

The Fourteenth State

Exploring ‘social ferment’ in early Vermont

By Tyler Resch

A series of powerful causes seemed to take hold among Vermont citizens during the half century after statehood had been achieved and before the rumblings of civil war. These movements were all vaguely linked to a theme of altruism, or you might call it do-goodism. They included religious revivalism, anti-slavery, anti-masonry, temperance, perfectionism, equal rights, class consciousness, even prison reform. The issues were all connected in one degree or another with politics.

These phenomena have been described and documented in a book that has become one of the important basic staples of Vermont history: “Social Ferment in Vermont 1791 to 1850” by David M. Ludlum.

The author (1911-1997) is especially interesting because he was best known as a meteorologist. His prominent obituary in the New York Times called him “the nation’s foremost historian of American weather.” He was believed to have had the only full set of National Weather Service records in private hands. During World War Two he was a key adviser to the U.S. military in the timing of various campaigns including D-Day.

Ludlum wrote a series of weather books with titles like “The Vermont Weather Book,” “The Nantucket Weather Book,” and “The American Weather Book.”

Ludlum’s study of social ferment was published by the Vermont Historical Society in the 1940s, reprinted in 1966, and is based on his 1939 doctoral thesis at Columbia University. He became fascinated with accounts of social phenomena while researching weather in old Vermont newspapers – and there were literally dozens of nineteenth-century newspapers in this state. It is research that required great patience and persistence. His sources can be followed in footnotes on every page.

Each of Ludlum’s Vermont “ferments” could be the subject of a book on its own, but seeing them together in one volume brings its own kind of enlightenment. Considering the ambience of early Vermont – without electricity, radio, television, internet, or modern transportation – it becomes understandable why people could get so totally focused on one of the issues he analyzed.

Temperance was a powerful influence throughout the 19th century. Indeed, Vermont was officially “dry” from 1850 to 1903, its own version of

Prohibition. Then of course the state became dry again during national Prohibition between 1920 and 1933, driven by a Constitutional amendment.

Anti-slavery was especially strong, with abolitionist societies in many Vermont towns. Ludlum makes frequent reference to William Lloyd Garrison, who published the weekly "Journal of the Times" in Bennington in 1828-29 -- before he gained a national reputation as editor of the abolitionist "The Liberator."

Anti-Masonry is perhaps the most peculiar of these issues. The movement grew out of concern that the secrecy of the Masonic order was somehow a threat to the democratic process. It found particular strength in Vermont, where William Palmer was elected governor on the anti-Masonic ticket four times from 1831 to 1835. Vermont was the only state in 1832 to cast its Electoral College ballots for William Wirt, the Anti-Masonic candidate for president.

This book may be difficult to find except in a library. It isn't on google books and abebooks.com offers a few at inflated prices.