

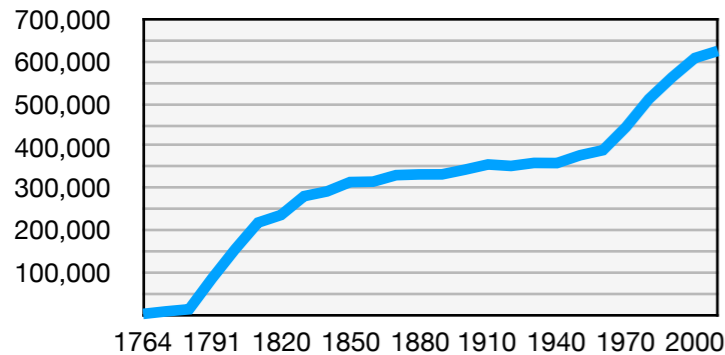
# *A Quick Primer on Vermont Environmental History*

by Bruce S. Post

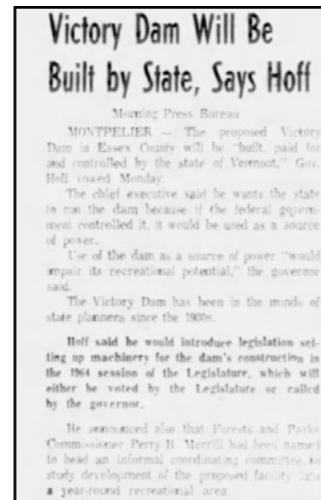


# OVERVIEW

Inscribed on a statue outside the National Archives in Washington, D.C., are these words: “What is past is prologue.” History, it reminds us, establishes the context by which we can better understand the present. *A Quick Primer on Vermont Environmental History* is just that, a necessarily truncated attempt to understand how Vermont has treated its environment. It is an overview, not an analysis of Act 250 specifically. It contains, furthermore, impressions I have gained in reading the works of others and in interviewing individuals who have shed light on environmental issues — past, present and future. Issac Newton wrote, “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” I am not an Issac Newton, but I certainly have benefited from the writings and insights of scholars and Vermonters. If this were an academic publication I would fully attribute their contributions. As a minimum, they have my gratitude. **All of the editorial cartoons were published in the *Suburban List*, a weekly formerly published in Essex Junction, in the late 1960s/early 1970s. They are the work of the late Jane Clark Brown.**



A general overview of “modern” Vermont environmental history: Three eras



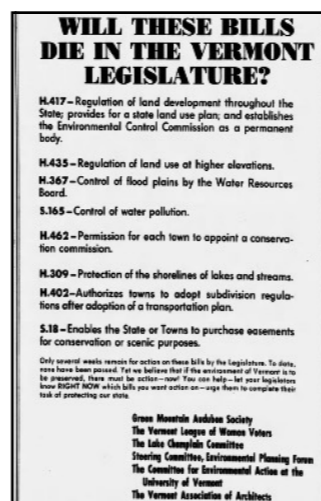
Four movements of Vermont’s Environmental Spring: Victory Bog, Camels Hump, Green Mountain Highlands, & Rampant Development



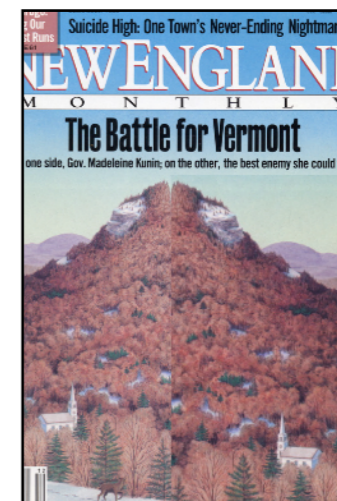
Some things never change: An early emphasis on Vermont’s waterways



Land-use controls gain traction



Vermont’s environmental laws were not slam dunks



Beyond the Myth: Can Vermont truly face its environmental challenges; or How much growth is enough?

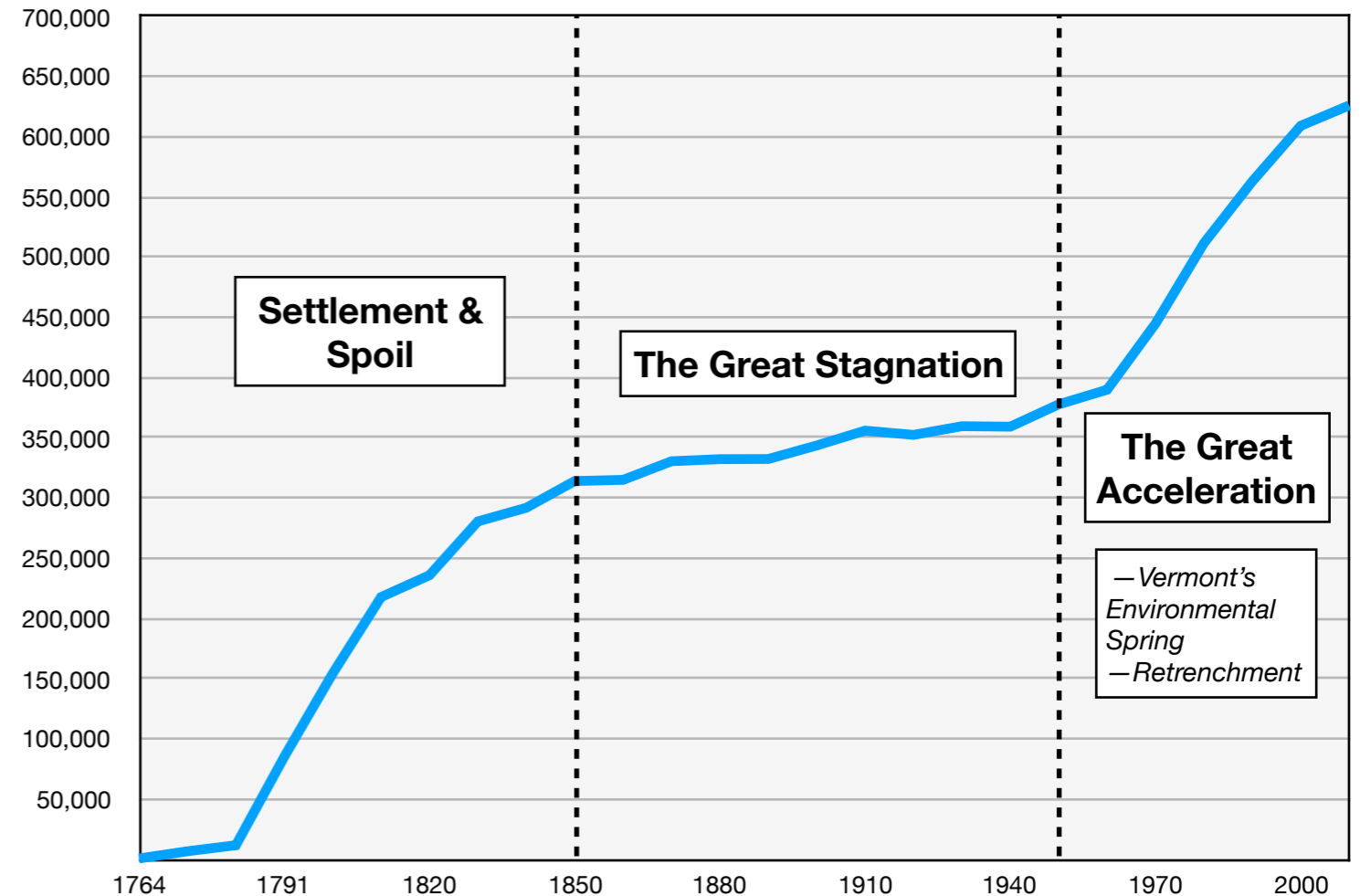
## COMMENTARY

I classify Vermont's "modern" environmental history into three general segments: Settlement and Spoil; the Great Stagnation; and the Great Acceleration. I use the term "modern" to describe colonial settlement in the 1700s up to the present.

- **Settlement and Spoil:** Early colonial settlement featured explosive population growth. One source claims that "in the twenty-eight years from 1763 to 1791 Vermont went from a wilderness to statehood, from a population of 300 to 85,000." Historian Lewis Stilwell describes almost a feeding frenzy as settlers came north with land hunger in their bellies.
- **The Great Stagnation:** Other authors call this the "twilight" period, and it lasted roughly a century, from 1850 to the post-World War II period. Vermont's environment had been largely used up. Stewart Udall, who had been Secretary of the Interior under both JFK and Lyndon Johnson, wrote, "Not even in the cotton and tobacco belt were soils exhausted faster and forest mangled more thoroughly than on the hillsides of Vermont." Considerable out-migration occurred. Vermont was described as "a good place to be from," and "by 1860 more than half the towns in the state were losing population, and forty-two *per cent* of the natives of Vermont were living in other states."
- **The Great Acceleration:** The post-World War II period saw tremendous growth in population and the availability of relatively low-cost fossil fuel. Swiss historian Christian Pfister coined the term "1950s syndrome," emphasizing the significant increase in greenhouse gases. Other historians assert that the environmental problems the world faces are much more multi-faceted. German historian Joachim Radkau argues, "The change in lifestyle that caused the environmental burdens to surge occurred substantially only in the 1960s and 1970s. .... The fixation on the '50s syndrome' could divert our attention away from new, environmentally harmful developments even more recently than that, for example, mass tourism and air travel." In this period, Vermont essentially joined the rest of the world, no longer a place apart.

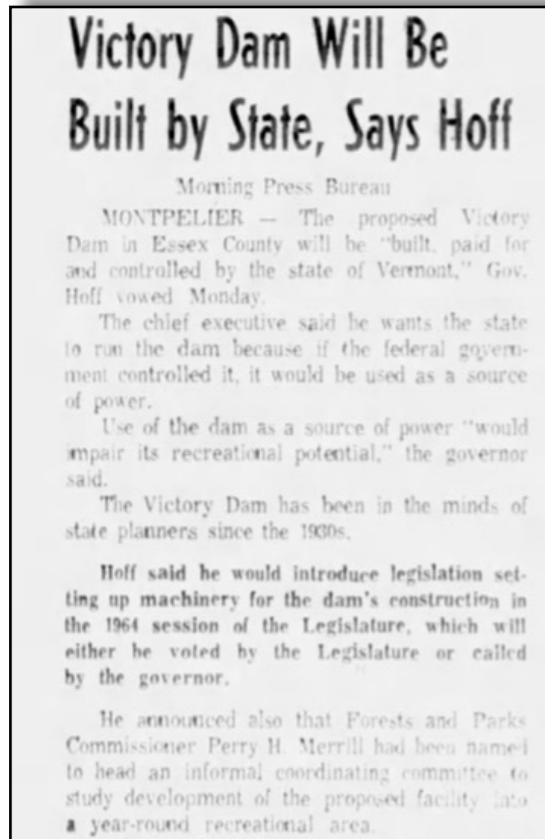
This period had two phases: first, *Vermont's Environmental Spring*, a growing commitment to environmental issues that began in the mid-1950s and ran until the mid-1970s; and after the failure of Act 250's statewide land use plan, we entered what I call the period of *retrenchment*.

## Vermont Population Trends - 1764 to 2010





# Four Major Movements in Vermont's Environmental Spring

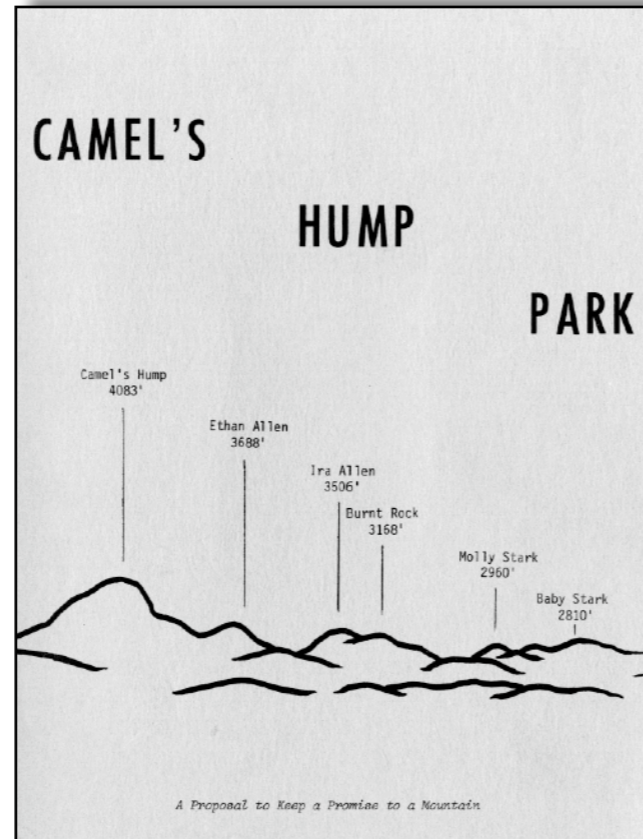


Burlington Free Press, March 12, 1963

## Saving Victory Bog

Victory Bog, in the Northeast Kingdom, was a target for many years. Federal and Vermont officials thought of it as part of a flood control effort and also for generating hydroelectricity.

In the early 1960s, major plans to build a dam and flood the bog were introduced in Congress. Prominent supporters of the dam were Sen. George Aiken and Gov. Phil Hoff. A coalition of early environmental groups, conservation-minded Vermonters and some state officials waged a pitched — and ultimately successful — battle throughout the 1960s to defeat the dam and preserve the bog.

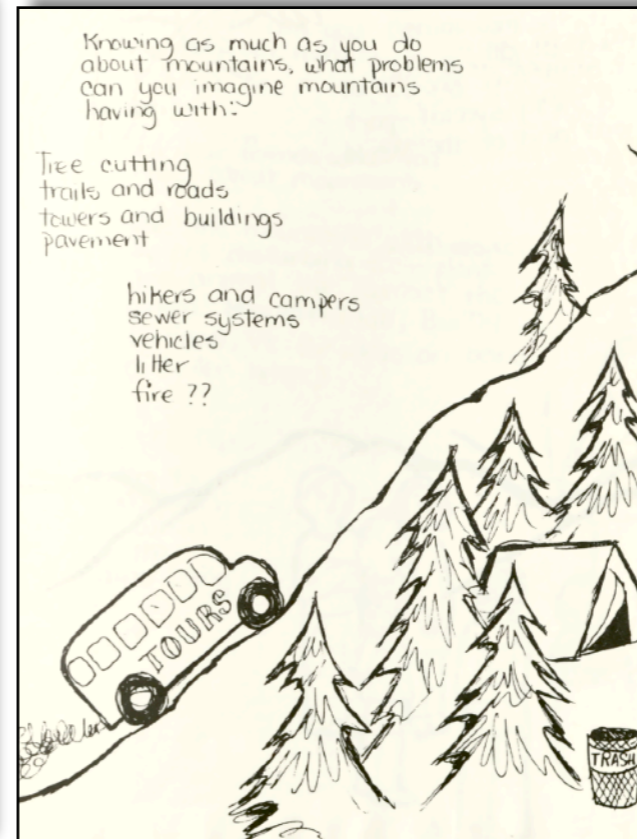


A Proposal to Keep a Promise to Mountain, UVM Special Collections

## Preserving Camels Hump

In the early 1960s, Camels Hump was the only one of Vermont's highest peaks not to have been spoiled by skiing and real estate development. Keeping it that way was not a foregone conclusion. A major ski area was proposed and turned down; building high-altitude chalets serviced by a cable car was another idea; rumors circulated that the Mafia had its eyes on the Hump; and the state Forests and Park Department was said to view Camels Hump as "just another woodlot."

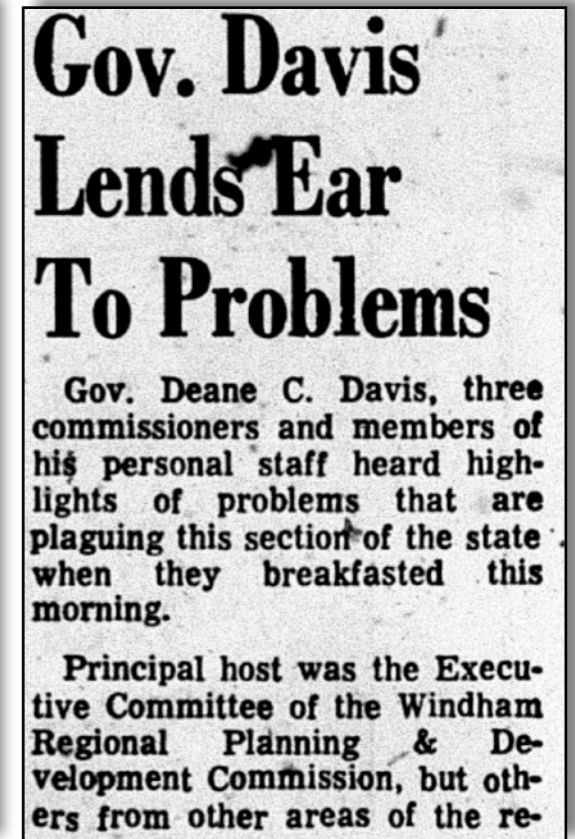
Bob Spear, founder of the Green Mountain Audubon Society, called for setting aside Camels Hump as a state or national park. Another coalition formed and issued a major park proposal, vowing to keep "a promise to the mountain."



Green Mountains Coloring Book, Hub Vogelmann, Green Mountain Profile Committee, Nature Conservancy of Vermont

## The High Elevations

According to Shirley Strong, first woman President of the Green Mountain Club, "That period between 1966 and about 1970 were just, everything was — fell apart. Things were happening, too many pressures — too much development, too much big money from outside." She then formed the Green Mountains Profile Committee to preserve a wildlife corridor along the entire heights of the central Green Mountain range. It called for significant restrictions on higher elevation development and ski area expansion. Act 250's 2,500-foot rule grew out of this group's efforts, although some participants assert that the elevation should have been lower.



Brattleboro Daily Reformer, May 28, 1969

## Controlling Rampant Development

The 1968 gubernatorial campaign, when Deane Davis was elected, was largely about taxes, not the environment. When 500 people attended the State House conference on the environment on May 14, 1969, land use controls were not a major part of the agenda. Bill Schmidt, Executive Director of the Windham Regional Commission, changed that with a phone call to the Governor, inviting Davis to meet with WRC board members and staff during a scheduled gubernatorial visit to Brattleboro on May 28. Davis returned twice within a month, learning about Florida-style land development schemes in Wilmington and Dover. The rest is history.





Jane Clark Brown for the Suburban List

## Water

Water, not land-use controls, was a dominant issue for many Vermonters. (In fact, a poll called *Vermonters on Vermont* found that more Vermonters were concerned with litter than with land speculation.) Lake Champlain was a problem, as the above cartoon indicates. Rivers were still being used for dumping waste. Governor Davis was especially committed to protecting high-elevation streams about 1,500 feet. Attorney General Jim Jeffords called a news conference to attack the rapidly expanding Stowe resort development, labeling Stowe, the self-proclaimed Ski Capital of the East, the “sewage capital of the East.

It is amazing that, nearly fifty years later, the health of Vermont’s waterways remains a major issue

# Davis is saving our water.

By calling for the toughest water pollution control bill in the U.S., and providing the plan to fund it, the Governor is assuring clean water to drink, clean water to swim in by 1980.

## Davis is saving our state

THIS SPACE PAID FOR BY DAVIS FOR GOVERNOR COMMITTEE

Gov. Deane Davis campaign ad, 1970

# Jeffords on Stowe 'Sewage Capital'

MONTPELIER, Vt. (AP) — The federal government Stowe, called the “Ski Capital of the East,” has been labeled “sewage capital of the East” by Atty. Gen. James Jeffords. The state 30 per cent of capital expenditures, the state 30 per cent, but it would be available if the village went alone.

In a letter to Stowe officials Jeffords also said immediate legal action would be taken Wednesday, Jeffords gave them a 30-day grace period from legal action against about 40 individual polluters along the Waterbury River nearby, if a town sewage treatment facilities. He said he would ask voters to decide which route to take for correction of its pollution problems. The resort town’s population has been mushrooming in the past five years.

“The serious blemish on the image of Stowe which would result if a prolonged dispute ensues is obvious to everyone,” Jeffords added. He also said the state favors a system sponsored by the town, but would not object if developers desire to establish a district. A similar action was taken near businesses in the Killington-Pico ski area and resulted in the closing of several.

Brattleboro Daily Reformer, November 7, 1969

*“Let me give you an example. You’ve heard I believe through the newspapers and elsewhere, that we have taken the public policy position in our administrative agencies which have this responsibility to give as near complete protection to what we call the pristine streams — those streams that are above elevations of 1500 ft., where the streams are clean and unpolluted and where there is a movement, a very definite movement, toward development.”*

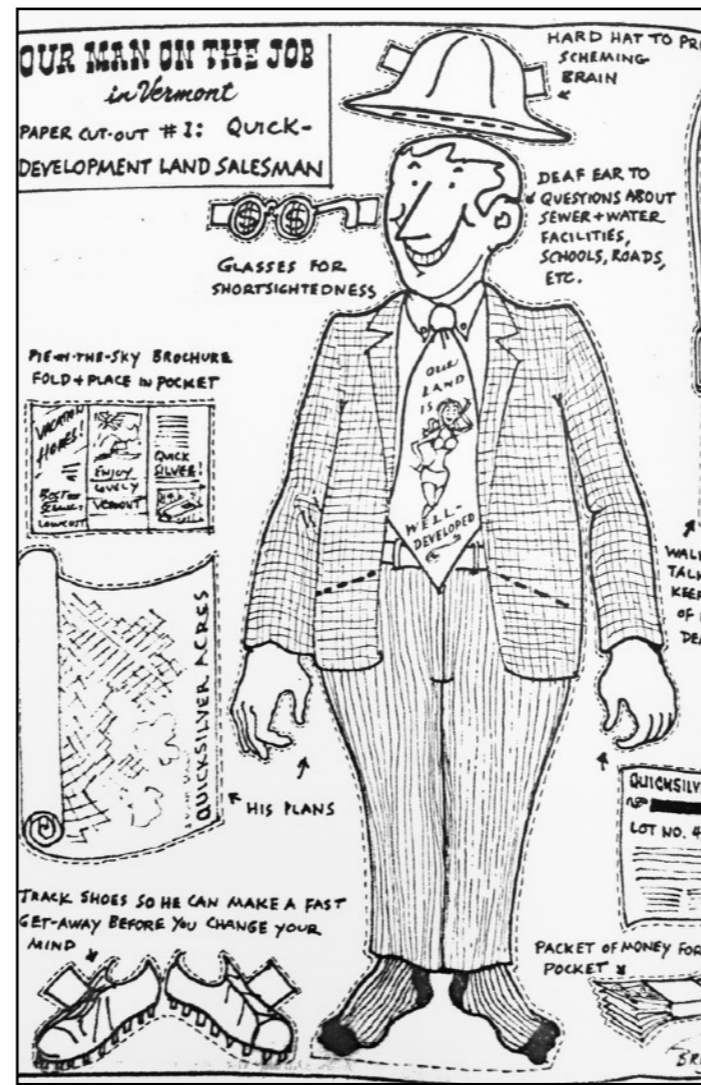
— Governor Deane C. Davis, October 8, 1971



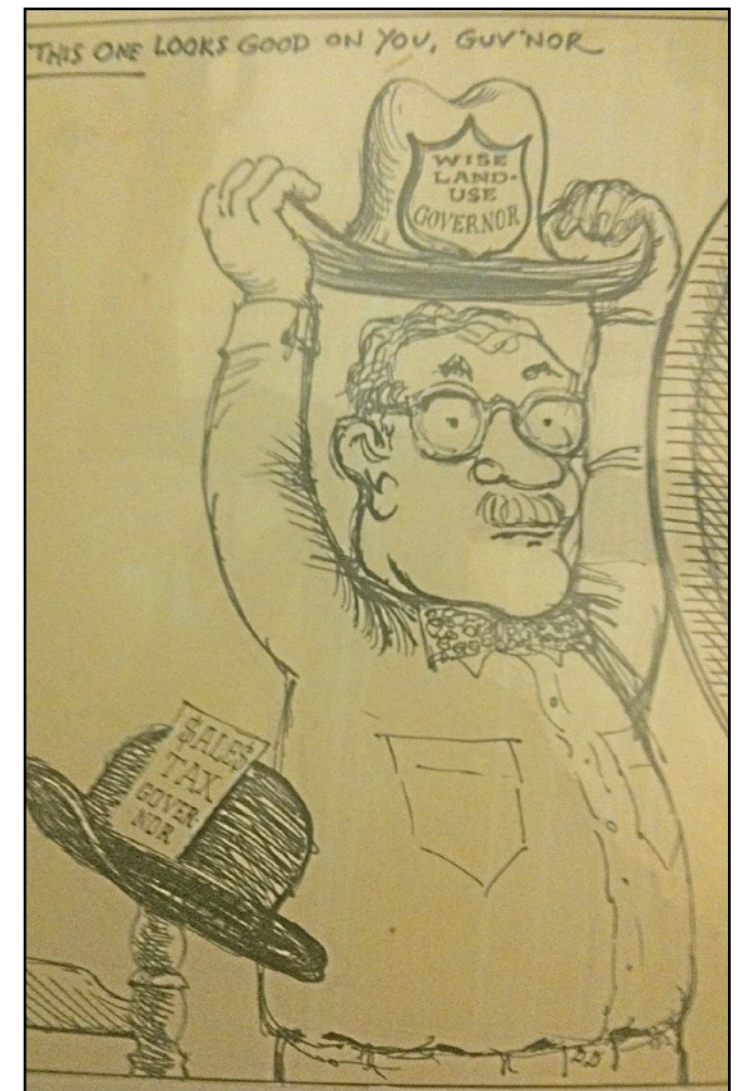
# Land-Use Controls Gain Traction ... then Slip!



Opening of I-91 exit 4, Putney, December, 1961  
Vermont State Archives



Jane Clark Brown for the Suburban List



Jane Clark Brown for the Suburban List

## The Mixed Blessing

When Vermont State Senator Ed Janeway helped open Putney's new interstate exit, many Vermonters were looking forward to economic progress after years of stagnation. Few, perhaps, were ready for the massive development the interstates would help bring. Standing in the crowd — along with Sen. Aiken and Gov. Keyser — was Bill Schmidt, who arrived in Vermont a month before to become pastor Putney's Federated Church. By the end of the decade, Schmidt was Executive Director of Vermont's first regional planning commission and would help Deane Davis understand the need to control land development. Davis later wrote, "Bill (was) the person who first gave me an understanding of what was happening in Vermont and to Vermont and the dangers that our lovely State faced if the unplanned, unbridled and dangerous rush to development then beginning in Southern Vermont should continue unabated."

## The Wheeler Dealer

"The selling process starts out with heavy advertising in down-country areas. It's followed up by telephone salesmen — that's all they do — there's a certain type of person that makes his living doing this and they're frequently called boiler room operators. They sit and banter. I don't know specifically, but that's categorically the way they operate. They get people on the phone and they begin to sense when they have a live one and they make appointments when they can, and those appointments are followed up by the next group of salesmen. This is called the 'sit' salesman because he goes out and sits in their living room."

— Notes on talk given by Jack Veller, realtor and chair of Windham Regional Commission

## Urgency and Regret

"We have only to travel some section of Vermont to know that we are already losing the battle to the developer and the growth (of) our State is already out of balance."

— Governor Deane C. Davis, Environmental Control Message, January 8, 1970

"Was the enactment of a Land Use Plan important? Indeed it was. It would have given a sense of direction to the district environmental boards, which hear and make decisions on applications for land development. It would have made decisions more uniform across the state. And, I believe, it would have given legal stability to the whole of Act 250. The disappointment was mine, but the loss, I believe, was the entire state's."

— Deane C. Davis: An Autobiography



# Vermont environmental laws were not slam dunks



Jane Clark Brown for the *Suburban List*

## WILL THESE BILLS DIE IN THE VERMONT LEGISLATURE?

**H.417**—Regulation of land development throughout the State; provides for a state land use plan; and establishes the Environmental Control Commission as a permanent body.

**H.435**—Regulation of land use at higher elevations.

**H.367**—Control of flood plains by the Water Resources Board.

**S.165**—Control of water pollution.

**H.462**—Permission for each town to appoint a conservation commission.

**H.309**—Protection of the shorelines of lakes and streams.

**H.402**—Authorizes towns to adopt subdivision regulations after adoption of a transportation plan.

**S.18**—Enables the State or Towns to purchase easements for conservation or scenic purposes.

Only several weeks remain for action on these bills by the Legislature. To date, none have been passed. Yet we believe that if the environment of Vermont is to be preserved, there must be action—now! You can help—let your legislators know **RIGHT NOW** which bills you want action on—urge them to complete their task of protecting our state.

Green Mountain Audubon Society  
The Vermont League of Women Voters  
The Lake Champlain Committee  
Steering Committee, Environmental Planning Forum  
The Committee for Environmental Action at the University of Vermont  
The Vermont Association of Architects

*Burlington Free Press*, March 24, 1970

Primary campaign ad targeting Vermont State Representative Royal Cutts of Townshend, chair of the House Natural Resources Committee, *Brattleboro Reformer*, September 9, 1974

## Time was running out

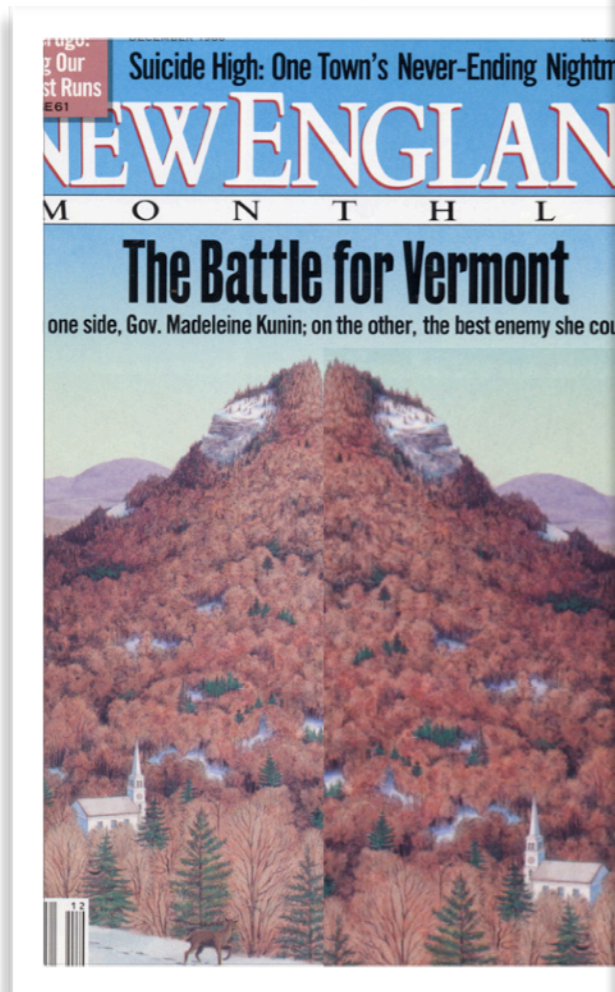
Sometimes, it is tempting to think that passing Deane Davis' environmental agenda was popular and easy. It was not. As Davis later recounted in his autobiography, "Three weeks before the end of the session, action had been taken on only two bills, one had passed the House and one the Senate. Opponents were having much success in setting up roadblocks, and in addition to the central acts of 250 and 252, bills were languishing that would limit pesticide use, restrict development at elevations higher than twenty-five hundred feet, and create zoning for floodplains and lake shores. The principal opposition came from lawyers representing developers and from conservatives who labeled Act 250 'statewide zoning.'" Ads were taken out putting pressure on legislators, and the Governor himself threatened to extend the session or call a Special Session if the Legislature did not act.

*I often think if it hadn't of been for Deane Davis, could Act 250 have come into being? It would have been tough."*

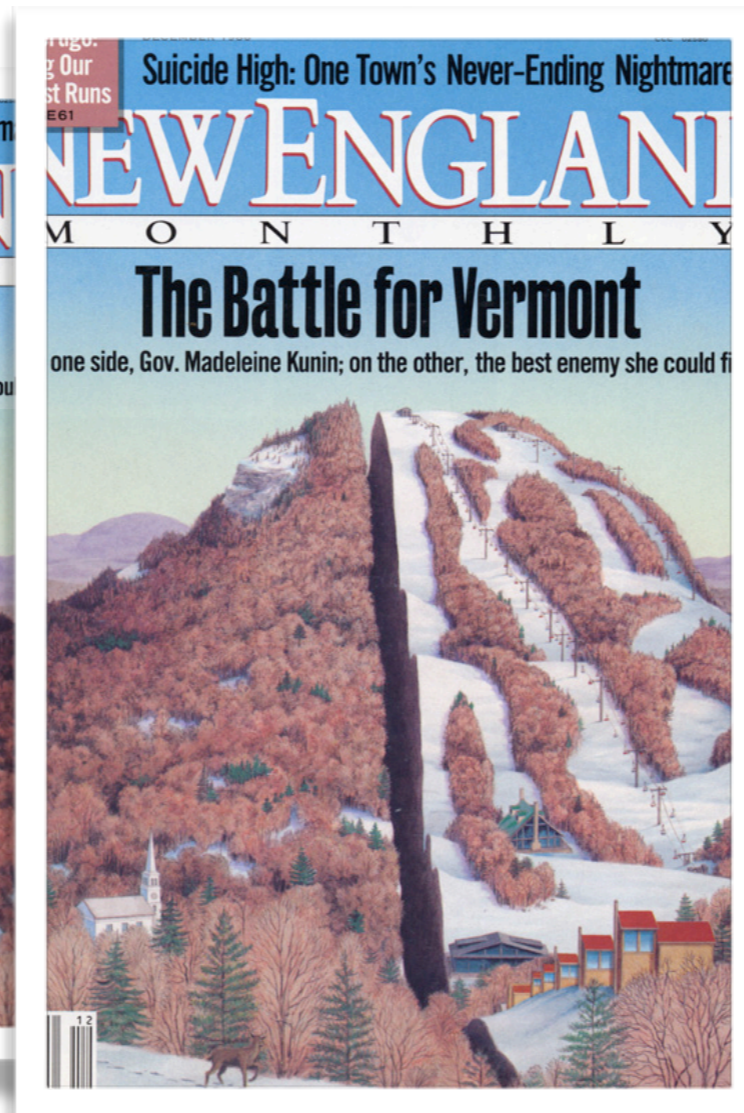
— Hub Vogelmann  
Vermont Folklife Center interview



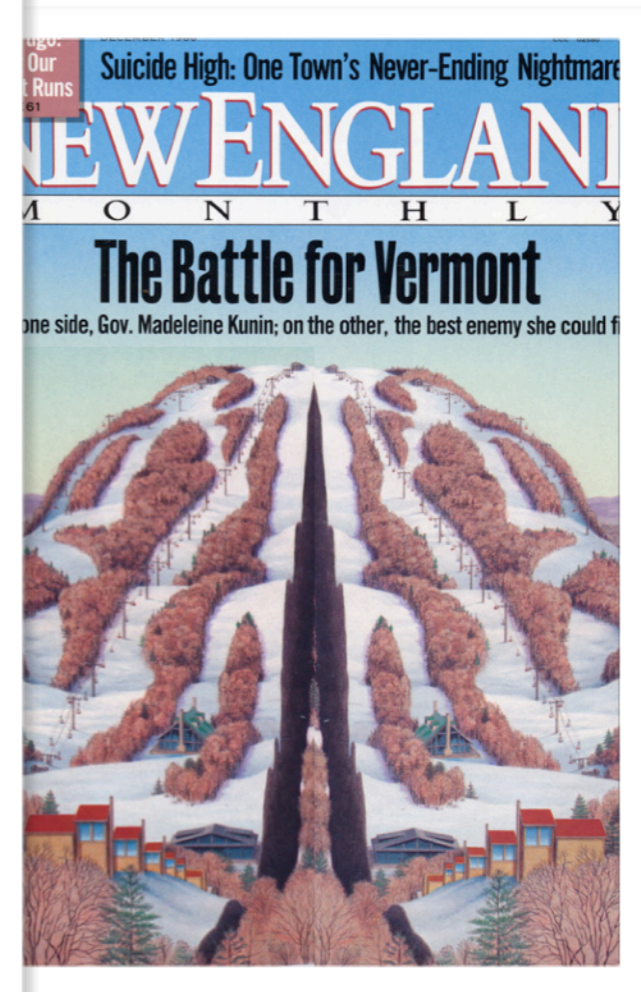
# The Three Vermonts



*The perceived Vermont*



*The real Vermont*



*The future Vermont?*

*“One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.”*

*— Aldo Leopold, Sand County Almanac*