game management, and other measures to preserve that landscape, and added, good boosters that they were, that prime sites for quarrying, mining, fishing, farming, and tourist hotels were still available.²¹ The cult of Vermont character served developers and environmentalists alike.

That cult, however, perhaps best served the antislavery movement, which Vermonters supported with unmatched enthusiasm. The movement drew strength from the same source that the Vermont Historical Society did: a desire to preserve Vermont and the values on which it was founded and to renew Vermont's power and prestige. Many feared that class tensions and the decline of self-employment would worsen in Vermont if slaveowners were allowed to buy up prime land and employ slave labor in the federal territories, where many Vermonters hoped to settle their children. Many Vermonters also felt it was time to assert themselves in national politics and to prove that they were still the most democratic people on earth.²²

These initiatives also had the support of the founders of the Vermont Historical Society. Henry Stevens was an avid booster and developer. His speeches on politics and economics revealed a keen grasp of the practical challenges that Vermont faced. Stevens and Daniel Thompson were conservationists, the former as a proponent of scientific agriculture, the latter as a celebrant of Vermont's scenic beauty. George Mansur, Stevens, and Thompson were active in the antislavery movement, especially Thompson, who joined the abolitionist Liberty Party in 1841 and edited its newspaper, *Green Mountain Freeman*, from 1849 to 1856. The founders of the Vermont Historical Society were in the vanguard of boosters and reformers.

Not every campaign went as planned. But the broader movements in which the founders participated were largely successful. By 1850, two-thirds of all voters opposed the retail sale of alcoholic beverages in their towns. An even greater proportion of all Vermonters supported temperance, which made life hard for the state's remaining drinkers, who found it difficult to get credit. Educational reformers had little success convincing rural voters to spend more on education, but the state did for the first time require teacher certification and appoint commissioners to oversee the schools. Revivals and religious controversies cooled as a new ecumenicalism arose among competing Protestant denominations. Evangelicals and nonevangelicals rallied increasingly behind the same

sentimental standard. Class tensions subsided and support for developers rose as the economy emerged from the depression of 1837-43. Environmentalists won few victories, but state-funded studies of Vermont's geology, farms, and fisheries gave conservationists much-needed scientific support. Only a minority of Vermonters favored the immediate and unconditional abolition of slavery. But Vermont was the most antislavery state in the nation. By 1849, all but six percent of its voters favored the exclusion of slavery from federal territories in the West. Vermont was far from homogeneous, but it became more like the Society's founders hoped it would be.²³

The Vermont Historical Society remained weak. But the scholarly efforts of the Society's first members—particularly Daniel Thompson's and Zadock Thompson's—were widely admired, and the historical myths they created—most of which were rooted in fact and careful research—were widely embraced. The identity they fashioned for Vermonters remained at the heart of the state's identity through the 1950s. That identity rested on a calm, compassionate faith that did not impose itself on others; on an uncompromising morality that imposed itself on everyone far and near; on an appreciation of nature and a commitment to preserve, commune with, and profit from it; and on a willingness to accept a lesser standard of living and a smaller place in national politics as the price of preserving a social order that remained more egalitarian than most and of setting a political course that was morally rigorous.

Not every Vermonter was happy, of course, with the society and the identity the founders helped create. John Wolcott Phelps, who later served as a Union general in the Civil War, left Vermont before the troubles of the 1830s and 1840s, at a time when military service was still held in high esteem. He joined the army as an officer and served in the Mexican War, only to discover upon his return that people in his home state despised him for it. His cousin, a judge in West Townshend and a Democratic candidate for the senate, had lost overwhelmingly because he called for an end to sectional bickering and for halting slavery not through non-extension, but through gradual, voluntary, state-compensated emancipation of the slaves. Phelps defended his cousin and spoke mockingly of the people who had repudiated them. "He is not for interfering with the governments of other states and kingdoms; he would not send a man to hell because he was foolish enough to drink liquor; he is not an abolitionist. . . . Why, he had no chance at all; one demagogue would have defeated a dozen of him—in such a moral, holy community as Vermont. Ah coz, we are too spiritually proud in Vermont; too holy—we thank God that we are not as other states are, extortioners, slaveowners; there's the rub." Phelps prayed that Vermonters might "arrive at that other state of mind in which with bowed necks we shall ask God to have mercy on

us, miserable sinners," so that they in turn might "have some mercy on the slave-owner."²⁴

Willard Stevens, the eccentric, embittered brother of Henry Stevens, was even angrier at the course Vermont had taken. By 1838, Willard had lost his property and been deserted by his wife, who tired of his self-pity and his failure to support her. He sued Henry unsuccessfully, claiming erroneously that his brother's wealth and his own reduction to poverty stemmed from Henry's corrupt administration of their father's estate. He showed similar tact in his dealings with his estranged wife, sending her this note: "If you have given your mind up to work wickedness . . . and if you spake the sentiments of your heart when you was last at my house, and do not obey the command of God as has been set before you [i.e. — to live with him until death did them part], your life will be miserable, and your death will be miserable in the depths of eternal woe. Defiance to the laws of God is terrible, and you and your followers and those that you follow after, have already defied the power of the almighty, and are doomed to hell." Willard's wife did not come back.²⁵

In his diary Willard Stevens found a medium through which he could vent his spleen against everything he had come to hate, including Christianity (he detested it, even though he invoked the Bible in his diatribes against his wife), temperance, abolitionism, and the majority of institutions supported by his brother and "respectable" society. "To uphold a whore master and a bastard for a Godhead, is a disgrace to all nations of the Earth. A man that holds to abolition, or to antislavery, cannot be considered any better in his principles than a pirate. . . . There is no man, that is influenced by a woman, that should hold any authority to enact laws for the United States government. . . . Woman, should she have the reign of government alone, the one 20th part of time, that Man the bright ornament of the earth has been raising the human family to the present state of civilization, would reduce them to a complete state of degradation." This sampling of Willard's thought comes from one entry, but such thoughts run throughout his diary.²⁶

Willard Stevens did not leave us his thoughts on the Vermont Historical Society. No doubt he would have objected to its members' interpretation of Vermont's past and to their celebration of Vermont's political and moral distinctiveness. Willard found solace in his allegiance to Andrew Jackson and in his conviction that the nation supported his views, even if Vermonters (especially his relatives) did not. He sent letters of advice to General José Joaquin Herrera of Mexico and Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria. He also sent letters to President Martin Van Buren and former president Andrew Jackson every month. Van Buren never said what he thought of receiving letters from a fellow who thanked him not only for maintaining the separation of church and state and for sup-

porting the Missouri Compromise, but for thinking slavery was a positive good and agreeing that Jesus Christ was "a bastard" and his mother Mary "a whore." The scope of the correspondence suggests at the very least that Willard had a hard time getting anyone in Vermont to listen to him.²⁷

It is not hard to find Henry Stevens's opinion of his younger brother, who came to fulfill the popular picture of a Jacksonian that Henry had drawn years before in a poem entitled "Character of a Democrat."

A Democrat's picture is easy to draw.
 He can't bear to obey, but will govern the law;
 His manners unsocial, his temper unkind,
 He's a rebel in conduct a Tyrant in mind.
 He is envious of those who have riches and power;
 Discontented, malignant implacable sour;
 Never happy himself he would wish to destroy
 The comforts and blessings that others enjoy.²⁸

Needless to say, Henry meant to keep Vermont safe from Democrats for many years.

The anger of John Wolcott Phelps, who distinguished himself in national service, and of Willard Stevens, whose mind and marriage crumbled under the pressure of the times, reminds us that the founders of the Vermont Historical Society faced considerable opposition in their campaign to give Vermont a new identity. Phelps and Willard Stevens were not alienated from the study of history. Indeed, they were fascinated by politics, economics, and public events. But they cared about American history, not Vermont history. Phelps's pride in the nation's accomplishments was direct; Willard Stevens's was vicarious and compensatory. But both looked to the nation and its history for assurance that they and people who shared their values were responsible for progress.

The founders of the Vermont Historical Society found validation closer to home. Phelps and Willard Stevens did not give them the credit they deserved for that. But they knew from personal experience that Vermonters who embraced the founders' new identity could be callous and overbearing toward those who did not. History would soon confirm that Vermonters were willing to go to great lengths to see their new identity prevail, even if it meant civil war.

NOTES

¹ Lewis D. Stilwell, "Emigration from Vermont, 1760-1860," *Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1937); and Randolph A. Roth, *The Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791-1850* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 117-86, 220-64. I would like to thank Cambridge University Press for permission to draw freely on *The Democratic Dilemma* for material for this article.

² James Davie Butler, "Deficiencies in Our History: An Address Delivered Before the Vermont Historical and Antiquarian Society at Montpelier, October 16, 1846" (Montpelier: Eastman and Danforth, 1846).

³ Weston A. Cate, Jr., *Up and Doing: The Vermont Historical Society, 1838-1970* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1988), 5-15, 81-3.

⁴ Cate, *Up and Doing*, 7-15; Edwin Henry Stevens, "The Stevens Family," typescript, Vermont Historical Society (hereafter VHS), 66-7, 80, 100-1; autobiography and diary of Henry Stevens, University of Vermont (hereafter UVM); and Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 47-9, 222-4.

⁵ John Ehret Flitcroft, *The Novelist of Vermont: A Biographical and Critical Study of Daniel Pierce Thompson* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1929), xii, 3-76; Daniel P. Thompson, *History of the Town of Montpelier* (Montpelier: E. P. Walton, 1860), 164-5; and the autobiographical letter of Daniel P. Thompson in Montpelier to his cousin, Josiah Pierce, in Gorham, Maine, 17 June 1835, UVM.

⁶ Charles Folsom-Jones, "George Barney Mansur," typescript (1953), VHS; the memorial letter of Isaac F. Redfield in Boston, Massachusetts, to Thomas H. Canfield, 23 February 1863, VHS; to C. R. Batchelder in Manchester, 28 November 1862, Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont (hereafter EDV); C. R. Batchelder, sketch of the life of George B. Mansur, manuscript (1862), EDV; and C. R. Batchelder, "Sermon on the Death of the Reverend Doctor Mansur," manuscript (1862), EDV. The fourth incorporator of the Vermont Historical Society, Oramel H. Smith, was not as active in the Society or as prominent a public figure as the other incorporators. Smith was an attorney and former state senator from Montpelier. See Cate, *Up and Doing*, 11-12; and Thompson, *History of Montpelier*, 165.

⁷ David D. Hall, "Reassessing the Local History of New England: The Rise and Fall of a Great Tradition," *New England: A Bibliography of Its History*, v. 7, ed. Roger Parks (Hanover: Univ. Press of New England, 1989), xxiv-xxx; and David J. Russo, *Keepers of Our Past: Local Historical Writing in the United States, 1820s-1930s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 9-61. See also Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture from Revolution through Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986); George Colcott, *History in the United States, 1800-1860: Its Practice and Purpose* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1970), 35-45, 109-19, 175-91; and David D. Van Tassel, *Recording America's Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Studies in America, 1607-1884* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960). An exemplary study of regional identity and historical consciousness is Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1990).

⁸ Samuel Williams, *Natural and Civil History of Vermont* (Walpole: Thomas and Carlisle, 1794); and Samuel Williams, "A Discourse on the Love of Our Country . . . December 15, 1774" (Salem: Samuel and Ebenezer Hall, 1774).

⁹ The preeminence of Williams's history stemmed in part from its availability. Ira Allen's *Natural and Political History of the State of Vermont* (London: J. W. Myers, 1798) was not published in America until it was reprinted in the *Collections of the Vermont Historical Society*, v. 1 (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1870), 327-486. Williams's history, on the other hand, was reissued in Burlington in 1802 and 1809 by Samuel Mills.

Other works on Vermont history were popular before the 1840s, including Ethan Allen's oft-printed *Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity* (Philadelphia: Bell, 1779); William Slade, ed., *Vermont State Papers* (Middlebury: J. W. Copeland, 1823); and Zadock P. Thompson, *A Gazetteer of the State of Vermont*. But F. S. Eastman, *A History of Vermont* (Brattleboro: Holbrook and Fessenden, 1828); and Nathan Hoskins, *History of the State of Vermont* (Vergennes: J. Shedd, 1831) never replaced Williams's account as the dominant history of Vermont.

Zadock Thompson's *History of Vermont, Natural, Civil, and Statistical* (Burlington: Chauncey Goodrich, 1842) was the first state history to supercede Williams's in popularity. Thompson, however, admitted in his preface that he "made free use" of Williams's *History*. Thompson was more than willing to "publicly acknowledge that he had often copied its language and facts" and had not been "particular to disfigure his pages with quotation marks" (iv). Thompson offered his own assessments of people and events, but his descriptions were largely derivative.

¹⁰ George Petrie in Griggsville, Illinois, to Eli English in Hartland, 27 November 1836, VHS; Mary Dodge in Little Osage, Missouri, to William Choate in North Montpelier, 10 January 1843, VHS; "A New Englander in the West," *Minnesota History* 15 (1934): 301-8; James Vaughn in Pomfret to Erastus [illegible] in Springfield, Wisconsin, 11 May 1845, VHS; undated entries in James Vaughn's notebook, VHS; Francis Upham in Waitsfield to Gideon Chapin in Janesville, Wisconsin, 21 February 1843, VHS; Zadock Thompson, quoted in Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1979), 55; and Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 117-41, 220-2.

¹¹ Thomas Emerson, *Account of His Trials, Troubles, and Distress Occasioned by the Financial Crash of 1837-8* (n.d.); F. E. Phelps in Windsor to Horace Everett in Washington, D. C., 5 April 1838, Wardner Collection, VHS; Rufus Emerson in Windsor to Horace Everett, 5 April 1838, Wardner Collection, VHS; records of the Farmers' and Mechanics' Mercantile Company of Peacham, VHS; records of the Farmers' and Mechanics' Store Company of West Fairlee, VHS; Allen F. Davis, "The Girl He Left Behind: The Letters of Harriet Hutchinson Salisbury," *Vermont History* 23 (1965): 276; the memoirs of Charles Paine, manuscript, VHS, 62; Ira Hoffman in Sutton to Henry Hoffman in Holliston, New Hampshire, 28 February 1848, VHS; T. D. Seymour Bassett, "Urban Penetration of Rural Vermont, 1840-1880" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard Univ., 1952), 72-4, 197-203, 303; and Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 220-2, 251-4.

¹²Emerson Andrews, *Living Life, or the Autobiography of Emerson Andrews* (Boston: James H. Earle, 1875), 135-6; Russell Streeter, *Mirror of Calvinist Fanaticism, or Jedediah Burckard & Co., during a Protracted Meeting . . . in Woodstock, Vermont*, 1st ed. (Woodstock: Nahum Haskell, 1835); William B. Parker, *Life and Public Services of Justin Smith Morrill* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 14; and Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 207-17.

¹³William Miller, *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ About the Year 1843* (Troy: Elias Gates, 1838), 9, 262-78; David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791-1850* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1939), 250-60; and Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 217-19.

¹⁴Daniel P. Thompson, *The Green Mountain Boys: A Historical Tale of the Early Settlement of Vermont* (Montpelier: E. P. Walton, 1839); George P. Marsh, "Address to the Philomathesian Society of Middlebury College," manuscript, UVM; and David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Versatile Vermonter* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958).

¹⁵Henry Stevens, address to the Caledonia County Temperance Society, 1 January 1836, manuscript, UVM.

¹⁶Daniel P. Thompson, *Locke Amsden, or the Schoolmaster* (Boston: Bazin and Ellsworth, 1847).

¹⁷Folsom-Jones, "George Barney Mansur." See also the following sermons by George B. Mansur, manuscript, EDV, "We Know in Part," 23 July 1853; "Lovest Thou Me More Than These?" 3 June 1857; "None of Us Liveth to Himself," 27 September 1857; and "Enter His Gates with Thanksgiving," 28 November 1861.

¹⁸Zadock Thompson, *History of Vermont*, part II, 212.

¹⁹Autobiography and diary of Henry Stevens, UVM; Folsom-Jones, "George Barney Mansur," VHS; Isaac F. Redfield to Thomas H. Canfield, 23 February 1863, VHS; and Daniel Thompson, *Green Mountain Boys*. My reading of *Green Mountain Boys* centers on Thompson's depictions of Captain Warrington and Lieutenant Selden, the principal rebel leaders. See also Thompson's portrait of Peter Jones, a Green Mountain Boy in the mold of Brother Jonathan. Jones is an awkward, rough-hewn son of the frontier, who cannot bring himself to declare his love for Miss Ruth until the end of the story, because "I didn't know how to get at the bothering business." (Montpelier: E. P. Walton and Sons, 1839) v. II, 276.

Zadock Thompson, *History of Vermont*, offers a more accurate account of the Green Mountain Boys, in part because he draws heavily on Williams's *History*. Zadock Thompson criticizes the Green Mountain Boys, however, insofar as they failed to live up to the ideals embraced by the founders of the Vermont Historical Society. He observes that the Green Mountain Boys "acquired unlimited confidence in their own abilities, and imbibed the loftiest notions of liberty and independence" (212). Vermont's future generations had to recognize the limits of human ability and make the compromises necessary to sustain liberty and independence.

²⁰See the annual gubernatorial addresses of John Mattocks, *Vermont Mercury* (Woodstock), 20 October 1843; of William Slade, *Vermont Journal* (Windsor), 10 October 1845; and of Carlos Coolidge, *Vermont Mercury* (Woodstock), 19 October 1849. See also Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 265-7.

²¹Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh*, 184-94, 246-76; George Perkins Marsh, "Address Delivered before the Agricultural Society of Rutland County, September 30, 1847" (Rutland: Herald, 1847); George Perkins Marsh, "Report on the Artificial Propagation of Fish" (Burlington: Free Press, 1857); George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature: Or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (New York: C. Scribner, 1884); Charles Baker Adams, *Annual Report on the Geology of the State of Vermont* (Burlington: Chauncey Goodrich, 1845), 5-7, 59; and Edward Hitchcock, Edward Hitchcock, Jr., Albert D. Hager, and Charles H. Hitchcock, *Report on the Geology of Vermont: Descriptive, Theoretical, Economical, and Sceneological* (Claremont: Claremont Manufacturing Co., 1861), v. I, 9-15, and v. II, 733-941. Zadock Thompson, who took as great an interest in Vermont's natural history as its human history, surveyed northern Vermont for the state geological survey in 1845 and served as State Geologist from 1853 until his death in 1856.

²²On Vermont's antislavery movement, see Bruce L. Bigelow, "Abolition and Prohibition: For An Historical Geography of Vermont, 1841-1850" (M.A. thesis, Pennsylvania State Univ., 1970); and Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 290-6.

²³See Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 220-98.

²⁴Phelps correspondence, especially John Wolcott Phelps in Fort Brown, Texas, to James Phelps of West Townshend, 11 February 1851, VHS; and John McClaughray, "John Wolcott Phelps: The Civil War General Who Became a Forgotten Presidential Candidate in 1880," *Vermont History* 38 (1970): 263-6.

²⁵Willard Stevens in Barnet to Mary Sheldon Stevens, 25 April 1834, UVM.

²⁶Diary of Willard Stevens, 5 August 1837, UVM.

²⁷Letterbook of Willard Stevens, especially Willard Stevens to President Martin Van Buren, 1837, UVM.

²⁸Henry Stevens, "Character of a Democrat," 7 November 1828, UVM.