

The Fourteenth State

Documenting thousands who fled Vermont

By Tyler Resch

After Vermont became a state in 1791 the population grew rapidly to about 1830 and then leveled off for roughly the next 150 years. That first census totaled 85,000 and by 1830 it had grown to 280,000, then edged up above 300,000. But during that time thousands of people also fled the Green Mountain State. Those who departed were balanced out by births and newcomers, keeping total population stable.

The subject of these departures has been analyzed in “Migration from Vermont,” which has become one of the important basic histories of the state. Author Lewis D. Stilwell, who taught history at Dartmouth College, assembled what he called “a composite biography of about 8,000 Vermonters.” To achieve it he scrutinized old newspapers, town histories, and county gazetteers of Vermont, Canada, New York, and the American Midwest.

The years from 1783 to 1808 were considered “an era of good times.” As Stilwell describes it: “Reproduction was also going on at an astonishing rate . . . they married young. Many . . . seemed to have produced children about as fast as was naturally possible.” But then the tide turned as many settlers found conditions too challenging in the harsh climate and environment of northern New England. Some 5,000 loyalists had migrated to Canada. Amid the rocky soils, high elevations, and short growing seasons there were frequent floods, caused by intensive logging, which produced erosion. There were damaging fires and times of famine. Diseases such as dysentery, smallpox, typhus, ague, and measles took a terrible toll. In 1813 an epidemic of “spotted fever,” probably a form of meningitis, killed an estimated 6,000.

In 1808 President Thomas Jefferson imposed an embargo that proved unpopular politically and economically. It was a maritime quarrel with England that was of no concern to an inland state but it curtailed important trade with Montreal and sent farm prices tumbling.

Especially distressing was 1816, “the year without a summer,” a year after an Indonesian volcano called Mount Tambora produced one of the most powerful eruptions in recorded history. The earth was enveloped by the resulting ash that prevented sunlight from reaching the soil, causing

worldwide crop failures and the threat of starvation. Snow fell each month in Vermont.

Depopulation accelerated with the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, and then of course when railroads began, in the late 1840s.

While Stilwell's scholarship is a century old – he interrupted it so he could serve in World War One – it is modern in the sense that he used many visual aids. The book has a series of color maps of Vermont for each decennial census throughout the 1800s, showing which towns gained population (in green) and which lost (in black). Other maps show major turnpikes, early settlements, numbers of sheep in each town in 1836 (the height of Vermont's "sheep craze"), growth of the in-state railroad network, and railway links to the West.

Stilwell's study has been used by other scholars as a basis for various concepts of revisionism but it remains a solid analysis of one of the most important demographic episodes in the state's history.