

Langdon Meadow and the Growth of Montpelier

By **Tom Brown** - December 1, 2016

by Paul Carnahan

Langdon Meadow has played an important role in Montpelier's growth and development. Originally a wealthy landowner's field, it was once the site of escapist pleasures and later, key to the region's economic aspirations. Today, it is the site of state offices, businesses, athletic fields and the high school.

Langdon Meadow was a 50-acre piece of land on the south side of the Winooski River, opposite the large houses of Montpelier's business leaders on lower State Street. Situated in what was originally part of the town of Berlin, it stretched from the location of today's VSECU building along the river west toward Montpelier Junction. Access was from Winooski Avenue (now Memorial Drive), a road that followed the river from the Main Street bridge to Montpelier Junction.

The meadow was named for an early owner of the property, Montpelier merchant and banker Colonel James H. Langdon, who in 1820, moved his family into an imposing brick house there. Upon Col. Langdon's death in 1831, the property passed to his children, Caira and James R. Langdon. In 1848 Caira married Anastasius Nicholas, a New York City banker with Montpelier ties, and the couple used the house part-time. "Then commenced the parties and banquets at the Nicholas Manor, at which caterers often came from New York to serve, and anyone who had not been entertained there was hardly considered quite socially correct," according to Montpelier historian Dorman Kent.

 Langdon Meadow during the time that it was used by the National Life Athletic Association for recreational fields. A tennis court is in the lower left corner of the photograph, while a

Langdon Meadow during the time that it was used by the National Life Athletic Association for recreational fields. A tennis court is in the lower left corner of the photograph, while a combined baseball diamond and football field is on the upper side of the main access road to the fields. (Courtesy of Vermont Historical Society)

The large house on Langdon Meadow eventually passed to Caira's son, Lucas Langdon Nicholas and his wife, a woman from England (by way of New York City) who fancied herself a "countess." Shortly after their marriage, Lucas decamped to Rutland, while "Lady" Nicholas stayed on in Montpelier. The grand family mansion deteriorated to the point where it was only being used to store hay. "Lady" Nicholas lived in the nearby crumbling Nicholas Block on Winooski Avenue. In April 1899 the mansion burned to the ground. The fascinating story of "Lady" Nicholas has been told by Paul Heller in an article entitled "The Countess of Montpelier," published in the Times Argus on July 11, 2015 (available online).

Caira's brother, J.R. Langdon, a wealthy Montpelier businessman, banker, railroad magnate and real estate developer, maintained an ownership interest in the meadow. The 1853 Presdee and Edwards map shows the meadow divided into over 40 lots facing streets named James Street and Langdon Street. J.R. Langdon's plans for the meadow never materialized, but he had insightfully recognized the economic potential of the meadow.

J.R. Langdon represented Montpelier and Berlin during different terms of the legislature but without moving from his home on Main Street (now the Inn at Montpelier). In 1880 he had a disagreement with Montpelier and switched his legal residence to his property in Berlin. According to his obituary, every year he "crossed the river on the last day of March, and thus maintained his legal residence in that town [Berlin], though living the greater part of the year in Montpelier." Langdon Meadow did not become part of Montpelier until 1899, after J.R. Langdon had died.


Langdon Meadow was the site of visiting circuses during J.R. Langdon's life and beyond, into the Great Depression. Circuses during this period would tour the region and stop in Montpelier for a day, providing its residents with a window into an exotic world beyond the meadow. It was a major event; schools, granite sheds, and factories would close for the day, and banks would close at noon, all so that townsfolk could attend the show. Access to the meadow was easy for the circuses, because the Central Vermont Railroad tracks ran right through the meadow (Langdon was vice president of the railroad), but pedestrian access was more difficult. There was no bridge at Bailey Avenue and the railroad didn't want people to walk across their bridge, so each year the city constructed a temporary bridge across the river.

While the citizenry of central Vermont was enjoying entertainment courtesy of traveling circuses, Langdon Meadow was changing hands. In 1911 the Central Vermont Railroad bought the

land from the J.R. Langdon estate. The railroad, an economic force at the time, planned to use the land to expand its operations in Montpelier, but that never came to pass.

Ten years later the National Life Athletic Association started leasing the meadow from the railroad and in 1932, bought it outright. The meadow started to be called “National Life Field.” The association maintained recreational fields on the meadow for its members, and for the teams from Montpelier and St. Michael’s high schools. In return, the city waived property taxes on the land. The meadow featured a baseball diamond, football gridiron, tennis courts and a nine-hole golf course. By 1943, with World War II underway, income from the field’s use was too low to cover operational costs. The National Life company stepped in and eventually took over ownership of the field. The stage was set for Langdon Meadow to become the education and economic growth center of Montpelier.

In the late 1940s the city started eyeing the meadow for a new high school to alleviate issues of overcrowding. In March 1950 the voters of Montpelier rejected a proposal to build a new \$500,000 high school on land to be donated by National Life. Four years later the company generously renewed its offer to give the city 15 acres of land, and the city residents voted overwhelmingly to issue a \$1 million bond to build a new high school. The new high school was dedicated on January 15, 1956, in a ceremony featuring the top education official in the country, Samuel M. Brownell.

 The new Montpelier High School with the city’s Public Works Equipment displayed in the parking lot, ca. 1960.
(Courtesy of Vermont Historical Society)

*The new Montpelier High School with the city’s Public Works Equipment displayed in the parking lot, ca. 1960.
(Courtesy of Vermont Historical Society)*

The new high school, however, was in an inconvenient location. To get to it, teachers, students and visitors had to traverse Winooski Avenue (now Memorial Drive), a narrow road lined with substandard dwellings, from Taylor Street toward Montpelier Junction. Fortunately, the state was planning a bypass around downtown Montpelier that would direct traffic from Route 2 across the Winooski River at Bailey Avenue, past the high school and towards the intersection of Main and Northfield Streets. Two years after the high school was constructed, the bypass opened.

The bypass had a second, equally important function — to connect Montpelier to the new interstate highway segment being developed on the western edge of the city. This connection was so important to the city’s economic health that Montpelier paid for an access road from the

high school across Langdon Meadow to the highway. This made Montpelier the only town in Vermont to carry the full cost of constructing highway access.

In November 1960, the interstate between Montpelier and Middlesex opened to the public, and Langdon Meadow became a prime area for development. National Life had already opened their new \$16 million headquarters on a large, wooded piece of land overlooking Langdon Meadow (most of which they still owned) earlier that summer. The retention of the insurance company headquarters in Montpelier was a major economic coup for the city, no doubt made possible by the promise of access to the interstate.

Langdon Meadow's full development was facilitated by new road construction. In 1957 the Vermont Crossroads Store had constructed a new building across the street from the high school at the site of the old Langdon mansion, now the location of Vermont State Employees Credit Union. The high school bought additional land for athletic fields, and the state built a liquor warehouse next to the interstate exchange. A new building for Green Mountain Power quickly followed; another, for the state's Department of Employment Security was completed in 1962.

Langdon Meadow seemed to offer an even greater capacity for development in the optimistic 1960s. In 1967, National Life announced plans to build a 70-unit Howard Johnson motel, complete with a 134-seat dining room, lounge and swimming pool, at the foot of National Life Drive. "Special attention" was going to be made to the design, "to adapt it to its Green Mountain setting." The proposal received strong support from mayor Willard Strong and Governor Phillip Hoff, who noted that the city and the state needed the facilities because the Tavern Motor Inn was then the only hotel with dining and auditorium facilities near the State House, following the 1966 closure of the Pavilion Hotel. But by October 1969 it was clear that the development costs for the site were too high, and the national chain pulled out.

Today few people rushing along Memorial Drive pause to consider the historic use of the land. Langdon Meadow, once a bucolic field, provided the city with a much-needed path to rail and transportation corridors. It also made possible the creation of a 1950s modern high school and the growth of three engines of the local economy: National Life Insurance Company, Green Mountain Power and the State of Vermont.
