

The Fourteenth State

Transportation and the country squire

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A book titled “The Role of Transportation in the Development of Vermont,” published in post-war and pre-Interstate 1945, offers a rare example of a case in which the author seems more interesting than his subject.

The author, William J. Wilgus, (1869-1949) was the engineer responsible in 1902 for the design and construction of New York City's Grand Central Terminal, notably its tunnels and double-stacked trackage. By electrifying the train lines he solved the problem of choking smoke from hundreds of steam railroads. He coined the term “taking wealth from the air,” meaning the lease of the area above the Park Avenue Tunnel to help finance the station. As a key adviser to the engineer of the Holland Tunnel, which opened in 1927, he was a founder of the Port of New York Authority.

To answer the question of what drew Wilgus to Vermont, one might refer to “Grand Central Terminal: Railroads, Engineering, and Architecture in New York,” published in 2001. Its author, Kurt C. Schlichting, posits that the story of Grand Central Station is one of coverups and conspiracies. Wilgus, as chief engineer of the New York Central Railroad, left New York under a cloud, Schlichting contends, after destroying evidence that his company knew of an engine problem that led to a 1907 train crash in the Bronx that killed 25 passengers.

Moving to Vermont in 1922, Wilgus and his second wife, Gertrude, settled in Weathersfield, where his Revolutionary War ancestor Gershom Clark had resided. He built a large house and, now known as Colonel Wilgus, lived the life of a country squire.

John L. Hurd's two-volume history of Weathersfield (1978) notes that Wilgus assumed an aloof attitude toward his neighbors; after he and his wife were subjected to “uncomplimentary and profane remarks” by some unsavory characters who hung out at a blacksmith shop, Wilgus purchased the shop and had it demolished.

In the 1930s Wilgus gained prominence throughout Vermont as author-promoter of the proposal for a 260-mile Green Mountain Parkway that would be built along the flanks of mountains from Massachusetts to Canada. The idea gained enthusiasm as a Depression-era job producer but was rejected by voters in a 1936 statewide referendum.

His name survives today in the 150-acre Wilgus State Park, which he deeded to the state in 1933. The park has become a popular summer camping area on the banks of the Connecticut River in Windsor and Weathersfield.

Wilgus's transportation book moves from walking paths and river excursions to horsedrawn vehicles to railroads, highways, and airports. He offers detailed accounts of the complex history of Vermont railroads, his specialty. Early turnpikes proved unpopular because of tolls and lack of maintenance, then canals became briefly popular,

largely due to the success of the Erie Canal, which opened to traffic in 1825 from Albany to Buffalo. But the more practical railroads soon snuffed out interest in slower and more expensive canals, the author found.

Wilgus places Vermont in perspective by giving particular attention to transportation outside the state's borders and declares that interstate connections offered the only hope for railroad success in a state of such modest population. His book, published by the Vermont Historical Society, includes generous maps, demographics, and bibliography. He concludes by defining Vermont's two chief attributes as its "priceless heritage of beauty" and its role as "a keystone in a northern arch of communication around the Adirondacks standing at the portal to the West."