

TWO VERMONTS: GEOGRAPHIES AND IDENTITY, 1865-1910

Paul M. Searls,
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The images and realities of landscapes and places from the past to the present have been topics of interest and study by geographers, historians, landscape architects, and many other versions of academics and scholars for a long time. So too has the conflicts of groups of people for those places, resources, and the hearts and minds of those who lived on and identified with such places. One such place that has experienced such a conflict of image, reality, practicality, and process has been Vermont. This conflict over Vermont's lands, people, and development seems to stem from its very origins as a settlement region and home for European settlers and developers, dating from the eighteenth century through the nineteenth century as Vermont steadily evolved from being a frontier society to a distinctive New England regional icon and homeland.

At the core of Searl's volume are two terms and concepts which he sees as identifying separate peoples, economies, and cultural landscapes. They are "downhill" and "uphill." These two labels not only identified very different groups of people who all too often were in vigorous conflict with each other to control Vermont's politics and everyday economic affairs. They also signified two very different views of the past and future of the state, and the very soul of Vermont.

Although numerous individual characteristics and individuals made up these two sides in an enduring struggle, each group and their respective members had several tendencies and commonalities. The "Uphillers" were primarily small-scale farmers, woodcutters, and common folk who coaxed and sweated a living out of the smallholdings of the hills and vales of the more rural and isolated areas of the state. Rarely commercially successful or financially wealthy, such people saw themselves as the preservers and practitioners of Vermont's traditional and pre-modern ways of life. With their long-standing control over the state legislature, Uphillers were often able to block or hamstring the modernizing tendencies of Downhillers. They were indifferent or hostile to industrialization, the development of railroads, commercial expansion, and the growth of higher education with the merger of a state agricultural college with the University of Vermont. They demanded localized control over their schools, as opposed to consolidation. They opposed, to varied degrees, immigration as a dilution of "True Vermonters," and were indifferent to the expansion and development of tourism and recreation industries in the state in the late nineteenth century. Considered obstructionists by Downhillers and hopelessly anti-modern, they struggled to keep their ways of life and to keep their children home.

Downhillers usually lived in the towns and cities of Vermont, and most often were involved in commerce, artisan professions, and industry. They also were described as “modernists,” and wanted in various ways to develop, using capitalist and vigorous means Vermont’s resources, lands, and people. They also were usually receptive of and welcoming to newcomers from other American regions and foreign lands. They also initiated programs to bring into Vermont immigrants as workers in budding manufacturing, quarrying, and transportation businesses. These included Irish, Swedish, French-Canadians, and others. These efforts to bring to Vermont “New Vermonters” met with indifferent success, as did efforts to keep young Vermonters at home, as opposed to migrating to other parts of the country. Ironically, the Uphillers and Downhillers agreed that the loss of younger Vermonters to emigration was something to resist, yet even here the two sides could never agree on methods to keep Vermonters in Vermont or even why they should do so.

A telling point of difference between the two groups was their conflicting opinions about who was a Vermonter. To non-Vermonters, such a question might seem odd, even irrelevant, but this became a recurrent issue throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. The common Uphiller vision was for one needing to be born in Vermont, and of a long-resident Vermont family. Downhillers were more willing to grant a “Vermont-ness” to people who were perceived leaders, developers, and benefactors of a modernizing and “improving” Vermont. In this often unpleasant and shrill disagreement, some rather important and affluent personalities both added to the development and change of Vermont, but also suffered political and social losses and less than total success. This was never a resolved question, with both immigrants and emigrants experiencing varied levels of acceptance, avoidance, and success that in turn influenced whether or not they remained in Vermont.

Searls has provided a thorough, well-supported and documented, and interesting study of life, culture, and events in nineteenth-century Vermont. This book is well-written, logically organized, and lively. Yet, for geographers the title at least might be a bit misleading. This is not a “geographical” study of nineteenth-century Vermont, but is a geographical history about much of the social and cultural aspects of the state. There are no maps typical of a regional geographic study; in fact, there are no graphics at all. At least a place-location map or two would have given readers who were unfamiliar with the towns and places of Vermont a helping hand, without the necessity of an atlas or road map. Other maps on industries, population patterns and developing transportation systems would have helped the reader to more clearly envision the cogent prose that Searls offers. So too would have some relevant photographs, though cost issues might have decided such. There also was no attempt to measure the numbers, locations, and various impacts of Uphillers and Downhillers, except to roughly assemble each in rural versus town and city settings. But, were such arrangements of these two groupings that totally separate? And, were all Downhillers completely Downhill, and all Uphillers with only one set of characteristics. It is probable that such a measurement is truly impossible, given the nature of these differing groups, and that this question comes mostly from the curiosity of this reader.

What this book accomplishes has many elements. It brings to readers an understanding of an iconic region on the “West Coast of New England” about the travail and angst of the traditional versus the modernizing of American peoples and places during the nineteenth century. One

suspects this conflict has not really ended in Vermont, and elsewhere, in the United States to this day. This study also adds much to an understanding of the special cultural and social development of Vermont. It also can provide a starting point for further studies on the geographical, historical, political, and cultural changes and evolution of Vermont. Although it is not strictly “geography” (as a discipline of study), it is very much a useful and thoughtful springboard for further studies. Plus, it simply is a good read.