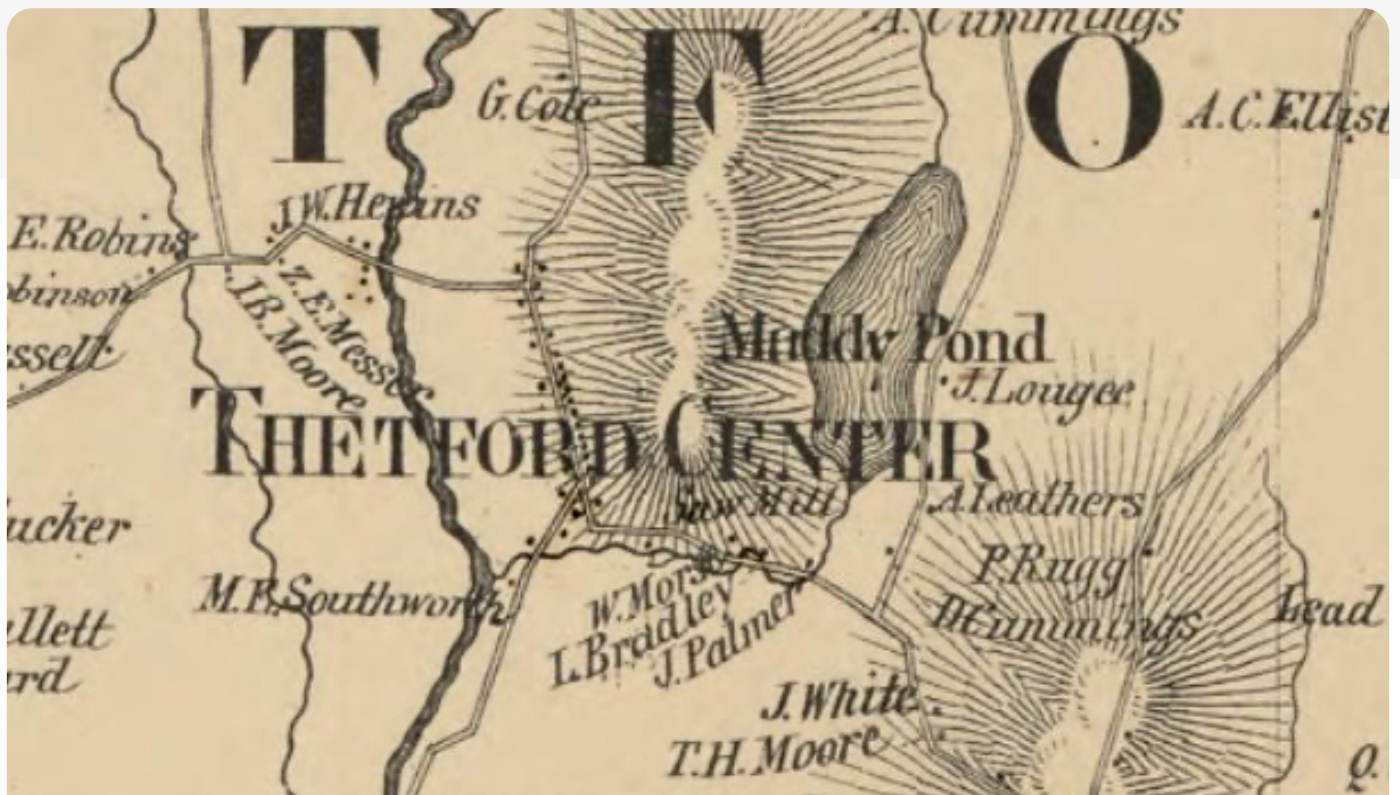


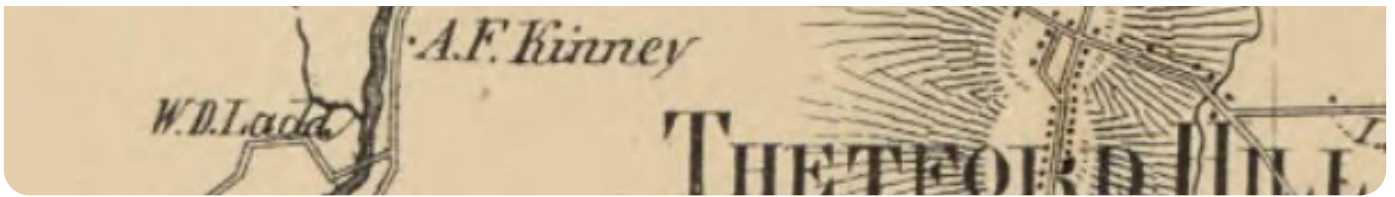


TIM TAYLOR · LI SHEN | MAR 12, 2023

Past social trends set the scene for today's development issues

It started with the establishment of Dartmouth College, followed by the founding of Dartmouth Medical College in the late 1700s.





The history of development in the Upper Valley can help explain why, today, we face an acute housing shortage that is crippling the area's economy.

It started with the establishment of Dartmouth College, followed by the founding of Dartmouth Medical College in the late 1700s to train more medical professionals for the rural upper valley of the Connecticut River where doctors were scarce.

To serve the sick and to provide a training ground for doctors, the Dartmouth Hospital Association (1890) gave rise in 1893 to Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital, a medical and academic center. Both doctors and college professors needed housing, and, historically, doctors were required to live close to where they practiced. Many settled in nearby Norwich. This growing class of professionals "from away" demanded a high standard of education for their children. Over time, they petitioned for this all the way to the highest levels of government, and, in 1963, an act of Congress created the Hanover-Norwich Dresden School District, the first interstate school district in the U.S.

Like a magnet, the reputation for excellence of the Dresden schools drew families with children. The high demand for housing

in Norwich and Hanover drove up house prices and effectively solidified an already developing economic stratification in the Upper Valley. It helped foster a wealthy economic ghetto at the center of the Upper Valley, with declining land values as one drove away from its center. Had Norwich been required to join with Hartford, land values might not have risen in Norwich as quickly.

Around the same time, another phenomenon was taking place against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing well into the 1980s, thousands of "baby-boomers" who had grown up in the suburbs of the Northeast fled to the rural parts of northern New England seeking an alternative lifestyle to break the mold their suburban parents aspired to. This back-to-the-land movement promoted by Helen and Scott Nearing was modeled on agrarian resurgence movements that marked various societal upheavals in history. The goal of the lifestyle was simple – rural self-sufficiency. Fueled by this influx, the hitherto stagnant population of Vermont grew by 14% in the 1960s and 15% in the 1970s. Significant numbers of boomers purchased open land or old farms that seemed cheap by city standards. Those who stayed ultimately followed different paths, but one common thread was, and still is, their desire to live on rural tracts of 5 to 50 acres that they have felt neither a social nor economic need to develop. The effect has been rural sprawl of single-family homes scattered along highways where foresight and planning could have produced compact neighborhoods that utilized land more wisely

while offering the same number of housing units. In addition, large lots developed on dirt back roads have fragmented formerly wild natural areas.

With more miles of road to maintain and more snow plowing, such developments put an increased load on town services. In addition, newcomers often demanded better schools and a bigger police force. These improvements were financed through property taxes, which inexorably spiraled upward. They disproportionately hurt low-income residents, especially those in possession of large tracts of family land, such as farms and woodlots, that generated a significant property tax burden. Some sold out and moved elsewhere, beyond the shadow of the professional economic center. The Property Tax Credit first created in 1970 to help aging Vermonters age 65 and older, and then extended to all Vermonters, significantly reduced the onerous impact of never-ending property tax increases as personal income declined.

The various newcomers ushered in outside influences. Across the U.S., and then in the Upper Valley, educational systems of the late 1980s and into the '90s increasingly focused on achieving a white-collar job with an emphasis on computer literacy. Unfortunately, this came at the expense of many students learning a trade. Today, there are few young plumbers, electricians, and carpenters. Tradespeople gravitate toward building profitable, multi-million-dollar homes in Lyme, Hanover, Norwich, and along lakefronts, rather than starter homes for young working people

(see Nick Clark's recent [Sidenote article](#)).

Turning to Thetford, a rural town historically comprising six small villages and a sprinkling of hill farms, the somewhat unique geographical setting and underlying surficial geology has had the effect of limiting affordable building sites. For example, any expansion of North Thetford village is severely restricted by its location in a FEMA-classified flood hazard zone.

East Thetford hosts Thetford's only community business district, but its potential for further development is constrained by the rich, productive agricultural soils bordering the river. As is typical of the Route 5 corridor extending north from Brattleboro, development has occurred along the road in one long continuous linear sprawl. Thankfully, behind the façade of development, very productive agricultural soils often remain. There has been some successful commercial development. At one time a mini plaza provided needed village activity – a laundrette and a pizza parlor – but it was eliminated when the Wells River Bank and its ample parking area were built, with no land reserved for future development.

Thetford Hill is a desirable location, but the soils on the hill are very wet and not particularly suitable for septic systems. And, ironically, potable water is difficult to find. It is a feat of engineering that two schools exist on the hill. New development is also restricted by the historical character of the village. Any development there is reviewed first by the Historical Preservation

Committee and again by the Development Review Board as a conditional use.

Thetford Center offers opportunities for development. Several fields just north of the Thetford Center Village store are prime sites for housing. They are not particularly useful for agriculture, although some might take umbrage with that assessment, and are located at the immediate edge of the village where development should take place. Much of the rest of the village is constrained by the Ompompanoosuc River.

Union Village is a vulnerable-feeling little village on the Ompompanoosuc River with a huge flood control dam looming above it. And it is, of course, partly in Norwich.

Post Mills once was a water-powered center of manufacturing in Thetford and has opportunities for growth. However, with Lake Fairlee nearby, the value of lots will be high. It is an important area of agricultural soils that are mostly classified as Statewide, meaning of State importance for agriculture but still prime agricultural soils. These soils are excellent for crops if irrigated. One large piece of land at Crossroad Farm has already been conserved and restricted for development by Act 250. There is virtually no location for further development along the lake shore. Most of the existing homes would be in violation of the state's lake shore development rules if built today.

With the exception of Thetford Hill, the population centers grew

up along rivers, particularly where settlers could site their various water-powered mills. The river valleys, especially on the Ompompanoosuc, tend to be narrow and steep-sided, and also encompass the best agricultural soils. While this topography accommodated the needs of the original population and their small, compact villages, it does not easily lend itself to the growth pressures we are now experiencing.

Tim Taylor has served on the Thetford Development Review Board for 25 years and is the current chair.

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