

## The Fourteenth State

### **Hills and Hollows of a Quintessential Town**

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In the annals of books on Vermont town histories, it is probable that none has exceeded Halifax in number of pages produced or in the quality of the content of those pages. This obscure Windham County town, on the Massachusetts border between Whitingham and Guilford, chartered in 1750 by Benning Wentworth (next after Bennington), has produced and published in recent years a total of 1,102 pages of its own history in two handsome hardcover volumes.

The first, “Born in Controversy,” was published in 2008, and the second, “Hills and Hollows,” in 2015. Both contain a foreword by Civil War historian Howard Coffin. These volumes match in appearance, garbed in dignified dark brown jackets with suitable photographs. They are bursting with energy, enthusiasm, and local pride.

Halifax is the quintessential small Vermont town, rural in the best sense, an anachronism in today's moving-ahead society of Internet, Facebook, big box stores, and acres of asphalt. Halifax has a fraction of its original population, so there are lots of cellar holes and stone walls, evidences of previous residence, and much lore. In Vermont's first census Halifax counted 1,309 souls. That number held above 1,000 until after the Civil War, then bottomed out at 268 in 1960. Fifty years later the 2010 census comeback is now 720.

“Hills and Hollows” focuses heavily on the families and their histories, and many trace back two hundred years or more. A section is devoted to the town clerks past and present. There is “the news – then and now,” which includes accidental deaths, suicides, murders (three), epidemics, curiosities, news correspondents, philanthropists, utilities, and notable storms. “Born in Controversy” has to do with early settlements, the path to statehood, agricultural and community and commercial life. Both books have many good photographs.

“It's the stories that have kept me riveted to this book,” writes Hilly Van Loon, one of many contributing authors, in a lengthy introduction, “. . . stories that evoke the landscape, a simpler time, that touch the heart and show the courage and spunk the folks of Halifax showed in tough times. During the Depression, the Burnett family raised mice to supply research centers to supplement their income; Elaine Fairbanks's grandparents picked ferns to sell.”

Van Loon further seeks to define the spirit of the town: “The people of Halifax, like so many rural families, were the epitome of 'living locally,' in the parlance of today's world. It was a way of life: They ate what they grew, ground the grains they raised for baking at the local grist mill, shopped at the store down the street for their staples, had

the local smithy shoe their horses, and built houses and barns from timber cut on their property and milled at the local sawmill. In one shining memory of putting things by for the winter to come, Regina Hardgrove remembers canning 350 jars of fruits and vegetables on the woodstove in the family's summer kitchen while her mother shouted out instructions from the couch where she was recovering from an accident.”

This writer is not personally acquainted with Halifax though I have dug deeply into the family of my wife's ancestors, the Jewells, early settlers in Whitingham, next door. These remarkable new Halifax books open up for the reader an appealing world of heritage of past Vermont decades.