

The Fourteenth State

The voluminous diaries of Hiram Harwood

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A remarkably well-documented account of early nineteenth-century Vermont farm and community life is found in the 4,000 tightly typed transcripts of the Harwood Diaries. These are found at the Bennington Museum library and there is a set of carbon copies at the Bennington Free Library. They are not available online.

These diaries were started in 1805 by Benjamin Harwood, a key member of one of the earliest families to settle Bennington in 1761. In fact, Benjamin was the first child born in that new wilderness town, in 1762. In 1810 Benjamin turned the diaries over to his son Hiram (1788-1839), who continued to write daily accounts of life on Tanbrook Farm until two years before his death. The farm is marked today by a plaque on a roadside chunk of dolomite, some two miles south of the village now called Old Bennington.

The original handwritten diaries are in museum storage, but the clearly typed transcripts are found in fourteen big brown volumes with gilt lettering on their spines. As finding aids there are indexes to names and subjects. The diaries were exhaustively transcribed on a typewriter from the original manuscripts, I have reason to believe, by the legal secretary of Hall Park McCullough, who was the greatest-ever collector of Vermontiana.

Benjamin and Hiram Harwood never expected that their words, sometimes expressing the most intimate thoughts and feelings, would be read by others – certainly not those more than 200 years in the future. Their diaries have been tapped as source material for numerous historical and biographical purposes. One example would be Hiram's comments about farming during the summer of 1816, “the year without a summer,” when volcanic ash from an eruption on Mount Tambora had shielded the sun's rays and prevented crops from growing. Another excellent use was recently undertaken by a scholar who followed the early career of carpenter-craftsman Hiram Waters and documented numerous houses he built. Builder Hiram Waters had married the sister of diarist Hiram Harwood, so the diaries contain abundant descriptive references to the builder.

These diaries were interpreted in a 250-page readable book-length narrative by Robert E. Shalhope, a history professor at the University of Oklahoma. The result, which might be called a retroactive autobiography, was published in 2003 as “A Tale of New England: The Diaries of Hiram Harwood, Vermont Farmer, 1810-1837,” by Johns Hopkins University Press. Shalhope's text is especially rewarding for his personality analysis of Hiram Harwood, sort of a dreamer who played the flute and suffered various personal hangups; he was not the down-to-business farmer his father had expected.

Shalhope happened upon the Harwood Diaries while researching his earlier book,

“Bennington and the Green Mountain Boys: The Emergence of Liberal Democracy in Vermont, 1760-1850,” also published by Johns Hopkins Press, in 1996. Shalhope summered at Menemsha, a village on Martha’s Vineyard, and he developed a habit of pausing partway during his travels from Oklahoma to conduct research at the Bennington Museum. His “Bennington and the Green Mountain Boys” (too simplified a title for a scholarly book) analyzes the political and theological origins of Bennington, which I may review in a future column.

The Harwood Diaries end two years before Hiram’s death at age 51 with the sad tale of his demise, which follows his treatment as one of the earliest patients at the Brattleboro Retreat, then known as the Vermont Asylum for the Insane.