

A Tour Through Time

Recreating a tour from a Depression-era guidebook shows how things have changed in our area. And how things have not.

Twenty years ago, I first learned of the American Guide Series, a collection of tour books written during the Great Depression as part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration.

I was living in New York at the time, and I took a copy of the New Jersey Guide that I bought in a used bookstore, crossed the Hudson River, and tried to follow one of the book's many driving tours. How things had changed since the 1930s! Roads described as two-lane and hard-surfaced had become four-lane highways, barely indistinguishable from an interstate. Later, I tried to follow tours in eastern Massachusetts. Again, what I was reading and what I was seeing were hardly the same thing.

Not so in Vermont. For better and worse, things haven't changed much since 1937, the year *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State* was published. Today, it is possible to drive many of the Guide's seven tours and see things that residents of and visitors to Vermont experienced when they picked up a copy of the book eighty-three years ago and went for a ride.

The Guide's second tour runs from the Connecticut River in Springfield to US Route 5 in Irasburg¹, passing through the Woodstock area. In a series of two articles, we'll travel through time and in a car along parts of Vermont Routes 106 and 12 that run through Reading, Woodstock, and Barnard. I'll focus on what hasn't changed and what has since the book was published. I'll use a writing style similar to what was employed in the Guide.

¹ Federal Writers' Project, *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937), p211.

Felchville to Hammondsville

The village of Felchville (mile 0) in Reading, the Guide states, is home to “an usually fine Library here and a commodious but rather bleak-looking Town Hall with an auditorium and stage equipment, both gifts of native sons [Gilbert A. Davis and Wallace F. Robinson, respectively].”²

If you notice in the last paragraph, the Guide referred to Reading Town Hall as “bleak-looking.” Unlike other tour books of the time, and even today, the WPA American Guide Series was not full of chamber of commerce boosterism.³ An event, a person, or a place didn’t need to be historic, sensational, or beautiful to be noted in the Guide. Instead, the books strove to portray the realities of the time. Katherine Kellock, the director of the tours, insisted that the tour section of the Guides relate descriptions “of all towns and all countryside, attractive and unattractive.”⁴

Traveling north on Route 106 at the intersection of Route 44 (mile 1.1) is a stately brick home with the masonic symbol and “1815” painted on the brick below the point of the roof. This second notation gives the building its familiar moniker, “the 1815 house.” This structure, housing a Masonic hall, was once the headquarters of the Budd Hawkins Seed Company, founded by its namesake in 1879. The Guide refers to this company as the “leading business” of Reading.⁵ In 1937, its founder had been dead for two years, and Elmer “Red” Hawkins, Budd’s son, had taken over operations.⁶ Red sold the business to Hart Seed Company in 1952.⁷

Hammondsville (mile 3.0) “is a tiny hamlet stretched along one side of the highway.”⁸ In 1937, the village was home to the Greystone Inn, a house built of “sturdy native stone,”⁸ and a Grange Hall, which the Guide notes “is not architecturally significant because it was built in

² Federal Writers’ Project, *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State*, 212.

³ Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers’ Project* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 75.

⁴ Katharine Kellock, “The WPA Writers: Portraitists of the United States,” *American Scholar* 9 (October 1940), 474.

⁵ Federal Writers’ Project, *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State*, 212.

⁶ Wilmond W. Parker, “Budd Hawkins’ Seeds,” *Vermont Life* (Spring 1951), 54.

⁷ Stephen D’Agostino, “A Growing Business—The Budd D. Hawkins Seed Company,” *Reading Informer*, (August 2017), 10

⁸ Federal Writers’ Project, *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State*, 213.

haste to replace a more elaborate structure, a tavern, that had burned down.”⁸ It is also the first place along Route 106 where the change in the road’s alignment is noticeable. From 1955 to 1957, about four miles of the state highway through Reading were moved, widened, and given a hard surface, but not quite the asphalt we drive today.⁹

The houses, including the Greystone Inn, are set back from the road, but in the 1930s, Route 106 ran by their front doors, crossed Baileys Mills Road, and continued into what is now woods west of the existing route. Standing on Baileys Mills Road and looking south, it is easy to imagine the old roadbed in the flat, treeless expanse in front of the houses. It is also easy to make out a still somewhat open spot to the north of the Greystone Inn. At one time, the Hammondsville Hotel occupied this space. Local lore has it that the building was moved from that spot to Quechee, Vermont, though the exact current location of the building is not known.¹⁰

In the intervening years, the Greystone Inn became the residence of Sherm Howe, who, along with Maude Edwards, launched the Reading Historical Society. In addition, Sherm wrote, printed, and distributed a bi-weekly newsletter called *The Reading Review* from the late 1940s to the early 1960s from his home.

Reading Hill

At mile 3.7, a modified cape-style house sits across from the marsh surrounding Reading Hill Brook. Like the houses in Hammondsville, this dwelling once sat directly on Route 106. Looking across the land, the path of the old highway to the right of the house is obvious. The old road rejoins the new at the driveway to Reading Farms.

⁹ Vermont Agency of Transportation, Reading S23 (3)
<http://vtransmap01.aot.state.vt.us/rp/dpr/DIwebstore/State%5Fand%5FUS%5FRoutes/documenttoc.asp?AID=State%5Fand%5FUS%5FRoutes&PID=51310,001>.

¹⁰ Esther Allen (president, Reading Historical Society) in email conversation with the author, March 11, 2020.

At mile 4.3, the road begins to climb Reading Hill. The Guide refers to the ascent as “one of great beauty, but one in which drivers should exercise more than ordinary caution.”¹¹ Residents of Reading who recall the road before its current alignment note that the grade was uneven and in some places quite steep.¹² The 1950s roadwork evened out the grade to eight percent.¹³

Driving Reading Hill, you can spot the old roadbed in several places. The woodlot opposite Caper Hill Road was once a bend in the road. The old route cut across the existing state highway and ran parallel to it. Their paths rejoin briefly at the highest elevation on Route 106. Here the new road is straight in its descent while the old road zigzagged. The most noticeable relic of the old Route 106 is visible to the right as you drive down the hill, a dramatic 90-degree turn demarcated by a stone wall.

South Woodstock

Green Mountain Horse Association, or GMHA, (mile 8.4) shares part of its history with Upwey Farms, which was run by publisher Owen Moon, Jr., and his wife, Margaret Scott Moon.¹⁴ Though the farm ceased operation in 1947 with the death of Owen Moon, remnants of its existence remain.

The GMHA’s large white “T” shaped barn was commissioned by Moon and completed in 1937¹⁵, the year the Guide was published. Though the Great Depression was in full swing, some were clearly faring better than others. The barn included stalls and an arena on the first floor, and storage for hay on the second. After the Windsor County Fair ceased operations in 1932¹⁶,

¹¹ Federal Writers’ Project, *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State*, 213.

¹² Robert Allen (Reading resident and selectman) in conversation with the author, March 3, 2020

¹³ Vermont Agency of Transportation, Reading S23 (3)

<http://vtransmap01.aot.state.vt.us/rp/dpr/DIwebstore/State%5Fand%5FUS%5FRoutes/documenttoc.asp?AID=State%5Fand%5FUS%5FRoutes&PID=51310,021,022>.

¹⁴ Stephanie Lile, “Upwey Farms: Then and Now,” *The Morgan Horse* (August 1992), 50-51.

¹⁵ Lile, “Upwey Farms: Then and Now,” 57.

¹⁶ “Our History,” Green Mountain Horse Association, <https://www.gmhainc.org/gmha-history>, Accessed March 29, 2020.

GMHA, just six years old at the time, moved their shows to Upwey Farms. In 1956, GMHA moved its headquarters to this location¹⁷.

At the sharp northward bend of the state highway, a barn sits practically on the road, proof that Route 106 has become wider over the years. The apple sorting shed bears a sign in three parts that reads “Upwey Farms” “Suffolk Punch” “Ideal Draft Horses.” Upwey Farms was “the leading agency in the introduction of the Suffolk Punch draft horse,” according to the Guide. The description continues, saying that the hardiness of this breed makes it ideally suited to the hilliness of the state.¹⁸ Others have noted that as farming equipment became heavier, sturdier horses were needed to move it.¹⁹

The barn is unique in its construction. Gambrel-roofed like the horse barn, it is also a different interpretation of a bank barn. Most of these structures are built with their backs against a bank so that carts and horses could enter the top floors. This barn was built beside a bank, its right half lopped off so that it could fit snugly against the hillside.

Immediately after the barn, Route 106 enters the village of South Woodstock. The Guide describes it as a “drowsy village with a Colonial air, a fitting transition between the rustic vigor of Reading, and the urbane reserve of Woodstock itself.”²⁰ Apart from mentioning the Green Mountain Liberal Institute, also known as the Green Mountain Perkins Academy, and the summer residences in the hills, the Guide says little about this hamlet.

South Woodstock Village was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.²¹ The district contains 35 structures, most of which are listed as historically significant.²² Though Federal and Greek are the prominent architectural styles, the stately houses and buildings are

¹⁷ “Our History,” Green Mountain Horse Association

¹⁸ Federal Writers’ Project, *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State*, 213.

¹⁹ Karl Wood, *Made in South Woodstock, Vermont: Tales from the Village That Raised Me* (self pub, 2009), 106.

²⁰ Federal Writers’ Project, *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State*, 213.

²¹ National Register of Historic Places, South Woodstock Village Historic District, National Register #82001713, 1.

²² National Register of Historic Places, South Woodstock Village Historic District, National Register #82001713, 3.

an eclectic mix of design. On the west side of Route 106, for example, the Greek Revival South Chapel is flanked by homes in Cape and Federal styles.

Sitting on the hill overlooking the village, the Green Mountain Perkins Academy mirrors the architectural style of the South Chapel, but in a much less ornate fashion. The school, which operated from 1848 to 1898,²³ was founded by Universalists,²⁴ who also built the South Chapel.²⁵ They wished for an educational experience free from religious orthodoxy. The school drew both boys and girls from around Vermont, New England, and the country.²⁶ Its enrollment dwindled as high school education became more common.²⁷ Today, the Green Mountain Perkins Academy serves as South Woodstock's Historical Society.

The third large white building in the village was a grade school with separate entrances for boys and girls. In recent months, its exterior has been returned to its original design.

The ability to return a building to what it looked like when South Woodstock was a hamlet on a dirt road proves my earlier point that Vermont hasn't changed much. This desire to preserve our history has its costs, but it also has its benefits. Historians and history lovers need not stray far to visit the past. Residents and visitors can see and experience what made Vermont Vermont. Then and now.

The tour goes on

One day, I hope to research, ride, and write about all of the Guide's second tour. In the meantime, the journey continues to Barnard in the fall issue of *Woodstock Magazine*.

²³ Wood, *Made in South Woodstock, Vermont: Tales from the Village That Raised Me*, 94.

²⁴ Grace M. Canfield. *The Valley of the Kedron: The Story of South Parish, Woodstock, Vermont*, (Kedron Associates, 1940), 172.

²⁵ National Register of Historic Places, South Woodstock Village Historic District, National Register #82001713, 21.

²⁶ Canfield. *The Valley of the Kedron: The Story of South Parish, Woodstock, Vermont*, 174.

²⁷ Canfield. *The Valley of the Kedron: The Story of South Parish, Woodstock, Vermont*, 188.