

A Tour Through Time

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

Part 2: Woodstock to Barnard

Unlike Reading and South Woodstock, which this two-part tour traversed in the last issue, Woodstock received an honor of sorts from *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State*.

Because of its contributions to the Vermont story, the guide devoted an entire chapter to the town. Only 14 cities and towns in the state received such an honor.

In this chapter, the guide says, “Woodstock is the village which probably more than any other in Vermont has reverently preserved both the physical setting and the spiritual flavor of an earlier day.”¹

It is true that preservation has played a considerable part in Woodstock's history, both before and after the guide was published. However, innovation has also had a role in shaping Woodstock.

Woodstock Country Club

In the last issue, the drive along Tour 2 ended in South Woodstock. The guide mentions nothing along the miles of Route 106 between that hamlet and the Woodstock Inn Golf Course (mile 0.0). The tour refers to the course as “undoubtedly one of the most beautiful landscaped and most carefully conditioned” in Vermont, though not necessarily sporty.

¹ Federal Writers’ Project, *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937), 151-152.

The original course was the brainchild of golfing enthusiast Dr. H.B. Harrington from Boston. In the 1890s, he created the original links, rugged and challenging to traverse, let alone golf, on Mount Peg.² Over time, the course moved to the flat land along the Kedron Brook.³ Given the ease of navigating the course compared to what it once was, "not sporty" seems to be a positive attribute.

The guide also notes that the abandoned Woodstock Ski Jump is visible from the course.

Jumping was Woodstock's first foray into skiing,⁴ but its popularity waned long before the guide was published. Today, the only evidence of this sport are photographs and stories passed down.

Parks, Farms, and Museums

In the village, the tour turns left onto Vermont Route 12. At mile 1.1, the route passes near "the former site of the Windsor County Fair, which at the time of its discontinuance a few years ago was the oldest county fair in New England."⁵

In 1855, the Marsh family sold the fair the 50-acre plot on which it once stood.⁶ Over time, it and the tracts of land bisected by today's Route 12 in the vicinity of the Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park changed ownership from George Marsh's family, eventually to Frederick Billings,⁷ and finally Laurence Rockefeller through his wife Mary,⁸ Billings's

² "The Woodstock Country Club", 1.

³ "The Woodstock Country Club," 9.

⁴ Crane, Charles Edward, *Winter in Vermont* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 208.

⁵ Federal Writers' Project, *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State*, 214.

⁶ Zephyr, Marianne, "Chronology of Billings Farm", 1.

⁷ Zephyr, "Chronology of Billings Farm", 2.

⁸ Zephyr, "Chronology of Billings Farm", 4-5.

granddaughter. All three men—as well as Billings’s daughters⁹—were conservationists.¹⁰ Their efforts restored and then maintained the arboreal nature of Mount Tom after logging, farming, and fire before and after George Marsh was born in 1801 had denuded it. These men and their families had all lived in the mansion near Mount Tom.

The park began its journey to what it is today in 1967 when Lady Bird Johnson, then First Lady, dedicated the mansion as National Historic Landmark.¹¹ In 1992, Laurence and Mary Rockefeller donated the mansion and the land on Mount Tom to the National Park Service, though they continued to live on the property. That year, the area Marsh Billings National Historical Park was dedicated. In 1998, after Mary's death, Rockefeller gave up his tenancy, and the park was renamed to what we know it as today.¹²

At around the time the guide was published, Mary Montagu Billings French, Mary French’s mother, and her sister Elizabeth were working to save Billings Farm. After the Windsor County Fair closed, the two women purchased the land and incorporated it into the farm’s acreage. The sisters managed the farm through the Great Depression, selling most of its herd of Jersey cows to Upwey Farms (see the last issue).¹³ In the 1940s, they expanded operations and built the

⁹ “The Billings Women” Marsh - Billings - Rockefeller National Historical Park (U.S. National Park Service), <https://www.nps.gov/mabi/learn/historyculture/the-billings-women.htm>, Accessed August 1, 2020.

¹⁰ “George Perkins Marsh” Marsh - Billings - Rockefeller National Historical Park (U.S. National Park Service), <https://www.nps.gov/mabi/learn/historyculture/gpmarsh.htm>, Accessed August 1, 2020.

¹¹ Zephyr, “Chronology of Billings Farm”, 6.

¹² Zephyr, “Chronology of Billings Farm”, 7.

¹³ Zephyr, “Chronology of Billings Farm”, 5.

farm into a successful dairy.¹⁴ In 1983, the farm became the Billings Farm & Museum and was opened to the public.¹⁵

Skiing History is Made

At mile 2.8 along Route 12 is a state historic marker commemorating the site of the first ski tow in America. The mechanized means of making it to the top of a hill was conceived and created in mere weeks after a request made to the White Cupboard Inn owners by skiers who were staying there.

These men from New York, weary from a day in which they spent more time climbing up the hill than skiing down, mentioned that a rope tow existed in Quebec. The innkeepers promised to have such a conveyance ready for their guests when they returned in mid-February.¹⁶ Using eighteen hundred feet of rope, they fashioned a lift that used the engine of their Buick for power. They chose a hill north of town that belonged to farmer Clinton Gilbert to run their invention.¹⁷ Two weeks before the skiers' return, America's first rope tow was functioning.

Various entrepreneurs and farmers looked at the hills around them and saw opportunity. By 1941, there were ten rope tows¹⁸ in Woodstock and several along Route 12¹⁹. One skiing enthusiast opened the Gulley in 1935. The following year, he opened another ski slope on the

¹⁴ Jennison, Peter S, *The History of Woodstock, Vermont*, (The Countryman Press: Woodstock, VT, 1985), 32.

¹⁵ Zephyr, "Chronology of Billings Farm", 6.

¹⁶ Crane, *Winter in Vermont*, 201.

¹⁷ Crane, *Winter in Vermont*, 202.

¹⁸ Crane, *Winter in Vermont*, 203.

¹⁹ Milyn Moore, "The Ski Tow Turns Fifty," *Vermont Life* (Winter 1983), 38.

opposite side of the same ridge. He named it Suicide 6.²⁰

As the tour leaves the area near Billings Farm, the land returns to the pastoral nature seen in Reading and South Woodstock. Large tracts of flat land at the foot of the hills that beckoned skiers are homes to farms or family garden plots. Along the route, iconic examples of gambrel-roofed barns sit in fields and along the roadway.

A Town with a Fantastic Story

At mile 10.6 is Barnard, “a drowsy village located at the outlet of beautiful Silver Lake,” according to the guide. In 1937, perhaps its most famous residents were Sinclair Lewis and his wife.²¹ Lewis left town in 1942 when the couple divorced. He gave her their home, Twin Farms, which is now a high-end inn.²²

As in Woodstock, philanthropy gave the town, the people of Vermont, and visitors a public space. Residents of Woodstock, Barnard, and Boston donated the land that, in 1955, became Silver Lake State Park²³. The park is open seasonally for day use and camping.

The guide notes two bits of colonial history related to Barnard. On the west side of Route 12, at mile 13.3, is a bronze marker. The guide says the plaque commemorates “the Site of Fort Defiance, which was maintained as a garrisoned stronghold during a part of the turbulent period of Barnard’s history.”²⁴

²⁰ Crane, *Winter in Vermont*, 210.

²¹ Federal Writers’ Project, *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State*, 210.

²² Teo Zagar (Producer/Director, Long Shot Productions) in email conversation with the author, July 16, 2020.

²³ Silver Lake State Park, VT. Dept. of Forests, Parks, and Recreation, <https://vtstateparks.com/silver.html>.

²⁴ Federal Writers’ Project, *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain, State* 210.

Though the guide's description is wordy, it does not describe the turbulence. The marker does a better job, stating that Fort Defiance was built after the Indian Raid of 1780 in which three men from Barnard and one from Bethel were taken hostage and carried away to Canada. The fort was started four days after the raid and completed within a month.

The second story of colonial history can only be described as lore. On North Road, 2.4 miles from the Barnard General Store, is Bowman Road. On a highpoint of this road in June 1775, the story goes, the Bowman children were fetching water. They heard booms that disturbed what was as likely a tranquil day then as a June day is now. Later, they learned that far to the south on the day they had heard the booms, June 17, the Battle of Bunker Hill had been fought.

Could the Bowman children have heard the cannons? Though doubtful, I want to believe this little piece of American folklore.

One hundred and sixty-two years after the Battle of Bunker Hill, the writers of *Vermont: A Guide to the Green Mountain State* shared this story, which belongs to the residents of Barnard, Vermonters, and all Americans. During the difficult years of the Great Depression, the Federal Writers' Project relayed such stories in the guides as a means to unite Americans through our shared experiences, our shared stories.

In difficult times, it is essential to appreciate the big acts of caring, the small tasks of living, and even the fantastical things, like moving skiers swiftly up a slope, booming cannons a hundred

miles away, the tenets our founding documents laid out, and our struggles to live up to those ideals. Then and now.