

The Fourteenth State

Vermont Place-Names: Footprints of History

By Tyler Resch

Just about everything you always wanted to know about Vermont cities, towns, villages, gores, neighborhoods, streams, mountains – and some of the history behind them – can be found in “Vermont Place-Names: Footprints of History” by Esther Monroe Swift.

This 700-page book, weighing three pounds, was published in 1977 by the distinguished but short-lived Stephen Greene Press of Brattleboro to coincide with the 200th anniversary of Vermont independence.

The author chose to emulate Abby Maria Hemenway’s nineteenth-century gazetteers by listing Vermont’s fourteen counties alphabetically, then the towns within them also alphabetically. Each county is described and introduced by a map. Then each town or city gets a thumbnail sketch of its history and some early settlers or persons of prominence, with emphasis on origins of names.

Every place-name has its story. Three towns are named for a German prince; one town is named for the dog of its original settler; another’s name was decided by a wrestling match; a district is called “Texas” to mock an ambitious young farmer who swore he was leaving Vermont for greener fields out West but never made it beyond the next hill.

Because place-names and surnames are cross-referenced, “Vermont Place-Names” is also useful for the genealogist. Most fun will be had by the casual reader perusing the 15,000 entries in the index.

The author was a sixth-generation Vermonter who lived in Royalton. She researched this book for some seventeen years while she was a library consultant and also worked for the Vermont Department of Libraries. She was the Vermont director of the Place Name Survey of the U.S., a bicentennial project of the American Name Society, a group that promotes onomastics, the study of names and naming practices.

The “before statehood” era is covered in early sections of this book: the Indians, the French, and the English in the wilderness, then a description of “the child of the colonies” that became Vermont. The author acknowledges, of course, that Vermont was never a colony.

A section I have consulted more than once is the list of township patents and “paper towns” that New York attempted to establish in today’s

Vermont. A prime example is “Princetown,” patented in 1765 and named for the first-born son of King George III. This presumed town covered the Battenkill valley including areas of today’s Dorset, Arlington, Sunderland, and Manchester. The author comments: “The dispute between New York and New Hampshire over boundaries was at its highest point, so it may have been hoped that the Princetown name would help conciliate King George.” That was the case with many towns, including most of those in Bennington County. But in the end, the guise to flatter the king didn’t work.

Author Swift wasn’t perfect. She assumed that Irish Corners near North Bennington was named for people of Irish extraction when the fact was that families surnamed Irish lived there. And she fudged on the naming of Mt. Anthony. But it’s not really fair to pick flaws in a book of such enormous detail. “Vermont Place-Names” has proved immensely useful to many researchers as well as casual Vermontophiles of all stripes.