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Vision and Division in a Frontier Community:

Virginia Allison Gellman

University of Vermont

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VISION AND DIVISION IN A FRONTIER COMMUNITY: BURLINGTON, VERMONT 1790-1810

A Thesis Presented

by

Virginia Alison Gellman

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts Specializing in History

October, 2007
Accepted by the Faculty of the Graduate College, The University of Vermont, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, specializing in History.

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Date: May 14, 2007
Abstract

In the 1790s and early 1800s, Burlington, Vermont – like towns in Ohio, Missouri, and Kentucky – represented a frontier on the edges of the new republic. Burlington was but one of many destinations for the settlers of the 1780s and 1790s. The town’s population merely kept pace with that of surrounding townships until 1820. Though Burlington became Vermont’s largest community in 1840, its place as the state’s most substantial population center was hardly a foregone conclusion in the early years of the republic.

This study examines how town residents translated Burlington from a forested territory into a town with a central square, vibrant marketplace, comprehensive school system, and established church. It places Burlington within the existing historiography of community of the early American frontier, where settlers borrowed from previous experiences and precedents to formulate a vision for their new town.

Burlington residents projected a vision that their town would become a central hub and city in northern Vermont. At the same time, community members also exhibited a good deal of division and disagreement during these early years of settlement. This echoes the findings of other community historians of early America. While the current study deals with mainstream historical topics (land distribution, the economy, education, and religion), it also looks at some of the less celebrated dynamics of frontier settlement. It deals with land distribution, but it looks at how the land speculation of the early republic created controversy and confusion for local residents. It acknowledges Burlington’s economic growth, but it also considers how the Lake Champlain shipping boom has masked the presence of the poor and homeless people in the community. It tells the story of the state’s first university, but it also probes the depth of community support for that project. Finally, this study confirms that formalized religious practice developed slowly in Burlington, but it also explores how formalized worship further exposed divisions in the community.
Acknowledgements

I extend my thanks to the following individuals and organizations for their experience, knowledge, and insights. Most importantly I thank and appreciate these folks and institutions for their support of local history and community studies.

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Kate Kenny             Thomas Visser
Mary Kenny

Town of Burlington, Land Records Office
Fletcher Free Library, Burlington, Vermont
Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont
Vermont State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Montpelier, Vermont.
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Introduction

In 1790, Burlington, Vermont represented a community on the frontier. Northern Vermont – like Ohio, Missouri, Kentucky and other territories of the transappalachian west – represented a borderland that rested along the edges of the new republic’s most settled areas. Before 1790, settlers had trickled into Burlington slowly. The first settler, Felix Powell, arrived around 1773 at Appletree Point, a peninsula of land on the town’s northern shore of Lake Champlain.¹ It was during these early years of settlement that Burlington and other Vermont towns exhibited a frenzy of land speculation and sales. These included the activities the Allen family and New Hampshire’s Governor Benning Wentworth, both of whom sought to make a profit on the unsurveyed lands of northern Vermont. By 1776, most settlers had cleared out of northern Vermont to avoid the threat of a British invasion from Canada, and it was not until after the Revolutionary War that men and women funneled back into Vermont’s northern frontier. It was also during this time that the native Abenaki had concentrated their populations further north near the mouth of the Missisquoi River.² By the 1790s, the frontier of northern Vermont was ripe for development.

Burlington mirrored other frontier settlements in a number of ways. From 1790 to 1810, the town experienced rapid population growth. The number of residents in the town rose from 300 in 1790 to just over 800 by 1800 (see figure 1). Within ten more years,

Burlington
Population based on U.S. Census, 1790-1810

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1790</th>
<th></th>
<th>1800</th>
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<th>1810</th>
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<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
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<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL POPULATION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Population</td>
<td>311</td>
<td></td>
<td>818</td>
<td></td>
<td>1681</td>
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<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>873</td>
<td>52%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>763</td>
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<tr>
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<td>125</td>
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<td>264</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average members per household</td>
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<td>6.54</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.37</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median members per household</td>
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<td>7.00</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age under age 10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>285</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 10-16 years</td>
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<td></td>
<td>107</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age 16-26 years</td>
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<td></td>
<td>180</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age 26-45 years</td>
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<td></td>
<td>200</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<td>45</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
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<td>MALE POPULATION</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Males under age 10</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>16%</td>
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<td>Males 10-16 years</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<td>Males 16-26 years</td>
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<td>12%</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<td>Males 26-45 years</td>
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<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Males age 45+</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Males under 16 years</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Males 16 years and above</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMALE POPULATION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Females under age 10</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females 10-16 years</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Females 16-26 years</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Females 26-45 years</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>159</td>
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<tr>
<td>Females age 45+</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>54</td>
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*Figure 1: Population of Burlington, Vermont based on U.S. Census 1790-1810.*
population grew to roughly 1680 residents. This growth – an increase of over 500 percent in a twenty-year period – was staggeringly high, and is representative of communities on the western frontierlands such as Ohio, Kentucky, and western Pennsylvania.¹

Burlington also exhibited a high level of population mobility, another harbinger of frontier populations.² Many of Burlington’s early settlers left town before 1800. Of the fifty-six heads of household listed in the 1790 Burlington census, only eighteen names (30 percent) persisted into the 1800 census. Of those same heads of household, only five (10 percent) remained into 1810. While there are many methodological cautions about using the census to assess migration, it seems reasonable to conclude that, for each decade between 1790 and 1810, almost half of Burlington’s population relocated to another place.³ The result was that the town experienced a constant influx and exodus of residents – a mix of what historian Bruce H. Mann has called “neighbors and strangers.”⁴

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² For example, Charlotte Erickson has described migration patterns in western frontier in The Frontier in American Development: Essays in Honor of Paul Wallace Gates, David M. Ellis, ed. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 350-52; in the same volume, Leslie E. Decker added a commentary on the “professional first-comers” of the midwestern frontier (see Ellis, 375-76).

³ For each decade from 1790 to 1820, the persistence rate is roughly 30-35%. Of the 124 heads of household listed on the 1800 census, roughly forty-five (36%) persisted into 1810; and of the 246 heads of household listed in the 1810 census, 86 (35%) appear in Burlington’s 1820 census. These numbers raise plenty of methodological questions. For example, they don’t account for daughters of 1790s families who married, took on a new family name, and remained in Burlington. They also don’t tell whether those original settlers from the 1790s died or left town. They don’t tell whether the original settlers somehow lost their head-of-household status – through poverty, for example. Nevertheless, the rates are high and indicate a mobile population.

⁴ Bruce H. Mann, Neighbors and Strangers: Law and Community in Early Connecticut (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987). This mix of neighbors and strangers carried implications for
The high level of in- and out-migration in Burlington was typical of communities on the frontier.

In this period, Burlington residents came mostly from Connecticut and Massachusetts. The town was but one of many destinations for the settlers of the 1780s and 1790s. They settled in Charlotte, Shelburne, Jericho, Danville, Peacham, Middlebury, St. Albans, and Montpelier. Up until 1810, Burlington’s population merely kept pace with the surrounding towns of Richmond, Milton, Charlotte, and Jericho, and it was not until 1820 that Burlington outpaced these towns in its population. Even then, Burlington battled against Middlebury and Rutland for status as the state’s largest town. Though Burlington would become Vermont’s largest community around 1840, its place as the state’s most substantial population center was hardly a foregone conclusion in the early years of the republic. In the 1790s and early 1800s, Burlington was one of many towns vying for centrality on the northern frontier.

The concept of the ‘frontier community’ is both intriguing and problematic since it conjures up a long list of stereotypes and preconceptions in the public imagination. Historians have probed both concepts – frontier and community – to debate how frontier settlements took shape and whether these communities were as tightly knit as supposed by popular preconception. The most noted historian of the American frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner, suggested in 1893 that the frontier was central to understanding American development. He maintained that the western frontier of the United States

offered “perennial rebirth [and] fluidity of American life” because of its “continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society.”\(^7\) Turner’s thesis sparked both interest and controversy among scholars. Some historians relished the frontier concept and extended its application beyond the American west to fields such as colonial history, agricultural history, the Revolutionary War, and even international history. Other historians were critical of Turner, objecting that he had reduced the course of history to a single, simplistic dynamic. Whatever the case, Turner’s writings about the American periphery fueled an interest in frontier and settlement studies that has continued for over one hundred years.\(^8\)

Among the historians who have continued this interest in the frontier are Richard Wade and Daniel Aaron, both of whom studied town development in the transappalachian west. In his study of nineteenth-century Cincinnati, Aaron challenged the popular conception that frontier communities were self-sufficient rural settlements. He described how Cincinnati’s inhabitants maintained their connections to the cities of the east coast and even endeavored to recreate the cultural institutions – universities, theaters, and literature – for which eastern cities were known.\(^9\) According to Aaron, Cincinnati residents endeavored to rebuild the institutions to which they were


\(^8\) Wilbur R. Jacobs offers a good discussion of how historians have used Turner’s frontier thesis in Wilbur R. Jacobs, *On Turner’s Trail: 100 Years of Writing Western History* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1994). There are many applications of the frontier thesis to international history; for example, see Steven K. Drummond and Lynn H. Nelson, *The Western Frontiers of Imperial Rome* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994).

acustomed, and in the process they shared a mindset that was more urban than rural. In this way, Aaron’s work challenged the traditional concept of the isolated, rural frontier.

Similarly, Richard Wade demonstrated how settlers borrowed from the nation’s cities to develop new communities on the frontier. Chronicling the development of St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Lexington, and Louisville, Wade illustrated that these western enclaves patterned themselves after the country’s eastern cities, transferring cultural institutions, including architecture, schools, libraries, and churches, that were more urban than rural. In addition, Wade illustrated an aggressive rivalry between the new towns of the frontier west. Each town vied for regional centrality, and no single town enjoyed an uninterrupted trajectory of growth. Wade indicated that this rivalry was perhaps one reason that residents looked to the nation’s cities for the ingredients to success and stability: a new town’s ability to build a marketplace or attract the first university was integral to establishing itself as the vital hub to the surrounding hinterland.

Wade and Aaron also challenged the presumed cohesiveness of frontier communities. Both of these historians indicated that the communities of the early west were not simple towns comprised of like-minded citizens. Instead, they described how frontier cities quickly exhibited a class stratification of merchants, professionals, waged and unwaged laborers, propertyless, and African-Americans. Wade asserted that “local boosters talked a great deal about egalitarianism in the West, but urban practice belied this theory.” He illustrated that the merchant elite owned most of the wealth of towns like Lexington and Pittsburgh; he also demonstrated that the elite dominated town

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10 Wade, 105.
government and made spending decisions that benefited their own interests more than public needs. Wade and Aaron were not alone in their conclusion that early American communities were socially and economically diverse. Camilla Townsend (writing on Baltimore), Jacqueline Carr (Boston), and Lisa Tolbert (Tennessee towns) have all described ways in which the opportunities of the early republic were not accessible to all. Exclusion manifested itself in various forms including a growing economic gap, class-consciousness, and increasing social barriers between neighborhoods. One colonial historian has labeled community “an elusive concept” that evokes “images of a simpler time when relations were close and familial, when people mattered more than things, when neighbors truly did love one another as they loved themselves.” These histories add to a growing literature that challenges the idea that early communities were simple, cohesive, homogenous, and harmonious.

This study places Burlington within the historiography of the frontier communities of the early republic. In the years between 1790 and 1810, Burlington mimicked the settlement towns of the transappalachian west, where inhabitants constructed a vision of how their new community would develop into a cultural and


13 Colonial historians have tackled the concept of community with gusto. For a good discussion of the historiography of colonial communities, see Bruce C. Daniels, *The Connecticut Town: Growth and Development 1635-1790* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 173-175.
economic hub. From 1790 to 1810, Burlington was one of many towns vying for centrality on the northern frontier of Vermont. Like towns of the transappalachian west, Burlington residents constructed their vision by borrowing from the towns where they had previously lived. They also duplicated practices of the nation’s largest city centers. In the process, Burlington manifested itself as a community that was less open than one might expect from the stereotypical frontier vignette. As early as the first decade of the 1800s, Burlington showed itself to be a diverse, dynamic community that struggled to establish itself and where opportunity was open to some to limited to others.

Burlington mirrors the frontier studies of Wade and Aaron since residents sought to recreate the cultural institutions to which they were accustomed. These included town architecture, a centralized market square, a university, a comprehensive school system, and a church. In many cases, the residents of Burlington looked to the nation’s large cities for ideas about their own development. For example, the town newspaper reported in 1803 on fires in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, and suggested that Burlington itself should take an example from those cities and begin to build with brick instead of wood. Burlington’s also merchants patterned themselves after the proprietors of larger cities in the ways they sold their goods and developed their market square. Residents vied for a charter for the state’s first university and developed a comprehensive school system that was informed by the latest thinking in educational systems. In the end, early residents of Burlington pursued a distinct vision for their new town. To create this vision, they borrowed examples from the places where they had lived as well as from the nation’s urban centers.
However, Burlington residents also experienced the limitations that accompany growth. Many of these changes – such as an increased government infrastructure and growing socioeconomic exclusion – resulted in a community that was less connected than we might presume of a traditional ‘frontier community.’ Together with the augmented material wealth of the early 1800s, these dynamics contributed to a community where opportunities were not as accessible as Burlington residents might have hoped.

This study describes the vision and division apparent in the frontier community of Burlington. It also seeks to continue the pattern forged by historians since the 1960s, focusing less attention on leaders and ‘founding fathers’ and more attention on non-elite populations. Until recently, many histories of early American communities have viewed their subjects through a celebratory lens of post-revolution or pre-industrialization, fitting town development into a path that traced from the Revolutionary War to the industrial boom. In contrast, this study treats Burlington’s celebrated architects – the Allen brothers, Stephen Pearl, Dr. John Pomeroy, William C. Harrington, and others – as only a piece of the town’s past. This study deals with the New Hampshire land grants, but it looks at how the grants created controversy and confusion. It acknowledges Burlington’s economic growth, but it also considers how the Lake Champlain shipping boom has masked the presence of the poor and homeless people who called Burlington home. It tells the story of the state’s first university, but it also probes the depth of community support for that project. Finally, this study confirms that formalized religious practice

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developed slowly in Burlington, but it also explores how issues around worship exposed rifts in the community.

It bears noting that this study just scratches the surface in fashioning an early history of non-elites in Burlington, Vermont. It sketches a general social history of the town and provides a skeleton onto which scholars can add more detailed historical studies. We can do more, for example, to determine the experiences and contributions of specific non-elite groups, including African Americans, women, youth, and the Abenaki population. The sources for the current study – town histories, the census, and town records – provide limited insight into these populations. To do justice to their histories, a dedicated study with a broader list of resources will be most welcome and appropriate.

The present study examines four topics: land, the economy, education, and the development of Burlington’s religious community. The first chapter, entitled “Land and Logistics,” looks at how Burlington’s early residents approached issues of land distribution, road-building, livestock regulation, and construction activity. It illustrates some of the ways that town residents translated Burlington from forested territory into a town with homes, farms, a marketplace, and roads. The second chapter (“The Marketplace”) layers economy into that development, offering examples of how the community evolved toward a market square with competing merchants and artisans. Chapter three (“Education”) focuses on the development of education options for the town’s children as well as on the struggle to establish a university in Burlington. Finally, the fourth chapter (“A Church”) examines the evolution of Burlington’s first recognized church and its relationship with the community around it.
Throughout, this study looks at the repeated themes of instability, vision, and division, all of which characterized Burlington in this time period. Community building was not a smooth process. Alongside the university and bustling economy were artisans who bickered with each other, apprentices who ran away from their masters, townspeople who neglected their debts, newcomers who were asked to leave town, and community members who sparred over their preferences for a town minister. Burlington’s divisions reinforce the notion that the nascent communities of the early republic were more troubled and split than we might assume from traditional portrayals of the ‘frontier community.’
Chapter 1 - Land and Logistics

One of the ironies of ‘frontier settlement’ is that residents were not settled. The first few years of founding a town offered instability from many directions, including confusion over land ownership, inability to access resources, and unclear legal processes and procedures. During their early years in Burlington, residents contended with the most basic issues in developing an infrastructure to sustain the town. Residents adjusted to the geography around them by altering town borders to make the landscape more workable. They collaborated with the town proprietors – a group of absentee landowners who owned nearly half of the town’s acreage – to resolve questions about land ownership within the township. They erected bridges over ravines and streets to connect key access points around the town. They also built a government infrastructure – town ordinances and personnel – to clarify road use and the rights of livestock owners. Finally, Burlington residents constructed buildings – homes, workshops, taverns, hotels, and a courthouse – to service the large number of new residents that were flowing into the town’s borders. In building up the town’s infrastructure, residents tackled the uncertainty of settling in a new town within a new republic.

One way that Burlington’s residents addressed this instability was to ground themselves in a vision: they brought habits and institutions from towns with which they were already familiar, and attempted to replicate some of these known comforts within Burlington’s borders. In the process, they extended the arms of town government, adding more ordinances and more personnel to ensure orderly living. By the end of the decade Burlington residents had significantly multiplied the number of officers servicing the
community. They increased restrictions on roaming livestock, tax collection, highway maintenance, and school district supervision. By 1811 Burlington residents were no longer satisfied to let town officers act on their own; in that year they required their elected officials to provide the community with a report on their annual accomplishments.

From 1790 to 1810, then, Burlington moved from a town with lax expectations and procedures to a more rigid structure that demanded accountability of its public servants. Residents began by addressing basic issues of town borders and land distribution. They then tackled the physical environment by building streets, bridges, and buildings. By the end of the period, Burlington residents had added more layers to town government. In the process, Burlington residents not only looked to other cities for precedents in how to shape the new town, but also found their freedoms more constricted under the growing infrastructure that they had built.

1.1. Land Boundaries and Ownership

Burlington’s residents spent their first years adjusting to the geography around them. They adjusted town borders to enable travel to important destinations. They also contended with an uncertain state of land ownership, since nearly half of Burlington’s 20,000-plus acres had not been assigned to specific owners as late as 1798. Residents coped with absentee landowners and faced the possibility that a proprietor might eject them from the lands where they lived. As residents worked through these logistics of land use, they confronted the stability of frontier living. In solidifying the details of town
boundaries and land ownership, residents took a first step toward implementing their vision for Burlington as a central nucleus of the northern frontier.

When chartered in 1763, the township of Burlington took a similar shape, on paper, to the other towns created in the New Hampshire grants. New Hampshire governor Benning Wentworth had followed a similar format for each land grant charter and divided towns into six-mile square townships. He required that towns set aside land shares for a missionary society, the Anglican church, schools, and a minister. There were also 500 acres of land reserved for the governor’s own use, which in Burlington sat on the town’s northeast corner near the Onion River. Wentworth’s charters specified that a spot “near the centre of town” should exist for “town lots” and that settlers were required to “improve” their land (that is, clear timber and build structures). Settlers paid a small tax to King George III in either corn or metal coin. Early maps of Vermont show townships intersecting at right angles to each other. They suggest squares in a row, and hint at the New Hampshire grants’ formulaic approach to dividing the land.

16 “A Correct Map of Burlington from Actual Survey Made by Wm. Coit, A.D. 1798, drawn by John Johnson, County Surveyor, State of Vermont, Chittenden County, April 12th, 1810,” MS (Local History Collection, Fletcher Free Library, Burlington, Vermont).
Like most of the grants, the township of Burlington was less formulaic once transcribed into practice. Its original footprint was indeed six miles square. One corner of the town began at the mouth of the Onion River, with a boundary line that continued ten miles along the river and to the east (see figure 2). The border then turned nearly south and continued another ten miles, finally returning westward toward Lake Champlain. In contrast to the regularity of Wentworth’s plans, Burlington’s town lines cut corners,

Figure 2: Burlington, 1810. Adapted from John Johnson’s map of 1810.

18 Hemenway, 488.
added angles, and crinkled borders to accommodate the irregular geographies of the river and the lake.

Like many Vermont’s settlers, Burlington’s residents spent a good deal of time strategizing, organizing, constructing, and petitioning to adjust their town lines to the geographic features around them. One set of adjustments came with Burlington’s border with Williston. In the original grant from Governor Wentworth, Burlington and Williston shared a border that was unworkable due to obstacles in the landscape. In 1791 a group of Williston residents sent a petition to the state in which they asked permission to form a new ecclesiastical society. In justifying the new society, the residents cited the inconvenience of a “large ridge of broken lands nearly throw [sic] the center of said town.” The Williston residents suggested that they should combine forces with the eastern side of Burlington since it would be “very convenient for the Inhabitants of Said towns to meet together in one society.”

By the summer of 1795, a Burlington town committee “conferred with a committee from Williston and the inhabitants who may be most affected” to “describe” a new dividing line between the two towns. The committees proposed that they redraw the town boundary at Muddy Brook. To the present day, this small stream forms the boundary between Burlington and Williston.

As the years passed, issues over Burlington’s boundaries remained: in 1796 three residents investigated whether to “anne[x] part of Colchester and a part of Essex to

19 “Petition to the legislature of Vermont,” (Courtesy of the Vermont State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Montpelier, Vermont), MsVtSP, vol. 18, 232, 4 January 1791.
20 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings, vol. 1 1787-1820, MS (Courtesy of the Local History Collection, Fletcher Free Library, Burlington, Vermont) 16 April 1795; 1 September 1795.
the Town of Burlington.”\textsuperscript{21} Town records offer no reasons for the proposed annexation, but it likely pertained to the Onion River and the frequently used bridges and mills located at the falls in Colchester and Essex. Two years later Burlington’s boundary discussions continued, when resident William Coit surveyed the town’s southern line – another region whose outlines were unclear. Even the issues around the Williston border continued, since in 1804 residents discussed how to “defray the expence [sic] of running the division line between Burlington and Williston.”\textsuperscript{22} It took many years, then, to adjust Burlington’s outer borders to a shape that contented town residents.

The boundary discussions reflect one way that Burlington’s residents attempted to make their daily lives more workable. Each of the new settlers had come from other communities, mostly in Massachusetts and Connecticut, and in those communities they had become accustomed to certain institutions and ways of doing things. In moving to Burlington, settlers made adjustments that would enable them to recreate the habits and institutions to which they had become accustomed. These included adjusting town lines to facilitate travel to a nearby meetinghouse, as well as considering whether they should annex a neighboring town that shared economic interests. In translating the town charter from paper to practice, Burlington residents adjusted the town borders to accommodate their vision of where the town was headed.

In addition to adjusting town borders, residents also contended with the

\textsuperscript{21} Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings, 24 March 1796.  
\textsuperscript{22} Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings, 5 March 1804.
uncertainty of land ownership. While Wentworth had chartered the town to nearly seventy proprietors in 1763, it was well into the 1790s before the grantees selected specific land plots to call their own. In June of 1798, Burlington’s proprietors met at the waterfront house of Gideon King to settle the land distribution issue. They discussed whether an “accurate survey map” of the town existed, as well as how they should “divid[e] the greater part of the lands of said township into severalty.”

The first challenge, they found, was to determine the list of current town proprietors. In 1763, the original grant had assigned Burlington to nearly seventy grantees, but the 1798 meeting hosted only twenty men. In addition, only half of those men (10) were chartered proprietors, while the other half were local residents. This left fifty proprietors missing. The meetings’ minutes suggest that twenty-seven of those men had asked local residents to represent them in Burlington. These town residents were Gideon Ormsby, William Coit, Daniel Hurlburt, Stephen Pearl, William C. Harrington, Nahum Baker, Thaddeus Tuttle, Zacheus Peaslee, and Gideon King himself. They all attended the meeting that day with the ten chartered proprietors. This left roughly thirty more men who neither attended nor had sought representation at the 1798 meeting.

A note in the proprietors’ record book explains the absence of these proprietors. They had deeded their rights to a land speculator and partner in the Onion River Land Company, Ira Allen of Colchester. Not surprisingly, Allen’s holdings became the next

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23 Town of Burlington, Proprietors Records, vol. 1, Town of Burlington, MS (Local History Collection, Fletcher Free Library, Burlington, Vermont) March 1798 and 11 June 1798.  
24 Ira Allen and his brother Ethan have been extensively studied by historians. For a good introduction to Ira Allen and the Onion River Company, see J. Kevin Graffagnino, ‘‘The Country My Soul Delighted In’:
topic of discussion. It was common knowledge that Allen owned a good deal of acreage in northwest Vermont, including in Burlington. However, he had not always kept clear paperwork and he rarely identified the names of grantees in his records. Thus, one of the first items of business at the Burlington meeting was to appoint a three-person committee of Burlington residents to ascertain the extent of Allen’s holdings.

A couple days later the committee confirmed that Allen held the shares of twenty-nine original proprietors. Their shares amounted to just over 9,000 acres (or 40 percent of Burlington’s lands) which were located on 270 lots throughout the town. The June attendees agreed that it was “the sincere wish of the proprietors not to interrupt the settlers” or to “interfere with any settlement made by the said Ira Allen.” The group voted to leave Ira Allen’s lands out of the land draft and then proceeded to divide out all lands that remained outside of Allen’s portfolio.²⁵

The group met eight times over two weeks to complete the land divisions. They used a draft process that was comprised of seven separate rounds (or “divisions”). During each division, Burlington resident William C. Harrington “cut so many square pieces of paper as there were lots” and wrote a number on each. Another local resident drew a lot number from a hat and Harrington “called the name of each proprietor.” Harrington then placed the slip of paper next to the name of the appropriate proprietor. The group selected

²⁵ Town of Burlington, Proprietors Records, 18 June 1798.

two area residents, David Russell and General John Fellows, to draw the lots out of the hat.  

Each of the draft’s divisions dealt with lands of a particular type. The first round distributed lots from the village center, or what the group commonly called the “town-” or “city plot.” These village lots consisted of small, ¼-acre plots, sometimes called “house lots.” The ¼-acre house lots were clustered into 2½-acre “blocks,” and around each block the proprietors “laid” streets (or “highways”). In the end, the proprietors drew out a central village that created –at least on paper – a near-perfect grid of streets and land blocks. The house lots were deeper than they were wide, allowing the proprietors to maximize the number of lots while still providing street frontage to each settler. Ten years later, the lands in the village center would prove to be the most valuable real estate in Burlington.

After drawing the lots in the village center, the proprietors adjourned for the evening and drew the remaining divisions the following day. First they drew divisions two, three, and four, which consisted of large, 103-acre lots located on the outer borders of town. Given their larger area, these lands were likely intended for farming. Next came the fifth and sixth divisions, whose moderately sized, five-acre lots were nestled between the town center and the larger farming lots. The seventh division brought elongated, narrow lots with waterfront access to Lake Champlain.

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26 Town of Burlington, Proprietors Records, 18 June 1798.
27 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings, 21 April 1810.
In the end, each proprietor drew ten lots and roughly 320 acres of land. They received four separate village lots in the first division (one acre total), and one lot in each of the remaining divisions (309 acres of farmland, ten acres outside the town center, and an 1/8 acre along the shoreline). The group closed their June meetings by reviewing the costs of completing the divisions. Local residents had executed a number of tasks at the proprietors’ request, running a survey of the town’s southern line (William Coit, $8), placing advertisements to invite the proprietors to the meeting (Stephen Pearl, $7.50), and performing clerk’s duties and buying paper (William C. Harrington, $34.66). The proprietors agreed to tax themselves seventeen cents per land right to pay these costs and elected Burlington resident Stephen Pearl to collect the funds.

The 1798 meeting was significant for a few reasons. Many historians have commented on the extensive land speculation of this time period, and Vermont’s towns were no exception. Selling lands on the frontier had become a lucrative business for many, resulting in a situation where many towns were owned by people who did not live in them. Frontier townships, then, brought together an interaction between absentee

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28 Town of Burlington, Proprietors Records 26 June 1798. Even the lowest of these debts was enough to buy an acre of land in some parts of Burlington. In 1810, town selectmen valued the outlying town farmlands at $2-14 per acre (in contrast, village lands were much more expensive at $300 per acre). Translated into 2005 dollars, these amounts equal $1,822.61 for William Coit, $1,708.70 for Stephen Pearl, and $7,896.45 for William C. Harrington, and the proprietors’ tax would equate to $38.73 per land right. Dollar values are based on the “unskilled wage” rate (1798 to 2005 dollars) from Measuring Worth, an online resource developed by economists at the University of Illinois at Chicago and Miami University (www.measuringworth.com; accessed March 2006). The estimated conversion for Pearl and Coit may be a bit overinflated, since both of their fees included the costs of goods (advertisements, paper) as well as services.

owners and local residents. The 1798 meetings also underscore the potential instability of the frontier, since proprietors were simultaneously working out land issues while local residents already lived on the land.

Even with the close of the 1798 meeting, the land distribution process in Burlington was not complete. Some town lands remained undivided until a second set of proprietors’ meetings that began two years later in 1800. In May of that year, proprietors asked Burlington resident William Coit to “make an accurate plan” of Burlington and to “ascertain the quantity of undivided lands” in the township.30 Coit found that most of the town’s undivided lands lay a bit north of the sixth division, along the water line and in the vicinity of what is now North Avenue. The area totaled just over 1600 acres, and within a few months the proprietors conducted an eighth land division to distribute that land. By the middle of 1801 all of Burlington “excepting about seventy to one hundred acres of lands” had been distributed amongst the proprietors. Local residents Coit, Pearl, and Harrington again submitted their bills, which included costs for surveying, chain men, markers, paper, and four dollars in “cash for liquor.”31

The process of paying these bills hints at one inconvenient by-product of the proprietor-resident relationship. Attendees of the 1800 meetings decided to “annex” the meeting’s charges to the 1798 tax since the earlier tax was “yet remaining uncollected.” The proprietors told Pearl that, in the case of “nonpayment of said tax,” he should advertise and “proceed to a legal sale of the whole or such a part of the lands in said

30 Town of Burlington, Proprietors Records 19 May 1800; Ibid., 6 October 1800.
31 Ibid., 2 March 1801.
“eighth division” to cover the costs of the missing funds. This interaction suggests that it was not always easy to collect monies from the absentee proprietors.

Perhaps more significant than the delinquency on debts was the situation created between absentee landowners and local residents. All of the people who submitted costs to the proprietors – Coit, Harrington, and Pearl – were local residents, and all the people who owed the taxes lived some distance from Burlington. The fact that Pearl had difficulties collecting the tax meant that local residents were carrying the charges of men who rarely came to town. Of course, these local residents seem to have been among Burlington’s wealthier residents. Still, the inability to collect the taxes – or, for that matter, to make other decisions concerning the land – surely created a frustrating set of circumstances for the people living in town. Delinquency in paying proprietors’ taxes was not unique to Burlington; other Vermont towns also advertised notices to their tax-owing proprietors.32

In addition to the outstanding debts, local residents also contended with the instability of frontier land ownership. Proprietors were still working out details of land ownership in the year 1800, a time when 800 residents had already set up their homes in Burlington. This paints a potentially tenuous picture for some of Burlington’s residents. During both the 1798 and the 1800 proprietors’ meetings, for example, proprietors could

“vote to any settler the land they live on in lieu of their draught.” Some proprietors exercised this right during the eighth division of 1800: proprietor John Wortman, Jr. abstained from the draft in order to give his lands to Burlington resident Elnathan Keyes. Gilbert Weeks did the same for Seeley Bennett, as did three other proprietors. Still, the fact that the proprietors were discussing land distribution at a time when nearly 800 settlers already lived in Burlington underscores the fact that the early republic’s settlers were not always “settled.” At any given proprietors’ meeting, absentee landowners could eject a resident from the lands on which he or she already lived. Burlington residents were not the only settlers living with these uncertain circumstances: meetings where proprietors would “allot & survey the undivided lands in said town” continued as late as 1807 in neighboring Colchester, for example.33

Fortunately for Burlington’s residents, proprietors did not ask settlers to leave the lands upon which they already lived.34 Some evidence even suggests that proprietors willingly granted lands to settlers who had already “improved” their plots. One such example comes from Ira Allen himself. In 1774 Burlington’s own proprietors, meeting in Connecticut, granted 1,500 acres of land to Allen and his relatives in recognition of the work they had accomplished in clearing roads and settling families in town. The proprietors appreciated the Allens’ efforts, labeling them “a great Advantage Towards the

33 Vermont Centinel (Burlington) 11 March 1807.
34 I draw this conclusion from the newspapers, town meeting minutes, and from notes in the Proprietors Records book. Two additional sources that could disclose whether proprietors ejected residents’ from their lands are the town land records (City Hall, Burlington) and the records at the Chittenden Superior Court (175 Main Street, Burlington).
settlement of those lands in general and especially the said township of Burlington.”

Other scholars have noted similar dynamics, where frontier land speculators gifted land plots at little to no cost to a new settler. Often the proprietor retained some lands in the region so that settlers’ improvements increased the value of the proprietors’ remaining holdings. Some proprietors even worked to draw artisans into a new township – for example, millers and blacksmiths – since their services made settlement more attractive.

Despite the beginning of ‘settlement,’ then, residents of Burlington still struggled to establish stability on the land. They were anything but settled. Burlington residents smoothed out questions of appropriate town borders, and they worked with proprietors to address outstanding questions about land ownership. Surely this process led to controversy between residents and proprietors. In some cases local residents footed the bills for proprietors’ activities, and in the most extreme cases proprietors had the ability to eject residents from lands on which they had already started their homes. The unresolved state of land ownership presented an uncertain situation for some Burlington residents as late as the turn of the nineteenth century.

1.2. Infrastructure

Along with working out town borders and land ownership, the 1790s brought plans for laying out streets, building bridges, and developing regulations over livestock and road use. These activities provided a physical and legal infrastructure that helped the ___________________________

35 Town of Burlington, Proprietors Records, 24 March 1774.
town function more smoothly. The first streets connected key access points and business
destinations around the town including the waterfront, Onion River Falls, and the roads
toward the eastern and southern parts of the state. Bridges allowed travel to mills or to
other inland towns. Together, these streets and bridges helped Burlington residents build
a transportation infrastructure that facilitated their vision for an economic hub on the
northern frontier. Residents also regulated livestock, increased the number of town
officers, and developed more town ordinances. They requested that town officers make
annual accounts of their activities. These activities created a more complex government
infrastructure and reflected residents’ desire for more accountability between town
officers and residents. While community members pursued cultural and economic
centrality, then, they also felt the restrictions of increased bureaucracy and infrastructure.

The 1790s and 1800s were decades of significant street building activity.37 For
example, a 1788 entry in the town meeting book described a proposal to survey a road
between the homes of “Captain Collins” and “Captain Boynton,” both of whom lived
near the waterfront. A couple months later a few residents surveyed out a “highway” that
was “3 rods wide” (49.5 feet) and ran from “Onion River to Burlington Bay.”38 Within
two more years the town approved a road from “Shelburne Laine” to the falls at the
Onion River. These roads became common thoroughfares since they connected the
waterfront, the falls, and access to the more populated southern part of the state.39

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37 Carl Bridenbaugh offers a descriptive passage on the process of clearing roads and building bridges; see
Carl Bridenbaugh, Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America 1625-1742 (New
38 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 7 March 1788, 13 May 1788.
39 Ibid., 3 June 1790, 8 June 1790.
Residents cleared land for at least three more roads in Burlington before 1795. By surveying out roads between the waterways and the major routes out of town, residents erected an infrastructure that enabled transportation of goods between harbor and hinterland. This infrastructure bolstered the argument that Burlington could be an economic and cultural center for the county.

At times, the process of laying out roads was contentious. In 1791 and 1793 the town meeting minutes describe two proposed roads, each passing Peter Benedict’s home on the east side of town. Vermont historian Abby Hemenway likely referred to one of these surveys when she notes that the road’s placement “was very zealously opposed” by residents who lived at Burlington’s eastern limits. They objected that, with the placement of the new road, “the travel from Hinesburg would be diverted” away from where they lived. Indeed, when only one major thoroughfare existed in an area, it was both convenient and lucrative to ensure that homes and businesses had access to the main road. Perhaps this is why settlers like Elias Buel of Huntington made sure to mention that his “tract of excellent land” was “situate[d] on a public road” when he put the land up for sale. In the case of the road past Peter Benedict’s house, historian Hemenway has suggested that the controversy concerned access of a different sort. Settlers had a “very vehement desire” to pass by “the forenamed tavern of Mr. Benedict, of which privilege they would have been deprived had the road run south of its present location.” Upon completion of the highway, Burlington selectman Daniel Hurlburt – who happened to

40 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 12 May 1791, 23 August 1793.
41 Vermont Centinel 11 May 1810.
42 Hemenway, 494.
live at the road’s western terminus – “immediately ordered a large quantity of that precious, refreshing and invigorating beverage commonly called Old Jamaica, to be distributed among the crowd.”\textsuperscript{43} Whether for visiting a tavern or access to the falls, the placement of roads could stir sharp emotions during these years of town building.

Road construction continued through the rest of the 1790s. In 1793 the town appointed “several surveyors” from “each district” to “view said roads and bridges in said town,” and in 1795 the town reallocated the funds away from “Building and repairing Bridges” and toward “the roads.”\textsuperscript{44} Street layout even crept into the 1798 proprietors’ meeting at Gideon King’s house. The proprietors not only divided the town plot into a regular grid of streets, but they also stipulated that, for every one hundred acres of land in the large farming lots, landowners had to reserve three acres of land for “publick highways.”\textsuperscript{45} Street surveying continued into the next decade as well: a town record book documents ten streets in town by 1802, nineteen more roads by 1810, and another thirteen roads by the end of 1813.\textsuperscript{46}

In addition to surveying and clearing roads, Burlington residents built and maintained bridges in the area. During the very first town meeting in 1787, residents voted a tax of two pence on the pound for “repairing the highways and building bridges,” and by 1790 the town had voted that “the Largest Plank Bridge easterly from Col Allen's

\textsuperscript{43} Hemenway, 494.
\textsuperscript{44} Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 16 April 1795.
\textsuperscript{45} Town of Burlington, Proprietors Records 20 June 1798.
\textsuperscript{46} Town of Burlington, Highways and Roads General Index, 1798-1850, MS (Burlington City Hall, Burlington, Vermont).
Mills shall be Built or Repaired on the Cost of the Town." In 1793 the town voted another tax intended for “the purpose of repairing roads and bridges on said town exclusive of the Onion River Bridge."  

The attention to bridges – like the focus on roads – underscored the challenges of land accessibility during these early years of settlement. New residents contended not only with large bodies of water like Lake Champlain and the Onion River, but they also found obstacles within the central village itself. These included a long ravine that cut diagonally across town from upper Pearl Street to south of Maple Street. If a resident found her or himself on the wrong side of the ravine, she or he took a detour of two or three blocks and crossed at a bridge on Pearl or Main Street. There was also a plank laid across the lower end of the road to the college; it bridged a small ditch in the land, and children used the plank to gain access to the waterfront. Over the two decades between 1790 and 1810, the town’s many bridges demanded repeated repairs from the settlers. For one repair in the early 1790s the town paid its residents for their labor “in good pork,” beef, wheat, and corn.

It was not always easy to raise funds for community projects because of the existing economic demands on households. Due to a generally low availability of specie,
many Vermonters looked for creative ways to fund their building projects. One solution came in the form of turnpikes. Historian Michael Sherman and his colleagues have described how, after 1796, some of the state’s “enterprising individuals” recognized that “residents of rural Vermont communities would continue to resist paying taxes to construct better quality roads.” The result was what Sherman and others have called “turnpike mania,” an era where residents advocated toll roads and bridges funded by private companies. In 1802 a number of Burlington residents collaborated with residents of Colchester to apply for a toll bridge across the Onion River “near the falls at Colchester.” The following year residents James Sawyer and Stephen Pearl petitioned for the another turnpike that would travel from the “Court house in Burlington” and “unite with the Turnpike from Troy.” In the latter half of the decade, Burlington merchants supported the Winooski Turnpike Corporation as well the Sand Bar Turnpike Company. These turnpike companies connected Burlington to key access points in the state despite the challenges in acquiring funds from town residents.


54 *Vermont Centinel* 2 September 1802. This structure is not to be confused with the oft-mentioned Onion River Bridge, which crosses the waterway not in Colchester, but further south.

55 *Vermont Centinel* 18 August 1803.
Since toll roads and bridges represented a new way of doing things in Burlington, it is perhaps not surprising that they introduced confusion and controversy among local residents. State legislation in 1805 permitted members of the Sand Bar Turnpike Company, including Burlington merchant Thaddeus Tuttle, to build a road from “the lower bridge over Onion River to Middle Hero.” The company built a gate on the road and collected tolls from those who traveled the thoroughfare. The fees ranged from thirty-one cents for a “four wheeled pleasure carriage drawn by two horses,” to ten cents for “every sled or sleigh drawn by two horses.” They also charged for “horses, mules, oxen, or neat cattle” (once cent per animal) and for “all sheep and swine” (“four cents per dozen”).

The state sanctioned these private road monopolies but attempted to regulate the turnpikes so that they did not interrupt community activities. For example, companies could not collect fares from people passing “to or from public worship,” or from those “on militia duty.” They also refrained from tolling people who drove “horse, team, or cattle, to or from any grist-mill or saw-mill.” The state prohibited toll gatherers from “unreasonably delay[ing] or hinder[ing] any traveler or passenger at either of said gates” or from “demand[ing] and receiv[ing] more toll than…allowed.” Passengers and local residents were also restricted, owing fines if they “cut, break down, or in any way destroy, either of said gates, or shall dig up or carry away any earth of said road, or shall wantonly or maliciously damage the same; or shall forcibly pass, either of said gates,

without having first paid the legal toll at such a gate.” The legislation prohibited “any person with his carriage, team, cattle, horse, mule, sheep, or swine” from “turn[ing] out of said road, and com[ing] in again with an intent to evade the toll.” In the case of infringements, offenders repaid the toll and compensated for any litigation costs. Judging from the extent of the toll road regulations, it would seem that private toll roads met with some resistance in the local community.

The Sand Bar Turnpike legislation reveals tensions between residents who lived locally and those who were just passing through. A year after the Sand Bar Turnpike Company’s inception, a second legislative act clarified that “no person living within five miles of the gate… shall be exempted from paying the toll at said gate; but shall pay the same rates of toll as other persons.” The act also added that any person traveling on foot would “pay a toll of four cents.” Local residents objected to paying a fee in order to ride or walk near their own homes. These legislative acts suggest that these residents expected certain privileges simply because they lived locally.

The toll companies illustrate the strains that arose when outside entities helped to build infrastructure in an existing community. By the time the Sand Bar Company began, Burlington had already become a busy port, as well as the home of the county court and the post office. Access to other parts of the region was important in order to carry out the town’s economic and political tasks. Residents lacked funds, however, and some embraced the clever solution of private funding through turnpike companies. Yet turnpike

companies were owned by shareholders from different regions, and when they built a road through a town they represented a group of outsiders who imposed their tolls on local residents. Conflict arose between the local residents and the non-resident turnpike proprietors.

More importantly, the turnpike legislation touches on evolving ideas about public and private property. The line between public and private ownership, as well as the rules around public and private usage of resources, must have been rather fuzzy during these years of frontier development. The scenario goes something like this: a settler arrived in town and often lived on land that was not his; he might win the support of a proprietor by cutting down a few trees and building a log or plank house on the land, or he might find himself ejected from the land by the proprietor. At the same time, rules, regulations, and expectations were unclear. Sometimes proprietors lived in other states, and were unaware of squatters living on their property. Town governments were just developing and lacked the rules and resources to enforce an orderly approach to building activities and resource usage. With few rules, an abundance of absentee landowners, and budding town governments, there was plenty of latitude for unwelcome conduct with respect to property.

Historian Richard Wade has described a similar dynamic in the transappalachian west where weak town governments struggled to define how residents could use nearby

58 Historians have explored the intricacies of land possession and ownership during various periods of early settlement. For example, see Mark T. Kanazawa, “Possession Is Nine Points Of The Law: The Political Economy Of Early Public Land Disposal,” Explorations in Economic History 33, no. 2 (1996): 227-249; Patricia Seed, Ceremonies of Possession in Europe’s Conquest of the New World, 1492-1640 (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.)
resources.\textsuperscript{59} For example, Lexington’s town government did not assume widespread care for streets, roads, and public spaces until the 1820s or 1830s. The result was that roads were a mess of dust, mud, tree trunks, and stones. Wade has noted that “lax supervision” from town governments even “permitted haphazard building, much of which spilled onto public property.” He also observed a general lack of regulation over streets, describing how one 1785 ordinance called attention to “all persons having cabbins, cow pens, hog pens or other inclosures whatever within the main streets.” Lexington’s example illustrates how residents were still developing their ideas about the roles and responsibilities of town government, and about the treatment of public and private space.

On the frontier, the allure of undeveloped land was accompanied by confusion and haphazard building activities, and Burlington mirrors these challenges. An 1808 newspaper advertisement advised that “all persons” who were “detected in taking sand out of the Street of this Village” would be “prosecuted…as trespassing on public and private property.”\textsuperscript{60} Similarly, resident Moses Fay warned that “all persons are forbid” from “cutting or carrying away…timber or wood of any description” from the land of his recently deceased brother John.\textsuperscript{61} Trespassing of this kind cropped up not only in Burlington but in other towns as well.\textsuperscript{62} For these new towns, the frontier represented an area when the rules of town living were often unclear.

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Vermont Centinel} 8 July 1808.  
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Vermont Centinel} 5 January 1810.  
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Vermont Centinel} 7 May 1806, 30 November 1810.
Of course, it was not always the case that residents were unaware of the proper conduct around public and private property. At times residents were fully conscious of expected behavior and nonetheless abused a neighbor’s property or a public road. Still, in a town where borders were not always clearly defined or where large areas of land had not been assigned to any particular owner, it seems likely that the rules of conduct were not fully clear. Sometimes new residents simply took resources from the land around them since they were uncertain who owned that land in the first place.

In addition to rules around streets and property, Burlington’s residents contended with guidelines regarding livestock. Most families tended farm animals in this period – even those who engaged in work other than farming – and livestock commonly wandered into the streets, the public square, or even into other people’s yards. In the 1790s town ordinances placed few restrictions on this livestock, but within twenty years this changed. By 1810 town residents voted that certain animals had to be kept within enclosures. They also increased the number of officials in town government, and required that those officials report back to the voters annually on their service to the town.

In 1801 Thomas Lathrop ran an advertisement asking “Have you seen a small yearling BAY HORSE COLT, with a very small slash in his forehead, in the streets or commons, since about the last day of May past?” Lathrop asked locals to provide any information about the colt “to the Editor of this paper” and promised that the informant would be “generously rewarded.” Similarly, in 1807 lawyer and merchant Stephen Pearl advertised that “a Cow, Middling sized, black and white coloured” as well as a

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63 Vermont Centinel 10 September 1801.
A couple “two years old Heifers, pied, lined-back, red and White coloured” had broken into his yard over the winter. Pearl asked that owners “prove Property, pay charges, and take them away.” Advertisements announcing lost and found livestock were common in the newspaper throughout the period.

To prevent animals from destroying property, as well as to ensure that they found their rightful owners, Burlington assigned surveillance tasks to its residents. As early as 1787 Burlington used a resident’s yard or stable as an animal pound; pound keepers included Phineas Loomis on upper Pearl Street and Peter Benedict in the town’s eastern section. The need to police livestock increased over these early years, and in 1795 the town voted to “build a pound at the town's expense.” Residents still tended the pound, but the town government assumed responsibility for the structure.

With the increasing number of livestock, the town also augmented the number of people required to oversee livestock issues. In 1792 the town added one hayward (or “hog howard”) to its list of town officers, and by 1808 the town had appointed two pound keepers where previously there had been only one. The following year Burlington residents voted in five more haywards, increasing the number to thirteen by 1810. An advertisement from 1803 illustrates some of the challenges that the haywards faced. The advertisement reads:

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64 *Vermont Centinel* 3 February 1809.
66 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 26 March 1795
67 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 22 March 1808.
Take care of your HOGS

The haywards of this town, are compelled to inform the citizens that they cannot longer resist the importunities of those whose Fields and Gardens have been laid waste by Swine, and have determined in the course of the next week to clear the roads and commons of ALL that shall be found at large. The task is not pleasant, but it is our duty.  

Despite the unpleasantries that the haywards describe, town residents voted again and again – in 1793, 1795, 1796, and 1804 – to allow swine to roam the streets. They did place a few requirements on the pigs, including that hogs be “well rung in the nose with a good and sufficient ring” and “well yoaked” with a piece of wood which residents could grab if they needed to do so. The town even regulated where the wandering pig should wear its yoke (“eight inches above the neck and four inches below the bar”).

However, around 1810 the residents exhibited a more restrictive approach to livestock. They voted that swine must now live within fenced enclosures, and when residents violated the ordinance, the town had the right to sell the stray animal. A similar ordinance regarding rams specified that “this Town shall have full power to take up and sell according to the Law of this State, all Rams Running at Large, from the first day of September of the fifteenth day of November unless in the Enclosure of the Owner.” The hog ordinance illustrates how Burlington residents imposed greater restrictions on town dwellers by 1810.

The legislation around streets, bridges, and livestock reflects an increasing level of government structure in Burlington between 1790 and 1810. The number of officers

68 Vermont Centinel (Burlington) 9 June 1803.
69 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings, 24 March 1794, 24 March 1796.
70 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 24 March 1794.
serving the town increased significantly over this twenty-year period. “Surveyors of highways” increased from three men in 1787 to five in 1790; by 1804 there were nine residents serving in this capacity. Similarly, there was one constable in town in 1792, and two more by 1804. The number of grand jurymen increased from one in 1788 to three in 1806. Accompanying this increase in scale was a more complex level of organization: by 1804, the town had divided itself into an increasing number of districts: there were five districts for listers, nine for road surveyors, and seven for haywards.71

Given the 500 percent increase in population from 1790 to 1810, it is perhaps no surprise that Burlington residents increased the complexity of their town’s administration. These changes allowed a more structured approach to serving residents’ needs, and similar changes occurred in areas outside Burlington. For example, Chittenden County opened its first land office in 1810. Builder-architect John Johnson collected the “digests of the land records of several towns,” and suggested that, for the “Collectors and committees of Land taxes,” the information provided by his office would allow clients “to proceed in the most easy, safe, legal, and convenient manner.”72 In addition, by 1810 the state almanac listed not only town officers for each town but also their specific responsibilities and pay rates. It seems, then, that towns like Burlington were slowly increasing their levels of record-keeping, local government, and regulation. This represented a striking contrast to the 1790s, when it was not even clear who owned the town lands.

71 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings compilation of town elections 1789-1811. 72 Vermont Centinel 5 January 1810.
1.3. Building a Vision

Though the increased level of town administration was more restrictive, it also brought an added benefit: it facilitated the residents’ efforts in pursuing a vision for the new town. One way that residents pursued this vision was in the way they constructed the physical space around them. While some residents built small log houses when they first arrived in town, they soon erected larger structures that represented the homes to which they were accustomed.\(^73\) In building these structures, Burlington residents observed the building trends in larger cities and endeavored to follow those trends in their own town.

Burlington was home to many spacious buildings, particularly after the turn of the century. Before the town built its court house, for example, Benjamin Adams hosted the entire town meeting in his own home. Similarly, at least two other residents – James Sawyer and Lyman King – regularly hosted public meetings or dances in the halls of their houses. The town erected many structures to cater to the various needs of a growing population: there were taverns, bar rooms, and houses of entertainment (owned by Peter Benedict, Gideon King, James Brinsmaid, Jeremiah Landon); hotels and inns (Aziah Crane, Gershom Holmes, Jesse Hollister); and at least one tenement house that boarded students at the college (Adolphis Walbridge). There was also a bath house, blacksmiths’ shops, a tannery, merchants shops, at least one distillery, a building for storing sails, a potters’ kiln, and mills for flour, textiles, wood, and flaxseed oil.

\(^73\) For example, Horace Loomis’s family first moved into a “log house” on what would become Pearl Street. Six months later the Loomises moved into a larger home “which was raised” by “all the people that could be got from Shelburne, Essex, Colchester, and Burlington.” Loomis observed that some of Burlington’s earliest settlers built “a shanty” for their first home and afterwards went on to build a larger home; see Hemenway, 495.
Residents generally built these structures out of the wood they cleared from the surrounding lands. As a result, Burlington – like other towns in this time period – experienced its share of fires. For example, John Eldridge’s family had just completed their “large new dwelling house” in the southeast part of town when the structure was “unfortunately consumed by fire.” The newspaper reported that “the joiners employed in finishing the house had, but a short time before, carried fire into it,” and the flames were “accidentally communicated to the shavings.” The editors cautioned that “repeated instances have happened of this kind, in which immense property has been lost,” and advised that “it certainly ought to serve as caution to every person concerned in building” that he should “never to suffer fire to be carried into houses while joiners are employed.”

Before 1805, Burlington’s newspaper refers to only one structure built of brick – the new University building – and, not surprisingly, there were many fires in town. Blazes were especially common in businesses that worked with fire or flammable materials: fires took the Burlington shop of a saddler (Asa Packer’s workplace was “leveled with the ground”); of a blacksmith (Christopher Johnson’s shop “was burnt to ashes”); and of a potter (Norman Judd lost his kiln as well as his home “with nearly all it contained”). Fires also took the lives of children, including Ebenezer White’s daughter who died “playing before the fire” in 1808.

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75 Vermont Centinel 20 January 1809, 24 March 1809, 4 August 1809.
76 Vermont Centinel 12 August 1809.
Burlington’s newspaper, the *Vermont Centinel*, listed blazes that happened not only in Burlington but also in Middlebury, New Haven, Boston, New York, and Portsmouth. An 1803 article noted that the residents of Boston “seem[ed] destined to be continual spectators of the ruin of property of their fellow citizens by fire.” The newspaper then told of “two successive conflagrations in different parts of town,” noting that “the Brick building formerly occupied by the [bank] on the south, and a new Brick stable on the east, seemed the only effectual barriers to the progress of desolation.” The author continued: “Why should we not… deposit our property, and secure our domestic tranquility, in dwellings of less combustible materials?”77 The same paper offered a solution from Philadelphia, where “three hundred and thirty eight brick, and one hundred and thirty six frame Houses, were built…last year.”78 With the high incidence of fire among wooden structures, many towns advocated brick construction to increase levels of safety.79

Like Boston and Philadelphia, Burlington’s own residents considered the benefits of brick structures in town. Between 1805 and 1810, residents constructed at least two new brick structures: Guy Catlin and Joseph Jasper opened their store in “the New Brick Store, West side of Courthouse Square,”80 and Ichabod Tuttle announced a “new brick

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77 *Vermont Centinel* 27 January 1803.
78 *Vermont Centinel* 10 February 1803.
80 *Vermont Centinel* 20 November 1806.
store” opposite the southwest corner of College Green.\textsuperscript{81} The fact that advertisements referred specifically to the brick construction suggests that this material was not yet common in town. Residents also stepped up the efforts toward fire prevention, incorporating “the Burlington Fire company” in 1808.\textsuperscript{82} According to one Burlington historian, “every man” in the fire company “owned and kept ready for immediate use a fire bucket, and nearly every man had a ladder.” When fire threatened, the “neighbors and the members of this company” brought their leather buckets and formed a line from water supply to fire. They also ensured that “adjacent buildings were protected by wet blankets and pieces of carpet.”\textsuperscript{83}

The increase in brick structures coincided with other ambitious development projects in town. In 1806 newspaper publisher Samuel Mills sold four building lots in the village center. Mills made one requirement of the new owner – one that would “positively be adhered to” – that a “three story Brick Building shall be erected on the premises within one year.”\textsuperscript{84} The fact that Mills asked for a brick building reflects his attention to fire safety and durability; the fact that he specified a building of three stories points to his hopes for larger-scale development. Within a couple years, Mills himself built the town’s first bookstore as well as a small business complex which he called Mills’s Row. Mills rented rooms to artisans, including tinsmith Moses Bliss (Mills Row, no. 11); painter John M. Morse (Mills Row, no. 2); shoe maker John Killips (the second

\textsuperscript{81} Vermon\textit{t} Cen\textit{tinel} 22 December 1809
\textsuperscript{82} Vermon\textit{t} Cen\textit{tinel} 6 January 1808.
\textsuperscript{83} Rann, 443.
\textsuperscript{84} Vermon\textit{t} Cen\textit{tinel} 8 October 1806.
door, no. 5); boot maker Daniel P. Beals (no. 12); and chair and chaise builders Luther Whitney and William Merrell (no. 4).\textsuperscript{85}

The change in Burlington’s architecture reflects the way the town had transformed by 1810. First, its infrastructure had significantly changed. The town shifted its borders to access a meetinghouse and built roads and bridges to improve accessibility to key areas. They increased regulations on livestock and built a more complex local government to accommodate these regulations. They also built more and larger structures, and began to use stone and brick rather than the timbers available from the surrounding lands. With this increased building activity came increased concentration in the village center, where Samuel Mills began renting his professional complex to the town’s artisans.

\subsection*{1.4. Conclusions}

Mills’s development projects reflected a particular vision for the young town. Indeed, it was a vision shared by at least a few others. A 1796 map of Vermont represents Burlington with a curious visual icon: a grid of streets and blocks.\textsuperscript{86} Next to this grid was printed the word “City,” and Burlington is one of only two towns on the map that used this label (see figure 3). Ironically, the “city” title was a bit premature for Burlington,

\textsuperscript{85} *Vermont Centinel* 6 January 1809, 5 May 1809, 19 May 1809, 28 July 1809.

\textsuperscript{86} “A correct map of the state of Vermont from actual survey exhibiting the country and town lines, rivers, lakes, ponds, mountains, meetinghouses, mills, public roads &c. By James Whitelaw Esq., Surveyor General, 1796.” Courtesy of the Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont, Burlington.
since at that time the town’s population did not even rank among the twenty largest towns in the state.  

Building projects like Mills’s Row responded to the growing needs and opportunities in the town, but they also projected an identity that some residents expected for Burlington. As early as 1791, Ira Allen had advocated for Burlington as the home for

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Figure 3: "A correct map of the state of Vermont from actual survey exhibiting the country and town lines, rivers, lakes, ponds, mountains, meetinghouses, mills, public roads &c. By James Whitelaw Esq., Surveyor General, 1796." Courtesy of Special Collections at the Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont.

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87 LaRose, “The Emergence of the Vermont Settlement Pattern, 1609-1830” (Cornell University Master’s Thesis, 1967), 90.
the state’s only university; this was a curious effort, since at that time the town claimed only 300 residents. The attendees of the 1798 proprietors’ meeting also projected a vision of the town’s development: when they laid out the village streets in a regular grid, they selected a symmetric pattern that represented a current trend in city design. 88 Residents also pledged $1,994 in cash as well as donations of boards, shingles, and a “gilt vain” to build a new court house. Curiously, they sought to build a new court house despite the fact that a building already existed for that purpose. Records betray the residents’ motivation: the state legislature had agreed to hold a session in Burlington “provided that they can be accommodated with a convenient apportment for that purpose.” 89 Plans for the university, the city grid, Mills’s Row, and the court house all illustrate that at least some of the early residents of Burlington expected the town to grow into something significant.

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88 By and large citizens and leaders of the early republic preferred a more orderly method of town planning and architecture, and continued the preference for geometric squares that had begun in Europe during the Enlightenment. The preference for physical orderliness in a town was partly ideological, a reaction to the winding streets and perceived chaos of the European towns of the Middle Ages. Streets laid out in a grid also satisfied more practical concerns, such as maximizing real estate sales and preventing fire. For more on the use of orderly, classical forms in town streets and structures, see Carole Shammas, “The Space Problem in the early United States Cities,” The William and Mary Quarterly 57, no. 3 (2000): 511-519; David Schuyler, The new urban landscape : the redefinition of city form in nineteenth-century America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), ch. 2; Spiro Kostof, The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown and Co., 1991), ch. 3; A.E.J. Morris, History of Urban Form Before the Industrial Revolution 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), ch. 9.
89 Proprietors of the County Court House, Subscription for the County Court House. 1801-1805, MS (Local History Collection, Fletcher Free Library, Burlington, Vermont) 2 December 1801.
Chapter 2 - The Marketplace

Rapid population growth into Burlington from 1790 to 1810 created a frontier economy that offered rewards. The town benefited from a thriving shipping business on Lake Champlain. Merchants and artisans addressed the vibrant marketplace with a variety of strategies, including business partnerships, competition with other businessmen in town, and expansion into areas outside Burlington. Businessmen expanded their product offerings to cater to a population that had a growing taste for material wealth and fashion.

In the process, Burlington’s businessmen endeavored to fulfill their specific vision for this growing frontier marketplace. Newcomers opted into partnerships with experienced proprietors, since they found that a partnership arrangement satisfied their aspirations to personal business ownership and independence. Merchants exploited marketing strategies that placed them on par with larger commercial centers such as Boston and New York. Business owners also extended their marketing efforts into surrounding towns, and in the process tested their hopes that Burlington would become the trading hub of northern Vermont.

However, the intense population growth of this frontier economy also brought struggles. Burlington merchants felt increasing competition from businessmen in other towns, and by 1810 some shops closed their doors. Artisans were shut out of the town’s political elite and residents voiced concerns about the growing number of poor people in town. Perhaps the apex of Burlington’s troubles came in 1808, when the town experienced the effects of a national embargo that hampered the economies of many
seaside towns. In the end, not every resident enjoyed the liveliness of Burlington’s frontier economy.⁹⁰

2.1. Economic Foundations

From the 1790s to 1810, Burlington’s marketplace grew more active, competitive, and diverse. In 1796, only five establishments had advertised in Burlington’s newspaper. One was James Sawyer, who opened his store near Gideon King’s tavern on Burlington Bay. Sawyer sold a long list of dry goods and groceries, including blankets, rugs, men’s hats, ribbons, different grades of cloth, bobbins, thread, writing paper, buttons, hammers, shoe buckles, chisels, looking glasses, spices, tobacco, sugar, and brandy.⁹¹ The Hickok brothers, Samuel and William, had stores in both Burlington and Jericho, and their list of goods was similar to that of Sawyer.⁹² Three more establishments advertised a small number of items for sale such as crockery and clover seed.⁹³ There were also a few tradesmen who advertised in the paper, though rarely did more than a single artisan practice the same craft. These tradesmen included a blacksmith, a carpenter, a cooper, two printers (they were partners), a saddler, and a silversmith. There was also a doctor, at

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⁹⁰ It bears stating that, since Burlington’s tax records are largely missing for this time period, it is difficult to make conclusions about the quantitative growth of Burlington’s economy from 1790 to 1810. I have therefore concentrated on the town meeting minutes (1787-1796 and 1804-1811), newspapers (1796-97, 1801-1803, and 1806-1811), and grand list returns (1792, 1802, 1804, 1806, 1809, 1812) that demonstrated an increase in the diversity and activity of the town’s economy during this time period. Judging from these sources, Burlington’s economy was irrefutably more lively and extensive by 1810.
⁹¹ Vermont Centinel 13 January 1797.
⁹² Vermont Centinel 9 December 1796.
⁹³ Burlington Mercury 6 May 1796, 14 October 1796, 20 May 1796, 30 December 1796.
least one innkeeper, a tavern owner, and a handful of lawyers, one of whom managed the town’s post office.

Ten years later, Burlington’s marketplace was decidedly more vibrant. The number of merchants selling dry goods, groceries, crockery, and imports increased steadily after the turn of the nineteenth century. Around 1796, four Burlington-based merchants advertised their goods; by 1803, nine merchants advertised in Burlington; and within three more years there were sixteen separate establishments advertising their goods to Burlington and its hinterland.

No doubt much of this growth resulted from the influx of population between 1790 and 1800. The growth also resulted from the mainstay of the Burlington economy: shipping to Canada on Lake Champlain. Since the early 1780s Lake Champlain served as a central artery for transporting exports to Canada. Most of these exports were a result of the extensive land clearing in Vermont and consisted of raw timber or semi-processed wood products (such as potash, pearl ash, or milled lumber). Exports on the lake traveled mostly northward to Canada since the southern route to New York City was obstructed by land travel. With rafts made of massive logs, drivers propelled the products to Quebec City relying on sails, poles, and water currents for power. The journey included a

94 Shippers had to leave Lake Champlain and transport cargo by land to reach the Hudson River. This changed when the Lake Champlain Canal was completed in 1823. Combined with other factors, including increased duties from Canadian customs, the canal reoriented Burlington’s economy from Canada to New York, and from international to domestic shipments. For more background, see Kevin Crisman, “Sails on an Inland Sea: The evolution of Lake Champlain’s Sailing Merchant Fleet” in Frederick M. Hocker and Cheryl A. Ward eds., The Philosophy of Shipbuilding: Conceptual Approaches to the Study of Wooden Ships (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), chapter 10; Charles F. O’Brien, “The Champlain Waterway, 1783-1897,” The New England Quarterly 61, no. 2 (1988): 163-182. Kenneth A. Degree’s article on Vermont banking also describes the reasons Burlington reoriented exports toward New York by the 1820s.
harrowing passage over rapids at the Richelieu River where rafts men disembarked their vessels, sent the rafts over the rapids, and then endeavored to collect any cargo that had fallen into the water on the other side of the rapids.

During the 1790s Gideon King began his shipping business out of Burlington. Famous (or perhaps infamous) in the history of the town, King was called the “Admiral of the Lake,” and acted as the agent for New York-based fur tycoon John Jacob Astor. Between 1790 and 1810 fifteen news ships were built at Burlington and were mastered by King and others. In addition to wood products, the vessels ran horses, sheep, fish, cheese, grain, and tobacco up the lakes to Canada. In return they brought salt, European goods, and specie back to Burlington.95

Town residents supported a secondary economy in response to this shipping business. A handful of local residents built ships for Gideon King, and a bakery that sold ship bread and crackers opened on the waterfront. Town residents also enjoyed an expanded array of specialized goods that shippers brought from other commercial centers. By 1810, shopkeepers had started to exhibit particular specialties with their inventories: Ebenezer Deming, for example, sold goods from Spain and the Mediterranean, while partners Guy Catlin and Joseph Jasper carried high-end products from Europe and the West Indies.96 By 1806 most Burlington businesses clustered their

95 Ralph Nading Hill, Lake Champlain: Key to Liberty (Woodstock, Vermont: The Countryman Press, 1976), 166, 208; Vermont Centinel 22 April 1808. For more on Gideon King, see Hemenway, vol. 1, pp. 656-707. For more on the need for coin and currency, see footnote 52 in chapter 1 of this study.
96 Historians have suggested that merchants and artisans grew more specialized as their communities expanded and developed. Some historians have posited that a progression from “all-purpose businessmen” to specialized trader was characteristic of the early republic. In contrast, Thomas Doerflinger has demonstrated that Philadelphia merchants honed their trading practices before the advent of the republic.
shops around Court House Square, and a small hamlet of mercantile activity was also
to grow along College Green. Artisans and merchants built establishments on
Pearl Street, filling in the road between the Onion River and the Burlington waterfront.

Burlington’s wealth increased in this same time period: per-capita wealth more
doubled from 1792 to 1802. These numbers could reflect a shift from subsistence
farming to a more mercantile and professional economy, since some historians have
suggested that Vermont settlement came in two waves – farmers first and professionals
afterwards. Burlington’s 1796 and 1797 newspapers harbored many more
advertisements for foal-bearing horses than those of later years, offering another hint that
the economy may have moved from agriculture toward more mercantile activities.

Together, the increase in population and the robust shipping business set the stage
for a growing marketplace in Burlington. The expanding economy also attracted a

This indicates that merchant specialization owed as much to the life stage of a community as to any
extraordinary economic conditions of the time period; see Thomas M. Doerflinger, Commercial
Specialization in Philadelphia’s Merchant Community, 1750-1791,” Business History Review 57, no. 1
(1983): 20-49. Carl Bridenbaugh and Sam Bass Warner provide further description about specialization of
merchants during the colonial period; see Carl Bridenbaugh, Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of
Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press,
1968) 5-8.

It is not clear whether these changes in physical space might have correlated with socioeconomic
divisions and changes in Burlington. Many community historians have noted that residents of different
socioeconomic backgrounds often live mixed in the same neighborhoods during the early stages of
communities, and that with community expansion and development come neighborhoods and
socioeconomic specialization of community space. For a taste of the discussion, see Betsy Blackmar, “Re-
walking the ‘Walking City’: Housing and Property Relations in New York City, 1780-1840, Radical
History Review 21 (1979): 11-148; Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, transl. by Donald Nicholson-
Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1991); Mary M. Schweitzer, “The Spatial Organization of

Based on Burlington grand lists and census populations published in The Vermont Register and Almanac
(Middlebury, Vermont: Huntington & Fitch, 1803, 1804, 1806, 1808, 1809, 1812). See appendix.

For example, Michael Sherman, Gene Sessions, and P. Jeffrey Potash, Freedom and Unity: A History of

E.g., see advertisements for James Brinsmaid or Samuel Allen, Burlington Mercury 1 April 1796.
number of artisans and professionals to support the increased population in the town. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, Burlington’s marketplace offered generous opportunities for many of the town’s newcomers.

2.2. Strategies and Successes

To negotiate the growing frontier marketplace, Burlington’s businessmen tested a number of marketing strategies and tactics. They formed business partnerships, competed with neighboring artisans, extended their business into surrounding towns, and catered to consumer tastes for current fashions. In carrying out these marketing strategies, Burlington’s residents developed their vision for the new town. Businessmen hoped for an economy that would enable independence and sole proprietorship, and newcomers saw prosperity in an open and competitive marketplace. Merchants extended their commercial activities into surrounding towns and portrayed Burlington as a central hub for the hinterland of northwestern Vermont. Finally, consumers exhibited their tastes for the latest fashions and material wealth – a taste that merchants and artisans endeavored to satisfy. Burlington’s marketplace in the eighteenth century demonstrated not only the dynamics of a frontier economy, but also that residents planned for their town to become the economic center of the region.

One way that Burlington’s storekeepers, lawyers, and artisans negotiated the changing marketplace of the early nineteenth century was to form copartnerships. The list of partnered artisans between 1796 and 1810 was lengthy and included clockmakers Lewis and Frederick Curtis, cabinetmakers William Earl and Willard Rockwell, hatters

Burlington shopkeeper Ebenezer T. Englesby provides an ideal example of how the copartnership arrangement might evolve. Englesby came to Burlington in 1797 from New York City. By 1801 he had formed a copartnership with Joshua Isham and together the men operated two stores, one in Shelburne and one in Burlington. A year later Isham and Englesby ended their agreement “by mutual consent,” and Englesby continued to run the business in Burlington. Englesby’s store sat on the corner of Court House Square and sold imported goods, crockery, groceries, hardware, and school books. Within five years the store was one of the more successful ventures in Burlington: Englesby was one of only two town merchants to advertise tickets for the high-profile Otter Creek Bridge lottery, and he soon began a wholesale business to supply storekeepers of the region’s inland towns. By 1808 Englesby became a director of the newly formed Vermont State Bank. Burlington memoirs have called him one of Burlington’s most successful merchants.

101 Rann, 421.
102 Vermont Centinel 29 April 1802, 30 September 1802.
103 Vermont Centinel 29 July 1807, 16 September 1808, 25 November 1808; Rann, 499.
Historian Naomi Lamoreaux has examined the nature of partnerships in Boston during the first half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{104} In Boston, partnerships were the preferred business type and their incidence increased – particularly among artisans – through the 1850s. The copartnership arrangement worked like this: most contracts involved short-term arrangements ranging from a few months to a number of years. The businessmen tended not to be relatives, and commonly one of them was a seasoned businessman while the other was relatively new to the line of work. Often, the less experienced partner had already worked for the other partner for a few years – as a clerk, for example. Lamoreaux has pointed out that Boston’s business community certainly had available to them other forms of economic organization: among their options were corporations, short-term investment or barter agreements, hired labor, and joint ventures that brought the expertise of two different businessmen without formally entering into a formal business partnership. Still, Lamoreaux found that Boston’s business community opted most often for a partnership arrangement, and they did so despite the fact that partnership put their personal wealth at risk.

Partnerships offered benefits to both parties. For the more experienced owner, the benefit was economic: he could offer an incentive (i.e., profit sharing) while avoiding the obligation to increase an employee’s wages. For the less experienced partner, the arrangement a way to break into a new line of work. In Burlington, there are many cases where, like Ebenezer Englesby, a man began a partnership and in short order went on to

continue the business alone. Printer Samuel Mills partnered with Daniel Greenleaf to publish the *Vermont Centinel*, and in 1806 Mills became the paper’s sole proprietor. Shortly afterwards Mills added Burlington’s first bookstore to his holdings, and within a few years he added real estate to his portfolio with the construction of Mills’s Row.

Druggist John Peck, distiller Elsick Powell, taylor Silas W.C. Chase, and cabinetmaker William Rockwell also began their Burlington careers in partnerships, and all of them shortly went into business for themselves.\(^{105}\) In fact, of the roughly thirteen Burlington partnerships that dissolved between 1806 and 1810, there were at least eleven instances (85 percent) where one of the partners continued on with his own business. This may have been particularly true for craftsmen: fully nine of these dissolved thirteen partnerships engaged in some sort of trade or manufacturing work.

Lamoreaux has suggested that ideological reasoning drove the preference for partnerships, particularly for the less seasoned owner. Rather than work for an employer, she suggested, the less experienced worker had a chance to enjoy ownership in the business. Partnerships had their risks, including personal liability for the business’s debts. Yet young men opted for the partnership structure because of a cultural prerogative to avoid dependency. They preferred partnerships not “from any real economic advantage that such firms had over single proprietorships, but rather from what the young men involved in them sought to avoid – relations of dependence.”\(^{106}\) This desire to avoid dependence fit well within the cultural values of the post-revolutionary period.

\(^{105}\) *Vermont Centinel* 20 May 1808, 24 February 1809, 9 July 1806.
\(^{106}\) Lamoreaux, 293–4.
Lamoreaux has rejected the idea that businessmen used partnerships strategically, combining skills and resources in order to expand their goods and services. Yet partnerships in Burlington indicate that some men collaborated for strategic reasons. For example, in 1806 Abram Brinsmaid and Moses Bliss advertised their shop at the “sign of the gold watch” on Court House Square. The duo repaired watches, fabricated jewelry, and completed metal work “at the shortest notice.” They stocked “constantly on hand” a supply of “chime, moon, alarm and plain arched clocks, with or without cases,” and announced their use of “the Machines invented by Mr. Barnabas Langdon, for the manufacturing of tin ware.” Brinsmaid and Bliss assured their customers that their technology brought “superior strength and beauty” than metal work “made in the old way,” and with this new machinery they could supply those merchants “who wish to purchase by quantity.”

As a pair, Brinsmaid and Bliss offered basic smithing services and luxury products, as well as a wholesale business to Burlington’s many enterprising merchants.

Brinsmaid and Bliss dissolved their firm in 1810. Moses Bliss assumed the firm’s debts and moved into one of Samuel Mills’s rooms on the southern side of Court House Square. He ran an advertisement for his solo business a month later. It stated simply:

Moses Bliss, No 11., Mills’s Row, will constantly keep on hand a general assortment of Tin Ware, which will be sold cheap for Cash or Country Produce.

Abram Brinsmaid also continued on as a clock maker. He moved to the loft next to Azrah Crane’s hotel and offered a list of goods and services that was also a bit shorter than the

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107 Vermont Centinel 16 October 1806.
108 Vermont Centinel 5 May 1809.
one Brinsmaid and Bliss had advertised.\textsuperscript{109} The brevity of both advertisements is striking when compared to the more detailed services of the partnership. Though both men achieved sole ownership of their shops, neither boasted the same cache of goods and services that they had offered as co-owners.

When they ended their partnership, Moses Bliss and Abram Brinsmaid contended with more than just the adjustment to sole ownership. They also faced a competitive Burlington marketplace. Some Burlington businessmen may have used partnership as a tactic to battle the increasing level of competition in town. A rivalry between four saddlers offers an example of how artisans used business partnerships to resist Burlington’s increasingly crowded marketplace. Daniel W. Johnson and Newton Hayes announced their new saddler’s business in 1806. Their advertisement listed a variety of goods available at their shop, as well as saddling services “cheap for Cash or approved credit” for “as low as can be bought in the state.”\textsuperscript{110} Johnson and Hayes ran their announcement on August 13\textsuperscript{th}, and immediately adjacent to their advertisement was a notice for a second saddler’s business, this time announcing the partnership of Moses Jewett and Luther Moore. Jewett and Moore offered a nearly identical list of goods to that of Johnson and Hayes; in fact, they even listed their products in the same order. Jewett and Moore claimed that their goods were “\textit{Cheaper and Cheaper!}” and that they were “determined” to sell all of their goods “\textit{CHEAPER than at the Shop of Daniel W. Johnson & Co.}” Both saddlers’ shops listed their addresses as the “North side Court House

\textsuperscript{109} \textit{Vermont Centinel} 6 October 1809.
\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Vermont Centinel} 13 August 1806.
Square,” and no doubt these artisans brought some spirited competition to the village marketplace. Jewett and Moore ended their agreement just over a year later. Moses Jewett continued on as a saddler but with little advertising or marketing behind his work. From the timing of the agreement with Moore, it is possible that Jewett used the partnership to contend with Johnson and Hayes’ entry onto Court House Square.

During these years, a taste for cutthroat competition had surfaced among some of Burlington’s businesses. Like Jewett, Silas W.C. Chase engaged in a direct challenge against fellow tailors Peter B. Smith and Silas Moulthrop. On the same day that Smith and Moulthrop announced their new location on the road “leading from the Court House Square to Shelburne,” Chase ran an ad offering tailoring services in a workshop that his competitor, Silas Moulthrop, had just vacated.\textsuperscript{111} Chase ran his advertisement directly next to that of his competitors. Once the reader finished reading Smith and Moulthrop’s announcement, Chase began his ad with the headline: “\textit{BETTER YET},” and then continued to list his own tailoring services. Like Jewett, Chase made a direct challenge to his competition, placing his own advertisement directly adjacent to that of his competitors.

The rivalries between the saddlers and tailors reflect the increasing level of competition evident in Burlington by 1806. A number of new men entered the marketplace between 1796 and 1810, and more men competed within single business sectors. Painter John Storrs, in business since 1801, saw competition from John M. Morse, who began advertising his painting services in 1809. Storrs likely felt competition from Elijah D. Harmon, since Harmon also sold paints and dyes at his medicine shop.

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Vermont Centinel} 30 May 1811.
Storrs himself encroached on the watch and clock making business of Lewis Curtis when he began to sell painted clock faces in 1809. Lemuel Page, one of Burlington’s largest shoemakers, saw competition from John Killips (1808) and Daniel P. Beals (1809). Thus, competition within Burlington’s borders increased after the turn of the century. In some cases – as was the case with Moses Jewett – businessmen found their competitors right next door.

Burlington’s drug shops illustrate the increasing number of merchants within a single sector. Between 1802 and 1806, Burlington saw the development of three different drug merchants. Lazarus Tousey operated one of them. He had been in business since around 1802 and offered Burlington’s residents and physicians “a fresh assortment of drugs & medicines,” including the patented pills of doctors from out of state. Tousey steadily developed his business through the rest of the decade; his goods included not only drugs and medicines, but also dyes, tobacco, and brandy that he received from New York and Canadian suppliers. By 1806 Tousey offered not only drugs and medicines, but also seasonal selections of groceries and fish. By the end of the decade, he relocated to Giles Chittenden’s new shop on College Green. From Chittenden’s store, Tousey continued to offer “a general assortment of dry goods, groceries, crockery, hardware, drugs, medicines, and dye stuffs” to the Burlington public.  

While Tousey managed to stay in business for many years, he nonetheless experienced competition from other Burlington-based merchants. Elijah D. Harmon

112 Vermont Centinel 10 December 1802.
113 Vermont Centinel 12 December 1810.
opened a similar business in 1806 at a relative’s store on Pearl Street. There, under the “sign of the Scales and Mortar,” Harmon offered drugs, medicines, paints, and dyes just as Tousey did. Around the same time, members of the Peck family announced another druggist business under the “Sign of the Mortar” on Court House Square.\textsuperscript{114} The Pecks offered a similar inventory of “drugs & medicine, dye stuffs, paints, &c., &c., &c.” By the end of the decade, there were three different druggists’ businesses in town: one on College Green, another on Pearl Street, and the last on Court House Square. Like other artisans, the drug merchants used the newspapers to play out their rivalry. Harmon announced his business under the headline “\textit{New Medical Store}” and the Pecks’ advertisement listed theirs as the “\textit{New Druggist Store}.” Tousey, on the other hand, exhibited a dry sense of humor at proliferation of new druggists’ businesses. He titled one 1806 ad with the following headline: “\textit{Old Medical Store, L. Tousey.”}\textsuperscript{115}

In order to prosper, merchants attempted to portray Burlington as a town that competed with the nation’s leading commercial hubs. Burlington’s businessmen tried to persuade their clients that Burlington’s offerings were as varied, well made, and affordable as those offered by more established trading areas. Tousey, for example, co-opted New York’s image by advertising his inventory “for sale at New York prices.”\textsuperscript{116} Newspaper publisher and bookseller Samuel Mills placed in his shop a “Catalogue of all the Books printed in the United States, with the prices” and invited customers to inspect the catalog so that they might “be convinced” that his books were “as cheap as can be

\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Vermont Centinel} 23 July 1806, 4 June 1806.
\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Vermont Centinel} 18 June 1806.
\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Vermont Centinel} 31 December 1806.
purchased in the United States.”117 Bakers Chester C. and William Granger, upon opening their new bakery on the north side of Court House Square, promised customers that “crackers of the best quality may be had at their shop, as cheap as can be bought in Troy or any other place.”118 In trying to establish their businesses, then, Burlington merchants positioned themselves against other successful commercial centers such as New York, Boston, and Troy.

Merchants also attempted to draw customers into Burlington from neighboring towns. During December of 1806, fourteen shops advertised heavily in the town newspaper. Over half of these shops printed in their advertisements that their location was “Burlington” or “Burlington, Vt.” This practice of writing the town name contrasted sharply with advertisements from previous years, when shopkeepers simply cited landmarks that were either geographical (“across from the court house”) or personal (“near R. Harmon’s Red Store”). Samuel Mills noted his location as the “Sign of the Golden Press, South Side Court-House Square, Burlington, Vermont.” Ebenezer T. Englesby began his ad with the headline: “No. 1, Corner of Court & Fair Street, Burlington, Vt., E.T. Englesby…..”119 Catlin & Jasper listed their store as “the New Brick Store…Burlington,” adding that “ladies & Gentlemen of this and the neighboring towns are requested to call and examine their goods.”120 Merchants used the newspaper to beckon customers into Burlington from outlying towns.

117 Vermont Centinel 30 October 1806.
118 Vermont Centinel 14 January 1807.
119 Vermont Centinel 11 December 1806.
120 Vermont Centinel 24 December 1806.
Reuben Harmon and Amos Weeks took their marketing efforts one step further. Weeks, a clothier who owned water-powered mills in both Burlington and Essex, advertised to “the people of South Hero” that he would receive their wool at Thomas Porter’s place on the island. Harmon, owner of a general goods store on Pearl Street, opened a second store in Milton. Thus, both of these men extended the arms of their business outside Burlington. By the end of the decade, Burlington merchants marketed more actively to towns other parts of northwestern Vermont.

Of course, it did not take long for Burlington’s merchants to see that outside competitors would also encroach on Burlington’s marketplace. Geographer Bruce LaRose has demonstrated that, in 1800, Burlington and St. Albans had extended tentacles into their hinterlands, and that Danville and Peacham were not far behind. Middlebury also was a competitor, as was Montpelier by 1810. Historian Richard Wade found that Cincinnati, Lexington, Louisville, St. Louis, and Pittsburgh all competed furiously on the new western frontier, and that population and economic development ebbed and flowed before 1850. Neighboring towns grew as quickly as Burlington in these early years, and no single town was destined for commercial centrality. Jacqueline Carr has made a similar argument for Boston: following the exodus of residents during the siege of 1775, Carr has noted that it was not a foregone conclusion that Boston would become the preeminent commercial and population center of the east. Burlington joined the ranks

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121 Vermont Centinel 18 May 1810, 3 June 1806.
123 This is the general premise of Wade’s book; see especially chapters 1 and 2.
124 Carr, 7-8.
of a number of 1790s towns that struggled to establish themselves as the unsurpassed commercial and cultural centers to their regions.

The competition between Dr. Levi Simmons of St. Albans and Samuel Mills of Burlington provides an example of how merchants from different towns sought to steal business from each other. Simmons began advertising his St. Albans-based printing business to the Burlington public as early as 1806. That same year, Samuel Mills took over the Burlington newspaper and built his own bookstore in Burlington. Simmons and Mills offered a similar list of services and goods, including printing, paper, blank forms, and certificates, and both advertised in the Burlington newspaper. By 1808 Simmons added school books to his inventory, and within another year Simmons’ listed nearly as many books for sale as Mills did at his Burlington bookshop. Simmons’ titles included printed music, poetry, medical titles, biographies, histories, school books, religious tracts, and novels, and his advertisement filled nearly two-thirds of the Vermont Centinel – ironically, the newspaper owned by his competitor, Samuel Mills.125 By 1808, Simmons competed explicitly with Mills’s business by advertising – in Mills’s own newspaper, no less – that goods at his St. Albans shop were “as cheap as can be purchased at the Burlington Bookstore.”126

Though perhaps not as aggressive as Simmons’ business, similar sorts of competition began in other business sectors. Between 1807 and 1810, three different clothiers – one from Essex, one from Georgia, and one from Milton – each advertised

125 Vermont Centinel 29 September 1809.
126 Vermont Centinel 24 February 1808.
their services in the Burlington newspaper. Similarly, a St. Albans-based clockmaker advertised his business in the *Vermont Centinel* in the summer of 1807. Caleb B. Smith and his business partners advertised salt, dry goods, and groceries for their sale at their store in Williston, noting – like Simmons – that they sold their merchandise “at Burlington prices.” Of course, Burlington had always had a certain amount of interaction with other towns. Even as early as 1796, the Hickok brothers advertised their two locations in Burlington and Jericho, and a few stores in Vergennes and Charlotte occasionally advertised their inventories to Burlington residents in the 1790s. However, by 1810, the competition from merchants outside of Burlington had become much more explicit. This increased competition with other towns was yet another harbinger of the expanding Burlington marketplace in the first decade of the nineteenth century.

A final aspect of Burlington’s expanding marketplace was a significant increase in product availability and diversity. By 1806, businesses advertised extensive lists of products to the town’s consumers. The front page of one 1806 newspaper lists four long advertisements, all of which ran a full column in length and left no room for editorial copy. John C. Price, Jr. advertised his “New Store of Fall and Winter Goods” on College Green. Guy Catlin and Joseph Jasper advertised their “new store” in Court House Square. Samuel Hickok headlined his ad with the title “More New Goods,” and Samuel Mills called attention to the opening of his “New Book Store,” each stressing the recent openings of their businesses. Nehemiah Hotchkiss, a store owner on College Green, makes explicit the onslaught of new store openings in Burlington. His advertisement

127 *Vermont Centinel* 18 November 1807.
from 180 reads opens with the heading, “Another New Store.” As 1810 approached, Burlington’s consumers could select from a more diverse array of product and service options than in the 1790s.

The growth in product options reflects Burlington’s taste for the styles of the times. Historian Jack Larkin has discussed how, from the 1790s to the 1830s, the early republic exhibited progressively more material wealth. By the 1830s, consumers spent more disposable income on an array of products that were once considered luxuries. This increased purchasing activity resulted in a more tangible taste for material wealth and consumption. In Burlington, John Storrs’s painting business illustrated this increased taste for material wealth. In 1801, Storrs advertised himself as a “House & Sign Painter & Glazier.” Within a year he also advertised seventeen new pigments from New York. The long list of colors offered tantalizing possibilities for his clients, including “Spanish Brown,” “Venetian Red,” “Dutch Pink,” and “King’s Yellow,” as well as putty for glazing windows in both black and white hues.

Over the next few years, Storrs’s business grew in both size and scope. The following year he advertised not just signs and house painting but also “paper hangings for rooms.” Within three more years, Storrs stocked “water colors in boxes – hair pencils – Drawing paper.” By the second half of the decade, Storrs had opened a new

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128 Vermont Centinel 11 December 1806, 18 December 1806.
130 Vermont Centinel 10 June 1802.
131 Vermont Centinel 7 June 1803.
132 Vermont Centinel 7 May 1806.
shop on Pearl Street, across from Reuben Harmon’s dry goods shop.\textsuperscript{133} By that time, Storr’s advertisements had increased significantly in length in order to accommodate his new array of products. Like the book lists of Levi Simmons and Samuel Mills, Storr’s advertisements extended nearly half the length of a newspaper page. He added “gilder” to his list of services, sold “a very large and extensive assortment of paints,” and promised “almost every article known or used in The Painting Business.” He soon included “paper cornices” in his line of offerings, and also added “profile likenesses, traced and framed” to his list of services.\textsuperscript{134} By 1810, Storr’s shop had become a destination for purchasing fashions of the home.\textsuperscript{135}

Storr’s business reflects the growing material wealth of Burlington during this period. Historian Larkin has indicated that in the early nineteenth century, painted houses were the domain of the well-to-do, since the average family simply let clapboards weather under New England sun, rain, and snow.\textsuperscript{136} Storr’s long list of dyes suggests that some Burlington residents had a taste and a budget for more than a standard “landscape of brown dwellings” to which Larkin alludes. The fact that Storr’s offerings evolved indicates that his clientele desired to dress their homes with the latest trends.\textsuperscript{137}

Burlington’s increased attention to home design and fashion also reflected the vision that Burlington belonged among the nation’s largest and most fashionable cities.

\textsuperscript{133} Vermont Centinel 29 July 1807.
\textsuperscript{134} Vermont Centinel 29 July 1807.
\textsuperscript{135} For more discussion on artisans who became merchants, see Sean Cadigan, “Artisans in a Merchant Town: St. John's, Newfoundland, 1775-1816,” \textit{Journal of the Canadian Historical Association 4} (1993): 95-119.
\textsuperscript{136} Larkin, 128.
\textsuperscript{137} Vermont Centinel 18 August 1809.
Larkin noted that, before the 1820s, smaller towns like Burlington had few architects among their lot. Instead, most houses were built by “builder-contractors” who learned their trade as apprentices and worked “almost entirely by eye and ear.”\(^\text{138}\) Often a builder worked in some other line of business during most of the year – such as coopering, cabinetmaking, or even farming – and he built only a handful of structures over his lifetime. After 1797 builders started to take advantage of new pattern books that were available from the nation’s printers – books that brought the latest building trends from Europe.\(^\text{139}\) With the help of those books, builders could reconstruct the classical architecture that had gained a following in the cities of Europe.

In Burlington, those who wanted to build houses and other structures had the aid of John Johnson, a surveyor, builder, and architect who offered lessons in “surveying, carpentry, and millwrighting, with all the necessary theories for each of the aforesaid branches.”\(^\text{140}\) Johnson promised “reasonable prices” and made himself “accountable for any mis-application of property, made by his direction.” Like other towns in the early republic, Burlington residents showed an interest in more stylized homes that were planned with a higher level of architectural sophistication. Moreover, this taste for the latest fashions was evident not just where the home was concerned. In 1806 Roswell Rider, a tailor, hired two “most approved” journeymen tailors from Montreal, noting in his next advertisement that “from [them] all may depend on the first fashions and prompt

\(^{138}\) Larkin, 108.


\(^{140}\) Vermont Centinel 23 December 1802.
attention.” Similarly, Ozias Buel advertised “the most fashionable Fall & Winter Goods” including “India cottons, vestings, & calicoes.”

Burlington’s taste for stylized architecture and clothing demonstrates that some residents planned for Burlington to evolve into a major city. An incident in the newspapers of 1806 underscores this point. In December of 1806, a handful of shopkeepers printed street numbers in their advertisements. Ebenezer H. Deming advertised his store at “No. 64, Pearl Street,” as did Ebenezer T. Englesby, “No. 1, corner of Court & Fair Street.” They both displayed their street addresses in large typefaces at the tops of their aids. Roswell Rider, a Taylor at “No. 16, Pearl Street,” did the same.

What makes the practice unique in Burlington is that the street numbers appeared rather suddenly in the town’s newspapers. Just a month prior, there was no such numbering system evident in the paper. Merchants, innkeepers, and artisans who advertised their Court House Square businesses referred to landmarks to set their location – such as “across from,” “next to,” or “near” the courthouse. In 1797 Robert Donnelly and James Hill, the publishers of Burlington’s first newspaper, included the following on their masthead: “Printed every Friday, by Donnelly and Hill, directly opposite the Court-House.” Arad Munn advertised a mill for cleaning grain at a location “a few rods south of the courthouse.” Amos Brownson wrote of his tin plate manufactory “opposite the court house, Burlington Bay.”

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141 *Vermont Centinel* 18 December 1806.
142 *Vermont Centinel* 30 October 1806.
143 *Burlington Mercury* 1 April 1796.
144 *Burlington Mercury* 13 May 1796; *Vermont Centinel* 3 April 1801.
By the end of 1801, however, Burlington businessmen referred to this area more formally as “Court House Square.” And then, in December 1806, three merchants from different parts of the town used street numbers to help customers find their way to their businesses. Even more strangely, the practice of numbering stopped as quickly as it started. By January, not a single business used a street address in its advertisements. Even the three business owners who had originally used the numbers stopped the practice the next time they advertised. Newspaper printer Samuel Mills was the next person to print numbers in an address, and that was not until three years later.

While town meeting minutes and newspaper editorials are both silent on why these merchants collaborated on the street numbering project, the incident does make clear that, by 1806, Burlington’s merchants were developing a specific vision for their new marketplace. The street numbering incident, though certainly small in scale, reflected a specific image for Burlington – one that followed more closely in the footsteps of large cities like Boston and Paris. Paris had begun numbering streets in 1805, and some Boston merchants listed street addresses in their advertisements as early as 1800.145 It is possible that Burlington merchants were fashioning themselves after those in the country’s larger cities, and attempting to adopt behaviors – like using street addresses – to better play the part.

By 1810, then, Burlington’s economy had grown into a dynamic marketplace. Where once there had been only one artisan to a sector, there were now two or three.

145 Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, Paris as Revolution: Writing the Nineteenth-Century City (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 28. For one example from Boston, see the advertisement for Samuel Coverley at “No. 10 Cornhill” in the Independent Chronicle (Boston) 29 May 1800.
Merchants and artisans engaged in business partnerships as a path to the opportunity and independence they expected of a frontier marketplace. They participated in an openly competitive economy and extended their business into the town’s hinterland. More importantly, the marketplace projected residents’ vision for their new town. By 1810 businesses coalesced at Court House Square, and the village center had begun to take shape. Merchants accommodate the expanding tastes of the marketplace and positioned themselves against the nation’s most successful commercial cities. They even tested out the use of street numbers, a practice that was just getting attention in the world’s largest cities. Burlington’s marketplace manifested the residents’ vision for the developing town.

2.3. Struggles and Challenges

Nonetheless, behind the fantastic growth of the Burlington marketplace stood a number of town inhabitants whose experiences were markedly less successful. The town selectmen singled out some of the Burlington’s poorer residents and identified them as a tax burden. A political elite excluded many of the town’s artisans from participating in town government. And by 1808, Burlington’s residents contended with a nationwide embargo, an event that took its toll on the economy and prompted five Burlington merchants to close their doors. Some residents even complained of the town’s growing penchant for material wealth and fashion: in 1809 a satirical newspaper columnist complained “of all rulers, fashion was the least tolerable….she was the greatest tyrant who ever oppressed the nation, and that the tailors, barbers, matuamakers [sic] and
milliners were her high chancellors and prime ministers.”\textsuperscript{146} This satire indicates that some residents did not embrace the vision of Burlington as a cultural and economic center. Burlington’s marketplace was neither open to nor prosperous for all the town’s residents.\textsuperscript{147}

Many artisans did not experience the same bountiful business growth as had John Storrs the painter. The experience of John Killips illustrates the trials that some new artisans experienced in Burlington. Killips came to Burlington around 1808 and began advertising his shoe and boot making business during the spring. Around the same time, the town selectmen instructed the constable to deliver to Killips and his wife Lucretia a “warning out” notice.\textsuperscript{148} “Warnings out” were citations issued to new town residents whose levels of poverty might become a financial burden to the town. Most warnings out during the early 1800s simply served to notify a new resident that he or she would not receive poor relief from the town. Like Killips, chair maker Luther Whitney and taylor

\textsuperscript{146} Vermont Centinel 27 October 1809.


\textsuperscript{148} “Warning out” was a common method for relieving town treasuries from the cost of poor care. The practice has roots in the seventeenth century, when residents “warned out” new town residents whom they considered undesirable to their community. In the early years of warning out, a town officer served a citation to the person or family in question and then escorted them to the town’s borders. By the eighteenth century, warning out had become more of a technicality: constables served citations but did not expect residents to leave town. By this time warnings out simply created a written record of those poorer residents to whom the town refused financial assistance. Most New England States discontinued the practice of warning out in the 1780s, but Vermont reinstated the practice from 1803-1817. See Josiah Henry Benton, Warning Out in New England, 1656-1817 (Boston, W. B. Clarke Company, 1911); Alden M. Rollins, Vermont Warnings Out (Camden, Maine: Picton Press, 1997), introduction.
Silas W.C. Chase also received warnings out from Burlington’s constable. All three of these men did manage to stay in Burlington for at least a few years. By 1809 Killips had rented a room in Samuel Mills’ new building on Court House Square, and by 1820 he shows up as the head of his household in the town’s census. Both Whitney and Chase each formed short-term partnerships with other Burlington artisans, and each afterwards managed to go into business alone.

The fact that all three of these artisans received warnings out conveys the seriousness of their struggle upon arriving in Burlington. The marketplace that bolstered the business of John Storrs was not as welcoming to Killips, Whitney, or Chase. Historian Lisa Lubow also has posited that the business climate of the early nineteenth century did not assure growth for all artisans. Studying Boston’s carpenters in this time period, Lubow has noted that many craftsmen became “the employees of others” as a professional class of entrepreneurial speculators took on the responsibilities of marketing and management.149

While Killips, Whitney, and Chase eventually found some success in their businesses, others did not. The town records for 1804 to 1811 list nearly 150 warnings out to people who had recently arrived in Burlington. With an average of thirteen to thirty warnings for each year recorded, this indicates that one to two percent of the town residents were without the financial resources to care for themselves. For most of these individuals, little to no additional information is available about their work, their

residences, or their lifestyles. They are absent from participation in town government, they do not advertise in the newspapers, and they do not show up in any of the censuses between 1790 and 1820. Fourteen of these people were women, and eight were identified as “negro.” The town’s poor population exists in great contrast to the vigorous market of Court House Square.

An editorial from the fall of 1806 reveals that Burlington’s residents were aware of this layer of Burlington’s society – of poor, landless folks who were relatively new to the young town. In a letter to the newspaper, the author, who signed himself “Common Decorum,” complained that “[w]hile all our respectable people are at church with their families, we too often observe men, strangers even to ourselves, from adjacent towns, occupied in this village in labor, completing houses, laying down water pipes or digging wells.” He added that “these vagrants and strangers, who come into town to obtain a little money by jobbing” had given Burlington its poor reputation as a place where “people hesitate not to labor on the Lord’s day,” Burlington, then, was home to a number of people who struggled under the financial stresses of resettlement. In addition, some townspeople grew conscious of these class differences, and even complained of them in the newspaper.

An attempt to incorporate a mechanics’ (or artisans’) society in 1806 hints at similar community tensions. A group of Burlington artisans met every three months in 1806, first at Lyman King’s tavern on Court House Square, and later at Adolphus

150 Vermont Centinel 20 November 1806.
Walbridge’s inn on College Green. By September, eighteen of Burlington’s artisans unsuccessfully petitioned the state legislature for permission to incorporate “in order to carry their Laudable assign into effect.” The petitioners represented a mixture of trades: three woodworkers, one house painter, two printers, three saddlers, and six men who made clothing, shoes, hats, or watches. Of the eighteen men listed, fifteen served the community in some capacity of the town government between 1790 and 1810. Many served as petit or grand jurors, and just over half acted also as hayward, lister, sealer, or pound keeper. Yet only two of the men on the list were elected to any special town committees (John Storrs and Moses Jewett). None of these artisans served in the capacities of town meeting moderator, selectman, or town clerk, all of which were the most selective of the town’s political positions. Instead, Burlington’s lawyers and merchants tended to fill these posts. Artisans, then, experienced limited opportunity in Burlington’s political structure. Moreover, the tradesmen may have been divided even amongst themselves: a newspaper notice for a meeting of the mechanics’ society hoped only for the attendance of every mechanic “of good character” in the town.

151 Vermont Centinel 2 July 1806.
152 Vermont State Papers, MsVTSP vol. 45, p. 829.
153 Beginning in 1804, clerk George Robinson noted that these positions were selected by ballot, while the other positions in town government were selected by hand vote. This would suggest that these positions were, in some way, more significant or protected by the town’s inhabitants.
154 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings, vol. 1 1787-1820, MS (Courtesy of the Local History Collection, Fletcher Free Library, Burlington, Vermont). This analysis is rough at best, since occupation information is incomplete for Burlington’s inhabitants. In addition, more information is available for 1800-1810 than for 1790-1800. Nonetheless, particularly for the 1800-1810 time period, evidence suggests that a professional elite held Burlington’s elected positions. Half of the selectmen from 1790-1812 can be attached to an occupation; of these, three quarters were lawyers (nine out of twelve), two were merchants, and one owned an inn. Five of the eight moderators’ occupations are known: four of these were lawyers, and one was a successful store owner and real estate speculator.
155 Vermont Centinel 28 May 1806.
While it was not impossible for an artisan to join Burlington’s political and social elite, it does seem that a good many of Burlington’s residents – artisans, “jobbers,” and the poor – had limited opportunities and successes in the young town. Others in town likely had a similar experience, including any one the seven young men who ran away from their terms of indentured service or apprenticeship before 1810. These included saddler Moses Jewett’s apprentice, Seymour Rossiter, as well as Charles Freeborn, the “indent ed negro boy” of UVM president Rev. Daniel Sanders. Also in this group were Jacob Johnson, Gardner Rite, Stephen Grayham, “Irishman” Michael McWhalon, as well as Levi Birchard West who twice ran away from painter John Storrs. They also included fourteen women who were warned out by the town constables, as well as the forty-five “blacks” that census-taker James Enos listed somewhat anonymously as a single entry in the 1810 census. These individuals did not partake in the comfort and wealth of Burlington’s growing frontier marketplace.

A significant backdrop for the challenges and rifts in Burlington’s economic community was a national trade embargo in 1807 and 1808. Caught in various maritime skirmishes with English and French vessels, President Thomas Jefferson tried to avoid

156 United States Census Office, *Population Schedules of the Third Census of the United States, 1810, Vermont* (Washington: National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, 1960). Enos’s records lists a line-item for the household of James Jarvey. It lists two men and three women; the number “45” seems to sit at the end of Jerry’s entry. In the opposite margin Enos has written, vertically, “1633 whites” and “45 blacks.” It is unclear whether Jarvey was the head of household for a home that included 45 African Americas, though it seems unlikely.

157 Howard B. Rock’s study of artisans in New York includes good examples of the tensions between apprentices and their masters. While the artisan-apprentice arrangement was preferred during the colonial period, it had started to lose its benefits by the turn of the nineteenth century. See Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979) 315.
warfare by using an economic boycott.\textsuperscript{158} In December of 1807, Jefferson forbade a large number of sea exports to other countries; the following March the president added a land embargo, forbidding any exports to cross the states’ land borders. Vermonters complained that, without their trade outlets to Canada, Vermont’s soils might as well be “useless trash.”\textsuperscript{159}

Jefferson’s embargo, in the words of one historian, attempted to “starve Britain into recognizing American’s neutral trading rights.”\textsuperscript{160} It didn’t work, for Vermonters – particularly those trading to British Canada via Lake Champlain – Jefferson’s experiment was economically devastating.\textsuperscript{161} In April of 1808, some Burlington residents convened a special town meeting to discuss a response to the embargo. The attendees elected seven residents – six lawyers and a merchant – to draft a letter to the president “praying for a modification” to the embargo. The letter shared that when Burlington residents first learned in December of an embargo “to provide against the dangers…upon the high seas,” they “applauded the wisdom” of the measure. They resolved to “suffer in common with their fellow citizens of the United States” and “patiently to submit” to the embargo. However, the Burlington residents added, with the additional land embargo in March, the

\textsuperscript{158} Jefferson’s embargo is an excellent example of how the new republic’s leaders weighed idealism against practicality in international politics. Rather than engage in war (which many Americans associated with Old World Europe), Jefferson used financial pressure to force his international agenda. Most historians fault Jefferson for erring too far on the side of idealism with respect to the embargo. For information on the embargo and Jefferson’s foreign policy, see Burton Spivak, \textit{Jefferson's English Crisis: Commerce, Embargo, and the Republican Revolution} (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979).

\textsuperscript{159} Sherman et al., 152.

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 152.

Burlington economy was now at risk. A large amount of pine lumber, as well as a shipment of pot and pearl ashes, lay on the lake and on the river banks and had now “become useless.” Valued at $400,000, Burlington residents complained that the cargo was “a dead loss to the owners” and that “the evils arising…in not receiving the avails, are incalculable.” They projected a drain of specie to the rest of the country without Vermont’s trade for Canadian coins; they also suspected that “our waving fields, whitened for the harvest will give place to their native briar and thistle” and that “husbands and fathers” would be “dragged from their afflicted wives…[to] take up their dwellings in a loathsome [debtors’] prison.” Surely, the residents of Burlington thought, Jefferson had made a mistake. They assured the president that “neither the vessels, seamen, or merchandize of the United States, are in danger of any belligerents of Europe on Lake Champlain” and wondered if the embargo “must have been imposed in reference to some other part of the United States.” Burlington’s residents sent their plea to Washington, D.C. and waited for a response.

Surprisingly, the embargo did not stifle the economy completely. It contrast, it actually prompted an increase in illegal trade to Canada. A New Hampshire editorial from a writer using the apt moniker “Ethan Allen” suggested how this might work: “suppose a man should drive a herd of hogs close up to the line of the United States, but not over, and a Canadian should accidentally make his appearance just within the boundary…with a basket of corn in his hand and should cry Pig – Pig – Pig…? Would it

162 Vermont Centinel 22 April 1808.
or would it not be a breach of the Embargo Law?"163 Indeed, it seems to have been common knowledge that smuggling had become usual practice. Samuel Mills even published in his newspaper that “a letter from Quebec, speaking of the beneficial effects of our Embargo, concludes thus – “God grant that your Embargo law may continue forever.”164

Despite the increased smuggling trade, however, the embargo brought hardships to the town. In the summer of 1808, the boycott took on new meaning in Burlington. A newspaper article from August 5th announced that “we have to record a very melancholy event which took place in this vicinity on Wednesday last.” The editor then described an event known to historians as the Black Snake Affair, a showdown on the Onion River between a group of smugglers and American customs agents. The customs officers boarded the smugglers’ large bateau near the mouth of the river and began to take it upstream. The boat, “besmeared with tar” and called the Black Snake, had become rather notorious in the area for its smuggling activities.165 The smugglers included seven Vermont residents from Alburg, Highgate, Swanton, and Milton; the ship’s captain was also a Vermont resident.166

During the pursuit, one of the smugglers shot and killed a customs officer as well as Burlington resident Jonathan Ormsby, who was just returning from work in his fields and, upon hearing a commotion, had proceeded to the bank of the river near his property.

163 Vermont Centinel 15 April 1808.
165 Hemenway, 345.
166 Sherman, et al., 154.
Officers of the town, with the help of “the spirited exertions of the people of this village,” managed to catch eight of the offenders and housed them in Burlington’s jail near the center of the village. The following day, a “vast assemblage of persons from this and the adjacent towns” attended the victims’ funerals. The attendees formed a procession “nearly a half-mile in length” which began at the court house and proceeded to the town’s burial ground. Burlington cabinetmaker and military officer Justus Warner pronounced military honors on the dead, and town residents continued to look for the “four desperadoes” who had eluded capture.

In the meantime, the town stewarded the care of the prisoners. Burlington baker John C. Youngman prepared meals for militia members who guarded the jail. People from the area provided rooms for the guards as well as rum, candles, dinners, blankets, and firewood. Members of the town militia – including Burlington residents Barnabas Spear, Norman Judd, Barnabas Hoos, and James McLaughlin – helped the state-sponsored guard protect the prison. Blacksmith Christopher Johnson fabricated the irons and shackles for one of the prisoners, as well as keys for the handcuffs. The prisoners’ trials began within a month at the Burlington court.167

While town residents collaborated and cooperated in the face of the Black Snake incident, the court trials also divided the community. During the course of the embargo Burlington had gained a poor reputation around the state as home of the Black Snake Affair. Residents from other towns launched accusations that Burlington’s merchants had supported the smugglers. A printed broadside from Rutland suggested that the

167 Vermont State Papers, MsVtSP vol. 73, pages 5-8, 17, 25, 33.
Burlington’s merchants “now begin to lengthen their faces, and pretend to feel regret for the transaction…they are partners in the guilt of the perpetrators, and they are accountable to their country and their God, for all the blood that has been shed.”\textsuperscript{168} The author insisted that “a large body of men, and more especially those in the higher walks of life” had dedicated themselves to “opposing the laws of their country” and had treated the “government and its officers” with “abuse, ridicule, and contempt.” Surely Burlington’s residents felt the heat of these accusations. Mills published an excerpt from a Troy newspaper, noting that it “took occasion to make some very favorable remarks respecting the inhabitants of this town.” He noted that this was a welcome compliment given the number of “unfounded reports against the people of Burlington that [were] in circulation” at that time.\textsuperscript{169}

The trial of smuggler Cyrus Dean garnered particular attention.\textsuperscript{170} Dean had escaped from the Burlington jail once before his trial. County sheriff Daniel Staniford then increased the guard to prevent “the destruction of the jail” and another escape. Staniford billed the legislature for “a second gallows after the first being torn down” and noted that he “found it necessary to personally attend [the jail] the whole time night and day.”\textsuperscript{171} He also billed the state for seven laborers who built the gallows and dug Dean’s grave, as well as for the coffin and burial clothes.

\textsuperscript{168} Nading Hill, 54.
\textsuperscript{169} Vermont Centinel 2 September 1808.
\textsuperscript{170} See The Trial of Cyrus B. Dean, For the Murder of Jonathan Ormsby and Asa Marsh before the Supreme Court of Judicature of the State of Vermont, at their Special Sessions Begun and Holden at Burlington, Chittenden County on the 23d of August, A.D. 1808 (Burlington: Samuel Mills, 1808).
\textsuperscript{171} Vermont State Papers, MsVtSP vol. 73, page 33.
It is unclear what role Burlington residents played in destroying the jail or tearing down the first gallows; however, there is evidence that Burlington residents were themselves passionately split over the guilt of the smugglers. One local historian has noted that, in choosing the jury for Dean’s trial, the “challenges peremptory, and for favor, were so numerous, that after an ineffectual attempt to fill up the panel, the court ordered a new venire for petit jurors.” Some residents noted that they had already “formed an opinion, that these men ought not to be punished.” It seems, then, the embargo had split the community politically. Prosecutor William C. Harrington lamented the role that party differences had played in the jury selection: “Have we not seen,” Harrington wondered, “measures taken and pursued by the prisoners’ counsel to sweep every republican juror from the panel by peremptory challenge? Have we not repeatedly heard this question asked: ‘Is such a juror a republican or a federalist? If the former he must not sit – if the latter he will answer our purpose.’” It seems that – dependent as they were on Canada’s trade – some Burlington residents believed that the smugglers had acted appropriately, and that the national government was in the wrong.

The embargo took its toll on Burlington’s economy. Samuel Hickok promised prices “as cheap as has heretofore been sold, excepting a few articles which are higher in consequence of the Embargo.” Guy Catlin and Joseph Jasper advertised “a handsome assortment of goods which are embargoed for the want of purchasers.” Storekeepers Zacheus Peaslee and Nathan Haswell had some fun with the concept of the embargo. In

172 Hemenway, 346-7.
173 Vermont Centinel 20 May 1808.
174 Vermont Centinel 5 August 1808.
an advertisement to collect monies owed to their store, they requested to debtors that “unless they call and settle…an ‘EMBARGO’ will be ordered by an Attorney to secure said demands.”\footnote{175}{Vermont Centinel 27 January 1808.}

The embargo also seems to have coincided with an increasing number of poor residents in Burlington. In 1809, residents reopened the discussion of whether to build a workhouse for the poor. This renewed a debate that had begun in the fall of 1807 when the town discussed building “a house of correction or workhouse for the purpose of confining and setting to work the poor of said town, and also all such vagrants, lewd, idle & disorderly persons as are or shall come to reside in said town.”\footnote{176}{Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 13 November 1807.} One must also wonder whether the embargo influenced the warnings issued to artisans like Killips, Merrill, and Chase. The constable served their warnings on May 3, 1808, just two weeks after Burlington residents drafted their letter of protest to President Jefferson.

2.4. Conclusions

From 1790 to 1810, Burlington’s marketplace exhibited the marks of a frontier economy. The surge in population facilitated a lively marketplace, and merchants and artisans sought to capitalize on that growth. Newcomers entered the market and competed for personal prosperity. Many merchants expanded their lines of goods and services and, in some cases, artisans evolved their businesses into merchant shops. Consumer wealth increased and town residents displayed the same tastes as found in the nation’s largest
cities. For businessmen like shopkeeper Ebenezer T. Englesby and painter John Storrs, the frontier marketplace was a robust and thriving place.

For others, however, the economy was more difficult to navigate. The embargo underscores the ways in which Burlington’s residents experienced the economy differently. By 1808 the number of merchants in town had plateaued and, in the next couple years, at least five merchants closed their doors. Residents viewed some new artisans – such as John Killips, Luther Whitney, Silas W.C. Chase – as a financial burden to the town. And still others failed to thrive with Burlington’s growth – including the anonymous “jobbers” who traveled to Burlington to work on Sundays, or the 150 men and women who were “warned out” of town and left no trace except a citation in the town book.

The embargo and the accompanying smuggling trade made differences and divisions more palpable to Burlington’s residents. Neighbors to the south accused Burlington’s well-to-do residents of treason. In this atmosphere, Burlington residents clutched onto whatever support they could get. One Burlington resident wrote an editorial to the paper hoping that “no vile slanderer assert that the ‘people of Burlington’ had any participation” in such treasonous activities. And a congregational missionary, passing through Burlington in 1809, wrote a farewell in the newspaper, noting that “the inhabitants of this part of Vermont, especially of this town, have been greatly
misrepresented abroad.” In addition to economic pains, the embargo took a psychological toll on Burlington’s residents.

Burlington’s economy, then, reflects two very different faces of a frontier economy. On one side there were challenges, poverty, and anonymity. These were the experiences of the town’s poor, the merchants who closed their shops, the artisans who could not penetrate the town’s political elite, and the newcomers and jobbers who were ostracized by the rest of the town. In contrast, the other side of the frontier economy brought opportunity, growth, and prosperity. The number of merchant shops quadrupled from 1796 to 1806, the number of artisans in the marketplace soared, and consumers had available to them a broader sampling of the latest fashions and luxuries.

The economy also provided a canvas on which Burlington residents could depict their vision. The street numbering project offers a good example. It is not obvious why a small number of Burlington businesses all listed their street addresses during the same month in 1806, nor is it clear why the trend stopped almost as quickly as it started. One possibility is that the merchants were marketing to customers who lived outside of Burlington. Another possibility is that, by adopting a trend from the world’s larger cities, merchants were creating an idea. The marketplace had transformed itself over this time period. During the early 1790s a few merchants had set up their shops on the waterfront and the Onion River falls. Soon more merchants and artisans clustered near the village center, and the village green came to be known as “Court House Square.” Burlington’s

177 Vermont Centinel 27 July 1809, 8 September 1809.
marketplace had evolved from a location into an idea: it was not just a geographical landmark but also the heart of Burlington’s prosperity.
Chapter 3 - Schools

In 1801, Burlington’s local newspaper ran an editorial entitled “On Libraries.” It praised “social libraries” as the “cheapest and most effectual mode” to disseminate knowledge “among the people.” The editorial also offered a formula upon which Burlington could model its own library. “A few neighbors,” it suggested, could join “together in setting up a library.” Each member paid “the sum of six or eight dollars at once, and a small annual payment besides.” Together the group would elect “some suitable person” and place the books in her or his care “to prevent carelessness and waste.” Otherwise, the editorial encouraged, there were “very few regulations.”

That same year, twenty-seven Burlington residents pledged money and books to launch the Burlington Librarian Society. The members formed due to “the great importance of establishing Public Libraries” for “the purpose of diffusing useful knowledge.” Doctor John Pomeroy brought a copy of “Winterbottoms History of America” to pay his one library share, while others – including University of Vermont president Daniel Sanders, town constable Benjamin Adams, and merchant Ebenezer T. Englesby – each paid a five-dollar fee and pledged to pay another “share” before he borrowed books from the society’s collection. Burlington’s saddler Moses Jewett pledged four shares, and Benjamin Boardman, Jr., a resident of nearby Colchester, promised ten shares. The members selected shopkeeper and former town clerk Zacheus Peaslee to

178 Vermont Centinel 27 July 1801.
179 Burlington Librarian Society, Meeting Minutes, 1802, MS (Local History Collection, Fletcher Free Library, Burlington, Vermont) 19 January 1802, 28 April 1802, 12 May 1802, 19 December 1802; Vermont Centinel 16 December 1802.
serve as librarian and treasurer. They also charged a committee with the task of developing a list of the “Books as may be deemed most proper” for the library to acquire. The society would secure the books on their list by either soliciting donations or purchasing the titles outright.

Together with the plan of gridded streets and central marketplace, Burlington’s Library Society offered yet another way that Burlington residents expressed a progressive vision for the town. By the turn of the nineteenth century, Burlington supported a full complement of primary and secondary educational options, including a town-wide system of district schools, a private academy, as well as boarding schools for girls. Sponsoring such a comprehensive educational offering was forward-thinking for a small town in the new republic. Residents also supported a number of non-academic educational options, such as the library and a substantial bookstore. Perhaps most importantly, the community members lobbied to bring Vermont’s first university within the town’s borders. Burlington’s portfolio of educational alternatives reflects that town residents viewed education as integral to the success of their community.

While the town’s menu of educational opportunities was comprehensive, its educational offerings also illustrated community tensions and divisions. A proprietor of the town library society lobbied to place the library close to his own home, thereby making the books less accessible to the rest of the community. In addition, the town repeatedly adjusted its school districts to respond to the increasing number of school-aged

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180 Burlington Librarian Society, Meeting Minutes, 19 January 1802, 28 April 1802, 12 May 1802, and 19 December 1802.
children in town. With redistricting came an increase in the number of clerks and more meticulous record-keeping about district resources. Even the university – viewed by some as the town’s crown jewel – sputtered and struggled to garner support during its first twenty years of existence. Burlington embraced a progressive educational program, but implementing the town’s school system was by no means a smooth process.

3.1. Schools and the Library

By the end of the 1790s, Burlington relied on an array of resources to educate the town’s young people. These included district schools, independent-pay academies, tutoring, and girls’ schools. By 1800 Burlington had a new university president who praised Burlington’s high levels of school enrollment (“nearly 40 Scholars… attended the Academy” and “about 50 more” students attended the “Town Grammar School”) as a selling point for Burlington’s new university.181 The vision of a town-wide school system that connected into a university represented a progressive educational model for the early republic. It was more representative of an urban center than of a rural town, and it demonstrated a forward-thinking approach to educational philosophy during the early republic.182 However, the growing enthusiasm for educational resources also had its downside. Town residents restricted access to books in the library books and they increased supervision to the town’s schools. The town itself was carved into smaller

182 For distinctions between rural and urban schooling options, see Carl F. Kaestle, Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860 (New York, Hill and Wang, 1985), chapters 1 and 2.
school districts that attended more to their own needs than to those of the larger community. The result was that the town’s educational resources were not as open and accessible as all residents might have hoped.

During the 1790s and early 1800s, education was a favorite topic of national leaders who sought solutions that would sustain the new republic. Schools sat at the center of a national debate on whether education should be accessible to the masses or limited to an elite few, and at the root of the dispute were questions about how education should fit into a new democracy. Advocates of universal education urged against adopting “the maxims of the Old World” and instead insisted that the new republic should extend educational access to everyone. Some argued that education was the remedy to the democratic mob, an anarchic phenomenon feared by many federalists of the time period. Advocates reasoned that common schools would “prepare our youth for the subordination of laws and thereby qualify them for becoming good citizens.”

The debate also touched on the appropriate administrative structure for schools in the new republic: should they exist independently or be part of a larger structure? Who should run them – the town, the state, or private citizens? Some lobbied for a free public school system that funneled children from grade school, to secondary academy, to college, while others were skeptical of the centralization that such a system required.

The debate continued through the middle of the nineteenth century, and the result was

183 Kaestle, 4-7.
186 Kaestle, 9.
that schools stayed under tight control of local communities rather than under the eye of the state.  

The foundation of primary education in Vermont towns was the ‘district school.’ In 1786 a legislative act provided that each county in Vermont should have a grammar school, and that each town should divide itself into school districts with a school house and teacher. The 1786 Vermont law provided that towns would pay the teachers in each district, though it is unclear whether towns followed this practice.

Historian Carl Kaestle has offered a description that helps explain why district schools were attractive to a new community like Burlington. Schools received funds from a variety of public and private sources, including taxes, state aid, family-paid tuition, and donated fuel and materials. They held classes in a one room schoolhouse – though in actuality Kaestle points out that “the first image that crumbles is that of the ‘little red schoolhouse’” since most schools were built of logs or unpainted clapboards. The schoolhouse was likely the only public building in the vicinity; this sometimes attracted competition among neighbors who sought to locate the building conveniently near their homes. A teacher often serviced schools in more than one district, and usually he or she boarded with the parents’ of students. Students’ attendance varied with the seasons, following the needs of planting and harvest, and district schools brought together children of different ages. While some teachers endeavored to group their students into

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187 Some New England states attempted to institute state-sponsored school systems in the 1780s and 1790s, but each of these programs stammered for support during the first half of the nineteenth century; see Lawrence E. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1876* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), chapter 5.
188 Lindsay, 4.
189 Kaestle, 13-14, 21-26.
“classes,” the fact that each student brought different texts to class hindered any chances for a singular curriculum. In this atmosphere, Kaestle has contended that the nineteenth-century schoolhouse was erratic. He posited that the goal of district education was simply “to provide children with rudimentary instruction at low cost under firm community control,” and that for rural and developing areas, it served that function well.

District schooling, therefore, was unstructured, malleable, and informal. It suited a new community because it provided the means to educate large numbers of students without a significant financial cost to towns. Burlington seems to have embraced the district school system. In 1790 residents split the town into two large school districts: one district was near the lake, and the other was inland, with the dividing line running from the “bridge east of the saw mill” at the Onion River to Shelburne Road.190 Within five years residents added a third district in “the south part of the town that is not considered in the other two school districts,” and still another year later residents voted “the house lotts of Burlington Bay be considered as a School District.”191 By 1807 the number of districts in town had grown to seven in number.192 In just under twenty years, the number of school districts in Burlington had tripled.

Part of the reason for this growth was an increase in the number of school-aged children in town. Between 1790 and 1800 the number of boys under the age of sixteen

190 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings, vol. 1 1787-1820, MS (Courtesy of the Local History Collection, Fletcher Free Library, Burlington, Vermont) 16 March 1790.
191 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 8 March 1795, 7 March 1796.
192 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 26 January 1807, 22 March 1808, 13 November 1807, 28 November 1807.
increased from sixty-six to 202, an increase of over 300 percent; the number of male and female children increased further over the following decade, from 1800 to 1810.¹⁹³

This higher number of school children instigated not only an increase in the number of school districts, but also an increased attentiveness to tracking those children. By 1805, Burlington’s town clerk had begun an annual record of “the number of children in each school district in Burlington…over 4 and under 18 years of age.”¹⁹⁴ He kept a record of each district’s school children for each year through at least 1812. No doubt much of this growth in school children resulted from the substantial number of new residents who came to Burlington between 1790 and 1810. Some of the growth also comes from the fact that it was easier for settlers to support children as their circumstances became more stable. The fact that Burlington’s town clerk kept close tabs on the number of school-aged children in each district suggests that the town sanctioned the district system for educating its young people.

While district schools satisfied the majority of primary school needs, some Burlington families sought other educational alternatives. In addition to the district schools, Burlington families had access to boarding schools, academies, and private tutoring. Historian Kaestle has labeled these as “independent-pay” educational options since they were funded more by tuition than by other sources. Children who attended these schools were more likely from the affluent families of merchants or professionals.

¹⁹³ Based on United States Census for Vermont for the years 1790, 1800, 1810.
¹⁹⁴ Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 3 September 1805.
In Burlington, a comprehensive series of independent-pay options prepared students to attend college. An advertisement for the “Burlington Academy” announced the school’s opening in mid-summer of 1796. The advertisement celebrated the boarding school for joining a full complement of education options in the community: “a common English School, a Grammar School for the preparation of young Gentlemen for College, and a School for the instruction of Misses.”

Rev. Chauncey Lee, an itinerant minister who had lived most recently in Sunderland, Vermont, taught the students in “Reading, Writing, English Grammar, Common Arithmetic, Geography, the Belles Lettres, and church Music if desired.” The Burlington Academy demonstrates that, by the late 1790s, Burlington had added secondary and independent-pay education options to round out the district schools in the community. Students also had the option to study with university president Daniel Sanders who acted as a private tutor to students for twelve dollars a year. Students went to Sanders for help with college preparatory subjects, and in 1799 Sanders noted that “several Students have made a progress in the languages, which, in a very short time will enable them to enter an University.”

By 1800, Burlington had developed an array of schooling options, some of which funneled students toward a university education.

The fact that Burlington supported many girls’ schools underscores that town residents had placed themselves at the forefront of the nation’s education debate. By the latter part of the eighteenth century, many of the nation’s schools had opened their doors

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195 Burlington Mercury 17 June 1796.
196 Lindsay 74, 55.
to girls but access still remained limited. Girls often attended district classes that were separate from the boys, and they received shorter sessions – for example, two hours in the early morning (e.g., 5:00-7:00 a.m.) before the boys’ session began. For many lobbyists female education fit nicely within the democratic experiment. Female education, like universal education for the masses, could save the republic, since educated girls would grow into educated mothers who passed their learning on to their children. In the words of one historian, women could “buffer the effects of change on their families by being better wives and mothers.”

In Burlington, the dialogue over female education took place in the town newspaper. In 1801 the Vermont Centinel printed an essay entitled, “On Female Education.” “Our ancestors, the first settlers of New England,” the author suggested, “brought with them many of their ancient prejudices, and this among others, that…female education was of little importance.” The author noted how earlier conventions maintained that if “daughters could manage their domestic concerns, with propriety, had learned their catechism [sic] by rote and could read the Psalter, their education was extensive and complete.” The editorial praised the new, progressive attitude that had evolved toward female education: “Hail happy era of refinement, that broke the shackles of superstition, enlarged the boundaries of the female mind…I sincerely congratulate you my fair

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198 Kaestle, 28.
200 Vermont Centinel 21 May 1801.
countrywomen.” The Burlington editorialist agreed with the nation’s leaders, insisting that “it is the province of the female sex” to “police…the family.” The author added that “more attention ought to be paid to the education females” since “to their charge is committed the rising hope of every nation.” According to the cultural beliefs of the period, then, education passed the democratic ideology from generation to generation. In the process it provided a self-perpetuating mechanism by which an orderly republic could sustain itself.

Female academies began in Burlington as early as 1803, when Mrs. Greene opened her “Burlington Boarding School for Young Ladies.” She charged twenty dollars per quarter and asked that “each young Lady” bring her own sheets and towels as she did not include washing in the tuition fee. Greene’s boarding school offered instruction in English grammar, writing, arithmetic, “Geography illustrated with the use of Globes,” history, and needlework; she also offered French, drawing, and music for an additional charge. “Above all,” she reassured her clients, she taught the “principles of Virtue & Morality, without which society can drive no essential benefit from the Individuals who compose it.”

201 Vermont Centinel 28 May 1801.
203 Vermont Centinel 9 June 1803.
Burlington’s attention to female education continued through the rest of the decade. In 1806 Miss Ross announced her school “for the tuition of Young Ladies” at a charge of two dollars per quarter. Three years later Mrs. Hannah Wait “and daughters” opened the “Burlington Female Academy” where they offered boarding and day rates, as well as music instruction. Burlington’s 1810 census records reflect that Wait had living with her nineteen girls under the age of twenty-six; this perhaps explains why she required her “scholars” to find “their own bed and bedding.” In addition, a Montreal girls’ school advertised directly to “the Citizens of Burlington, and of the State of Vermont in general” when they “extended and improved” their academy to include “whatever…is useful and ornamental in the Education of young Ladies.” Burlington residents sincerely embraced the possibilities of female education in the early part of the nineteenth century.

In the end, Burlington’s educational options reflected the trends of the times. The community offered district schools under the close eye of the town residents; they also developed independent-pay options for those students who sought to extend their education outside of the district schools. With the addition of female schools and the university, Burlington actively participated in a debate that pertained not only to education but also to the strategies of stabilizing a young democracy.

In addition to formalized schooling, Burlington residents had access to books. Reading and writing materials were available in Burlington from printer James Hill and

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204 *Vermont Centinel* 17 September 1806.
205 *Vermont Centinel* 7 July 1809.
206 Based on United States Census, 1810.
207 *Vermont Centinel* 2 September 1808.
from shopkeeper Ebenezer T. Englesby in the early 1800s. By 1806, printer Samuel Mills
brought bookselling to a new level, opening his “Burlington Bookstore” with an array of
reading materials for local residents. Some of his newspaper advertisements listed so
many book titles and genres that the ads ran over a page in length in the newspaper.

Mills’ success came, in part, from his ability to furnish books to the personal and
public libraries in town. Burlington residents had formed the town library society in
1801, and society membership included residents from different backgrounds including a
doctor, a druggist, at least two lawyers, a distillery owner, two innkeepers, three
merchants, a saddler, a hatter, and a carpenter. An 1801 newspaper editorial praising
“social libraries” described its benefits to the community. The books would be “much
better preserved…than if they belonged to individuals,” it stated, and they offered an
“advantage in the social intercourse of persons who have read the same books by their
conversing on the subjects which have occurred in their reading.” Thus Burlington’s
library society helped the community by lessening the burden of caring for books as well
as providing a common set of topics about which neighbors could converse.

While Burlington seems to have embraced the idea of accessible education, there
is also evidence that educational resources were limited. The library society held its first
meeting in 1801, but the society seems to have floundered a bit after its first gathering.
When the books’ committee convened two weeks later they reported that they were “not

208 Library societies existed during both the colonial period and the early republic and were the precursors
to public libraries. See Robert A. Gross, “Reconstructing Early American Libraries: Concord,
Edgar C. Reinke, “A Classical Debate of the Charleston, South Carolina, Library Society,” Papers of the
209 Vermont Centinel 27 July 1801.
prepared,” and subsequent meeting minutes offered little in the way of specific accomplishments. Eight years later, in 1809, Moses Catlin (owner of the flax seed mill at Onion River Falls) gave three hundred dollars’ worth of books to support “a donation Library.” Catlin’s gift indicates that he was frustrated with the library’s progress: he called for more community participation in the society and offered his own books as an incentive, hoping that other “such persons” would “enhance” the library by donating a dollar each year for the next half decade. Unfortunately, the newspapers tell nothing of the community’s response to Catlin’s offer. By the end of 1809, society members met once again to discuss whether “to move their Library to the College, or some other place.”

Not only did the library society struggle, but residents also became overprotective of library resources. When Moses Catlin offered his donation to Burlington’s library, he made one stipulation: that “the library always…remain in the Third School District, alias Catlinsburgh, in the town of Burlington.” This reflects a common dynamic among district schools in this time period, when the specific location of a new schoolhouse became a hurdle for community members. Historian Kaestle has described how “parents in a district often quarreled vociferously over the location of the schoolhouse, each wanting it as close as possible to home.” Another author described how neighbors required a school “precisely on the center of the district; and after measuring in every direction, the center had been discovered exactly in the centre of a frog-pond.”

Similar debates seem to

210 Vermont Centinel 26 May 1809, 1 December 1809.
211 Kaestle, 14.
have cropped up in Burlington with the case of Catlin’s proposed library. Much like Kaestle’s example, Catlin’s library illustrates how residents of the early republic grew protective of materials and resources. In Catlin’s case, he hoped to bolster the library’s holdings but also tried to ensure that he and his neighbors had greatest access to the books.

It is perhaps no coincidence that, a few months before Catlin’s proposal, Burlington residents exhibited a similar attentiveness to the lines between the town’s school districts. At the town meeting of 1809, residents appointed a committee to examine “whether any alterations are necessary to be made in the divisions of the school districts” in town.\textsuperscript{212} A couple weeks later the committee reported back on the “present situation of the several school districts,” recommending that it was “expedient” to “carve out one entire new district, by the name and description of District No. 8.”\textsuperscript{213} They created district 8 in the heart of Burlington’s village by pushing back the boundaries of districts 1, 2, and 3. Within a year, the eighth district had a teacher, Mr. Dodge, who advertised an exhibition in which “scholars” of the new eighth district would “give a specimen of their literary acquirements.”\textsuperscript{214}

Catlin’s library and the redistricting project indicate that town residents were somewhat possessive of town resources. Both incidents also coincided with a period of

\textsuperscript{212} Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 20 March 1809
\textsuperscript{213} Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 3 April 1809.
\textsuperscript{214} \textit{Vermont Centinel} 22 June 1810. School district no. 8 was bounded on the south from present-day College Street (the “highway leading from the North Side of the Court House Square”) and stretched north “two hundred rods” (or about two-thirds of a mile) past Pearl Street. The district’s eastern edge was present-day Willard Street (then called Middle Street), and its western edge was the lake (Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 3 April 1809).
intense housekeeping among Burlington’s town officers. Between 1805 and 1810, the town contended with a growing population of school-aged children which had increased 50 percent. What’s more, the first and second school districts were consistently larger than the others, and with the addition of District 8, these three areas of town had two and three times as many pupils as each of the remaining school divisions. At the same time, the town also continued to explore the needs for a work house, as well as whether to increase taxes “for the purpose of paying such debts as are now due” and to “meet such further demands and expences as may arise hereafter.” With so many financial concerns on the minds of community members – taxes, debts, the burden of supporting the poor – it is not hard to imagine that community members questioned whether the town tax was equitably distributed across Burlington variably-sized school districts.

3.2. University and Community

Like the town schools and libraries, the efforts to establish a university at Burlington portray the dual nature of the town’s vision. On the one hand, community members cooperated in activities to establish a state university. Their enthusiasm for the university project indicates that the institution fit within the residents’ vision for their community. The University of Vermont helped put Burlington on the map and gave the town an edge toward economic and cultural centrality in northern Vermont. However, the university also demonstrated community divisions. While residents pledged money to

215 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings September 1805, March 1806, March 1807, March 1808, March 1809, March 1810, March 1811.
216 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 20 March 1809.
found the institution, they failed to pay their debts well after students started to enroll. Moreover, the roster of graduates represented a sampling of only the more prominent families in town.

It is perhaps striking that – before the district school system and the library were in place – Burlington had sought a charter for the state’s first university. In the 1770s, Vermont’s leaders had laid the groundwork for “one university in this State…established by the direction of the General Assembly.” For the next few years there were scattered efforts from players in various parts of the state to house the university in their towns. Around 1778, for example, the president of New Hampshire’s Dartmouth College petitioned to become part of a nearby Vermont town; his goal was to lay a claim to Vermont’s intended college. Similarly, in 1785 a Westminster resident vied to locate the university in the town of his residence. The Dartmouth and Westminster proposals played off each other, each raising the ante of the other, until the bartering became a tiring issue for Vermont’s legislators and they struck the clause form the revised constitution.

Part of this early enthusiasm for establishing a home for the university came from an interest in acquiring the land and resources set aside for the school’s use. In 1779, a number of new Vermont towns wrote into their charters a provision to reserve

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217 College education was as an integral part of the republic’s educational philosophy. For histories of early colleges, as well as contrasts between colleges of the colonial period and the new republic, see Jurgen Herbst, From Crisis to Crisis: American College Government 1636-1819 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982); Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955) 185-200, 293-302.
218 Lindsay, 4.
219 Lindsay, 6, 11.
land “for the use of a seminary or college.” This added up to 29,000 acres of land spread over 120 towns throughout the state. The university had access to the resources from this land, including rents from tenants and compensation for lumber or stone cleared away by local residents. Whoever founded the university, then, would have access to the wealth of these university-owned lands.

The maneuvering to claim the college and its lands continued into the 1790s, and this time the efforts were more conclusive. In 1789 a former president of Harvard College, ousted from his post in Massachusetts and hoping to find a successful situation elsewhere, encouraged Colchester resident Ira Allen to take up the fight for Vermont’s first college. Allen took the challenge. His efforts included a personal pledge of £4,000 to “the Public” to purchase “provisions,” “materials,” and “labour,” as well as “a proper square” of land for college buildings, a “handsome Green,” and “Convenient Gardens.” Allen’s pledge included a gift of lands whose rent in “Wheat, Beef, Pork, Butter, Or Cheese” would serve as a continued source of income to fund the university’s activities. In return for this gift, Allen asked that Vermont’s legislators select “the place for erecting a College in this State at or within two miles of Burlington Bay.”

In October of 1789 Allen presented his own proposal as well as a list of additional “subscriptions,” or pledges, to the state legislature. In elaborating the benefits of placing the university in Burlington, Allen included that “buildings can be erected cheap” since “all Kinds of Materials” except for “Marble stone” may be “had within two miles.”

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220 Lindsay, 10.
221 Lindsay, 20.
222 Lindsay, 20.
noted that roads “from the back country may conveniently center at this Bay,” and that the college would gain the interest and donations from “the Province of Quebec & northern part of the State of New York where there are no colleges.” Allen also suggested the “Lands reserved for the use of the College” – that is, the 29,000 acres allotted in towns throughout Vermont – were located nearer the “Northerly Part of the State” and would yield greater returns in Burlington’s northwestern setting than if transported across a “greater distance.”

The legislators responded favorably to Allen’s package, but tabled the issue until citizens pledged more money. They assigned one man from each of Vermont’s seven counties to continue to collect donations, and Allen collected for Chittenden County. He enlisted other “agents” to help him in gathering funds to support a university near Burlington. By 1791, Allen and his collectors saw to it that more was “subscribed for Burlington than elsewhere.” One agent estimated that they had secured roughly $26,000 in pledges to establish the university in Burlington. Some suspect that Samuel Williams, the displaced Harvard president, continued to support Allen’s lobbying efforts, and perhaps even wrote a number of Allen’s memos to the Vermont legislature. In one note Williams urged that “it does not appear that the people are desirous or willing to erect [the university] at any other place than Burlington.” He noted that Vermont had “no monies for advance for this purpose” of a college, and urged that “a University cannot be

223 Lindsay, 19.
established in any place, unless the people shall so far agree in it as to be willing to bear 
ye expense of it.”

By 1791, Burlington’s lobbying efforts worked. Vermont’s legislators passed an 
act “for the purpose of founding an University at Burlington” in November of that year. 
Seven members of the “Corporation of the University of Vermont” met the same day that 
the legislation passed. They selected a committee of trustees, authorized purchase of 
records book, and approved a committee to collect existing and future donations. The 
state’s first college, it seemed, was under way.

Efforts, however, moved along slowly for the rest of the 1790s. One university 
historian has blamed the trustees for the stagnated efforts, suggesting that they were 
“bogged down immediately” and had become “apparently overcome with paralyzing 
lethargy.” Despite this criticism, the group did make some progress. The year after the 
charter was approved, the trustees met in Burlington “to agree on the spot where the 
college should be erected.” By the time the trustees arrived, local residents had “fixed on 
different places for the College buildings” and, in the words of one trustee, the delegation 
“had to visit, & survey the different places the parties contended for according as their 
interest swayed them.” The trustee lamented that they “spent a whole week in this 
business” until they selected a spot “on condition, that Ira Allen, who was owner of the

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224 Lindsay, 18, 24-5.  
225 Lindsay, 29-31.
soil would secure to us by Deed fifty acres of land for buildings & Gardens, & pastures for the officers of the Institution.”

Unfortunately, the corporation encountered more obstacles than successes during the 1790s. Many of these involved land acquisition. A few months after selecting the college site, trustees discussed a dispute with Ira Allen “with respect to the true construction of his memorial as it regards his donation of three thousand pounds.”

Another couple years passed and the trustees continued their search for land, this time applying “to the legislature for a part of the society [for the Propagation of Gospel] lands… in this state for the use of the University.” Likewise, they also asked a university advocate to approach the New York state legislature for land that the university might be able to use. In 1795 Allen left the state on what would become a six-year hiatus in France and, in the summer of 1800, the trustees brought legal action against him. They directed a deputy sheriff to “attach the goods, chattels, and estate of Ira Allen of Colchester to the total of twenty-five thousand dollars” and, if found in the vicinity, to “take his body.”

By 1802, the trustees abandoned their hope of collecting on Allen’s pledge, and by 1803 Allen had left Vermont for Philadelphia, where he remained until his death in 1814.

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226 Lindsay, 32, 78.
227 Lindsay, 33.
229 Lindsay, 60.
Despite these obstacles in obtaining land, the trustees did manage to complete one building project before 1800. In 1794 the trustees appointed Joshua Stanton to “contract & build” a home for the future president of the university. They planned a two-story house with four rooms on each floor, a hipped roof, two chimneys, and “a good kitchen annexed to it.” Little progressed on this “college domicile” until 1796 when Stanton contracted with Daniel Hurlburt, a Burlington resident and selectman of many years, to “complea[t] the President’s house.” Stanton and Hurlburt managed to hire two men to dig a cellar for the house but since few subscriptions or rents had been collected, the university had insufficient funds to compensate the men for their labor. Stanton devised some creative ways to turn up the money to pay the labor and materials costs. In the case of the two diggers, he tried to persuade a relative of the two workers to compensate them for the work they had already completed on the house cellar. He also “suffered [him]self to be sued” to pay some of the construction debts. Despite pledges of land, money, and materials, the university had little to show for its efforts. The trustees had completed the president’s house, but as one historian has pointed out, as yet “there was no president.”

To say the least, the university faced other obstacles in its first decade. Among these obstacles were the problems in collecting subscriptions. In addition, many members of the university corporation lived out of state, and in fact only three members of the corporation were “in the neighborhood.” Of those, just one man lived in Burlington proper, and he moved to Vergennes shortly after his appointment. Before 1799, the

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231 Lindsay, 48.
232 Lindsay, 54.
university lacked teaching and administrative staff. To add to these challenges, Burlington’s university faced growing competition from the town of Middlebury. Between 1798 and 1800, representatives of that town approached the legislature three times in hopes of gaining a college charter for their town. The state assembly granted their third request to Middlebury in November of 1800.

The competition from Middlebury reinvigorated efforts among Burlington’s university advocates. Historian Julian Ira Lindsay has suggested that it was Burlington’s own residents, and not the university’s trustees, who helped the university finally take shape.233 “The people of Burlington were becoming restless,” Lindsay observed, and they became more involved in university affairs. In 1799, a group of residents asked the trustees to make more progress in developing the university and, two years later, petitioned for “the immediate appointment of a president or other College officers.” Two residents rode to Vergennes to invite Rev. Daniel Sanders, an available minister and Harvard graduate, to come to Burlington; Sanders accepted and in 1800 was appointed the university presidency.234 The trustees hired Burlington resident David Russell to be the new “agent of public buildings,” and asked three local men to serve on the corporation. When one of the trustees failed to deliver a plan for the classroom facility, it was the local residents who finished the assignment.235 Residents also collected more new subscriptions and loans of goods and materials to push along the building projects.

Writing a number of years later, President Sanders recalled that “the establishment of a

233 Lindsay, 64-66.
234 Lindsay, 59
rival College did not discourage the patrons of the University,” but “served rather to awaken a latent spirit of increasing energy.”236 By 1800 the university was better poised to begin its mission of instructing students: they had hired a president and they were ready to build facilities for teaching. Just a few months after Middlebury secured its charter, laborers in Burlington had already fired 300,000 bricks, had contracted for clearing timber, and had arranged to bring stone to the green reserved for the college.

Construction of the “college edifice,” or classroom building and dormitory, began in the spring of 1801. The trustees employed a Middlebury mason and a crew of twelve brick layers to oversee the brick and stonework, and President Sanders laid the first stone in the building’s southwest corner. Within a year the masons had completed three stories’ worth of the work, and the year following the masons completed the walls, raised the roof, and added a forty-foot tower.237 Building agent David Russell ran a newspaper announcement praising the building efforts, noting that “those who read this information…will say, ‘I am glad to find that the building is like to go on, it will be of great utility in general, and particularly beneficial to Burlington and the towns around it.’” Russell suggested that “many will torn aside to view the foundation, be pleased with the delightful situation of the ground on which it is laid, having such a commanding view of lake Champlain.”238

While Russell was pleased with the university’s progress, others criticized the size of the structure. President Sanders recalled that “the extent of the intended building was

236 Lindsay, 58.
237 Tolles, 3; seventh illustration plate (“University Hall”) in Lindsay.
238 Vermont Centinel 18 June 1801.
condemned by most” for its excessiveness. The building is said to have cost around $35,000, and it housed a chapel, halls for society meetings, medical studies, and recitation, a mineral museum, a philosophical room, and forty-six dormitory rooms for boarded students. Sanders, Russell, and Burlington doctor John Pomeroy all defended the building’s large size to its objectors, urging that “they builded [sic] for posterity and that a great building would promise greater liberality.” While some area residents believed the building was too large, other local residents anticipated growth and expansion.

The university held its first graduation ceremony in 1804, the same year that students first moved into the partially finished building. Before that year, students had lived in the president’s house with Sanders, his wife Nancy, their children, and an “indentured negro boy” named Charles Freeborn. Sanders taught all of the university’s classes; he also preached for residents of the town, farmed the “twenty acres or so” around the house, and published a book. Sanders hired two different tutors from 1804 to 1806; neither of these men remained long with the university. In 1806 Sanders finally hired Dartmouth College graduate James Dean who became the university’s first professor in 1808. By 1806 Adolphus Walbridge advertised to “Students at the UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT” that he would board them in his inn for $1.25 each week. The university had gained momentum at last.

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239 Lindsay, 59.
240 Vermont Centinel 2 April 1806.
241 Lindsay, 68.
242 Lindsay, 105-6
243 Vermont Centinel 17 September 1806.
There is plenty of evidence that the university project garnered support from the community of Burlington. Despite their delays in paying subscriptions, Burlington residents pledged more money and support than any other community in 1790. Similarly, once building efforts began community members offered striking examples of generosity and support. For example, David Russell appealed to local residents to supply provisions and produce for the building crew. In one newspaper advertisement, he extended “a call on all those who ever mean to lend their aid in the erection of the new building, to do it without delay.” 244 “It will therefore be in the power of every one to do something,” he continued, urging neighbors not to “wait to enquire what is wanted, but bring such as they have, it will be accepted cheerfully, however trifling.” 245 Similarly, the “ladies in the village” contributed $150 to purchase a 300-pound bell for the tower. President Sanders’ wife Nancy contributed five dollars in silver toward this end. 246 These examples suggest that, certainly, university-building was a community effort.

The university project also enjoyed the support of some of Burlington’s most wealthy and politically-active residents. Support for the university came from the town’s most successful professionals and merchants, including lawyer David Russell, judge Samuel Hitchcock, Vermont state attorney William C. Harrington, merchant and real estate mogul Thaddeus Tuttle, merchant Samuel Hickok, doctor and eventual professor John Pomeroy, and painting merchant John Storrs. 247 These men represented, in historian

244 Vermont Centinel 18 June 1801.
245 Vermont Centinel 18 June 1801.
246 Lindsay, 63.
247 Lindsay, 49-50.
Lindsay’s words, “some of the best men available in the state.” They took an active interest in university affairs, including petitioning the corporation to find a president and coordinating the logistics of subscription collection and building activity.

Despite this support, however, the university encountered a number of obstacles. Perhaps the most stubborn barrier was the trouble in collecting debts. In 1807 Burlington merchant Samuel Hickok advertised that “the committee for finishing the College edifice” had turned over debtors’ accounts to a lawyer for collection. The university owed its president over $1,550 in unpaid salary, and Sanders himself soon embarked on an effort to rebuild the university’s treasury. In the winter of 1807, he set out on horseback to various towns – including Hinesburg, Starksborough, Richmond, Bolton, Moretown, Waitsfield, Warren, Roxbury, Danville and Braintree – to survey the college lands and collect rents that were past-due. Despite these efforts, the debt situation did not improve and four years later Sanders embarked on another journey to collect unpaid rents. By 1811 the university owed fees to Sanders ($2138.98), David Russell ($7904.04), William C. Harrington ($317.84), John Pomeroy ($200), and new professor James Dean ($847.15). In today’s currency, the university’s debts would total nearly two million dollars.251

The difficulty in collecting debts suggests that, despite a widespread willingness to support the university in concept, the project was not always coveted in reality. It took

248 Lindsay, 67.
249 Vermont Centinel 9 December 1807.
250 Lindsay, 75.
251 Debts to Sanders, Russell, Harrington, Pomeroy, and Dean totaled $11,408 in 1811 dollars. This converts to $1,970,700.66 in 2005 dollars based on an “unskilled wage rate” conversion.
nearly ten years after incorporation to break ground on the classroom building, and the university struggled to secure rents and land ownership. One historian has even noted that the College Green was “little by little, piece by piece…alienated” from the university as town residents purchased plots around the college. Students and faculty “could not gain access to dormitory or classrooms except by trespassing the properties of others which completely surrounded the college building.”²⁵² It seems, then, that some members of the community were less invested in supporting Burlington’s college-building efforts.

Lindsay has suggested that it was the “people of Burlington,” and not the university’s corporate members, who propelled the university to fruition. The trustees “seemed not to care whether the lands were rented or not…. They did not even suppose that Mr. Sanders might like to receive his promised salary,” Lindsay quipped. “Why worry?” Lindsay continued, “Let Burlington do it.”²⁵³ Despite the cooperation of local citizens, however, there is reason to believe that the Burlington community was split in its support of the university project. The university may have benefited only a certain sector of the community. Students’ surnames included Pomeroy, Russell, Sawyer, Allen, Harrington, Buel, Loomis, Hitchcock, and Chittenden. This roster echoed the names of the community’s most noted members – men who held the town’s most selective political posts, were members of exclusive social groups, or were part of the economic elite. Certainly there were graduates from the artisan sector, including Jacob Collamer who

²⁵² Lindsay, 65.
²⁵³ Lindsay, 66.
was likely a relative of a town carpenter, but these names were few in number.\textsuperscript{254} The university’s roster lacked the names of children of Burlington’s less prominent residents such as Simon Backus, Ephraim Leak, Jenks Young, Calvin Snell, and John VanSicklin. While the institution gained broad support from the community’s social, economic, and political elite, it is less certain how much the town’s laboring class craved the presence of a college.

The university was of great symbolic significance to Burlington. While it is unclear whether the university’s supporters extended beyond the community elite, it does seem that those who championed the project did so with verve. And so the question remains: why was building a university so important to local residents? Why did towns vie for the university in the 1780s, and why did Vermont’s university attract the interest of college presidents from Dartmouth College and Harvard University? Some of the answers come from Ira Allen in 1789. He noted that “establishing a regular seminary in this Place would annually draw cash from a neighboring Province & States.” He added that “the sooner the Legislature establish the Place for the College…[and] prepare materials for the Buildings &c. the better – Doubtless many donations may be obtained in New Lands now that cannot be had in a future day.”\textsuperscript{255} A university could attract economic activity to the town.

\textsuperscript{254} Lindsay, 82. Surname information based on graduation announcements in the \textit{Vermont Centinel}.
\textsuperscript{255} Lindsay, 19.
Perhaps more than these economic benefits, however, was the psychological comfort that a university brought to a frontier town like Burlington. Allen remarked that “having a desire to make the Place I have chosen for my residence respectable by the Establishment of Liberal Arts and Sciences I therefore name Burlington for that purpose.” For Allen, a cultural and scholarly institution brought respectability to the young town. Perhaps he was right, since the college’s presence did in fact command the attention of visitors. Rev. Timothy Dwight observed in 1808 that “the college [edifice] is a copy of those at Princeton, Providence, and Dartmouth, but is handsomer than either of them.” And a visitor to Burlington in 1832 noted that “on the summit of the hill is the College situated so high that you can see it long before you get into town,” adding that it was of “singularly dazzling appearance.” Indeed, the university garnered just the attention that local residents expected it would.

3.3. Conclusions

When the Burlington Academy opened in 1796, it advertised that the school was “designed to embrace all the objects of Academic Education.” Burlington’s commitment to education tells an optimistic tale of a frontier town that carried out a vision of economic progress and cultural leadership. The community believed in the power of

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256 Richard Wade made a similar argument regarding the cultural rivalry between Louisville and Lexington, Kentucky over Transylvania University; see Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790-1830* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1959), 233-242, 331-34.
257 Lindsay, 19.
258 Tolles, 1.
259 “A Travellers’s Account of Bellow’s Falls and Burlington in 1832,” *Vermont History* 36, no. 4 (1968): 212. The original college edifice, built from 1801-1807, burned in 1824. This traveler refers to a second domed building that the college built soon after that fire.
education and the importance of higher learning. Community members used their education system to participate in a dialogue about the stability of the new republic. Burlington’s schools exhibited many progressive trends: a strong tradition of locally-run, district schools, a mix of independent-pay options including girls’ schools. The also laid claim to the state’s first university.

Yet Burlington’s approach to education also reveals that the vision was neither shared nor enjoyed by all residents. Community members grew possessive of the resources available in their neighborhoods, and district lines carved the town into separate parts. Even the effort to build the state’s first university – the pride and joy of community members – lacked support among some community residents. Just as Burlington’s economy exposed rifts among community members, the town’s educational system also revealed that divisions plagued this developing frontier town.
Chapter 4 - A Church

In reviewing his thoughts on Burlington’s university, Asa Burton, a conservative minister and university trustee from Thetford, called university President Daniel Sanders “the most unfit person they could have well appointed.” He complained that “the President for a whole year never convened [the students] for prayers either morning or Evening.” Burton and a few other board members “exerted” themselves to “render the College respectable.” But in 1810 Burton resigned as a trustee and quickly aligned himself with Middlebury’s college.  

Burton’s words reflect another source of community tension in the first decade of the nineteenth century: religion. From its beginning, the university charter had outlined that it “not tend to give preference to any religious sect or denomination whatsoever.” While some praised the university for this nondenominational foresight, Burton and other conservatives objected to the university’s credo of tolerance. Many communities in the early republic relied on the town church to proffer religious values and teachings, and, to people like Burton, Burlington lacked the proper attentiveness to worship. Part of the challenge was that the church itself was slow to develop as a Burlington institution.

By 1810 a drama concerning the town’s first church had been unfolding for half a decade. The town had not even formed a church until 1805, and in that year it was comprised of only fourteen members, including Sanders and his wife Nancy. The town lacked a dedicated minister, and church meetings took place either at members’ homes or

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260 Lindsay, 79-80.
261 Lindsay, 30.
at Burlington’s court house. By 1810, Burlington’s religious landscape had changed. Sanders himself broke ranks with the original church members and, along with 140 other residents, began attending the services of a rival sect. Some members of the community filed a statement with the town clerk that they did “not agree in religious opinion with a majority of the inhabitants of this Town.” Dr. Daniel Coit, son of one of Burlington’s earliest residents (and inventor of “Doctor Coit’s Family Pills,” a “prevention and cure of the most common disorders incident to mankind”), maintained official ties to one minister but attended the services of another.  

Perhaps most strikingly, the town now had two churches, two ministers, and nearly two hundred church members; this was in stark contrast to twenty years prior, when Burlington residents relied on services of other towns and did not even have an itinerant minister preaching within its borders. The drama that unfolded around Burlington’s first church reflects not only the growing pains of a newly forming town but also the splits that could occur when settlers endeavored to more specifically define what they envisioned for their own future.

4.1. Early Religious Activities

During the early years of Burlington’s settlement, religious practice was regular but informal. Many sects – including Baptists, Protestant Episcopalians, and Methodists – had organized in Vermont as early as the 1760s. Burlington’s own records show a

262 “Doctor Coit’s Family Pills.” broadside MS (Edward G. Miner Library, University of Rochester Medical Center, Rochester, New York, n.d.).
consideration for preaching around 1791, with the first dedicated minister coming to
town just before 1800. Nonetheless, Burlington did not organize a church until 1805, and
the town operated without a dedicated meetinghouse until 1812.

Burlington struggled to find a minister willing to settle in the town. Records first
show a concerted effort to hire a preacher at the March meeting of 1791, when voters
raised a tax of two pence to pay for preaching. They appointed Phineas Loomis as “a
committee” to hire a minister for the town. But for much of the 1790s, preaching in
Burlington was rather happenstance. The year 1793 brought what one historian called the
“first instance of public religious instruction in Burlington of which anything definite can
be said,” when Rev. Cotton M. Smith of Connecticut visited the town as part of a twenty-
two-town tour. Like many itinerant preachers who visited Vermont, Smith commented
on the dearth of ministry in the area. He recounted that “women traveled barefoot through
the woods for miles…to hear a sermon." Rev. Nathan Perkins made similar
observations about the area: “Land extraordinarily good all along the lake and for twenty
miles back. People troubled with fever and ague. Colchester and Burlington all deists and
proper heathen.” Within a couple years – around 1795 or 1796 – preaching in
Burlington became more consistent when Chauncey Lee ministered “a considerable part

263 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings, vol. 1 1787-1820, MS (Courtesy of the
Local History Collection, Fletcher Free Library, Burlington, Vermont) 15 March 1791.
264 The Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the First Church (Burlington, Vermont, 1905), 11.
265 The Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the First Church, 11.
266 T.D. Seymour Bassett, Outsiders in Vermont: Travelers’ Tales over 358 Years. (Brattleboro, Vermont::
of the time” in the new town, in addition to instructing students at the Burlington Academy.267

There are also clues that Burlington’s residents relied on surrounding towns for preaching.268 Burlington was part of the Vergennes and Charlotte circuits of Methodism in the 1790s and into the early 1800s.269 And in 1791 some Burlington residents joined ranks with Williston to form a new ecclesiastical society.270 During the early years of settlement, Burlington had within its own borders few resources for religious practice. Those resources that did exist came from the temporary preaching of ministers traveling through the area, or from the societies already organized in neighboring townships.

Finally, in 1799, Burlington found a minister who committed to living in town. In that year David Russell and Dr. John Pomeroy – both prominent residents in Burlington – learned that Rev. Daniel Sanders had just completed his term in Vergennes. They rode south and asked Sanders to minister in Burlington, offering him $400 a salary that they would pay personally.271 Within a year Sanders also accepted a post as the president of the new university, splitting his time between preaching for the town and teaching the university’s classes. Even with his university responsibilities, Sanders seems to have preached regularly, often in the court house and sometimes at homes of town residents;

267 W.S. Rann, ed., History of Chittenden County, Vermont, with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Some of its Prominent Men and Pioneers (Syracuse, New York: D. Mason & Co., 1886), 518.
268 For more on itinerant preaching on the frontier, see Malcolm J. Rohrbough, The Trans-Appalachian Frontier: People, Societies, and Institutions 1775-1850 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 146-152.
269 Rann, 519.
270 Petition to the legislature of Vermont,” (Vermont State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Montpelier, Vermont), MsVtSP, vol. 18, 232, 4 January 1791.
271 The Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the First Church, 12; Mrs. Henry J. Nelson (revised by Effie Moore), Chronicles of the First Congregational Society (Unitarian), Burlington, Vermont (Burlington, Vermont: Lane Press, 1919), 8-9.
he also presided over weddings and funerals of community members, and delivered sermons at the Burlington chapter of the freemasons.

Since Burlington did not keep town records from 1797 and 1803, it is unclear whether the town felt the need to seek a full-time preacher during Sanders’ tenure.272 One historian has stated that Sanders “filled his post as town preacher to the entire satisfaction of the community,” but that “of the immediate results of his ministry there is no clear evidence remaining…there is no record of any revival here.” She speculated that there were few revivals during Sanders’s tenure because “there was no church to assist the preacher” and “he was unable to give any portion of his time to personal and parish work.”273 Thus, while Burlington residents certainly enjoyed the community benefits of a preacher (someone to officiate over funerals and weddings, and someone to deliver sermons on nearly a weekly basis), they did not receive Sanders’s full attention. Indeed, there were certainly signs that at least some Burlington residents believed their town needed to step up its commitment to preaching. When Jericho raised the first Congregational meetinghouse in Chittenden County, the new building excited praise and longing from the publishers of Burlington’s newspaper: they called the raising an “auspicious event” and hoped that “the laudable example of Jerico, may excite a suitable spirit of imitation in all the sister towns.”274

272 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 5 March 1804.272
273 The Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the First Church, 12-13.
274 Burlington Mercury 15 July 1796.
4.2. Organization and Dissent

Around 1805, Burlington residents initiated efforts toward more formalized worship in Burlington. With more resources and stability, community members hoped to bring a full-time minister to the town as well as to build the first meetinghouse. These efforts coincided with the Second Great Awakening, a period of increased religious attentiveness that was characteristic of the early republic. Erecting the meetinghouse would put in place another component of residents’ vision for Burlington: the ability to worship in a dedicated church. However, in the process of formalizing worship, the community uncovered divisions. Some community members made a written record that they disagreed with the religious beliefs of the town, and by 1810 the community had split into two separate church societies. The process of building a church and hiring a minister offers a conspicuous example of community division in this frontier town.275

First, residents signed a covenant and formed a church society. In the winter of 1804-5, Daniel and Nancy Sanders joined twelve other residents at Moses’ Catlin’s house in Burlington’s main village. The meeting included members of seven Burlington families, and nine of those present were women. Sanders drew up an agreement for the meeting’s attendees – a “confession and covenant” – and read it aloud at the following Sunday’s service. The fourteen attendees approved the covenant, and Sanders

275 Schisms of this sort were common to the time period Gerald F. Reid provides an excellent account of how socioeconomic shifts among town residents connected to religious schism; see Gerald F. Reid, “The Seeds of Prosperity and Discord: The Political Economy of Community Polarization in Greenfield, Massachusetts, 1770-1820,” Journal of Social History 27, no. 2 (1993): 359-374.
pronounced the group a “regular church of the Lord Jesus Christ established in Burlington.” One historian has speculated that the church formed, in part, because of the growing demands on Sanders’s time. “It is no wonder,” she posited, “that…after nearly six years of double duty in college in addition to his preaching – the minister of Burlington felt himself to be overburdened.” A few months after the church formed, eleven Burlington residents approached the town clerk George Robinson and requested that he announce a meeting of the town’s residents for the following month. Robinson posted a broadside at six locations throughout the town; the poster announced three main agenda items, all of which revolved around issues of worship. The town discussed whether to form a society “for the supporting of social and public worship,” whether to build a meetinghouse or choose an existing home to serve as a place, and whether to “take measure” to hire a minister in the town. At the meeting two weeks later, in mid-June, thirty-one residents voted in favor of forming the society. Robinson’s town meeting minutes emphasize that of the voters, “not one voted in the negative,” and “the society was formed.” They became the “First society for Social and Public Worship in the Town of Burlington.” Clearly the town residents were rather anxious to open their first meeting of the society, since Robinson closed his notes by writing “Town meeting closed, and Society meeting opened.” By the end of 1806, Burlington residents had organized themselves into a church and a worship society, and in the process had taken their first steps toward a more formalized practice of religion within the community.

276 The Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the First Church, 12-13.
277 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 15 June 1805.
278 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 15 June 1805.
Despite these steps, the rest of the decade moved slowly in working toward formalized worship. The group discussed their other two agenda items – whether to build a meetinghouse and hire a full-time minister – but for there was little progress on these measures. In July of 1806, the society gathered again at the court house, this time to determine if “the Society will agree to give the Rev. S. Willard a call to settle in the Gospel Ministry.”\textsuperscript{279} They did in fact agree to invite Willard to Burlington, but the minister declined. Other ministers passed through town and lent their temporary services to the community; residents extended an invitation to at least one other minister over the next couple years, but in the end Burlington continued without a settled minister through the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{280}

The town clerk’s notes suggest that Burlington exhibited unanimity of thought on matters of religion. He wrote that no one “voted in the negative” with regard to the society, and though he makes no mention of abstentions, his meticulous note-taking indicates that abstentions were unlikely. Yet it does appear that there was some level of disagreement among Burlington residents on the church issue. Over the course of the next couple years, a small number of residents declared in writing that they did “not agree in the religious sentiments with the majority of the inhabitants of the Town of Burlington.” In fact, twenty-six men went on record as disagreeing with Burlington’s religious majority between June of 1805 and April of 1807.

\textsuperscript{279} Vermont Centinel 2 July 1806.
\textsuperscript{280} The Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the First Church, 13-14.
Historian Edith Fox MacDonald has offered a reason for their statements. She relays that, at the beginning of the republic, all Vermonters were expected to pay taxes to support the church in town. In the early 1790s, however, a state law eased the burden of taxation on any resident who could prove membership in a different church. Dissenters proved their faith by making a sworn statement with the town clerk. Burlington residents likely presented this small flurry of dissent because of the formation of the church and religious society. By going on record with their dissenting religious opinions, these residents avoided any economic obligations to the new religious organizations.\footnote{Edith Fox Macdonald. \textit{Rebellion in the Mountains: The Story of Universalism and Unitarianism in Vermont} (Concord, New Hampshire: The New Hampshire Vermont District of the Unitarian Universalist Association, 1976) 3.}

The statement of at least one dissenter suggests that there was some level of disagreement when the society first formed, back in June of 1805. Daniel Francis gave the following for clerk Robinson to record:

\begin{quote}
Burlington June 15, 1805. I do not agree in religious opinion with a majority of the inhabitants of this Town, as I at present think them believe – Attest, Daniel Francis. Reviewed and recorded March 26, 1806, W. Geo. Robinson Town Clerk.
\end{quote}

The dates in Francis’s statement contend that the town meeting on the society – the one where Robinson claimed “not one voted in the negative” – did not go as smoothly as he said. Francis dated his statement “June 15, 1805” – the very date of the society’s formation. What’s more, Francis’s word choice (“I do not agree in religious opinion…\textit{as I at present think them believe}” (italics added)) implies that, even at the time of the meeting, he questioned some of the circumstances around the society’s formation. Perhaps the objectives and intentions of the new society were not clear at that first
meeting and society members agreed to work out the specifics over their gatherings to come. It is also noteworthy that the date of Francis’s statement differs from the date on which Robinson recorded it (June 15, 1805 versus March 26, 1806). It appears that Francis reiterated his statement of dissent to Robinson a year later, at the town meeting. Dissenters’ statements often coincided with town meetings – when taxes were on the agenda – and a significant motivation for declaring discrepant religious beliefs appears to have been economic.282

Nonetheless, Burlington continued to work toward more formalized opportunities for worship. In 1808 the state repealed a law that provided funds for public worship, and upon hearing this news “a number of the most respectable inhabitants of Burlington” assembled to “devise[e] means for the continuance of [religious] support, in this town, without the aid of legislative munificence.”283 Within a couple months, the group met at the court house and raised a tax “to support preaching for the year ensuing.”284 A year later, the town tackled their hopes for a town meetinghouse. Nestled amongst a number of agenda items (including whether to build a workhouse, redistrict schools, and repair roads), the town discussed whether to “take…measures for fixing on a place for building of a meetinghouse in said Burlington.”285 Residents appointed a five-man committee to select land on which to build a church building, and the committee presented their recommendations to the town two weeks later. Lawyer Stephen Pearl read aloud the committee’s statement, which informed the meeting’s attendees that they had selected a

282 See Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 14 April 1807, 269.
283 Vermont Centinel 18 November 1807.
284 Vermont Centinel 13 January 1808.
285 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 20 March 1809.
“piece of ground” on Middle Street between “the Road called” College Street and Main.\textsuperscript{286} Town residents then directed a committee to draft a building plan and receive proposals for construction.\textsuperscript{287}

By 1809, Burlington residents were recreating the religious traditions that they had practiced in the communities from which they came. They had a preacher – albeit a part-time one – in the form of Daniel Sanders. They also had formed a society and collected a tax to support preaching. In 1809 town residents selected lands in the village on which they could build their first meetinghouse. Church development certainly lagged behind development of the economy and the schools, but it was under way. Or, at least, so it seemed.

\textit{4.3. Schism and Controversy}

Despite the selection of an “excellent committee” for building a church house, the meetinghouse project quickly stalled. One author has speculated that “there is little doubt that the lack of sympathy between the church and the prominent members of the parish on matters theological had much to do” with the hindered efforts.\textsuperscript{288} Two notices that ran in the newspaper the following year shed some light on the problem. In March 1810, the following two announcements appeared alongside each other in the \textit{Vermont Centinel}:

\begin{quote}
The Members of the First Congregational Society in the town of Burlington are notified to meet at the Court House on Monday the 12\textsuperscript{th} day of March inst. at one o’clock P.M.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{286}It is unclear what road Middle Street has become, but it was a section of road east of (and parallel to) present day Church Street. Given that residents would likely have chosen a location south of the ravine for purposes of accessibility, Middle Street likely referred to Winooski Avenue.
\textsuperscript{287}Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 3 April 1809.
\textsuperscript{288}\textit{The One Hundredth Anniversary of the First Congregational Society, Unitarian}, 32-33.
“To see if the Society will give the Rev. Samuel Clark, jun. a call to reside with them as their Gospel Minister,” &c.

“The Members of the Congregational Society, associated under the Calvinistic order in the town of Burlington,” are notified to meet at the Court House on Monday next, March 5th, at two o’clock P.M. Business of the meeting. “To organize said Society, by choosing the necessary officers agreeable to the articles of association.” &c.289

The two notices – listed as they were, side by side in the newspaper, with meetings just a week apart – betrayed the issue at hand: members of the community disagreed on religious matters. By the spring of 1810, the original congregation had split. Both groups still labeled themselves Congregationalists, but one allied itself with the more orthodox doctrine of Calvinist Congregationalism, while the other pursued a more liberal covenant, soon to be called Unitarianism.290

Church records demonstrate that disagreement had been brewing for at least a few months before the split. An early sign of conflict came the previous fall, when Burlington residents continued their ongoing search for a permanent minister in the town. A church committee had asked Daniel Haskel, a minister from Connecticut, to come to Burlington to preach for the congregation and, in effect, to audition for the open position. Soon thereafter, someone “acting for the ‘liberal’ wing” of the parish invited another minister, Samuel Clark, Jr. from Massachusetts, to come to Burlington to do the same. Sources note that Clark’s invitation went out “apparently without authorization from the committee” of the church, and what followed must surely have been an embarrassing set

289 Vermont Centinel 2 March 1810.
of circumstances. Clark arrived in Burlington before Haskel and preached to the congregation, but he did so while members of the selection committee were out of town on a business trip. Then Haskel arrived on the day for which he had been invited, and the two ministers “made each other’s acquaintance” at the table of Colonel Ozias Buel, a member of the original church and a strong religious traditionalist. Haskel observed that he lacked the apparent support of the congregation and departed for St. Albans. It was likely a confusing few weeks. Church records note that immediately after the church had extended its invitation to Haskel “several clergymen, from distant parts of the country, came into the place and, without consulting the existing church and Pastor.” The disagreement on matters of worship – first evident four years earlier with the statement of Daniel Francis – continued to rankle the growing town.

The following January the church disagreement came to a climax, and the chain of events make for a confusing plotline. After the departure of the two ministers, church members continued to discuss which man was appropriate for the position. On the first day of 1810, church members voted whether to invite Clark to minister over the church. They rejected the measure. Then the next day, they met again – and once more could not reach an agreement. The church dissolved on January 15th and, by the end of the month, a new group, composed of more liberal members of the congregation, held their first meeting. The liberal Congregationalists – hereafter known as the First Congregational Society – outnumbered the orthodox Calvinists 150 to 30, and on January 29th they voted to invite Clark to be their minister. This surely roused consternation among some

291 The Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the First Church, 16.
members of the original church, since they had voted against Clark earlier that same month. The First Congregational Society set a date for Clark’s ordination, three months later on April 19th, 1810.

Apparently, the liberals and conservatives were each strategizing and contriving to install a minister of their own persuasion. There were signs of creative maneuvering even before Clark and Haskel arrived in Burlington the previous fall. At the end of the previous August in 1809, ten new members joined the original church – a curious addition, since the church had seen no growth in membership for the previous four years.\footnote{Records of the First Congregational Church, Volume 1, 1805-1830,” MS, 13 August 1809, 11-12. There is a discrepancy here with the history of the Calvinistic Church, which says nine members joined; this is likely because the members are listed in two separate sentences. See The Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the First Church, 14.} What is perhaps more curious, though, is that the addition of these ten church members tipped the scales when it came time to a vote on the town’s first settled preacher. When the church members first voted on whether to call Clark – on January 1st, and before the split – there were two yeas and four nays. In favor were Dr. Daniel Coit and Rev. Sanders; voting against were Colonel Ozias Buel, Ebenezer Lyman, Lyman King, and Christopher Johnson. Coit and Sanders were members of the original (1805) church, as were Buel and Lyman. However, Johnson and King had joined the church in that small influx of ten members in August 1809. Had Johnson and King not joined the church that August, the vote would have stalemated at two nays against two yeas. It is possible that the charter members had finagled to increase their number of votes.\footnote{Records of the First Congregational Church, 1 January 1810, 12-13.}
After the split, each group raced to install its minister. In April, the orthodox Calvinists voted to “give Mr. Haskel a call to settle, as a gospel minister” in Burlington. They planned to ordain Haskell just over a week later, on April 10th. Interestingly, they had selected a date nine days before Clark’s ordination by the opposing liberal congregation. And so on April 9th and 10th the Calvinists convened once again at Buel’s house to examine and install Daniel Haskel. They had invited eight ministers from parishes around the state to administer the ceremony. The group approved Haskel, voting “unanimously to consecrate him to that work” of ministering to Burlington. Rev. Publius Booge, a minister from Georgia, noted that “according to vote,” Haskel was ordained “over the Congregational church and Calvinistick Congregational society, in said town.” About a week later, the liberals ordained their own candidate, Samuel Clark, to preach in Burlington but the orthodox Calvinists had beat them to the punch.

By 1810, the religious landscape had shifted significantly. The church had dissolved itself and reformed into two rival sects – a large wing of liberal Congregationalists and a smaller wing of orthodox Calvinists. Just five years earlier the town had struggled to find even temporary and part-time preachers, and now they had to two ministers. Where once there was one meager congregation of only fourteen people, there were now two congregations whose numbers totaled 180 souls.

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294 Ibid., 9 April 1810, 14-15.
295 Ibid., 10 April 1810, 18.
To confuse matters further, not all community members clearly aligned themselves with one society or the other. Both Coit and Sanders seemed ambiguous about their own religious leanings. At one meeting of the church, Coit asked “whether, as two Congregational societies were formed in town, any member should have his option to go to which he pleased.” The people at the meeting responded that “their minds were not ultimately decided yet.” Soon thereafter Coit, Sanders, and Sanders’ wife Nancy began to attend services with the “rival” liberal congregation. However, they did so unofficially: Daniel and Nancy Sanders attended services “without joining [the] church,” while Coit left the Calvinistic congregation “without first getting a letter of dismissal.”

The situation with Coit caused particular tension between the two groups. The orthodox Calvinist Congregation instructed Haskel to send a letter to Coit stating that they “had resolved not to consider the church formed [by the liberal Congregationalists] as a church of Christ.” They objected that Coit had not sought a “letter of dismissal” from the old society, and that his membership in the new church was therefore not legitimate. Coit countered that, if letters of dismissal made church membership legitimate, then Burlington’s original church of 1805 was inauthentic, since none of those original members had “obtained letters from the churches in Connecticut to which they had belonged.”

The conservatives then escalated the issue and beckoned an ecclesiastical council of ministers to resolve the issue. They asked the council whether the liberal society could be regarded as a true church. Rev. Asa Burton of Thetford wrote

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296 The Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the First Church, 18.
297 The Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the First Church, 15-18; Vermont Centinel 14 September 1810.

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their response: “Notwithstanding, it would have been more regular for those who were embodied with a church, in this place, to have previously procured certificates from the churches to which they belonged…. Nonetheless, the council decided that the certificates were “not indispensably necessary to their existence as a church” and that the First Congregational Society “must be considered as a regular church of Christ, possessing full powers of discipline.” They would recognize the First Congregational Society among churches in the state. However, Burton and the council expressed unequivocal disapproval of the new church’s tactics. The council observed that “[i]t does not appear that the numbers of the church were so great, or its principles and practice so corrupt, as to justify the organization of a new one, in its neighborhood.” Burton added that “we see not how it can be consistently be regarded, as a regular christian church” since the “manner of its organization, and many other circumstances” challenged whether “this newly organized church does embrace the distinguishing and effectual doctrines of the gospel.” The liberal congregation could exist by technicality, but ministers around Vermont questioned whether the members’ behavior exhibited the true spirit of church doctrine.

The controversy between the liberals and the orthodox Calvinists has many facets. Part of the issue was rooted in the fact that some of church members had lived in Massachusetts, while others had come from Connecticut. A church history, written one hundred years after the controversy, recounted that in 1810 “there were two parties in the

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298 Vermont Centinel 31 August 1810.
299 Vermont Centinel 31 August 1810.
parish, of which the more numerous and the more influential was called in the language of that day, the ‘liberal’ party. Most of these were from Massachusetts. …” The historian went on to note that these Massachusetts liberals did not agree with the “doctrines and aims of the [originally chartered] church, whose members had come mainly from Connecticut.” The disagreement over ministers reflected a geographical split as well: Clark’s roots were in Massachusetts, while Haskell was from Connecticut. Finally, the dispute with Dr. Coit also reflects the tensions between Massachusetts and Connecticut emigrants. Originally, when the Calvinists sought the opinion of the ecclesiastical council, they agreed to collaborate with Coit to select the council. The conservatives made one stipulation as to the council’s selection: that the ministers “were all within the state,” since the Calvinist congregation was “not willing to be at the trouble and expense” to solicit clergy from outside state borders. It appears that Coit did not care for this restriction. The church minutes note that, in what must have been a rather abrupt rebuttal to the Calvinists’ offer, Coit “refused to join on these terms, and left the meeting.” The Calvinist society then proceeded to select the members of the ecclesiastical council. As Coit had left the meeting, the society chose ministers only from the state, apparently against Coit’s wishes.

Another source of bitterness between the two groups was the repeated scampering by one faction to beat the other to the punch. A letter to the newspaper, written by “A Member of the Congregational Society,” complained of the “unseemly haste, and

300 The Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the First Church, 16.
301 Records of the First Congregational Church, 18 June 1810, 22-23.
extreme anxiety of the Calvinistic society to settle Mr. Haskell before the ordination of Mr. Clark, as if some signal advantage was thereby to be obtained.” Indeed, there was an advantage to being the first minister in town. That advantage was the acquisition of land. Land plots for “the first settled minister” had been set aside in Governor Wentworth’s original land grant of 1763, and, since 1801, eleven separate lots had been waiting for a minister who would commit permanently to the town. It’s likely that the Calvinists rushed Haskel’s ordination to ensure access to these land plots. They installed Haskell just one day before a town meeting where lands were on the agenda.

That meeting happened in 1810, when clerk George Robinson announced that they would divide up the land for “the several religious societies in said town that now are or hereafter may be formed.” The issue at hand was this: land had been set aside for the first minister in town – and Burlington now had two. Roughly 342 acres were at stake, arranged in eleven lots throughout town. The lots followed the sizes laid out in the proprietors’ meeting of 1798, ranging in size from one-eighth of an acre to 103 acres. The most valuable lands were the four ¼-acre plots in the main village; other lands included the lake water lot, three of the 103-acre farming lots, and a smattering of small and medium-sized lots on the outskirts of the village. During that April 11th meeting, the town appointed a committee to assess what had been set aside for the minister. The committee consisted of two Congregationalists and two Calvinists, and the town

302 Vermont Centinel 14 September 1810.
303 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings [DATE] April 1810.
304 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 21 April 1810; land values in 1810 (and 2005) dollars are as follows: $300/acre (2005) for village lots; $120/acre ($2005) for water lots; $2-$14/acre ($2005) for 103-acre farming lots; $4 to $41/acre ($2005) for small and medium sized lots just outside the village.
instructed them to ask “said Mr. Haskel which part of the right he shall hold” and to “receive a deed from him of the remainder.” They would then allocate those lands that rejected by Calvinist Rev. Haskel to the First Congregational Society and to the town of Burlington.

A few days later the town reconvened to hear the committee’s report. They proposed a division that seems to have been satisfactory to most of the town’s residents. Each group – the Calvinists, the Congregationalists, and the town of Burlington – received roughly $1,000 of land. While the total land values were equal, there were qualitative differences in locations and values per acre. The Calvinists received their land spread over an area of 160 acres, while the Congregationalists received just 53 acres of land. Rev. Haskel appears to have selected mostly farmlands, since 155 of his 160 acres sat in large 103-acre lots on the far reaches of town. Rev. Clark’s congregation, on the other hand, received the more valuable lands that sat in the village proper: they received one-third of the acreage of their rivals, but they also gained all four of the valuable village lots. What the Congregationalists lost in acreage, they gained in location.

As for the town, it received 103 acres of farmland plus a small amount of land just outside the central village. The town also received the one water lot. The selectmen had already made arrangements as to how they would leverage the town’s plots for profit: they had rented their lots to five town residents (Abijah Warner, John Smith, storekeeper Ebenezer T. Englesby, lawyer Alvan Foote, and Dr. John Pomeroy) for a total rent of $50 per year. This appears to be the first time that the town actively stewarded assets outside
of taxes, and they gave the rents to the congregations to pay the preacher’s salaries.\textsuperscript{305}

The people of Burlington – those of both congregations – agreed to the division, since the town meeting minutes state that the recommendation was “accepted without dissension.”

The selectmen then proceeded to secure the deeds for the various lands.

With the societies established and the land divided, there was one last issue to resolve between the two congregations: where each group could hold its meetings.

Throughout Burlington’s early years, public meetings took place in three kinds of places: at the courthouse, at the private home of a resident, or at a hall (which was often part of a person’s home). Of these, the court house was the only space that qualified as truly “public,” and it seems that, during the spring of 1810, both groups endeavored to hold their meetings in this space. During the late spring of 1810, the Calvinists had switched their meeting location, from the private home of Colonel Buel (where they had held a majority of their meetings in early 1800s) to the court house.\textsuperscript{306} By the beginning of the summer, the Congregationalists recorded a resolution that asserted “their right to use the Court House upon all public religious occasions without any accountability to any of the members of the Calvinist Society.” They argued that they had proposed “every pacific measure” to resolve the claims between the two societies, and that “the Calvinist Society”

\textsuperscript{305} Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 21 April 1810.
\textsuperscript{306} Records of the First Congregational Church; the church met at Moses Catlin’s at the first meeting (21 February 1805). The next few entries do not specify a location (23 February 1805; 23 August 1806; 24 August 1806; 13 August 1809; 1 January 1810; 2 January 1810). The next meeting is at Buell’s house, the church cotes to ally with the Calvinistic Society and invite Haskell to be their minister (2 April 1810); the next meeting is the ordination of Haskell, and is also at Buell’s house (9-10 April 1810). The group then switches locations and meets at the court house until mid-summer (27 April 1810, 4 May 1810, 18 June 1810). On 1 August 1810 the Calvinistic church returns to Buell’s; the location of their meetings for the rest of 1810 and 1811 are seldom recorded after that.
had “opposed and neglected” every one of their offers. The Calvinists soon ceased their court house meetings and resumed meeting at their private meeting space, at Buel’s house once again.

It is perhaps no surprise that Burlington’s congregation split in 1810. The second decade of the nineteenth century exhibited increased attention to religious matters throughout the northeastern United States. These represented the early years of the Second Great Awakening, a time of significant religious discussion and congregational revival. Though Burlington’s early years show little attention to religious matters (the town did, after all, take over thirty years to erect its first meetinghouse), Burlington certainly became more vocal about religious matters in this pre-revival period. By 1810 there was a decided increase in the availability of published sermons, including “a number of religious tracts” furnished by newspaper publisher Samuel Mills, which he intended “for the promotion of Piety and Morality.” He delivered the tracts free of charge “to those who wish to aid this laudable design, by distributing them in their neighborhoods.” Similarly, a letter sent by a Philadelphia merchant praised camp meetings (a popular tactic of the revival era) and solicited “especially printers and booksellers” to “unite in manifesting their zeal for religion and morality.”

309 Vermont Centinel 30 June 1809.
310 Vermont Centinel 16 March 1810.
during 1809 and 1810 a missionary named Thaddeus Osgood passed through Burlington en route to Canada “to prosecute [his] mission to the Northward.” He thanked “those gentlemen in this and neighboring towns” who had “furnish[ed] means for printing and disseminating useful tracts.” This new attention to religiosity differs markedly from Burlington in 1796, when the newspaper’s only mentions of religious matters were of the new Jericho meetinghouse, the new publication of a theological journal, and advertisements for religiously-themed books available at the general store.

### 4.4. Conclusions

The 1810 church controversy has continued on in the institutional memories of both churches. The ecclesiastical histories of both societies commented on the fact that the 1810 split led to bitter feelings within the community. One historian has noted that “there were hard feelings and some hard words…One party was certain the shield was of silver; the other knew it to be gold.” Another historian recalled that all this “was not accomplished without a spice of human feeling,” and that even fifty years later a pastor noted that “the words he has heard… [were] hardly consonant with the religious spirit of this place.”

The orthodox Calvinists became the First Congregational Church. They built their first church building on Winooski Avenue in 1812, and when that building burned they erected the large, colonnaded brick structure that still stands on Winooski Avenue.

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311 *Vermont Centinel* 8 September 1809.
312 *The One Hundredth Anniversary of the First Congregational Society, Unitarian* 32-33.
liberal Congregationalists became the Unitarians later in the nineteenth century. They built their first church in 1816, commissioning a Boston architect to design the structure; the building still exists at the top of Church Street.\footnote{Church historians agree that Burlington’s Unitarian Universalist Church was designed by Boston architect Peter Banner, with some consultation in the early planning stages from noted architect Charles Bulfinch. See \textit{Burlington Free Press} 3 April 1937; Letter from W. R. Greeley to Charles J. Staples, 20 November 1916, MS (Special Collections of the Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont, First Unitarian Church Carton 1, Folders 40 and 41).}

Even with the split, though, the doctrinal lines between denominations were blurred during these years. The liberal Congregationalists adopted articles that, reportedly, were based almost verbatim on those of the original 1805 church – a group that was more conservative in origin. Writing twelve years after the schism, Rev. Clark’s successor scribbled the following beneath the liberals’ covenant: “The above \textit{Articles} and covenant were deliberately subscribed to by those who considered themselves and were considered by others as being Unitarians!!! May I be permitted to record my special wonder, my utter astonishment!!!”\footnote{H.L. Wheeler (ed.), \textit{The First Congregational (Unitarian) Society, Pages from the Church Records} (Burlington: n.p., 1892), 6-7.} Indeed, one of Burlington’s church historians has recounted the religious character of these years, noting that “there had been no break outwardly in the Congregational Church in 1805, nor even in 1810” and that “none of the early Unitarians were desirous of seceding from the Congregational body.”\footnote{\textit{The One Hundredth Anniversary (Unitarian)}, 31.} This perhaps echoes what has been said of the Puritan “split” from Anglicanism in seventeenth-century Boston, in which colonists maintained that they wished not to break from the church but to purify it. All that is to say: while the church schism reflected a
decided rift in religious feelings, the differences between the two groups were perhaps not so clear.

More than differences in religious feeling, the schism reflects the growing pains of a new town. When residents first organized a church in 1805, they cared little that their membership represented the beliefs of different backgrounds. Their meetings were somewhat informal: they met at whatever location was available, whether it was the court house or a private home, and they listened to Rev. Daniel Sanders, a preacher who spent more of his time on university matters than on preaching. Asa Burton – the preacher from Thetford – noted of Sanders’s “laxity” in prayers, and that the trustees of his university were “quaquers, others Episcopalians, Baptists, Universalists, Deists, and Calvinists.”

By 1810, however, the town endeavored to become more formal around matters of worship. They attempted to build a church edifice, divide lands, and hire a permanent minister. The church split indicates that community members were less willing to make compromises on matters of faith – and on matters of vision. Perhaps by 1810, they had gathered the resources – population, funds, a marketplace, and cultural activity – that would enable them to construct a more sophisticated church bureaucracy. They saw themselves equipped to build the church community that they had planned all along, and in the process became less willing to compromise on its vision.

316 Religious historians provided recurrent examples of sects splitting and splintering as the religious community endeavored to define itself. For one example, see Eve LaPlante, American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson, the Woman Who Defied the Puritans (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).
317 MacDonald, 64.
In this sense, the controversy over church fits within a larger discussion that was taking place in Burlington, over how the town would organize its community. Indeed, the agenda’s of the town meetings grew progressively longer and more specific between 1796 and 1810. When community members discussed the prospects of building a church in 1807, their meeting agenda included a long list of other items, including whether to build a workhouse and house of correction, how to address the issues of growing school districts and town debts, and what to do about roads and bridges that were in states of disrepair. The rush to ordain a minister – and the schism that followed – accompanied a number of discussions about how to erect the infrastructure for the town that residents envisioned. In implementing that vision, however, they exposed more tensions and divisions among community members.

318 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 20 March 1809.
Conclusion – Vision and Division

Not surprisingly, the early years of settlement in young towns like Burlington brought a detectable level of instability. It began with the uncertainty of land ownership. For many Vermont towns, absentee proprietors divided and assigned land plots at the same time that settlers had already started to reside on them. In some cases, proprietors could ask residents to leave the places they called their homes. The line between public and private property was at times either unclear or at least able to be ignored: residents borrowed sand from the road, cut timber from neighbors who had passed away, and relocated stones from lands whose proprietors lived out-of-state. The community might “warn out” newcomers who had stumbled financially. Even Burlington’s college was, in the words of one historian, “a rickety affair, liable to collapse at any moment.”

Settlement was, assuredly, an experience racked with uncertainty.

University president Daniel Sanders’ hinted at part of the problem when he set out on horseback to seek out the rents that tenants owed to his struggling institution. He noted that “almost every tenant seems highly pleased with his bargain” and that many had “become quite rich on the lands.” However, Sanders observed, some of the renters did not know to whom they should pay their rents. It was hard enough to build a town in the middle of a forest; it became even more difficult when communication was slow, newspaper distribution limited, and laws and procedures were still being worked out.

John Johnson opened his land office for these reasons. He hoped to diffuse some of the

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320 Lindsay, 75-6.
confusion around land ownership by compiling the land records of the region’s towns so that tax collectors could do their jobs without tripping over the law. An 1807 state act sought to further stabilize the work of tax collecting, imposing a new requirement that “before [a collector] enters upon the duties of his office” he had to pay a promissory bond in case he died or “remove out of this state.”

A 1793 entry in Burlington’s town record book calls on the “several former collectors of taxes” to “exhibit a fair account of the moneys by them collected and paid over to the several Treasurers.” Whether due to confusion, lack of communication, or simple neglect, Burlington and other towns in the new republic added procedural disarray to the list of challenges of building a new community on the frontier. This instability and confusion led to more definition and structure in the town government. By 1812, Burlington asked its town officers to provide regularly a report of their activities at the annual town meeting. In so doing they demanded higher accountability of their civil servants and greater visibility into town government.

In addition to a heavier town infrastructure and extra efforts to clarify procedures, residents relied on a particular vision to guide them through the challenges of settling a new community. It is striking how quickly Burlington’s early residents attempted to erect institutions that were modeled after those places they had previously lived. Four years after the first town meeting, Burlington residents were already planning

321 Vermont Centinel 5 January 1810.
322 Vermont Centinel 25 November 1807.
323 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings, vol. 1 1787-1820, MS (Courtesy of the Local History Collection, Fletcher Free Library, Burlington, Vermont) March 1793.
324 Town of Burlington, Burlington Records of Town Meetings 1811 and 12.
a state university in their town of just 300 residents. By 1810, residents would endeavor to bring the county court, state bank, capital city, and state legislature to Burlington. They established a dancing school even before the university graduated its first class. They also formed societies for political parties, an order of the freemasons, and a young ladies’ society. Many institutions—such as the mechanics’ society, the library society, and even the town newspaper and the university—struggled in these early years. The fact that residents attempted to build these institutions suggests that they saw them as an important part in making their new town work. Many residents had a vision of what they wanted Burlington to become.

Of course, this begs the question of what that vision actually entailed. Writing in Paris in 1799, Ira Allen recalled that he valued Burlington Bay because it would “become a place of consequence.” He criticized his cousin, fellow land speculator Remember Baker, for “looking for good lands” while Allen himself instead looked for “situations.” In staking out Burlington, Allen was looking for a confluence of factors that could make for a successful community. These included access to international trade routes to Canada and rivers to power the mills that could support a growing community. Allen also vied to bring the university to Burlington because a cultural and scholarly institution could bring respectability to the frontier town.

Other residents likely shared Allen’s vision and tactics for moving Burlington from an unstable town to a recognized cultural and economic center. Some residents used

the nation’s major cities for a template on how to shape the frontier community. A mapmaker labeled Burlington a “city” on his 1796 map, and the proprietors laid out the town’s center in a regular grid of blocks and streets – yet Burlington still lagged behind other towns in development. It had a smaller population than other Vermont towns and hardly boasted the markings of a ‘city’ even for contemporary standards. Burlington’s merchants styled themselves after the shops of Boston, experimenting with street numbers and naming their shops after the town (the “Burlington Bookstore,” the “Burlington Shoe Shop”). The editor of Burlington’s newspaper retold the stories of fires in crowded cities, and advised Burlington residents to build with brick instead of wood, as Boston and Philadelphia had already started to do. It seems that Burlington residents – at least, some of them – envisioned that their town would join the ranks of the country’s largest cities.

Burlington residents may have relied on this vision to defeat the instability of the settlement experience. It does seem that Burlington residents embarked upon a battle for legitimacy, credibility, and respectability. Ira Allen hoped that a university would make Burlington ‘respectable.’ Missionary Thaddeus Osgood tried to correct the view that Burlington was a backward town, insisting that the town’s residents “have been greatly misrepresented abroad.” Burlington’s merchants tried to gain credibility for their own shops by comparing themselves to their counterparts in Boston, Troy, and New York. In some ways Burlington residents seemed a bit defensive of their situation, and it

326 Lindsay, 19.
327 Vermont Centinel 27 July 1809, 8 September 1809.
is perhaps understandable why. When missionary Nathan Perkins visited Vermont in 1789, he chronicled his ride “through the wilderness on Lake Champlain” where there was “next to no road – mud up to my horse’s belly – roots as thick as they could be – no house for four miles. I got lost.” Perkins concluded that “my living situation is a paradise compared to Vermont.” It is likely that many Burlington residents came from towns where infrastructure and cultural institutions were already in place. Moving to the frontier was likely an awkward adjustment for these transplanted citizens. Pursuing the vision of a developing young city may have helped diffuse some of the feelings of instability and discomfort that accompanied frontier development.

At the same time, pursuing a specific vision also helped to uncover divisions in the community. While many area residents pledged support for a university, its trustees had difficulty collecting on those promises when the masons started laying the bricks of its first building. Local residents objected to private companies who charged fees for roads near their own homes. Many artisans successfully built their businesses, but they were not always able to penetrate the town’s political and social elite. Residents like Moses Catlin became possessive of town resources. And, with the selection of Burlington’s first settled minister, the town broke ranks and split into two completely separate churches. Carrying out a vision meant further shaping the contours of Burlington society. As those contours became more defined, disagreements and differences became more evident. Even the residents themselves were aware of these differences. They complained of “jobbers” who worked on Sundays, and published satires in the

328 Bassett, 43, 45.
newspaper. Burlington, like other towns in the early republic, found splits in its community within the first few decades of its existence.

The dynamics in Burlington from 1790 to 1810 help illuminate the experience of frontier settlement. Burlington’s settlers were hopeful and determined, but they were also discouraged, rejected, and disenchanted. Growth was neither easy nor tidy. Some people met less successful circumstances and either shrunk from the history books or migrated to another community. Viewed from this perspective, the romanticism of the frontier story falls apart.

Nonetheless, settlers of towns like Burlington deserve our esteem. It is an impressive feat to leave an established community and foray into a region that is uncharted, uncleared, and undeveloped. It is perhaps this very willingness to confront instability that makes the frontier story such an attractive one for the American mythology. Even more impressive is the speed with which residents of frontier towns – Burlington, Middlebury, Cincinnati, Lexington, and others – identified and developed the infrastructure and institutions that they deemed crucial to establishing a successful community on the frontier.
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