

WALLOOMSACK REVIEW

BENNINGTON MUSEUM

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Bennington: View from Bingham Hill

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The *Walloomsack Review* is a publication of the Bennington Museum. Its purpose is to present a wide range of articles about the history and culture of Vermont and neighboring New York and Massachusetts. We invite submission of scholarly articles and of books to be reviewed. For author guidelines and submission deadlines please contact the editor Tyler Resch at tresch@benningtonmuseum.org.

This special issue of the *Walloomsack Review*
is generously underwritten
by Robert and Cora May Howe and Bennington College.

On the cover:

“The View from Jennings,” a woodcut by Lucy Swenson.

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Photographs by Naomi Middleton and Lucinda Royte

Introduction

This special issue of the *Walloomsack Review*, “Bennington: View from Bingham Hill,” is a collection of essays written by undergraduate students at Bennington College from the fall 2018 term. It includes a variety of writings, each inspired by a different methodology used to study the town: observation, participant observation, interviewing, quantitative data collection, and analysis of personal journals, published histories, newspapers, records, databases, and scientific reports. The essays and supporting research were part of a multidisciplinary course entitled, “Studying Place by Metes and Bounds,” which introduced students to a variety of research methods for the purpose of collecting data about Bennington and describing the environmental and socio-political-economic concerns of the town, and by extension, of post-industrial life in the northeastern United States.

Originally, Bennington College Director of Environmental Studies Valerie Imbruce conceived of the course and received funding from the National Science Foundation in 2013 to develop it. She organized a multidisciplinary group of eight faculty (anthropology, architecture, biology, ceramics, chemistry, geology, plant science, and social psychology) to plan, discuss, debate, and devise a sequence of two courses with a rich variety of community internships. One primary goal of the course was to increase engagement between the community and the college.

Dr. Imbruce, a plant scientist, taught the first course in the spring of 2015, along with me, an anthropologist. Students spent time in the community weekly, learning about the town. And in class, they engaged with many community members as guest lecturers who shared their knowledge of Bennington’s history and contemporary issues. The new course was written up in the *Bennington Banner* and the *Rutland Herald*, which highlighted the focus on students studying Bennington and learning through regular community interaction. And so, the multi-faceted experiment in higher education at Bennington College was off and running.

The course we created continues. I taught it for the third time at Bennington College in the fall of 2018, and Valerie Imbruce and Robert Holahan will teach it at SUNY Binghamton in the fall 2019 term. In both contexts, program creators envisioned the ultimate goal of increasing collaboration and cooperation between the college and the town. That goal has been achieved throughout, initially as members of the community contributed to the education of the faculty and the students, and now as the students make public their knowledge via this community-based publication of the Bennington Museum.

The selection and editing of the essays was a collaborative process between the instructor and a group of three student editors, including Duncan Allen, Naomi Middleton, and Lucinda Royte. The ultimate editorial authority rested with the journal’s editor, Tyler Resch – uniquely qualified as a former longtime editor of the *Banner* as well as the author of more than dozen books of regional history – who kindly recalibrated his professional standards to support the 18-22-year-old undergraduate student authors. We are all grateful for his patience and forbearance. We are also grateful to the *Walloomsack Review* and Bennington Museum for partial funding, as we are to the Bennington College Dean’s Office, the Center for Advancement of Public Action, and the programs of Environmental Studies, and Society, Culture and Thought.

It is through the eyes of briefly resident youth that this portrait of our town emerges.

- Dr. Mirka Prazak

Editor's Notes

The varied essays in this journal represent “contemporary history” from the viewpoints of today’s Bennington College students about the town in which they find themselves, Bennington. The articles are a different breed of cat – not news accounts or analysis, not scholarly history, not fiction. I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I did working with them. They should help to enhance a town-gown relationship that has been flourishing for some ninety years now.

The students’ choices of subject matter have surprised and pleased me as the editor of this journal. On a local level they have touched base with the sociological, governmental, economic, agricultural, demographic, environmental, and philanthropic, and a touch of the political. It is always useful and frequently enlightening to have the observations about one’s own surroundings from those who come new to it.

The cover of this journal is graced by a woodcut by Lucy Swenson, who wrote the article about the Bennington Farmers Market. It coordinates with the essay by Georgia Williams titled “View from Jennings.” A little explanation is in order. The curved image in the foreground of the woodcut mimics the stone fencing that frames the patio of Jennings, the college’s music building, and the lines behind it represent the panorama described by Georgia Williams, starting with mountains at the right side.

For those not acquainted with the abbreviations used in Georgia’s essay, VAPA stands for the spacious Visual and Performing Arts building, which contains major performance arenas for music, dance, and drama plus abundant space for all the arts, and many classrooms and offices. It was built in the late 1960s to a scale recommended by Joseph Papp, founder of the New York Shakespeare Festival. CAPA is the college’s newest building, the white-marble-clad Center for the Advancement of Public Action, which has been moving the college forward in a new role as a well-informed citizen exploring contemporary social and political issues.

Jennings is the college’s music building and the name itself holds redolent historical memories. It was the 1904 summer home of Frederic Beach Jennings and his wife, Laura Park Jennings, who donated the estate in two phases, 1932 and 1939, to become the campus. Their daughter, Elizabeth Jennings Franklin, was the college’s longtime board chairman. Laura Park Jennings was a daughter of Trenor W. Park, the nineteenth-century business dynamo who built the Park-McCullough mansion and once owned the entire campus itself when it was known as Bingham Hill. Hence an alternative name for this journal: View from Bingham Hill.

- Tyler Resch

*List of Participants in
“Studying Place by Metes and Bounds,” Fall 2018*

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Duncan Allen '21 | San Diego, CA |
| Emily Halliburton '20 | Austin, TX |
| Stephanie Hernandez '20 | Houston, TX |
| Jessica Jaundoo '19 | Boston, MA |
| Hannah Lobue-Deshais '20 | Humboldt County, CA |
| Stevie Martinez-Farias '20 | Austin, TX |
| Naomi Middleton '19 | Stonington, CT |
| Ludjie Montout '19 | Boston, MA |
| Jenny Morgan '20 | Bennington, VT |
| Lucinda Royte '21 | Brooklyn, NY |
| Katharine Ruegger '21 | Indianapolis, IN |
| Roua Atamaz Sibai '21 | Homs, Syria |
| Lucy Blue Swenson '20 | Gearhart, OR |
| Lila Weiser '21 | Westport, CT |
| Georgia Williams '21 | Fayetteville, AR |
| Benjamin Wolinsky '19 | Tenaflly, NJ |

Selected quotes from students about the town of Bennington

Stephanie

- I identify as a low-income student of color. So, when I am in town, I get the economic struggle.

Jess

- Old fashioned in appearance. Not very modern/updated. Very different from a city/ larger town. Spread out, not comfortably walkable.

Hannah

- There is something to be said about the nature that grows in Bennington.
- Bennington is closely connected to the heart of New England living.

Roua

- People wise, Bennington has an aging population other than us, Bennington College students. Which plays an important role in the characteristics of the town.

Benjamin

- Because of its early American history, the Bennington area... is an important center. The textile industry was important here.
- There is a strong local identity, which is helped by the very "personal" nature of connections to local features.

Kat

- The Bennington bypass, on Route 297, cut Bennington Museum tourism by 50%. Some town members want to rename it. Others want to install a "Welcome to Bennington" sign. This requires a mixture of local, statewide, and federal permission.
- So much of this town is protected through the historic register of places (National Register of Historic Places) This means that in order to paint a white strip on a road and call it a bike lane, the town has to pay for extensive surveying.

Lucy Blue

- Village School in N.B-ton started by townspeople.
- "Bennington College was started in order to provide women with a valuable education"

Georgia

- I know I have ancestors from Bennington long, long ago – my mother says they were some of the “founders” of the town – who have graves in the same cemetery as Robert Frost and William Ellery Channing. I don’t have as much interest in my Bennington ancestors as my mother does, but I do think it is an interesting coincidence that I ended up here.

Emily

- Like many small towns there seems to be a certain pride and community. Many locals interact and seem to know each other well.

Jenny

- This is a beautiful place and very worth saving.

Duncan

- The town has a history of being a booming industrial and agricultural center, heavily occupied by mill workers because of its proximity to the Walloomsac River. The town in these days, though, is in a state of post-industrial decline. The state considers it a “food desert” resulting from the high population that cannot afford nutrition and healthcare.

Lucinda R.

- Paran Lake is a rec center as well as a water source to Paran Creek.
- The Mile-Around Woods and surrounding conservation lands hold evidence of the farmland that once covered all of Vermont.

The View from Jennings

Georgia Williams

The sky is overcast, making the different shades of green feel more true. The light is spread evenly throughout and shadows are minimal. I absorb most scenery like this, beginning with how the light would photograph and how the colors are presenting and interacting with one another. Upon this observation I layer subsequent others in order to create a scene as in a film or photograph.

I experience the landscape as either a viewer or creator of art: detached yet highly interested. Distance like that found at this vantage point is especially provocative of this “director’s eye,” as I classify it internally, though the percentage of scenery I admire that I actually capture with photographs is low. This way of interpreting the landscape is more concerned with the confirmation of potential. Imagining how a certain image may be captured and presented solidifies my ambiguous initial attraction. The canvas onto which the view from Jennings is painted prompts this response from me.

After noticing the overcast light of the cloudy day, I drink in the composition of objects in view with appreciation for the fact that I don’t have to squint in harsh sunlight or search for aspects hidden in shadows. I break down the unfamiliar image into what objects strike me quickest. I see first the short, concrete wall a few feet before me. The wall and the bright green vines growing on top of it create a sort of ornamented frame for the view ahead, resembling a pedestal for the composition to stand on. I then create a rectangular area to which I limit my attention based on this wall and where it ends in my periphery. First, in the distance, I notice a balance between man-made elements and natural elements. There is a split in the image between the left, where campus buildings and a monument reside, and the right, where mountains extend upward and outward to the edge of this imagined canvas.

I focus and linger on individual details of what is before me. First I look at the structures that stand out as man-made. The Bennington Battle Monument, a towering structure, looks thin and weak placed on the same level as the solid, multiplying mountains. CAPA becomes very sculptural when seen from a distance as a whole. The windows present as chunks cut out of a block, and the whiteness of the marble contrasts strikingly with the dark, warm greens of the trees and grass. It seems alien in its placement. VAPA, a building I know quite personally and have come to appreciate

functionally and architecturally, looks quite shabby and unfinished from afar. The many rectangular windows and panels don't line up in a pleasing way. This is slightly unnerving, but it also teaches me about how VAPA was intended to be experienced; the building that fosters creativity and close interaction with many materials invites its inhabitants to interact with the building itself closely rather than view it from afar. Jennings offers this unique opportunity to compare these buildings in such a way.

My eye then drifts to the right, where the mountains stretch from just behind VAPA into my periphery. So grand they seem in this particular weather, touching the wisps of clouds that hang lower than usual in the sky. Though it is a summer day, and it had been quite hot a few hours before, a hint of the approaching fall is suggested in this image. Land onto which buildings have not yet been planted extends, untrimmed, upward from the "pedestal" I have made of the concrete wall. This natural element of plant life holds the majority of this scene, commanding a powerful presence. I feel a sense inferiority and submission to this natural prosperity and growth. Though it is easy to feel rather large from this vantage point, as though one is a ruler looking down upon a kingdom, I am reminded of my place and how small it is as I watch the tiny figure of a person descend a trail from the far right. The figure becomes smaller and smaller as it gets closer to interacting with the objects I have been observing. The power I feel is only granted to me by the hill on which Jennings rests. Ultimately, I am humbled. □



Using Construction Patterns and Regulations *Predicting the Trajectory of a Town*

Emily Halliburton

As the saying goes, Vermont has four seasons: almost winter, winter, still winter, and construction. Physically, the growth of a town is reliant on its development, and there are certain hoops every person or business must go through to build. Examination of these construction regulations and patterns provides a unique insight into physical and social aspects of a town that can be used to better understand the present and to predict its trajectory for growth. While working for a general contractor in Texas, I became interested in how local regulations and ordinances reflected the community.

This paper is a case study based in Bennington, Vermont, which analyzes the processes undertaken and the patterns that come from them mainly through Bennington's Land Use and Development Regulations and Vermont Act 250 database, as well as interviews and observations with Holly Andersen, the Bennington College project manager, and other town documents. The aim is to demonstrate the ties between physical and social aspects of a community and offer insight into how to use construction as an indicator of the values of a town.

To begin a project, a party must first apply for a permit through the Development Review Board, which is made up of seven members appointed by the Selectboard of the town. The process of review through the board includes analysis of the application, a public hearing, and issuance of a written decision (Agency of Natural Resources, 2018). This decision is made based on the Town of Bennington, Vermont Land Use and Regulations, prepared by the Bennington Planning Committee and Bennington County Regional Commission, and funded partially by the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development. This document was created in 2004 and has been amended six times, most recently in 2016 (Land Use & Development Regulations, 2016). The Planning Committee is a group of five members, also appointed by the Selectboard, that performs planning functions for the town in the fields of economic and social development, as well as transportation. Its stated goal is to "articulate and implement a vision for the future of Bennington" (Planning Commission, 2018).

The regulations are broken down into twenty sections, one for each district of the town. Each district has unique requirements, specific to the intended function of the area and the aesthetic and historic value placed

on it. For example, Table 3.1 in the regulations outlines the guidelines for building in the Central Business District (CBD). Among the regulations, several aesthetic components are made clear. New buildings must not exceed two stories, consistent with the original architecture of the area. Parking must be hidden from the street, and businesses are not allowed to have drive-throughs. This creates a seamless effect among buildings, which adds to the classic New England landscape that tourists and townspeople alike expect. Most importance is placed on buildings considered historic, as defined by the Vermont Historic Sites and Structures Survey. In fact, Section 4.2 of the Land Use Regulations explicitly prohibits the demolition of a historic building unless rehabilitation would cause “undue financial burden” on the owner (Land Use & Development Regulations, 2016).

What constitutes rehabilitation and historic conservation is determined by the Historic Preservation Committee, another group of five members appointed by the Selectboard and established 1987 (Historic Preservation Commission, 2018). Its handbook, “Time and Place in Bennington,” was created in 2005 and includes a guide to Vermont architecture and preservation. This group’s domain is called the Central Bennington Historic District, and generally falls in between the Walloomsac River to the north, Union Street to the south and east, and North Street to the west. The use of the Walloomsac River as a boundary calls to mind the town’s industrial roots in the mills and businesses powered by the water.

The goal of historic preservation is not only based in aesthetics



and character; the Historic Preservation Committee also intends it to be functional. Its handbook states: “Responsible historic preservation encourages keeping good construction from every period. It encourages high-quality changes to existing buildings, and construction of new buildings where these will contribute to a town's “ongoing growth and health” and that “Real people build towns, not just historians” (Time and Place in Bennington, 2006).

Nothing could be more true. In 2013, there were forty-six businesses pertaining to construction and development operating in Bennington. According to the town plan, the availability of this local workforce is vital to the region. It circulates business with the local community and provides jobs for many people living in town. Further, Bennington's existing building conditions and infrastructure are considerably older than state average. Historic preservation and renovation create a strong market for construction work. Even without factoring in some growth of the town, the market for construction work would still increase from pre-existing projects.

That said, Bennington is not a stagnant town. The opposite is true. While some construction work may be more subtle, many times it is unavoidable to notice the undertaking, and despite the work being a nuisance from time to time, it is one of life's inevitable necessities. The *Bennington Banner* reports on much of the day-to-day construction that can be seen. For instance, in its October 22, 2018, issue, road work for the upcoming week is listed, and a small spotlight is shown on Tatro's Concrete Impressions, which was preparing for a “pocket park” by Main Street and South Street, called the Four Corners.

Road work is vital to the functioning of a town, but doesn't necessarily reflect on the trajectory of the town (*Banner* staff, 2018). Road work can either reflect the wear and tear of environmental and traffic-related factors, or can reflect growth if it includes projects such as expanding lanes or building new roads.

Construction projects that reflect more on that topic would be, for example, the renovation of the Bennington Downtown Alliance location, which is temporarily housed on South Street, published in the *Banner* on September 17, 2018. Despite the short-lived time in this new location, the Alliance still wanted the space to feel welcoming and natural. John Shannahan, the executive director, was quoted saying, “We're a pop-up visitor center, but [tourists] coming for fall foliage don't know that.” This keys us into the importance of tourism in the town, by showing how construction is catering to that sector.

Not all data about development in town can be found through the newspaper. To bridge the gaps, the database for Vermont Act 250 can be used to collect data on permit applications in Bennington County. The Act, passed in 1970, provides a judicial process for “reviewing and managing

the environmental, social, and fiscal consequences” of developments within the state. For this project, I reviewed the most recent one hundred permit applications published on the Act 250 Database, available through Vermont Agency of Natural Resources. All these applications were for projects in Bennington, beginning June 23, 2005 and ending August 29, 2018. I found that of these, forty-nine were classified as minor construction, fourteen as major, and thirty-two as administrative amendments to existing projects. Approval for most projects was granted in between a week and a month, with projects facing opposition in public hearings taking longer.

The growth of this town reflected in these figures: eighteen of the one hundred projects were construction of housing units, primarily condos and apartments. The expansion is also seen through the growth of businesses such as the construction of two new car dealerships, and construction of other new and renovated businesses such as Wal-Mart (permit applied for in 2011 with an extension applied for in 2016) and Chili's (constructed in 2004) (Agency of Natural Resources, 2018).

What cannot be overlooked in the trajectory of the town is the role colleges are playing. Of the permits applied for, nine were from Bennington College and four were from Southern Vermont College (SVC). Up until the recent announcement of the school's closing, it seemed as if there was an obvious sign that SVC's student population was expanding, because two of the college's applications were for new student housing. The new buildings would have provided one hundred twenty-four and one hundred thirty-nine units, respectively. However, because of low enrollment, previous debt, and the placement of the college on probation for accreditation (Therrien, 2019), it turns out this is not so. Construction will play a major role in reshaping the identity of the 371-acre campus in coming years, depending on who purchases the land and what intent they have for its use.

In the case of Bennington College, while no new housing was built in the time frame of applications looked at, construction of a new student center, Center for the Advancement of Public Action, and rehabilitation of the Commons Building were all applied for and approved (Agency of Natural Resources, 2018). Holly Andersen, the project manager at the college, stated that the main rationale behind renovating Commons was to provide dining for a thousand students and to complete deferred maintenance (Andersen, personal correspondence, 2018). This implies that, unfortunately unlike SVC, the student population is growing. The closure and growth respectively of both of these schools will have an impact on how the town expands as well. As the percentage of college students living in the town fluctuates, so will the town to fit their needs and wants. There are already many businesses, such as Spice N' Nice, Goodwill, and Two Brews that offer student discounts, but I predict that as more Bennington College students come to the area, more projects catering directly to students will be

started. This could mean more niche establishments, or places that double as workplaces for students.

This does not mean that the growth of the school is not without regulations. More accurately, school growth and town ordinances work in tandem. For example, the renovation of Bennington College's Commons Building is limited by the regulations of both the Town of Bennington and North Bennington, as well as state and federal policy. This came to light in my interview with Holly, which was conducted in November of 2018. To pay for this project, the college applied for a Rural Development grant from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) through the Vermont State Historical Preservation Board.

As previously discussed, the aesthetic of historical conservation is incredibly important to Bennington, and this is no different in the case of the college. During the abatement and demolition portion of renovation, as much of the original building as possible was salvaged, including doors and window panes. These window panes are now incorporated into the southern face of the building (the side that faces Commons Lawn). The division of local regulations is especially interesting in this case, because the village line between Bennington and North Bennington runs directly through the building. The aforementioned southern face lies in Bennington and the northern face, appropriately, in North Bennington. This means that for construction to occur, both municipalities had to be involved, and different regulations had to be followed for each half of the building. Also unknown to me before the interview, this divide seems quite apparent in the outer aesthetics of the building, in which the south face represents the original 1930s vision of Commons and progressively becomes more modern as you move towards the north face (Andersen, personal correspondence 2018).

The impact of construction regulations does not stop at the physical structures. The hiring of local contractors and subcontractors obviously plays into the economy, but the type of businesses hired offers a unique insight into the makeup of a town. One interesting fact that came up during my interview was that neither the school nor PC Construction, the general contractors hired by the college, were required to hire a certain percentage of Historically Underutilized Businesses (HUBs). HUBs typically include minority and women-owned businesses, but qualifications for HUBs vary by state. In 2016, the HUBZone program backed by the U.S. Small Business Association expanded in Vermont to include six counties including Bennington. Most HUBZones are in rural areas with limited economic development. The designation of Bennington as a HUBZone makes Bennington businesses potential HUBs. This unfortunately means that, economically, the county is not growing at the same pace as the state average. Still, only federal construction projects give preferential treatment to HUBs, meaning that these businesses don't have an advantage in any privately backed jobs, as many

projects are in the town, according to the SBA District Office.

Despite the temporary frustration a construction project may cause, it is one of the most effective ways to look at the growth of a town. Examining the rate of construction, type of project, and project applicant determines



where the town is headed next and how. In the case of Bennington, emphasis is being placed on historic preservation to accentuate character for tourism and aesthetics, while the population is currently experiencing an influx. What I really learned from diving into this topic is how interdependent the material aspects of a town are with its community and with its growth. Regulations are adopted by the local governance for many reasons, but primarily they intend to lay the path for what they believe to be a viable future for the town. What this looks like can take many shapes depending on the environment, economy, people, and perhaps a whole new Bennington. □

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The Bennington Farmers Market

Small Business in a Small World

Lucy Blue Swenson

I performed my participant observation at the Bennington Farmers Market intending to collect data on the experience of small-business owners and artists in the community. A participant observation typically involves researching a topic while being physically present at the site of the intended data collection, taking note of characteristics of the setting while being a participant in whatever is being observed. I wanted to prompt conversations with as many farmers and artists as I could to make connections for future endeavors and build relationships, and also to learn about their passions and reasons for pursuing the living that they have. Not only did I initiate conversations, but I also waited to see what kinds of conversations they would start with me; and I observed their exchanges with other townspeople.

Due to the consumerist nature of farmers markets, I thought it best at times to talk to the owners, along with purchasing some of their merchandise, so that I could have longer conversations with them and I didn't feel like I was wasting their time. It was easier to observe the musical guests without speaking to them so as to not interrupt their set. I found a balance of dialogue and active surveillance during my participant observation was beneficial to get a clear picture of this weekly venture for small-business owners and artists in Bennington.

Rain or shine, vendors of the Bennington Farmers Market bring their goods to 150 Depot Street every Saturday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. The place bustles with students, townfolk, children, and dogs ready to try a free sample or pick up some groceries for the week. Bennington students are given five free market bucks to encourage participation and save them money. Often by 11 a.m. the market bucks are all gone, which means large numbers of students are coming early to get the best deal.

There is parking in front of the market, an ATM in the RiteAid across the street, and downtown Bennington is within walking distance. So the location is convenient and accessible. Entertainment is provided for people who wish to sit, local and traveling musicians play on a central stage, and on a nice day children dance to the music and parents sit and talk while watching their kids. The booths are aligned along both sides of a curving cement pathway, each with a white tent and a table or two presenting products. The owners stand behind their displays and wait for shoppers

to stop, or greet them and invite them toward their booth. The vendors offer various craftworks like jewelry, knitwear, tie-dye, and wood carvings; a blend of baked goods like pastries, bread, and cookies; canned goods like pickled vegetables, beets, jams and jellies; maple products and farm fresh produce like fruits, vegetables, eggs, and decorative pumpkins and gourds.

I started my conversations and observations on September 8, 2018, and went every Saturday morning since then. I only took data of attendance on one day and I didn't stay for the entire duration of market hours. I collected a total of around twenty townspeople who circulated through the market in the span of an hour, about half between adults in their thirties and senior citizens late sixties and up. The ratio of men to women was an estimated 1:4. I noticed one child attended with his mother, he looked about four. The average number of Bennington students to visit the market this term added up to about 18, according to Anya Piotrowski, the director of student engagement.

In total there were twenty-four vendors, which included nine family farms, four bakeries, eight specialty and prepared food booths, and three crafts and art tents. Marketgoers brought their dogs, their children, and plenty of fascinating stories. Interestingly, I made a socio-economic observation: folks who appeared to be middle to upper class were walking to each booth, with reusable bags, and a goal in mind for what they needed, as though this was a regular outing, and the market was what they relied on for many of their groceries. Folks who appeared to be lower middle to lower class often sat on the sidelines in groups, collecting at the picnic tables and hanging out among the chatter without purchasing anything. Members of different class levels rarely interacted and the only vendor who typically interacted with lower middle class was selling CBD products. This led me to wonder if that was due to stereotypes surrounding cannabis: is it only used by lower-working-class people?

How do the vendors know what people want to buy? I got my answer when not one but three vendors told me they don't sell anything they think people will buy; they only offer what they love to make, what they're passionate about. I frequently asked how long the artists, bakers, and farmers had lived in Bennington. Many told me stories of living in a big city in another state and working a 9-to-5 office job, burning out, and realizing they needed to follow their dreams. One woman told me she was becoming a person she despised, working in the service industry, so she quit and started making jewelry. She felt that it brought her back to herself and helped her make genuine connections with people she couldn't relate to working in restaurants.

Often I would ask about a certain product and how it came to fruition and end up learning about the person and his or her home life. I asked one vendor about her handmade alpaca yarn hats, and she told me they are made from an alpaca on the farm of her parents. She lived with her parents now, also after having left a 9-5 job in Philadelphia, and started her own business online through which she offers goods made from the alpacas her parents kept for their own amusement.

Many of the farms were family owned and the vendors who represented their name learned their craft over many years. One man said he grew up on his family's farm and had known everything he knew now since he was ten years old. He had grown pumpkins and potatoes for thirty-two years. Another married couple perfected and modified and revised their maple syrup concoctions over eighteen years together from the trees planted on their property before they purchased it. I wondered if the traditions would continue to be passed down or if interest in farming is diminishing and the skills passed down through generations will eventually be unnecessary.

Almost every vendor was willing to speak with me and share their story, but not without a little encouragement. If I meandered through the booths or sat and observed, I was left alone. I did have one intriguing interaction with a market-goer, a woman who noticed my friend's shirt with an illustration of a bear on it. She ended up telling us about the bears in her yard, her cats, her previous career in nursing, her wigs, and tattooed-on eyebrows. She appeared from thin air and left the same way. What was interesting to my observational data was that she said she had lived in Bennington for "300 years" and still didn't know that certain small businesses in town existed.

I was surprised to hear that in a town of around 15,000 people, word doesn't always get around. I wonder how this affects the small-business owners and artists trying to make a living by word-of-mouth. I could tell that my presence as a college student was obvious because vendors often asked if I went to Bennington, which did seem to steer the conversation in a certain direction. It was common for the topic of the relationship with the college and the town to come up and they were always open to making connections with students and bridging that gap. I later compiled a list of farmers who were willing to give excess produce to students who were willing to come harvest it. I plan to put the list in the Paran Creek Apartment and on various bulletin boards around campus. I gathered that the townspeople and small business owners want to get to know students and unveil the mystery of the college on the hill.

The information I wanted to collect was most easily reached through conversation, so I think I relied on the participant part of the observation.

I collected more interesting ideas of the town and the people living in it through my observations, but not much about small-business owners and artists. Most of my questions arose from my conversations, which opened up a more natural dialogue between the vendors and me. Still, coming prepared with questions in mind was a valuable conversation starter.

I think in an alternative setting like volunteering on one of the farms where I could be an equal with my subject would be a beneficial place for participant observation. I was invited to bake bread with one of the bakeries, and if I could have participated in that before my observations were due, I would have learned more about the inner workings of their business, which would have been valuable to my research. Overall, I met one of my goals, which was to forge ties with people in the greater Bennington community and open up new doors. □



What Does the Fund for North Bennington Do?

An interview by Lucinda Royte '21 with Robert E. Woolmington.

Lucinda Royte: Can you tell me about The Fund for North Bennington and how it works?

Rob Woolmington: The Fund for North Bennington is a non-profit and tax-exempt corporation started about twenty-five years ago to be a vehicle for community activities. It is organized so it can sponsor and perform charitable activities that extend as broadly as the Internal Revenue Service allows a tax-exempt organization, but only focused in the North Bennington area. This gives us the flexibility to get involved in issues surrounding education, conservation and historic preservation, and social services.

The Fund arose out of conversations between two local philanthropists and the Preservation Trust of Vermont. The donors asked: "What can we do to institutionalize philanthropic giving in North Bennington?" The answer was giving a little money to a new organization, and then seeing what people do with it. That was in 1992.

We have focused on conservation around the village. The Mile-Around Woods and surrounding fields were then privately owned by a family that had lived here a very long time, but was going through generational succession. Land titles would be going to different members of the family with different interests. There was a good chance there would be some type of development, and the historic land use of farming and forestry would change. The Fund's board thought we could take this on. We acquired the initial land by gift.

Since then, over the course of twenty or so years, we have increased our holdings by about 15 parcels – a few by gifts, some by fundraising, and others through grants. We have gone out opportunistically and tried to acquire land that has conservation or agricultural value. Originally the new parcels were all around the Mile-Around Woods on the west side of the village, north and south of McCullough Road. About fourteen years ago we had the opportunity to think about acquiring land on the east side of Lake Paran. It had been permitted for very dense residential development. After the permitted development was halted in a court case, we were able to buy land on the east shore, all the way up to the Robert Frost Stone House, through fundraising, gifts, and grants. The college now owns about six acres of the Frost farm, and we own seventy-five acres.

We developed a conservation mission and then worked out plans to implement it. We have now acquired about 416 acres in and around Lake Paran, and in and around the village. From the point of view of many people, nothing has changed. But use of those acres would have changed if this organization had not gotten the support we have. It's been a lot of work and money to keep things the way they are. It's just not apparent.

LR: What does a conservation mission look like, and what conservation methods are used on the land?

RW: Management plans for the Mile-Around Woods and land around Paran are posted on our website. The plans are simple. We are not allowing development of new structures. We are allowing public access consistent with agricultural uses. Our forestry management plan is to let the trees grow. Having clusters of land that eventually go into old growth is the goal, and essentially what we are doing. On our website, you can see more detailed plans of what is and isn't allowed, how we manage our land, and plans for stewardship.

LR: How is the community involved in efforts of conservation?

RW: In many ways. We get an enormous amount of support financially from people in the town. Small gifts from ten dollars and up and some larger gifts have been tremendously helpful. We also have volunteers who help us with stewardship, invasive species management, and trail work. We have no staff. One of the reasons we do not is that people seem to follow the simple rules that we set. We find that a lot of issues are solved by the people in town who walk the trails and know things. We rely on a sort of a shared culture about how people should use our land. We also have people who come to us with ideas. A lot of our projects come from community involvement.

LR: What are the main uses of the land?

RW: Mainly conservation, just letting it grow. We host two farming operations. One is a dairy operation in White Creek that manages our fields under a management plan that we have approved. By the Mile-Around Woods, there are horses and crops that are worked by another farmer. We also own the Hiland Hall greenhouse near the Park-McCullough House. We have just finished a \$100,000 renovation there. The greenhouse and surrounding Hiland Hall Garden get used a lot by the elementary school.

Students are doing science and art projects.

LR: Is most land acquired when it is going to be developed? You spoke to land being given as gifts but what about the other land?

RW: We started out very opportunisticly. Once we started to conserve more systematically people in the town started coming to us. I am a lawyer and do real estate work – so I sort of know what's going on and can see ways to work things out. A former astronomy professor at the college had an absolutely key piece of property on one side of Paran Creek. He was very interested in conservation and a large landowner. He worked with us. We were also very lucky. Most people don't want a public trail on their property, and that can defeat a project or make it different. We had willing and cooperative landowners. If you walk the trail on the north side of the lake you will find a boardwalk along the shore. The landowners still live there and sold us their waterfront land. No one does that in Trump's America, you know? They did that because they really care about their community, and were willing to give up their private control to benefit the community. They were paid for it, but it was an enormously generous thing to do. I think they were willing to cooperate because North Bennington has a strong community feeling -- it's a place that still has a strong sense of community. When I talk to people and tell them this a great project, they can see what we are doing for the community. People here still believe in that bigger picture.

LR: Can you tell me about the Vermont Land Trust? What is the relationship between the two organizations?



RW: The Vermont Land Trust is a statewide organization that has similar legal characteristics to The Fund for North Bennington. Its mission is focused on acquiring legal interests in land in the form of conservation easements, or acquiring land itself, for the purposes of conservation, agriculture or managed forestry. Vermont Land Trust does it on a big scale, and has the capacity to effectively serve as a watch guard or steward of land across the state. A couple of the parcels we acquired had land trust easements on them when we acquired them. We later brought in the Vermont Land Trust as a conservation partner for all of our land. We are a small organization. We wanted to be sure that if we went out and acquired these parcels for conservation purposes, the land would remain perpetually conserved. We went to donors and to the community and raised the money for conservation. This is what we wanted. If new trustees came into our organization and decided to change it and develop the land, the conservation mission might be lost in the future. We didn't want that to happen so we made an agreement with the Vermont Land Trust so it legally can enforce the conservation purposes for which the land was acquired. If anyone in the future tried to develop those parcels they would be sued and lose because the land trust is enforcing these restrictions. Vermont Land Trust is also a credible partner for grant application. We are now a much more fundable and credible applicant when the land trust is our conservation partner.

LR: Aside from land, what buildings does the Fund for North Bennington own?

RW: We own the Left Bank. That was gifted in 2013. It was run as a bank from 1865 to 2003 and title had never transferred from the original bank. We went to Merchants Bank with the Preservation Trust as our partner. We have since bought out the trust, and the Left Bank is now solely our project. We have turned part of the first floor into a community space, and rent out the top offices to pay off expenses. That is the only building we own besides a barn on our farm property.

We also make grants. We have been doing so since The Fund started. You can see our grant history outlined on our website. We have granted about half a million dollars. The money goes out in small doses to support the work of others in our community. For example, the volunteers who run the recreational center at the lake came to us and asked for support. We underwrote the cost of membership for senior citizens and people who have income qualifications so they can swim at the lake all summer. □

What I know about Bennington

Jenny Morgan

1. It is small but large.
2. It is divided very much by haves and have nots.
3. There are a lot of misunderstandings between the above mentioned groups but there are also a large number of people trying to correct those misconceptions.
4. The schools are in need of help.
5. There are families that have been here forever . . .
6. There are streets and sections that are “good” or “bad” as there are in many towns.
7. There are stone walls dividing fields and old property lines where you can find old bottles and pottery and other cast offs.
8. There are a lot of old families here who are very willing to talk about their connection and history with the town.
9. Most people you speak with here will be happy to share what they know or believe to be true about the area.
10. The woods are filled with old cellar holes or places where people had lived (I don't know many of the spots and remember hearing about them).
11. The town was in a much better position when we had factories and the race track and other businesses. The decline was steady but has become much sharper in recent history.
12. You can go to any of the town offices and ask to see things
13. People here may seem standoffish but are really very helpful
14. The Putnam Project has made a large impact on downtown businesses.
15. Information spreads like a game of telephone here.
16. There are lots of organizations who are trying to solve the problems created by lack of education, jobs, drugs, homelessness.
17. Families migrate from Pownal to Bennington to Hoosick Falls or North Adams because of housing issues.
18. This is a beautiful place and very worth saving.
19. The wildlife here is beautiful and it is interesting to see what comes and goes in larger numbers. There have not been as many robins and monarch butterflies in the last few years.
20. There were at one time many more schools because people needed them to be within walking distance. □

The Sweetest Dream That Labor Knows

Small-Scale Agriculture in Bennington County

Katharine Ruegger

Agriculture in Bennington County shifted significantly during the late twentieth century due to the rise of industrialization and the decline of multi-generational dairy farms, which have become almost obsolete. Today's agriculture is more defined by small-scale "livelihood" farms, which often produce more emotional than economic profit.

Through a mixture of interviews, participant observations, census analysis, local reports, and Robert Frost poetry, I will trace changes in "authentic" agricultural practices in Bennington County and their impacts on the landscape of this New England community.

Beholding the Landscape: The Natural and the New

Behind the ridged trunks of four black locusts rests an old barn. Unlike its neighbors, it is not painted red. Instead, its wood is stained. Some vertical planks are lighter than the others. A fieldstone foundation suggests a cellar, a gable roof, a loft. At one time it may have been filled with hay. Now its interior is unknown. Outside, the metal panels have rusted but have not decayed. One reflects the most sunlight as red seeps from the top of its steel. Facing east, Green Mountain ridges protrude from either side. Gnarled branches rise like chimneys entangled in clouds, but masked by the structure, their trunks stay hidden from view. The barn dominates its landscape. In the spring, dandelion heads will rise from the soil, mowed down after they've gone to seed. Lilac shrubs frame worn corners, their gentle flowers contrasting with the timber reclaimed from local maple and pine. A fence weaves through young apple trees to divide the barn from the telephone pole. Tethered to wood, the black-coated wire connects the people next door to the people everywhere else. In the distance, through the spruce, there stands a brick house with three stories of symmetrical windows. Their faux shutters open up to Silk Road. Between the glass and the pavement, the yard holds bright red pick-up trucks and manicured shrubs, but no garden, no cattle, no crops. The grass grows greener than a well-watered field.

The Farm as Metaphor: Robert Frost in Bennington County

"Where's this barn's house?" asks the poet. His mystical speaker leans against a Dutch frame's paint-chipped wood¹. Frost hides behind trees,

aware but wary of the modernization that peeks through their branches. Never entirely “at home in the metaphor,” the California-born poet cherished the New England landscape and lured readers to romanticize its manifest expanse². Frost might be what Thoreau would call a “poetical farmer.” He did “nothing with haste and drudgery, but as if he loved it.” From his letters, he seemed ambivalent about his agrarian identity. Before moving to Bennington, when farming poultry on land his grandfather gifted him, he wrote to John Bartlett: “Ain’t working the land. Easier to write about it. Think I don’t understand?” The next year, he changes his stance. “I won’t make much from poetry . . . it seems to me as I look at it now I had much rather farm than write for money.” That was in 1914, when he was living abroad. Near the end of his life in 1960, he still wasn’t sure. To Richard Poirier, he wrote, “I’m not a farmer, I haven’t led a literary life.”

Frost idolized manual labor, but could not depend on its profits. The Imagist poets in England were the first to respect him as an American Agrarian. He moved back to the United States with spearheading modernist Ezra Pound’s approval, and bought a house in South Shaftsbury, Bennington County, Vermont, where he made more money as a poet and professor than as a farmer. According to Robert Frost Stone House Museum director Megan Mayhew Bergman,

“Frost came to Shaftsbury to be an apple farmer. He planted hundreds of apple trees and was seriously invested in the orchard and apple farming. Apple work is seasonal and less demanding year-round than other types of farming...in a letter he states his intention about moving to Vermont: to plant a new Garden of Eden, a thousand apple trees of some unforbidden variety.”

In his former yard a few of these trees still stand. This orchard was a business, but also a spiritual endeavor — a search for an original landscape for himself and his family³. If the divine fruits dropped, they’d rot, but they could still be pressed into cider. If they stayed on the branches long enough, they could be churned into poems. In his most famous example, the farmer-speaker becomes exhausted with his expectations of the metaphor:

*“For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.”⁴*

Instead of depending on one crop, Frost’s farm planted a variety. There was a vegetable patch with enough greens to feed his family. He grew flowers, sweet pea stems, which his children sold by the side of the road. Mayhew Bergman recalled a story his granddaughter told about cows moving between the Stone House and the Gulley, now owned by television



writer and producer Norman Lear, across the way. Frost also planted red pine and birch saplings, which weren't harvested while he lived there, but could have helped his son, Carol, to successfully farm once he inherited the land.

Frost home-schooled his children in Bennington County, relying on local flora to teach science. Many of those plants can still be seen on the Robert Frost Trail, which runs between the house and Lake Paran. Easeful, but not lazy, the poet won a 1924 Pulitzer prize at the Stone House, his first of four, for his fourth collection, *New Hampshire*⁵. Commuting between Vermont and Massachusetts, Frost taught regularly at Amherst College; academic colleagues called him too much of a “hen-man,” but to his rural neighbors he was a gentleman from out west (Parini 126).

The Livelihood Farmer: A New Definition

Frost was not the first livelihood farmer in Bennington County but his poetry popularized an archetype: a gentleman-tramp who could leave the city and return to the land. This inspired others to move to Vermont and do the same. In the introduction to *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture, and the Community of Life*, environmental law scholar Eric T. Freyfogle defines the livelihood farm as

“the well-run farmstead that provides the locus and cultural center of a family’s life, the place where the young are socialized and taught, where stories arise and are passed down, where leisure is enjoyed, where the tasks of daily living are performed, and where various economic enterprises take place, in garden, orchard, kitchen, woodlot, toolshed, and yard” (xiv).

Livelihood farms are both economic and educational places. They provide opportunities for intimate relationships with the land because they require repetitive manual work and seasonal understanding in exchange for bodily nourishment. Many livelihood farmers homeschool their children as Frost did, using nature as a teacher. Rather than cultivating fields with large equipment, livelihood farming emphasizes ease as an essential element of physical labor, which blurs the line between work and play.

In a 2014 ethnographic study conducted by the University of Vermont, researchers found that many activities reported as leisure were also productive: 52 percent of landowners hunted large game or let other people hunt on their property, 44 percent hunted large birds, 51 percent cut and processed their own firewood to heat their homes, 21 percent produced maple syrup from their own trees. Asked what specific activities they considered recreational, a dairy farmer said “weed whacking.” Another landowner, “snow-blowing.” For these Vermonters, pleasure is also practical. These activities provide the landowners with food that can be eaten or sold, or warmth, which lowers nonrenewable energy usage and heating costs. But only 19 percent of the respondents derived all of their income from farming, so efficiency was less of a factor than it would have been in Frost’s era, when more farmers relied exclusively on their land.

Geographer Cheryl E. Morse helped conduct this study, analyzing the contemporary bodily performance of the New England landscape.

“While Vermont has a strong dairy sector, is the country’s largest producer of maple syrup, and is experiencing what some have called an ‘agricultural renaissance’ with high growth in the number of small diversified farms, most Vermonters do not rely on farming for their livelihoods.”

Freyfogle interprets “livelihood” as a holistic endeavor, but Morse equates it directly with income. Between 1992 and 2012, the number of farmers in Bennington County has grown. “Farmer,” however, is no longer an occupation-exclusive term: according to the USDA 2012 Census of Agriculture, of the 305 principal operators in Bennington County, over half (53.4 percent) had a primary occupation other than farming. The average farm size is shrinking significantly as well, from 219 acres down to 136 acres, a difference of 38 percent (For more census figures, refer to Table 1).

The USDA nationally defines a farm as “any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would’ve been sold, during the census year.” On a state level, Vermont’s definition is much looser. Until 2015, “small farms” included any farm with less than 200 dairy cows or 300 beef cows, “all the way down to one chicken or a 10-by-10-foot vegetable garden.” After significant changes in

Act 46, the small farm category was split into three distinct types: Non-RAP Operations (NRO), Uncertified Farm Operations (UFO), and Certified Small Farm Operations (SFO). The requirements for each are listed in Table 2, based on number of animals, use of manure, acreage, and annual gross income. Since Vermont's definition of a farm is more inclusive than the USDA's, many "livelihood" farms may have been omitted from their report. But since Bennington County's product market value has nearly tripled, livelihood farms may be more profitable than they were in the twentieth century.

At the Market: Participant Observation

On Saturday mornings throughout the year, local farmers gather at the Walloomsac Farmers Market. Once November snow falls, the market moves inside, from its location by the Walloomsac River on Depot Street to an event hall at the First Baptist Church. Between walls lined with handmade quilts, there are two rows of tables, with sixteen vendors selling produce, meat, sweets, and handmade goods. There are about twenty customers in the room at a time. The majority of them are older white women, with wrinkled foreheads and white, grey, or bleached-blond hair. Young children run around while their parents shop. About two thirds of the people carry cloth bags on their shoulders. Most people walk alone. In the corner, two musicians play bluegrass standards. There is only one table to sit at. Otherwise, everyone is standing, conversing, or grocery shopping. I stroll through the room with five dollars to spend.

I first speak to a local woodworker. He displays bottle openers, sophisticated pens, and wine stoppers, all made from Bennington County wood. When asked where his business is based, the woodworker asserts, "Right here, up Carpenter Hill." A customer interjects to inform him of a recently fallen hardwood tree. He says he'll take a look — he forages most of his material like this.

Seated across from root vegetables and onions, a hemp farmer tells me to try his teas. Three other customers stand around his booth, sampling oils and organic microgreens. An older woman raves about CBD's joint-relaxing properties. The farmer stresses the difference between the two strains of sativa, THC (which was recreationally legalized in Vermont this summer, but cannot be sold or grown locally) and CBD (what he grows, used medicinally). He reveals a recent mistake: rather than putting industrial leaves in the teas, he made them with oil leaves, which are four times as potent. He gives me two to try, and I buy a brownie in exchange.

A Golden Town: Ecotourism and Boutique Agriculture

Dave Senecal, a longtime bus driver, born in Bennington County, vaguely remembers visiting the dairy farm his father grew up on. “He stopped feeding cows and started feeding cars,” he said. His father sold the land in his twenties, before Dave was “even an idea,” and moved to Bennington County to start a mobile service station. The farm was purchased by hobby farmers, a subtype of livelihood farmers. He described them as wealthy weekend residents who would “flip” distressed properties to “preserve what would otherwise be lost.” In New York, he recalled, many dairy farms have been bought by people with “pretty deep pockets,” and they’ve preserved them. He framed this as positive, denoting the agricultural landscape, regardless of its production, as an essential “part of our heritage.”

Now, Dave is skeptical of dairy farming. In this part of Vermont, it’s not economically viable, he says. Bennington County’s rocky soil cannot grow enough hay to feed a herd large enough to be commercially successful. He believes industrialization helped farmers improve their efficiency, with machines allowing them to “work a little less hard and produce a little bit more,” and pushed farming’s “inevitable fade” into the 1980s, rather than the 1950s. Yet the image of the pastoral Vermont with many more cows than people ended in the 1990s. Instead of seeing grazing holsteins, they are met with empty barns. His favorite is on Silk Road.

Conclusion: The Future of Farming in Bennington County

Agriculture is still prominent in Bennington County, but alongside the rise of large commercial dairy farms and industrial and technological advancement, small practices have changed. Frost’s romantic pre-Depression scythe is no longer viable, but its manual idealization is preserved in the the same pastoral memory that lures tourists to visit and spend in an “authentic” New England town. Bennington has transitioned from medium-sized multigenerational dairy farms to new small, livelihood farms selling boutique products like hemp, grass-fed lamb, and alpaca wool. As a result, market product value has nearly tripled since 1992. In the future, I wonder what actions the state will take to make locally grown food accessible to Bennington residents of all income levels, and whether young people will stay in Vermont after high school or college in order to farm. Near Bennington College, the barns on Silk Road look beautiful but are underutilized. Their walls can be painted, but I am curious what will become of their interiors. □

Notes

*The title begins with a line from “Mowing,” which Frost included in his debut collection, *A Boy's Will* (1915). The full line, “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows,” is written from the perspective of the scythe, and is essentialized by critics as Frost’s definition of poetry.

(1) “Where’s this barn’s house?” is the first line of “The Old Barn at the Bottom of the Fogs,” a poem in Frost’s *A Further Range*. His fourth collection, it was published in 1936 when he lived in Ripton Vt. But Frost claimed he wrote all of his poems before he left his Shaftsbury Stone House in 1929.

(2) Frost was a teacher, poet, and livelihood farmer. From his Amherst College speech “Education by Poetry,” subsequently published in the Amherst Graduates’ Quarterly of 1931: “What I am pointing out is that unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere . . . you don’t know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don’t know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe with science; you are not safe in history.” Frost made metaphors with the agrarian objects around him: most commonly apples, fields, scythes and cows. In order to understand the metaphors he was working with, he had to physically tend to their strengths and weaknesses as the seasons changed, and deal with their science and history as a self-taught botanist, deepening his relationship with natural forces he couldn’t control. These metaphors stamped his poetry as “authentically” American. Sensorially, they stunned him, but he could afford to press most apples into cider: his poems and teaching were paying the largest bills.

(3) In many of his poems (“God’s Garden,” “Nothing Gold Can Stay”), Frost exhausts allusions to the Garden of Eden. While Frost was deeply interested in the Old Testament, his mother raised him Swedenborgian, which is a Neo-Christian religion that relied heavily on science and would later create agrarian communes in Vermont as part of the Back to the Land Movement.

(4) These lines come toward the end of “After-Apple Picking,” included in Frost’s second collection, *North of Boston*, also published in 1915. In this dreamy poem, a weary speaker expects the impossible from both farming and poetry, then resolves himself in a “human sleep.” It centers on his level of effort as a writer and ease as a farmer. Sometimes confused with laziness, his easefulness in New Hampshire hurt his ability to be a successful poultry farmer, and led him to move away as soon as his contract with his grandfather ended.

(5) Frost’s 1924 collection *New Hampshire* (not to be confused with the later poem of the same name) included “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” Schoolchildren memorize this poem all over the United States. It begins:

“Whose woods these are I think I know.”

These woods stretch from Shaftsbury to Lake Paran, as Frost wrote these lines when he lived in Bennington County, and regularly walked two miles between his home and the water. The trail is now lined with birches, and other plants he identified and explored in his poetry. Managed by the Fund for North Bennington, it is appropriately called the Robert Frost Trail.

(6) “Livelihood farm” is the term used most by the New Agrarian movement, but in my research, other synonyms have surfaced. These all denote varying levels of profit and pleasure. They include “hobby farm,” “gentleman farm,” “weekend farm,” “homestead,” and Thoreau’s “poetical farm.”

Appendix

Table 1: Changes in Farming in Bennington County

| | 2012 | 2007 | 2002 | 1997 | 1992 |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Number of Farms | 305 | 226 | 228 | 214 | 154 |
| Land in Farms (acres) | 41,387 | 36,580 | 41,126 | 32,374 | 33,682 |
| Average Size of Farm (acres) | 136 | 162 | 180 | 189 | 219 |
| Market Value of Products Sold | \$15,073,000 | \$10,518,000 | \$7,818,000 | \$8,232,000 | \$6,685,000 |

Source: Census of Agriculture, 1992-2012

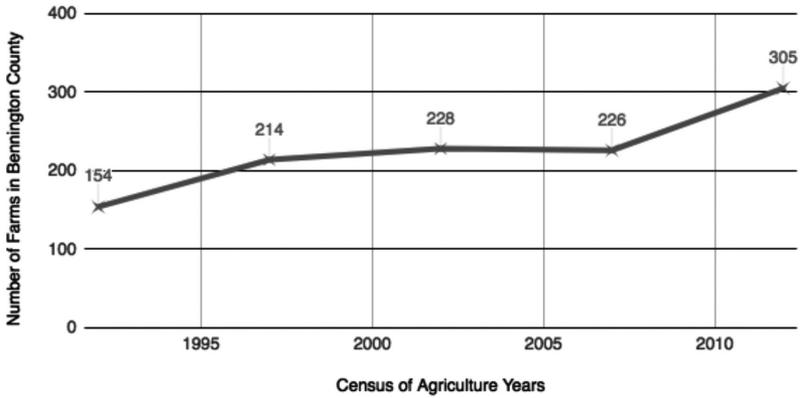
Table 2: Types of Small Farms in Vermont under Act 46

| Type of Farm | Requirements |
|--|---|
| Non-RAP Operations (NRO) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Operates LESS THAN 4 continuous acres for farming <i>AND</i> has animal numbers below UFO (1-4 cows, 1-3 horses, 1-99 layers) 2) Makes LESS THAN \$2,000 Annual Gross Income <i>AND</i> did NOT file a 1040F once in the last 4 years |
| Uncertified Farm Operations (UFO) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Operates 4-9.99 acres that are used for farming <i>AND</i> meets animal numbers (5-19 cows) <i>OR</i> 2) Regardless of acreage, any farming operation that makes more than \$2,000 Annual Gross Income <i>AND</i> filed a 1040F within the last 2 years <i>OR</i> 3) Has an approved business management plan <i>OR</i> 4) 10+ acres used for cropland with NO manure, composts or wastes applied |
| Certified Small Farm Operations (SFO) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Operates 10+ acres used for farming <i>AND</i> 2) Meets animal numbers (20-199 cows) <i>OR</i> 3) Applies manure, compost, or other waste to farming acres |

Source: State of Vermont - Act 46 Sections 2.25, 3.1(a-d), 4.10 in RAPS Graph 1.1, Number of Farms in Bennington County

Number of Farms

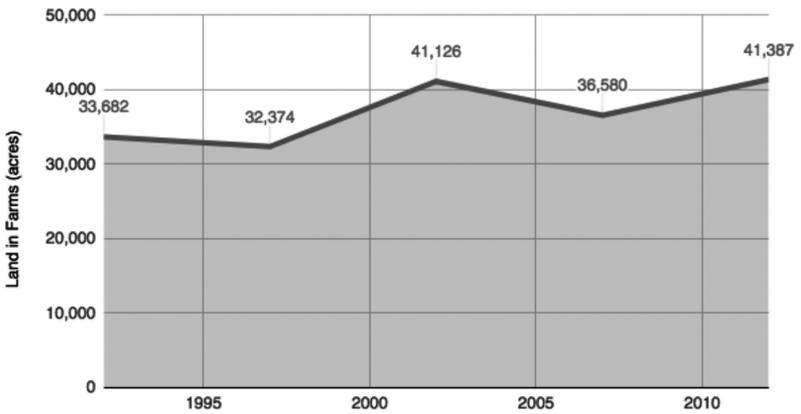
Bennington County, 1992-2012



Source: Census of Agriculture, 1992-2012

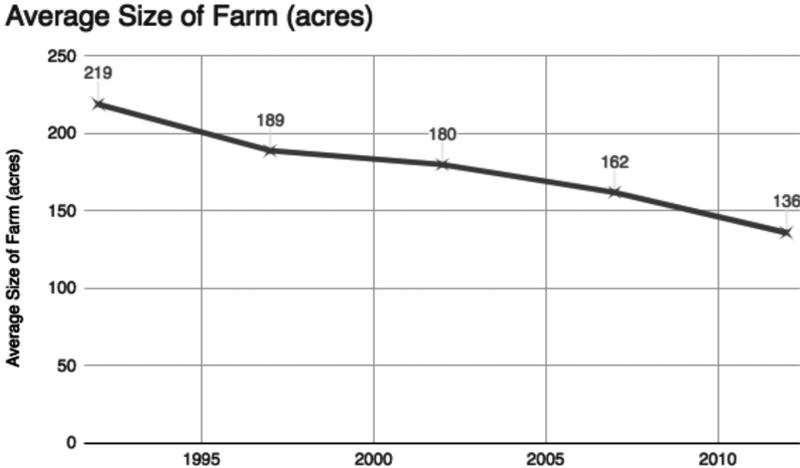
Graph 1.2, Land in Farms in Bennington County

Land in Farms (acres)



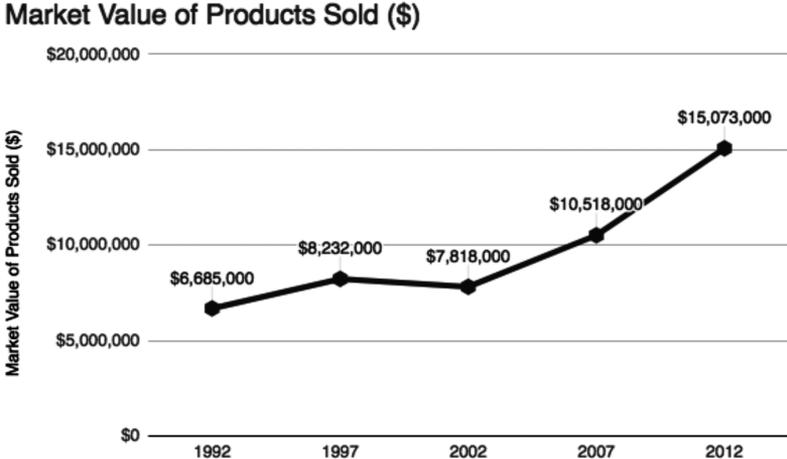
Source: Census of Agriculture, 1992-2012

Graph 1.3, Average Size of Farm in Bennington County



Source: Census of Agriculture, 1992-2012

Graph 1.4, Market Value of Products Sold in Bennington County



Source: Census of Agriculture, 1992-2012

The Kitchen Cupboard and Empty Bowls

Bennington's Fight Against Food Insecurity

Stephanie Hernandez

Having in mind my first-hand experiences seeing family members suffer from food insecurity and remembering my family values of helping those in need, I decided to focus on the relationship between poverty and food insecurity in the town of Bennington and how its citizens come together with Bennington College to fight against food insecurity. An issue that is prevalent in the community, food insecurity is defined as a lack of available financial resources for food at the household level. I hope to help those who deal with such crucial issues.

While researching the community, I learned that Bennington is considered a food desert and that some residents experience food insecurity. There is a need to bring awareness of this issue and highlight how our community combats it. Those affected do not have access to fresh healthy food, a basic human right. Affected families are not able to get the proper nutrients they need not only to survive but also to thrive. It should be one's basic right to not have to worry about when the next meal is going to come or if it is ever going to come.

Bennington is the fourth poorest town in Vermont. According to "Farm to Plate," a non-profit organization that educates the state about hunger, the percentage of food-insecure Vermont households increased from an average of 9.1 percent (more than 22,000 households) from 1999 to 2001 to an average of 13.2 percent (more than 34,000 households) from 2011 to 2013 (Schattman, Nickerson, Berlinet, 2013).

The United States Census Bureau reports that, out of 37,125 residents in Bennington county, 12.8 percent live below the poverty level, often struggling in vain to pay all their bills and buy medicine and groceries (UNC, 2010). The poverty level is annually defined by the Department of Health and Human Services and is used to determine eligibility for programs and benefits, including Food Stamps and Medicaid. Not having enough money for food leads people to buy less expensive and less nutritional food. For example, purchasing unhealthy food like \$10 worth of ramen noodles will satiate hunger for a longer time. Although a single \$10 meal has more nutrients and is healthier than a cup of ramen noodles, it is more cost-effective to disregard nutritional value and to buy the ten packets of ramen noodles for \$10. By doing so one is able to feed oneself and one's family for about a week, rather than only having one meal and sharing that

single meal with one's family.

The face of poverty in Bennington is hard felt and can manifest in a variety of ways, as a result of illness, job loss, death or other unexpected events. Because this is a topic that affects many people in our town, I spent my time looking at poverty, food insecurity, and how the communities of the town and of the college work to fight hunger.

My research began with brainstorming the community outreach programs that help those affected by food insecurity. I began at the Kitchen Cupboard, a food distribution program aimed at providing Bennington residents with sustainable options for healthy eating. I decided to base most of my research on my time at the Kitchen Cupboard, in the form of volunteer work and observation. Observing seemed to be the most appropriate way to come face-to-face with hunger. It also gave me insight into how the Kitchen Cupboard functions and how Bennington residents use its services. During my first time volunteering there I did a participant observation for about 30 minutes.

Due to limited resources, services are provided on a first-come first-served basis. Kitchen Cupboard's policy is that guests cannot come until 15 minutes before distribution to ensure equal opportunity for everyone to shop. In the Kitchen Cupboard the word "shop" is used to define the act of patrons using their services so as to lessen the supposed shame of getting help from this community outreach program. By arriving exactly on time, people are discouraged from sitting out in the cold. Those who come on time for distribution are welcomed in, to sit in the lobby. Each guest is given a number in the order shoppers arrive. After this a volunteer will call out: "Numbers one through five please make a line at the next station." At this station a volunteer will look up the guest's first and last names to see that they are in fact a resident of Bennington. To ensure that guests have an equal opportunity to access food, some items are limited per shopper. For example, hot-ticket items like milk and protein are limited to one item per person.

During my volunteer service, I noticed the tension between those who provide the service and those who need it, a strange feeling of shame and defensiveness. Although I could not interact with the guests, because I was in the kitchen scooping almond butter, I did overhear a tense conversation. There was a mother with a child who felt she must have gotten a wrong number. She began to aggressively ask the volunteer coordinator, in a sharp tone, "I have two daughters that I need to feed. Why is it that I can only take this? Are you trying to say that my daughters do not deserve to eat tonight?" The volunteer patiently explained, saying that she was only a human and she too makes mistakes. The aggressive asking and the fact that

she was the only person who was speaking in the room full of other people, made the whole interaction tense. Despite this I could empathize with both sides. This woman was probably agitated and stressed from not being able to get her kids food. Then I can also understand the volunteer's defensiveness. She was only trying to do her job in assisting people. I decided that I needed to spend more time at the Kitchen Cupboard to truly grasp the reality of Bennington's food insecurity.

About two weeks later I returned and decided to visit an hour before opening and stay for the whole distribution period. As soon as I entered, the volunteer coordinator greeted me and began to show me how the Kitchen Cupboard functions during distribution. At around 10:40 a.m. a line of guests began to form by the door. That morning was very cold, so cold that a guest asked to be let in sooner. She wasn't dressed for how cold it was that day. All she had was a purple T-shirt in a zip-up black sweater and black sweats. The woman asked us volunteers, if anyone had a coat that she could have, sadly none of us did. She then asked to be let in to be able to shop for food. One of the older more authoritative volunteers, W., told the woman that if she wanted to go shop at the Kitchen Cupboard she would have to arrive exactly at 11 because it is against the rules to come 15 minutes early. Once again that tension came and a heated discussion ensued. W. was adamant in persuading the woman to just come 15 minutes later. The discussion went back and forth. W. assertively yet patiently explained to the woman why she cannot get a coat at the Kitchen Cupboard or get inside early to shop. The woman countered with how the weather was very cold and it hurt her joints, making it difficult to stand. As the conversation went on, about 30 to 36 guests began to show up also asking to be let inside due to the cold weather. After a long discussion, W. decided to let them in early. Her demeanor turned serious and made an announcement: "Today was a one-time deal. In order for us to be able to adequately supply food for you all, there are rules set in order for everyone to have equal access to food. Please make sure to dress for the weather. We cannot control the weather. Please remember that it is not allowed for you to come 15 minutes before the Kitchen Cupboard opens."

While W. spoke in a authoritative manner, I noticed that her hands behind her back were shaking. Seeing this, the volunteer stepped into the conversation, only to be confronted by another woman who had an elderly mother, insinuating that her grandmother could not get food simply because she could not stand the cold. The woman, clearly frustrated, asked questions like: "Oh! I just wanted to clarify, so you're just saying that my mother cannot get food?" This is when things got more intense. The volunteer explained how volunteers are humans and that we do

understand the pain that they were going through, yet there are rules in order to keep the Kitchen Cupboard running and provide food to everyone. The volunteer began to show signs of stress as she began to tear up. At one point she said: "We are humans and we have hearts just like you. I know what it's like to not have food at the table. Please, we are doing this so that all members of the community are able to shop for the food that they need." After this the volunteer had to excuse herself for five minutes. It was surprising for me as an observer how somebody who has spent a considerable time working in the Kitchen Cupboard and is experienced at working in non-profits can become overwhelmed and need some time to collect themselves. Volunteers have to be patient, empathetic and must always keep their cool, even in adverse situations, in order to best serve the community.

The issue of food insecurity is a very real problem for many residents here. I observed that most people who visit the Kitchen Cupboard are elderly, or due to old age and disability are not able to feed themselves. I also noticed that the majority of guests are women and heads of families who need to feed themselves and their family. Few were adequately dressed for how cold that day was. It became apparent that they were making economic tradeoffs in order to survive.

With this, I wanted to understand how the Kitchen Cupboard is able to give food to its guests and have food throughout the day. I also learned that it makes Thanksgiving baskets for the holiday out of collected items donated from the Vermont Foodbank. Items like turkeys, canned greens, instant mashed potatoes, and cornbread mix were put into nice baskets that were distributed, providing a hearty meal.

After learning how the Kitchen Cupboard serves its residents, I began to wonder if there was any intra-community support for it. I knew that most of the volunteers were people who use its services. I wondered if the town has done anything to support it. I also wanted to see if there was any support from the college. So I began to research community events that help support the Kitchen Cupboard. Luckily, I found an event called Empty Bowls. I was curious how the event supports the Kitchen Cupboard and if Empty Bowls did anything to bring awareness of food insecurity. By participating, I got to see for myself the impact the event has on the town.

Empty Bowls is a two-step project. First it invites local artists and the community to create bowls. Then it invites them to host an event at Mt. Anthony Middle School where they serve soup to bring awareness of food insecurity in Bennington. As one enters the school, one is greeted by pictures of bowls while waiting in line. When you finally enter the gym where all the bowls are, a volunteer describes how the event was created

to support the Kitchen Cupboard, what the Cupboard does, and statistics on child hunger in Bennington. When one sits down to eat and enjoy the soup, they are given an orange sheet titled *Food for Thought: Facts to Consider about Local Insecurity*, which has statistics on hunger like, “what percentage of families seek food at the Kitchen Cupboard? What percentage of high school students in Bennington County reported eating vegetables three or more times per week? 15 percent. Statewide? 18 percent. Should we be concerned? Why or why not? What percentage of Bennington County high schoolers report going hungry due to not having enough food at home in the past thirty days? 11 percent.”

According to an event leader, half the money it takes to keep the Kitchen Cupboard running is raised at Empty Bowls events, which do an excellent job at bringing awareness to food insecurity.



To understand how the community comes together to fight food security, I decided to interview a person who has spent her entire time here at Bennington focused on food and food insecurity. I wanted to gain an understanding from someone who has worked with community outreach programs here and has worked extensively with Bennington ACTS. Asked

about intra-community engagement, she said that from her own experience with Empty Bowls, there wasn't much collaboration. This surprised me. Yet when I went to the real event, I discovered that there are locals and local businesses who do contribute. For example, the soups are from restaurants in Bennington, some bowls were made by an elementary class that my interviewee had facilitated, and most of the volunteers were from town with the exception of five Bennington College students.

Asked about how the college participates in being engaged with the community, she mentioned cautiously: "This is just my personal experience but . . . Bennington College students are not the most involved with volunteering and being involved with the community." She also grew visibly more uncomfortable as she mentioned how class was one of the biggest factors that inhibit students from volunteering. I remember she would raise her hands in defense when she mentioned, in her own experience, that the students who tend to be the most committed are ones who are working class-low income. I found it interesting how often she would reiterate that this was her own experience and this may not be reflective of reality, even though she works with the head of Bennington ACTS.

Logically what she said makes sense since the connection between Bennington College and the town is rather strained due to the incredible disparity of wealth -- having one of the most expensive colleges in the fourth poorest county in Vermont.

Food insecurity is a very real problem here in Bennington. Even if it is a small percentage of people who cannot afford to get healthy and nutritious food, there is a community outreach program that focuses on providing food for those in need. Bennington does its fair share in supporting the Kitchen Cupboard by holding Empty Bowls. Overall, I have learned that the community does come together to provide help for those who are dealing with food insecurity. There are also organizations that come to the community and do their best to help those who cannot get food. Although there is a lot of community support there also isn't much from the college. □

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Observations at Bennington Price Chopper

Naomi Middleton

The purpose of my observations at Price Chopper was to observe a broad variety of townspeople during an activity we all participate in, grocery shopping. I wanted to engage naturally with people and see where conversations would go. I did not mention I was from Bennington College, nor wore anything that said Bennington College on it, wanting them to bring it up themselves, if at all. From all of this I was trying to learn about people's reactions to Bennington College, because town and gown have this supposed cut-off and distant relationship.

I always started in the produce section and worked my way to dairy on the far side of the store. I tried to go aisle by aisle though I didn't go down the cleaning supplies aisle, nobody ever seemed to be in it. In choosing Price Chopper my hope was to limit the number of non-townsfolk I would encounter, because I figured it would be more likely that townsfolk would be in the Price Chopper than visitors just passing through. I also wanted to put us on a more level playing field of people grocery shopping, rather than me being a Bennington student exploring the town, though I would like to do this as another research trip.

On my first trip I noticed when I was pulling into the parking lot, a large number of elderly people. I slowly followed as they flocked into the store. There was a soup sale that Thursday afternoon and clearly people were taking advantage, for there were not many options left. Mostly the vegetable-based soups were left. I guess this dissipates the theory that Bennington people are mostly vegetarian. I forget who told me, but someone had once said that the town of Bennington was a vegetarian town. WRONG!

I wandered the aisles for a while. My roommate was off doing her shopping. I felt somewhat strange just walking through the store aisles. I picked up some meat for dinner and went to find my roommate. Once I found her, we headed for self-checkout. An elderly man stopped us in front of the checkout stations and started chatting. He asked us if we're from the college. Then he asked where we were from and what we are studying. My roommate told him she studies music and I said I study video. He responded that he loves movies and will be watching for some of my work. He bid us good evening and as we were getting ready to checkout our groceries a lady (not a store employee) came out of nowhere and grabbed my roommate's cereal box saying she has to go show the manager. My roommate and I looked at each other and shrugged our shoulders. We

waited for her to return, which she did. She thanked us and apologized, stating she had to prove to the manager that the cereal was on sale. We left, and the clerk came running after us. I had forgotten my meat.

My second trip to Price Chopper I took on a Sunday evening, around 7. There were fewer people out shopping at this hour and hardly any elderly folk. Most people looked like they were in their 30s and 40s. I noticed a lady taking produce without plastic bags. She had an avocado, oranges, and onions. She already had milk, cereal, and some chips in her cart. She sped by me after making awkward eye contact. I browsed the flowers while my roommate looked for a card for her mom. A man, possibly Hispanic, engaged me in conversation. He asked me if I go to the college. When I said yes, he proceeded to tell me about how beautiful the campus is. He also said that he loves to walk his dog with his son “up on the campus” and he thinks the students are very nice. Then he asked where I was from and when I told him Connecticut, he said that he’s planning a trip to Connecticut soon and wants to check out Stonington since he’s mostly stayed up in the Hartford area. He said because of his construction work he has traveled a lot between New Jersey and Vermont. He got some flowers for his wife, and I told him I think she will love them. He smiled, thanked me, and left.

My roommate didn’t find a card and wanted to try CVS. I grabbed a bag of chips and we went to check out. The cashier asked if I have a Price Chopper card, which I handed to her. She then asked if I am from the college and upon my saying yes, began complaining about how Bennington students never have Price Chopper cards even though they’re free to obtain, so she’s happy I have one. She told me all about the gas points and savings benefits that come with having a Price Chopper card and told me to tell other students to get one. She said she didn’t understand why they would waste money when all they have to do is get a card to get the savings. I told her maybe people think the card costs money. She paused a moment and agreed that this might be the problem. Then she asked where I was from; I told her Connecticut, and she proceeded to tell me that she knew I wasn’t an international student and explained to me how she identifies international students. She told me that they always ask for rolling papers and leaf tobacco rather than cigarettes. I told her that’s really interesting and she agreed. She seemed rather happy I thought so. My receipt finished printing and she proudly told me I saved 49 cents on gas and reminded me to cash them in before they expire. I thanked her and left with my roommate.

My third trip to Price Chopper was on another Sunday, but this time around 4 p.m. There were not many people in the produce section and as I went down the snack aisle I noticed a dad with several small children all

begging for this and that. He looked flustered and kept telling them no, as he desperately searched his grocery list. Nobody was in the meat section, and there was massive restocking happening in the frozen foods aisle. Nobody was in the alcohol section and as I made my way back to the main part of the store an elderly gentleman stopped me and asked for help finding something. He showed me the list his wife wrote, explaining that he did not know what she meant by “six-pack Hershey with almond.” I explained it was chocolate and we went to the candy aisle. I found the six-pack Hershey with almond chocolate bars and handed them to him. He thanked me and asked if I was a student at Bennington College. I respond yes, and he smiled at me. He thanked me once more and went on his way.

The cashier told me she was a local who goes to Community College of Vermont (CCV). She complimented my reusable bags and guessed I went to Bennington College. She said that a lot of Bennington students shop at Price Chopper. She plans to transfer to another school next year and eventually move to New York City. She doesn't know what she wants to do yet but will figure it out. I told her I thought those were great plans. She thanked me and blushed a little.

While I only had a few interactions, I feel that I learned a lot and definitely want to learn more. Something I was very aware of throughout my interactions was that I was a Bennington student trying to investigate how people feel about the college. Only the boldest people are going to actually tell me what they think about the college to my face. I want to work on figuring out how to make my affiliation with the school not heavily skew my results in the future. I realize now that I didn't have any name exchanges with people. It's as if they wanted to get to know me from an anonymous distance, and I reciprocated that.

I think participant observation in a grocery store was difficult because a lot of it relied on people wanting to talk to me. Maybe a public event would have been more beneficial, but I had hoped the store would put us on more equal footing -- that we are all just people doing our weekly shopping. I also wanted to limit the number of tourists I ended up meeting. Overall, I feel this participant observation will be beneficial to my project of exploring the college and town relationship, but to further my findings need a different space and approach. I also need to figure out how to work around the fact I am a Bennington College student and how to make people feel comfortable with being honest with me and not adjusting their answers, so they don't hurt my feelings or offend me. Even if I was to interview people, I would need to have this established, so their answers aren't what they think I want to hear. □

A Bennington Take on Vermont's Population Decline

Duncan Allen

Vermont's population has been declining gradually every year, largely because so many young people are moving away. In this report, I study Bennington College's students' places in this phenomenon, comparing trends among these students and others from greater Vermont.

Vermont's population decline is not unique in the United States. According to Pew polls and the U.S. Census Bureau, Vermont, Illinois, Hawaii, Alaska, Louisiana, North Dakota, West Virginia, and Connecticut all lost significant numbers of inhabitants between the years of 2015 and 2016. Vermont was taken off this list for the current (2017-2018) population estimate, but it is not making significant population increases either. Looking at the history of Vermont's population patterns, these numbers can be concerning. Between the years of 1960 and 1999, Vermont's population increased by 219,000 (over a third of its current 624,000), an average of 5,500 people per year. Yet, between the years of 2000 and 2009, the population rate began to plateau to only 1,700 new residents per year. Estimates for the population of the state in 2020 also look grim: a thousand inhabitants less than what it was in 2010 (World Population Review).

When we compare these numbers to other states in the northeast and across the country, a division arises between east and west. Western states dominate charts of population rate increases: Idaho, Utah, Nevada, and Washington add an average 2 percent of their populations every year. Still, even Vermont's neighbors, like New Hampshire (at 1.3 million residents and increasing 0.16 percent yearly), New York (whose 20 million population increases at 2.1 percent yearly), and Massachusetts (which adds 0.75 percent yearly to its population of 6.9 million) are all gaining even more people on top of their already safe population counts (World Population Review). While Vermont lacks the metropolises that New York and Massachusetts possess, New Hampshire's population is also still increasing — albeit shallowly — and is predicted to have significant gains by 2020, even though its largest city has a minute 111,000. So, what is causing this decrease in Vermont, and why is it happening here specifically?

Efforts have been put in place by state and private interest groups to understand this. A recent video called "Vermont Population Decline," published through YouTube has gone a bit viral. The channel behind it, a

statistics and mathematics-based duo named “Justin and Ezra,” sat students from Middlebury Union High School down in an auditorium and asked them a series of questions. These questions were: “Do you want to leave Vermont and live somewhere else?”; “Do you think there are enough job opportunities in Vermont to allow you to pursue your dream career?”; and “Would you leave the state to find a job in this field?” Most students answered all with “Yes” (the last question was answered “Yes” by 90 percent of students). These answers are important for the state to review if Vermont still has the interest of maintaining a healthy population rate, especially in the twenty-first century, where nations all around the world are seeing the populations of their cities doubling and tripling (Centre for Cities) and their rural districts being significantly drained of people.

But studies by UVM economist Arthur Woolf, “Justin and Ezra,” and state-led studies are quite limited in their results. There is little to be seen about current socioeconomic, familial, or other educational circumstances of the young people of the state, and whether those may be reasons for their anticipated departure. Too much focus is applied to students’ plans for college. Also, Middlebury and Burlington are two of the richest and most highly educated municipalities in the state (homestacks.com). For these reasons, the subject pools surveyed so far provide only a minute diversity of opinions.

Bennington County offers a more diverse perspective. First, Bennington a relatively large town by Vermont’s standards, and has a significant young adult population (U.S. Census Bureau). It also has four colleges, including Bennington College (where I am a sophomore), and Southern Vermont College. This town also has members of all socioeconomic backgrounds; in a recent article in the *Bennington Banner*, Bennington is one of the poorest municipalities in Vermont and its poverty rate, currently 12.3 percent of all citizens — 16 percent of all children in Bennington — is increasing (Tan). Therefore, because of the possibility of diversity in results, I studied the youth culture of Bennington — both in the modern day, and through its changes over the past since the beginning of the new millennium.

This report contains several different research methods from which I draw conclusions. These methods and the chronology of this report are as follows: first, I write my hypothesis based on observations of having lived here for one and a half years. Next, I explain and analyze my quantifiable survey answers. Third, I connect these quantitative analyses and apply them to the four interviews I conducted throughout my investigation phase. Lastly, I draw my conclusions. In this phase, I ask what this means for the future of Vermont and Bennington, and how Bennington specifically fits into the culture of youth on the national stage.

First, as stated, are my observations of Bennington from the perspective of an outsider. I am a sophomore studying at Bennington College, finishing my third term, meaning that I have lived in Bennington for about one and a half years. That said, my encounters with youth here were admittedly few. Throughout my first year I went bowling with colleagues most Tuesday and Friday nights and encountered high school students there. For about four months I worked at a grocery store in Bennington, where I got to know my co-workers, many of whom were near-graduation age. Outside of these scheduled activities and school hours, I noticed local students gathered in certain areas of town, such as South Street Café and Cilantro; at the recreation center, usually doing sports; at high school events; and walking or driving around. I recognized in many of them the same attitudes I had in high school: a want to leave, an aura of impatience, a longing to be somewhere else. At the time, I did not know about Vermont's population decline. But for this report, as I look back on my observations of the youth around town, I have decided to make youth views of their future the focus of my exploration. My hypothesis is as follows: Bennington's youth would be in step with students from Montpelier and Burlington — that the majority would want to leave and/or be dissatisfied with living here.

Four reasons: first was my own longing to leave my home town and attend university as far away as possible, and finally discover a change. Second was the knowledge I received by word of mouth, and through exploring the remnants of the town's long-gone industrial heyday, that Bennington lacks opportunity for young people. Third was the absence of entertainment I noticed when moving to Bennington. Lastly, because of Vermont's small geographical size, I did not think it abnormal that the youth cultures of Bennington and a city like Middlebury — given their differences in population and job markets — could be *that* different, because they are so close in proximity. I based these suppositions — along with the survey results by economist Woolf and “Justin and Ezra” — as the hypothesis and foundation of my research.

Second, I explain my survey and explore the results. Taking on this topic, quantifiable evidence would be important. I began by deciding which group of students I thought would be most beneficial. After contacting an economics teacher at Bennington's regional high school, I thought her senior students would be the best candidates for my research. I drafted a survey and sent the teacher 150 copies.

After each student took one copy home for the weekend, I returned (and was both impressed and humored) that about 85 had completed and brought the survey back.

These responses are shown in the following tables. I have broken down

results into three categories: all survey responses; then, I divided them into two categories: results from students who answered “Yes” to “Do you like living in Vermont?” and those who answered “No.”

The results on Table 1 clarify that the greater majority of Bennington’s students like living in Vermont overall. This already contrasts with the results from the work of Arthur Woolf and “Justin Ezra,” who claim that 70.2 percent of Vermont’s students want to leave and go to a different

Table 1

Overall results from the survey, which is eighty-five results.

| Question: | Yes | No |
|---|-----|----|
| As a young person and student, do you like living in Vermont? | 56 | 29 |
| Does your dream career allow you to remain in Vermont? | 44 | 41 |
| Would you be willing to leave Vermont to get a job in this field? | 76 | 9 |
| If you anticipate staying in/were to remain in Vermont, does your family have to do with this decision? | 56 | 29 |
| If you anticipate staying in Vermont, do you want to move out of Bennington? | 55 | 30 |

state. There was close to an even split among students who could find their ideal careers here and in a different state, which challenges the common opinion — including my own — that there are few job opportunities in the state that youth are looking to fill. Yet, what caught my attention was the size of the majority who would be willing to leave Vermont (89.4 percent of respondents) to pursue job opportunities elsewhere if they cannot find it in Vermont, even though another strong majority (66.8 percent) find family and community important and a reason they would want to

stay. This suggests relatively strong emotional ties to Vermont, but that they are a group of students who are career-oriented and willing to make strong sacrifices to themselves and family for their futures. The last point worth noting on Table 1 regards Bennington specifically. While students may have strong ties to Vermont, my results show that students' attitudes toward Bennington is different: 64.7 percent are insistent on leaving for other towns in Vermont. This latter number emphasizes the difference of economy and culture between Vermont's more cosmopolitan Champlain region and post-industrial south.

After looking at these statistics, I found it important to divide all the surveys between students who have a positive attitude/experience of living in Vermont, and those who do not, to try and find any correlation between social perspective and likeliness of remaining. This led to a Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2 questions the majority of young people who grew up in the region of Bennington and like living in Vermont. Already, there is a difference between the "Justin and Ezra" report on students from Middlebury and my own findings. Next, there seems to be a correlation

Table 2

Answers specifically from students who marked "Yes" for "Do you like living in Vermont?" which is 56 survey results (65.9% of survey results).

| Question: | Yes | No |
|---|-----|----|
| Does your dream career allow you to remain in Vermont? | 37 | 19 |
| Would you be willing to leave Vermont to get a job in this field? | 49 | 7 |
| If you anticipate staying in/were to remain in Vermont, does your family have to do with this decision? | 27 | 29 |
| If you anticipate staying in Vermont, do you want to move out of Bennington? | 31 | 25 |

between the number of people who seek careers that may allow them to remain in Vermont, and those who like the state. In other words, I claim that students who can find jobs here are more inclined to appreciate living in the state. Still, the vast majority (87.5 percent) would be willing to leave if opportunity does not come their way in Vermont, suggesting, again, a highly career-driven student base. A contradiction arises when viewing results on family and community obligations as a reason to stay: just as 85.7 percent would be willing to leave, a similar 86.2 percent find family greatly important to their lives.

Table 3 consists of the answers from students who do not like living in Vermont. These students further emphasize a correlation between the ability to find a dream career in the state and the extent they enjoy living here: a significant 79.5 percent would not be able to find a career here they want

Table 3

Answers specifically from students who marked “No” for “Do you like living in Vermont?” which is 29 survey results (34.1% of survey results).

| Question: | Yes | No |
|---|-----|----|
| Does your dream career allow you to remain in Vermont? | 7 | 22 |
| Would you be willing to leave Vermont to get a job in this field? | 27 | 2 |
| If you anticipate staying in/were to remain in Vermont, does your family have to do with this decision? | 25 | 4 |
| If you anticipate staying in Vermont, do you want to move out of Bennington? | 24 | 5 |

to pursue. And even further, 93.1 percent are willing to leave the state to pursue job opportunities. On top of these results, 82.8 percent *seek* a future outside of Bennington, *regardless* of whether they can find job opportunities here, showing that they are not unsatisfied solely because of Vermont’s job

market. While Table 3 — the “unsatisfied” students — are the minority, they stand as a significant percentage of Bennington’s youth. Their openness for change suggests a drive that is bigger than that which a small town and greatly rural state can withhold.

The fourth step in my research was interviews. I conducted my interviews before receiving the survey results to be as unbiased and untelling in my interviewing as possible. Three of my four interviewees were seniors in the same economics classes at the Bennington high school that received my surveys. The interviews gave me more of a concrete understanding of the attitudes of young people in Bennington. Even though I allowed for a space on the survey in which I asked students to write down what Bennington and Vermont are like for a young person living there, I knew that speaking with students for around thirty minutes each would be more beneficial.

Three young Benningtonians, though interviewed at different times, all had similar views. All anticipate going to college outside of Vermont, but in New England. All three also said they are pursuing job opportunities that do not allow them to remain in rural, small-town Vermont, and are *more than willing* to pursue passions outside state lines. Parents and school staff both — as heard through interviews — are happy for students so long as they go to college or find work after school, regardless of where those opportunities might present themselves. These attitudes correlate with my interpretations of the results of the survey — that students are more career driven rather than family oriented.

On the topic of family, community, and remaining, one of my interviewees said there is a stigma with staying in Bennington after graduating — that they are often called “townies” by those who leave; also, to their knowledge, and contrary to my hypothesis, all three of the high school-age interviewees said that people choosing to remain in Bennington represent all socioeconomic backgrounds and that there is no economic condition more likely to stay than to leave, from their observations. This point especially intrigued me as a student of anthropology, increasingly trying to find certain correlations between existing circumstances and future ambitions.

Several of my interviewees were also vocal about the lack of entertainment in Bennington. Two stated that there are hardly enough establishments in the town to create a healthy, non-toxic atmosphere for students throughout all four years of high school. What they believe ends up happening is a negative culture based on rumors, partying, (specifically) alcohol abuse, and overuse of social media.

Even though all spoke highly of the closeness of the community, and benefits that come through knowing nearly everyone’s face they encounter on the street, all three students interviewed testified to the idea that there is

an age divide in Bennington. While I did not necessarily expect *not* to hear phrases like “old people,” “high schoolers,” “young people,” and “parent-age,” from a group of teenagers, I found the number of times they used these terms surprising, and the sense of social division created by the age gaps in Bennington immense. One said that because there are so many old people in the state, there is not a strong enough effort to change anything, which is what she, as a young person, needs to remain here.

What struck me is when one student told me that it is simply “expected that people are going to leave.” I reacted strongly to this for two reasons: first, it is just a truly depressing and somber picture of youth life and future in Vermont, and one I (when picturing what life in Vermont is like before flying here from my home in California) did not imagine to exist. Second, because it relates to the fourth person I conducted an interview with.

This fourth interviewee was a thirty-seven-year-old woman who has spent the entirety of her life in Bennington, and who was recently hired in an administrative position at Bennington College. Often with tears forming in her eyes, she spoke about her years in high school in Bennington (class of 1999 at the same high school I had been working with during my research); the abundance of entertainment for young people during her upbringing; her childhood and youth, having grown up with an abusive father; personal responsibilities she—and friends of hers in similar situations, of which there were many—felt towards family; the importance of community; and what she feels is persistent drug abuse, economic decline, and suicide among those in her age group.

The most striking sentence she stated was that, because of the friends she loses consistently and “strife” in the town, living in Bennington is a “constant uphill battle,” but that the majority of those she knew as a child never decided to leave. She posits with the local population that believes Bennington is their home not because their careers are here, but because their families are here and that they love their communities. She mentioned certain coping mechanisms she discovered through living in such a—as she put it—difficult place to be in: she refuses to read newspapers, she turns off the radio when disturbing news comes on, and only focuses on the positives in life, which are her family, her close friends, and her boyfriend of several years.

Her words made me wonder: how many of these students on these surveys, who marked that they are planning on leaving the state to pursue opportunities, but who recognize that family and community will be something they will miss, will actually become more like my fourth interviewee? Will they discover that their joy comes not—as they think now—from careers, but of proximity to their families and the culture in which they were raised? Also, does my fourth interviewee’s testimony make sense of the beginning of the plateauing of Vermont’s population rate around 2000? Lastly, what is it about Vermont—or its municipalities—that



makes some people stay, despite the difficulties that are attributed with it?

The answers to these questions are difficult to find. They require a sense of knowing a place one can only achieve after living here for much longer than I have so far. I was not able to discover much about correlations between economic status, race, gender, and sexuality, and whether these play roles in whether students stay or leave. But, what was learned in my research is that: Vermont's youth culture has not greatly changed since the turn of the new millennium and today; there are differences between socioeconomic conditions and the cultures of Vermont's more populous and metropolitan north, and the more working-class south; contrary to other surveys taken in the north, there are statistically more students who like living in Vermont in the south than there are in the north; and, finally, that, even though students appreciate Vermont's benefits, they are much more career and ambition-oriented than ever thought before. A part of me wishes I could speak with these same students in five years and see where they are then.

Two weeks after completing my research, I thought about where I am now and what I now know. In better words: I am a nineteen-year-old student at Bennington College focused on urban studies who decided to pursue this field in a small town in southern Vermont, even though I grew up in one of the nation's largest cities in southern California. What knowledge does being in this situation give me?

I feel my responsibility now — not as an anthropology student, but as a person who has harnessed new knowledge — is that I must contemplate the space in which I now live to the space from which I come. Is the history of Bennington the same as the history of San Diego? As for the students, I

recognized so many attitudes in them I felt soon before I graduated from high school two years ago. So, are they and I really that different? Through completing the research and writing of this paper, I have come to the realization that I have been living in this new place for over a year, and yet I feel I have come to understand the future of this town more than I do its past and the present.

In conclusion, this paper explains the story of the small number of students in southwestern Vermont on the cusp of deciding who they want to be in life, and who have largely been misunderstood by those who wish to understand them. Even though they live in one of the poorest regions of the state, they like where they live and appreciate their roots. Yet the economic and social infrastructure required by these students to build fulfilling futures for themselves does not exist for them to an extent that can allow them to feasibly stay. In an age of rapid urbanization and career-oriented attitudes, not even Vermont — America’s rural, New England idyll — is safe from this phenomenon. Though, after seeing this report, people and administrators in this state can have a more extensive and diverse explanation of what they may want to prioritize to ensure that the students’ futures are Vermont’s future. □

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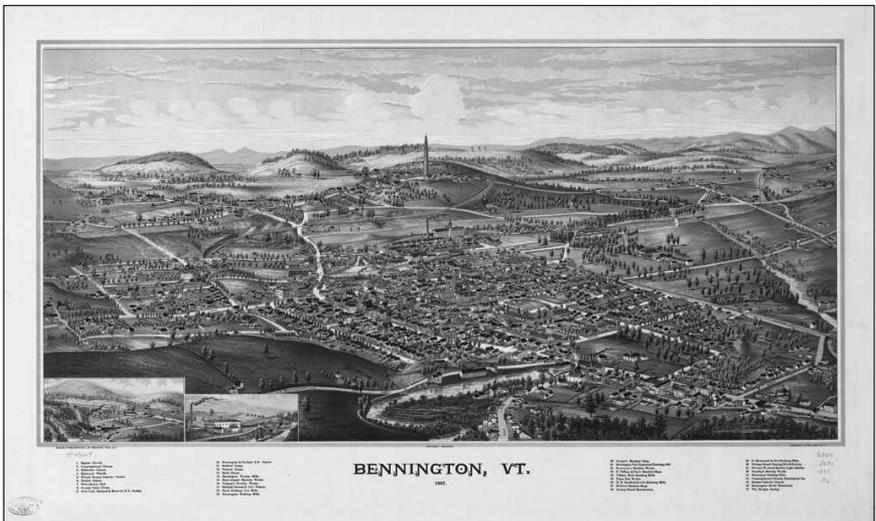
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Fundraising and Funding Development in Bennington

Georgia Williams

When new developments in Bennington, Vermont, are proposed and seek funding, several efforts work behind the scenes of physical construction to ensure completion and financial security. Like any community, there are often new events and initiatives to raise funds for these projects. One reads about them in the newspaper, sees invitations to events online, and hears about them in conversation.

Recognizing the differences in information about these funding efforts, I have conducted an introductory investigation into how funding sources for new developments in Bennington are brought into the public eye. Through my use of interviewing, participant observation, and academic research, the difference between funds that are sourced federally or by the state and those sourced by private entities has become a key distinguishing factor in how development projects are communicated to residents, and thus how connected to these projects residents feel. From this I have discovered how development fundraising in Bennington significantly contributes to individual senses of community and identity.



The inspiration for this investigation is rooted in my initial fascination with the Putnam Block Project, a large-scale residential and commercial construction project that reimagines the historic Putnam Hotel in the heart of Bennington's downtown area. *The Bennington Banner* frequently supplies updates about the multi-million-dollar project's progress. It was in one

of these update articles I learned that the project has seventeen different funding sources just for the \$53 million of Phase One, including a mix of private and public contributions.¹ Bennington College is one of these investors; this connection piqued my interest.

Historic development in Bennington has been done mainly with industrial mills and factory construction that were typical of New England in the 1800s. Each business participated in a struggle for financial success in an industrializing and competitive climate, though Bennington didn't experience a boom as large as many neighboring areas.² The conditions of these large-scale developments, the first and last of their kind in Bennington, were often haphazard even though they had to support throngs of largely young female workers. These workers earned meager wages and were subjected daily to potentially fatal work environments. Yet the promise of work was highly symbolic and meaningful for employees of these mills and for the town of Bennington.

Though my inspiration came from *Banner* articles about the Putnam Block Project, my interests were expanded by reports and advertisements for fundraising events that emphasized individual involvement and community co-operation in a more grassroots context. When Bennington Project Independence, a non-profit offering adult day services for the elderly and disabled, wanted to finish the lower level of its care center, a party was thrown to raise an expected \$55,000.³ Publicity of these events is driven by individual passion, not by requirements for transparency or accountability (though it could be said that publication and dissemination are required for substantial participation and donations). The manner of these events takes on a more personal and emotional appeal to the public and garners interest more grand than a fundraising purpose. Though the purpose of the event is ultimately to raise money, people go because there is a potluck.

The most helpful driver of this investigation was one who assisted me in refining this project's focus. Zirwat Chowdhury, community development director for the Town of Bennington, met with me and explained how difficult it was to address my interest in funding for developments because it was so broad. But she managed to speak to so much about the process and her own experience that I felt more confident moving forward. The most useful information she left me with was her observation that "people forget how much public funding goes into all these various projects." It is more important to Bennington's residents that they "see physical transformation." This point brought me back to articles I read about the Putnam Block Project in the *Banner*. How did the *Banner* acquire its information about all the funding sources? Was it made public by federal requirements? Were the project leaders committed to transparency regardless of its funding sources?

Zirwat said that when developers apply for federal or state grants to fund new projects, many requirements are tied to the money received.

Recipients must report on how the funds are being used and most often use them for purposes defined by the grant. This also means that information about the project's funding is accessible to the public. When projects receive private donations, on the other hand, requirements for the allocation of such funds may be non-existent, and identities are often obscured; tracing the sources of private donations is difficult.

A corporation or organization may represent a cause similar to the way a grant does, but the pool of money gathered by organizations is often the result of many donors. This was the case for Second Chance Animal Shelter in Shaftsbury, which funded a new \$3.5 million facility with mostly grants from family foundations.⁴ So why, I asked myself, do I hear more about the fundraising for efforts that aren't accessible to the public by law and are sourced by private donations? The answers, which I have only begun to find, are ones that help characterize Bennington as a town committed primarily to a sense of community and make this investigation truly about Bennington.

Zirwat reminded me that Bennington has never seen development on as large a scale as the Putnam Block Project. It is a total change of pace for the community. The number of smaller-scale events I recall seeing so often in the *Banner* show insight into what it means to participate in the development projects of Bennington and thus what it means to be a Bennington citizen. Opportunities for Bennington residents to shape their individual senses of community and identity often come in the form of development fundraising events. Enthusiasm for community and cooperation in this small town rise above the transparency of federal and state funding sources to make smaller-scale, private initiatives more publicized in actuality. Seeing the dynamics of this pattern in real-time was then necessary to deepen this observation and gain better understanding.

I first found the enthusiasm for community gatherings and togetherness to be true at the Park-McCullough House's Village Block Party in early September. A sizable group of about 300 people attended the event, where conversation was lively. It was helpful to the Bennington students who attended to see a genuine moment of community in the more abstract sense of the term. Once my interest was more focused on development and fundraising, I chose to attend a service at the First Congregational Church of Bennington. This experience was a confirmation of how strong individual and smaller group passions for development and upkeep of existing facilities are. The church was pristine in its maintenance, though attendance was low. A certain feeling of dismay came as I observed the contrast between the grand building and the humble crowd it held, especially as I thought of how many more people once filled the seats during Bennington's beginnings. A coffee hour after the service allowed me to become acquainted with the church's members. Most of them were of middle-age or older and relatively

quiet, though they were eager to express to me how much history the building held when I asked about it. A woman who was especially kind to me filled my hands with brochures and informational pamphlets and encouraged me to take one of the tours that begin every Sunday after the service. I watched as a donation box was dragged out into the foyer. The excitement of every person I spoke to for my interest in the church as a student was evident, as was the individual concern in the building's funding and maintenance on a personal level. Though state or federal funds could be sourcing some of the renewal efforts of the church, the personal connection the members had to the building and its history was much more advertised.

Though a passion for community unity and effort clearly thrives in Bennington, it is also important to note that people who reside in places of population density often bring with them indifference and conflict. There is potential for a resident of a larger community to disappear into the crowd. There is also more room for such conflict with the buffer of a greater number of social circles. Small towns don't have the crowds of strangers to fall back onto when conflict arises; people are much more closely acquainted and familiar with one another. To adopt the more positive perspective on this quality of small-town life, one can see how having closer connections to the people of one's town can lend an increased sense of personal passion and drive to new projects. There aren't as many large organizations to which residents may hand off fundraising efforts. Ann Kingsolver notes in her book *Tobacco Town Futures* how "living in a small town requires a set of skills, and that those skills are a resource that people can draw on, especially in hard times" (p. 110).⁵ This may certainly apply to fundraising efforts, which are at their core most effective when personal; even larger nonprofits are beginning to use this face-to-face contact to their advantage.⁶

The town of Bennington's document called "The Bennington Strategic Economic Development Plan" outlines some of the town's goals for future development and explains which types of projects are being encouraged for the ways they benefit the town in areas that could be lacking. This sort of public document fits the kind of publicity and accessibility that federal and state funding sources ensure. For my investigation, it mostly helped with explaining the patterns of life in the town so that individual events and initiatives I read about in the newspaper made sense on a deeper and often statistical level. One of the goals is to "market key downtown properties for redevelopment or increased utilization." This is clearly a goal being met by the Putnam Block project. More specifically within the Bennington Town Plan, a goal is to "ensure adequate financial resources are available in conjunction with public and private business development interests" to increase business recruitment and retention. "Bennington's population is stagnant," the document emphasizes. This point explains my observations of enthusiasm and passion to build the community's unity, but also offers

an opportunity for even further research into just how aware and conscious residents are of particular facts and phenomena.

Before considering the ways my study could be expanded, it is important to note its limitations and in what areas it needs more developed evidence. The previous paragraph's note, that connecting statistics to observation is very useful, first brings up how this study could greatly benefit from more quantitative data analysis, possibly of trends in types of developments in town or to find patterns in budgets and the scales of projects. Also, encouraged by the fruitfulness of my interview with Zirwat, I think having more interviews with townspeople involved in fundraising efforts would have added to this report. After making the necessary changes, I could expand and dive deeper into the world of individually or privately driven, community focused fundraising initiatives of Bennington. I'd like to see how much planning and strategy go into these goals. How are goals for money donated created? How do efforts compare to those without events to fundraise?

Though my broad interest in the processes and sources of funding for development in Bennington lingered, the more specific focus on the distinction between private, small-scale funding initiatives and state or federal funding sources in their outreach and accessibility rose to the surface. Through a beginning investigation of this, I found that community events with underlying fundraising goals are much more publicized than government funding sources, and this brings me back to Zirwat, who importantly reminded me in our interview that "people need to see physical transformation." Without an event in which residents of Bennington could participate and bond with fellow citizens, because of largely detached and federally sourced funding, they yearn for that indication of progress that a community gathering would have given them on a level that feels personal and genuine, manifested in a desire to see the success of the Putnam Block Project. This speaks to the key pattern I've found in this study, that community cooperation and bonding precedes physical transformation and sets the stage for future developments. □

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The Crossroads: Bennington's Political Location

Benjamin Wolinsky

Vermont's rugged topography has always set it apart from the rest of New England, let alone the rest of the United States of America. It has also set apart communities within from one-another, to such an extent that informal regional designations such as the famous Northeast Kingdom embody very real divisions. Thus an area that is both small and sparse (by northeastern standards) presents an impressive amount of diversity. This extends to geographic, climatic, biological, social, economic, cultural, and political characteristics. In addition to its wildlife, state's unique political climate has been the subject of much attention and commentary. Many express admiration for what is considered a model articulation of communal political participation and discourse, noting the state's centuries-old tradition of town meetings.

Having now had a class on Bennington, I was intrigued to consider what made the area unique in political ideology. I set out to determine: What ideological strain or value sets Bennington County apart from the rest of Vermont? What is the role of the town of Bennington in this? After investigation of the literature, an interview, and statistical analysis, I have found that Bennington County defies popular notions of Vermont politics – specifically when it comes to the relationship between party membership at different electoral levels; and that the town's unique role in the county as a Democratic stronghold reveals the anomalous geopolitical position of the county as a non-metropolitan area with metropolitan characteristics, located immediately outside the metropolitan fringe of its neighbors across state lines.

Vermont History editor Michael Sherman defines *Vermont exceptionalism* as the concept of Vermont “as a last bastion of independent thinking, rural living, and old-time American republican virtue — as a holdout, in short, against the downward drift of national culture and politics” (Sherman, 2003). Indeed, the notion that Vermont is superior to the rest of the American nation – in many ways, the best of it – in a “less-is-more” way, remains a pervasive aspect of how the state is perceived. Vermonters, this view holds, are free from the alienating constraints of metropolitan life and enjoy at the same time greater individual freedom and community belonging.

Common perceptions of small-town politics inform the political landscape of Vermont. The political landscape of small towns is idealized as more personal and less conflict-oriented than that of cities, and there is a greater sense of community solidarity (Mattson & Burke, 1989). Vermont, famous for its rurality and town halls, captures the public imagination on

the subject of small-town politics. Official state website *thinkvermont.com* notes that “Vermonters are more likely to pick the person over the party,” noting that Republican governor Phil Scott was elected alongside a “heavily” Democratic state legislature (*thinkvermont.com*, 2018).

Robert E. Shalhope’s 1996 *Bennington and the Green Mountain Boys: The Emergence of Liberal Democracy in Vermont, 1760-1850* remains one of the pre-eminent works on Vermont state politics. Shalhope argues that Bennington was unique among eighteenth-century settlements on the New England frontier, in that “New Light” Protestant separatist settlers could escape the perceived tyranny of the congregations of Connecticut and Massachusetts. The willingness of diverse groups of settlers from different origins to work together for the good of the community engendered a sense of “openness” that transformed early Bennington into a “liberal democracy.” The introduction of industry in the area in the nineteenth century and subsequent arrival of land-owning industrialists, who brought with them “cosmopolitan values,” and were unlikely to attend church, created conflict within the town. The residents of Bennington’s “uphill” community had a “populist ethos [that] led many townspeople to view certain immigrants, especially college-educated gentlemen and lawyers, as a threat to the natural republican order they so cherished,” and were consequentially antagonistic toward “downhill” elites.

I interviewed the owner of a local business on the subject of Bennington politics, a man I will call Neil. Originally from Connecticut,



Neil arrived in Bennington eight years ago. A Republican, Neil emphasized his respect for people across the political spectrum and the necessity to tolerate those of differing political persuasions. He characterized the community of Bennington proper as staunchly liberal and Democratic, observing that Democratic political figures often met in his establishment. He described the political culture of Bennington as one of openness and inclusion combined with solidarity and strong community bonds. When I asked about metropolitan immigration to Bennington, he alleged that “you can be who you are . . . without that huge setting,” indicating that social tolerance of individual expression was enjoyed, though in a small-town and tight-knit locale rather than a bustling major city. Values brought by newcomers from New York and Boston, he said, serve to *reinforce* Bennington’s own “melting pot.”

The outlying areas were a different story. Neil described a Republican “old guard” to be found out in “the mountain,” or Woodford, as he would clarify. Such communities, he claimed, were more “rooted,” and hostile to change. He said that community members did not wish for their children to be influenced by external social pressures, and considered Bennington a “lost cause.” To them, he elaborated, the influence of Bennington proper was negative, and to be resisted. Thus, Bennington assumed something of the role of a city with relation to its smaller neighbors, despite its small size and non-metropolitan geography, as well as its small-town nature and tight-knit community.

Some continuity with the old tensions described by Shalhope, between the more “rooted” communities of the “uphill” and the newer “downhill” settlers, seems present; but this time it does not appear to be because the newcomers threaten the egalitarianism present among the “open” society forged by the old blood. Rather, the central tension appears more simply that of the resistance of native roots to new additions. Yet in both, the “core” of Bennington finds itself juxtaposed against the “periphery” of the outlying areas.

Focusing on political tendencies that cross state boundaries, Wendy K. Tam Cho and Erinn P. Nicley identify a “Democratic political island” centered around Rensselaer County, New York, including Washington County to the north, and extending east across the border into Vermont to add Bennington County. Aside from the county going consistently to Democratic presidential candidates, Bennington was also the only county town to vote for Hallquist in the 2018 gubernatorial election, as noted by Jim Therrien in the *Bennington Banner*. Therrien also noted that Searsburg and Stamford, both at the county’s eastern edge, contradicted the trend of the county to support statewide winners (namely Democrats), and voted for the Republican candidate for lieutenant governor Don Turner Jr. over David

Zuckerman, the Democrat who “easily won statewide” (Therrien, 2018).

Rural Vermont as a whole appears to show a scattered distribution of political affiliation. It is also known that “college towns” across the country display strong Democratic tendencies, with even entire counties – “flagship counties,” or those counties in which the state’s namesake university is located – voting more strongly against Trump than the rest of the state as a whole by a significant margin in many states, including Vermont (Najmabadi & Knott, 2016). Thus, small college towns could function as liberal “colonies” within rural hinterlands. In Bennington County, both Bennington College and Southern Vermont College, as well as the local campus of the Community College of Vermont, are all located in the town of Bennington. The liberal draw associated with colleges would be as a result concentrated in Bennington, rather than scattered among small towns.

I was interested in the idea that perhaps Bennington County represents an intermediate zone between the metropolitan areas to the west (Albany and Glens Falls) and south (Pittsfield), and the non-metropolitan rurality of Vermont (except for Chittenden County). This would relate to Neil’s “crossroads” description of Bennington County, as well as Cho and Nicley’s concept of “islands” across state borders. Neil’s description of the relationship between Bennington proper, and the rest of the county, would also be important. In this kind of political landscape, outlying towns are contrasted with “core” cities (Sellers, Kübler, Walks, Walter-Rogg, & Rochat, 2013).

If the town functions as a cosmopolitan center, and the outlying towns as a peripheral zone, then this would mean a metropolitan relationship in the context of small, non-metropolitan towns. I would also need to find evidence of this at the electoral level. An October 2018 article from the *Washington Post*, “The geography of voting – and not voting,” addressed the national rate of voter turnout in the 2016 elections by county. It showed that the counties between the major coastal metropolitan areas of the northeast, and the rural hinterland to the north and west, displayed average rates of voter turnout (Mellnik, Tierney, & Uhrmacher, 2018). In this regard, Bennington as well as neighboring counties were connected to the upper Hudson Valley of New York State and the Berkshires of western Massachusetts.

The data for three of the four elections seemed to corroborate this: in the 2016 and 2018 gubernatorial elections, as well as the 2018 state Senate elections, the two House districts of the town of Bennington were consistently more Democratic than the others; and in the 2016 gubernatorial election and 2018 state senate election, both were within the four most Democratic districts in the county (Vermont Secretary of State – Election Results, 2018). The presidential elections seemed to be something of an exception: in it, the districts were not especially “blue” compared to

the rest of the county, as the majority of the districts went “bluer” for the presidential election. Combined with the generally Democratic tendency of the county as a whole in presidential elections, this does give it some characteristics resembling those of metropolitan areas.

The relationship alluded to by “Neil” between the politics of Bennington County and those of major metropolitan areas may be due not only to migration and movement between regions, but more immediate sheer geographical proximity. The absence of the “people over party” phenomenon, as attested by statistically significant positive correlations between same-party candidates at different electoral levels (and significant *negative* correlations between candidates of *opposing* parties); the function of the town of Bennington as a Democratic regional nexus, as contrasted with outlying towns; the persistence of a sense of small-town community; and geographical rurality, with low population and density, all combine to give Bennington County a curious political location. The county occupies a space, both political and physical, between the rural heartland of Vermont to the north, and the metropolitan zones to the west and south. □

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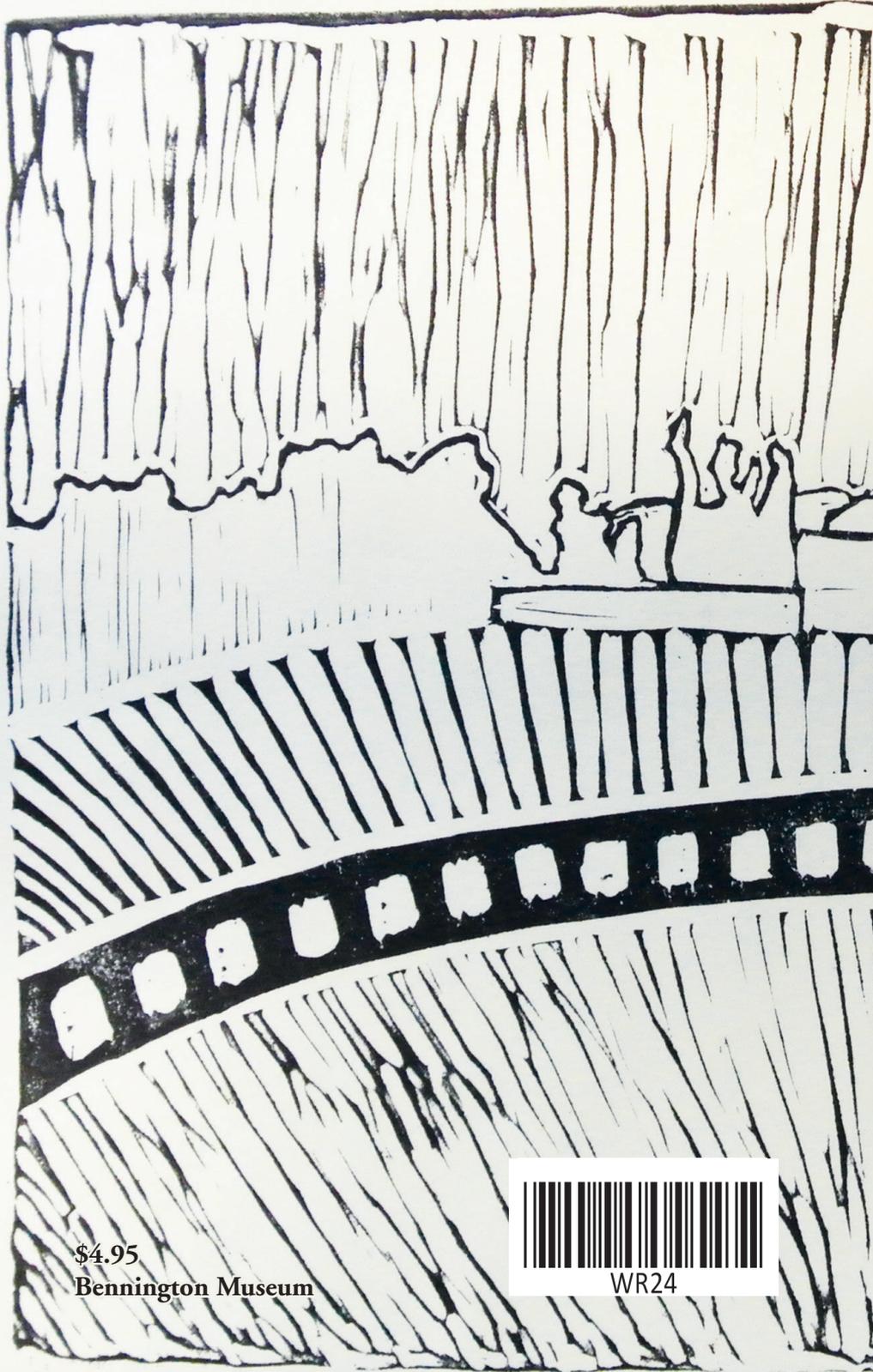
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