The Rise and Fall of A Vermont Village:
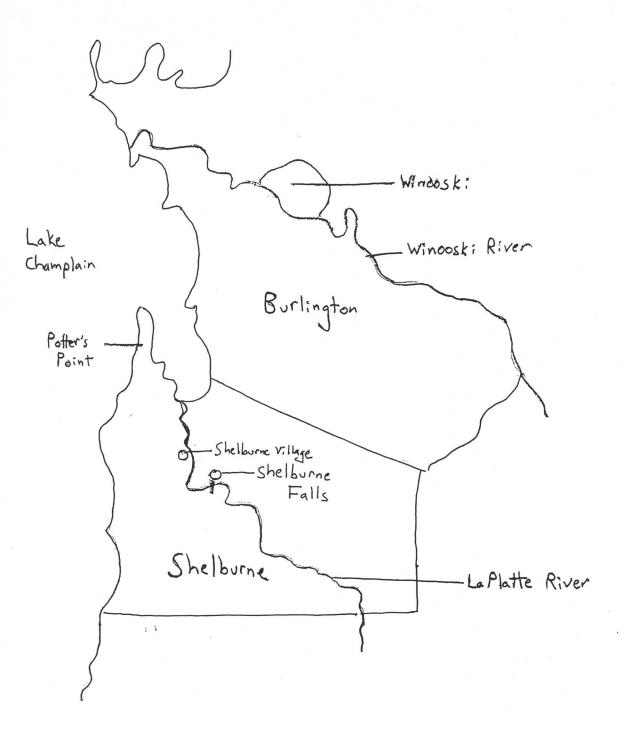# Shelburne Falls, 1785-1996

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Winooski

Winooski River

Lake
Champlain

Burlington

Potter's
Point

Shelburne Village

Shelburne
Falls

Shelburne

La Platte River

Modified Map of Shelburne, Burlington, and Winooski

The Rise and Fall of a Vermont Village:
Shelburne Falls, 1785-1996

"Unquestionably rural in 1840, Vermont entered a period when urban influence kept increasing. Its villages were the points of politics, trade, transportation, industry, education, and religion. Except for the family, found in all locales, every local and cultural activity not in a setting of fields, woods, and mountains centered in the village. ...The next Vermont generation would see the valley villages expand and mesh with the cities."[*]

        —T.D. Seymour Bassett

Just over half a century ago, the town of Shelburne, Vermont contained two separate villages. The older community, known by local parlance as "Shelburne Village", still exists today as the sole center of the town. The other village, Shelburne Falls, only remains a distinct community as a vestigial marking on Vermont road maps. Once a thriving mill village located a mile south-east of Shelburne Village, Shelburne Falls has now been completely socially and economically absorbed into the "Village". Shelburne Falls had begun its development in 1785, when Ira Allen built the first mills by the falls, and reached its peak in population and community identity in about 1835. The village continued to thrive well into the first quarter of the twentieth century, with economic adjustments to meet the changing times. Despite its prosperity during the nineteenth century, it began an inexorable process of decline following the introduction of the railroad into Shelburne Village. On a local scale, the erasure of the village of Shelburne Falls occurred at the time of the destruction of the mills during the flood of 1927. Yet the predominant factor which resulted in the Falls village's decline was actually the longer process of integration with nearby Shelburne Village, due to the economic and social changes that affected isolated mill communities all

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[*] Bassett, T.D. Seymour. The Growing Edge: Vermont Villages, 1840-1880. p. x and 12.

across New England following the transportation revolution. After the coming of the railroad, local mills were no longer needed to supply the town, and the town center beside the tracks economically outcompeted the nearby community of Shelburne Falls. Without any remaining commercial distinction of its own, the identity of the village of Shelburne Falls disintegrated, and the town of Shelburne became one unified community.

Early Development of Shelburne Falls: 1785-1835

The initial development of Shelburne Falls took place during the early years of Vermont settlement, before the admission of the state to the Union in 1791. In 1785, a land speculator, Ira Allen, purchased a tract of land near the falls on the La Platte river in the town of Shelburne. This town had been founded in 1763, on a land-grant given by Benning Wentworth, the governor of the royal colony of New Hampshire. Allen, a shrewd businessman, had already successfully profited from his creation of a substantial community by a mill he built beside the Falls of the Winooski River near the northern community of Burlington, and saw a way to make some quick money in Shelburne by constructing a similar mill. The La Platte river possessed a considerable falls of thirty-two feet and year-round pressure from the water of nearby streamlets. Ira Allen's mills filled a much-needed service in the town of Shelburne, and quickly attracted farming residents to that particular area of town. By 1835, the resulting village was an industrious and viable community.

By the time that Allen began to develop his land near Shelburne Falls, a small village already existed just to the north in the town of Shelburne. The town possessed land adjacent to Lake Champlain, and the first settlers had constructed their homes near the mouth of the "La Plotte" River, on

abandoned farm land which had been cleared by Native Algonquians (Lamson 112). As the name of the nearby river indicated, the early inhabitants suffered from frequent skirmishes with Natives and Tories, and even occasional kidnappings to Quebec. (The name has since been Anglicized to the "LaPlatte River". League of Women Voters brochure.) The population dispersed back to safer regions in southern New England for the duration of the Revolutionary War, although the community in Shelburne quickly recongregated after the fighting ceased. Most eighteenth-century settlers in Vermont, including those in the town of Shelburne, migrated as farmers from southern New England because of the dwindling availability of family farm land (Harding). Farmers cleared their claims by hand, cutting the trees and removing the stumps to plough fields for crops of wheat, rye, and corn.

Ira Allen began his development of Shelburne Falls in 1785 by hiring James Hawley, the contractor from his endeavors at Winooski. After constructing a log-bridge across the La Platte River to create a route to Allen's hometown of Winooski, Hawley built a mill and a nearby forge to create the iron parts necessary for the mill's construction. James Hawley's sawmill offered a number of advantages which attracted farmers to the Falls as a place of settlement. A mill reduced the labor needed to produce boards for construction of the attractive frame homes soon favored by prosperous settlers in the town. Whereas two men hand-sawing could manufacture about twelve boards a day, a man and son working in the mill could easily turn out sixty (Dodge 62). As farmers cleared land and cut trees, they turned their timber into boards for their own use or for a profit at the already growing shipyard and lumber industry to Quebec, located on Shelburne's Potter's Point on Lake Champlain.

In order to increase the waterpower for his sawmill, Allen organized the construction of a dam at the falls. The increased water pressure enabled the construction of a second mill downstream, a gristmill, in 1786. Grinding grain by hand in a mortar to obtain a consistency appropriate for family consumption proved a tedious task for early settlers, whose isolation from commercial centers often demanded that they operate nearly self-sufficient farms. This monotonous chore took precious time away from other chores such as tending vegetable gardens, caring for cattle in order to prepare homemade dairy products, butchering pigs for smoked meat, and shearing sheep for fleeces to card and spin and weave into cloth for family clothing. Settlers soon perceived gristmills to be so essential to the development of a community that the southern Vermont town of Arlington advertised free land and fifty pounds to whomever would build and run a grinding mill! (Lamson 118) Residents of the young town of Shelburne also needed such an enterprise. The first Shelburne settlers had faced the prospect of travelling extreme distances to have their grain ground more efficiently. James Spear, for example, travelled by boat to mills at Whitehall, New York or to St. John's in Quebec; then to a more recently developed mill at Willsborough Falls, New York; and was finally able to make a day's trip by wagon to Ira Allen's mill constructed at Winooski Falls, about ten miles away. Ira Allen's new gristmill at Shelburne Falls served both to make a profit from the business of Shelburne residents, and to attract new settlers (and patrons) to the area surrounding the Falls. As his mills quickly prospered, Ira Allen began to divide his original tract of land and sell small parcels to other commercial venturers.

David Fish purchased one such tract of land between the saw and gristmills in 1789, and completed construction of his own enterprise of a

fulling mill. Such a mill served to more efficiently perform one of the many time-consuming tasks in the textile industry. Whereas women settlers had previously woven their homespun yarn on looms into greasy and often irregular cloth, beating the cloth into shape as best they could, a fulling mill smoothed and cleaned the woven product much more effectivly into cloth fit to be cut and sewn for the family wardrobe.

Another entrepreneur, Thaddeus Tuttle, purchased land from Allen on the bluff above the mills and built a "red store" where he sold goods from the lower story of his home. Tuttle's store largely profited from the commodity of potash, a common Vermont product needed in the soap and glass industries until the early nineteenth century. Farmers in Shelburne Falls could make potash as a by-product of burning wood in their clearing process, and then exchange this commodity for goods such as salt and sugar which they could not produce on their farms. Tuttle could sell the potash to industries in distant towns to buy more goods for his store, and he could sell the potash to David Fish, who required the product in one of the steps of the fulling process at his mill. In addition to fulfilling a needed economic position in the growing community of Shelburne Falls, the store probably also served as a social gathering place where villagers could exchange news and gossip. A sense of identity at the Falls continued to grow.

As the mills and the store thrived, the village kept expanding. New settlers with specialized skills opened small businesses in the village. Ira Andrews, who migrated to the Falls from West Bethany, New York in 1825, combined a number of occupations. Andrews built a shop on the opposite side of the road from the village store, where he maintained his apprenticed trade as a wheelwright. He also set up a number of other profitable businesses. In addition to manufacturing ox cars, stone boats, wooden axle

sleighs, buggies, bob sleds, and cutters, Andrews manufactured coffins to order, sold his sizable flock's fleeces to the operator of the fulling mill, and cut cloth to size for neighboring residents (Lake). Other new residents opened small industries, too. In 1830, Henry Fuller opened a blacksmith shop at the back of Andrews' wheelwright shop, so that Ira Andrews could install iron axles on his wagons. * Across the road on the west side of the river, Lemon Judson ran a tannery and shoe shop. Justus Warner moved to town in 1832, and opened a second goods store. (Rann 681) Settlers near the Falls found an increasing number of economic reasons to gather in the expanding village, and the sense of community continued to develop.

Shelburne Falls also furthered its sense of community with the creation of its own school. As early as 1792, the town of Shelburne had divided into eight separate school districts, and a one-room schoolhouse for Falls children opened in 1801. The school moved several times until assuming a permanent location on Falls Road in 1831, the same year that Shelburne Village opened its own brick school. The teacher "boarded round" with various residents, forming another link between community members. The Falls school undoubtedly served as a village center as parents gathered to watch their children's contests and concerts. Although there are no recorded reminiscences or programs from school concerts, Shelburne residents clearly loved to sing; in 1806, one of the Spears, a family who lived near Shelburne

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* After the Curry family moved to town around the 1850's, George Curry operated the store, and his brother Simon Curry assumed Henry Fuller's position in the village, as recalled in a charming 1940's poem of F. A. Morse entitled "Shelburne on the Map":

> "A general store did business a little further down,
> George Curry the Proprietor toward the southern end of town.
> His brother-- Simon Curry-- Black-smith to his trade
> Did the ironing of the wagons Ira Andrews made."

Falls, requested a Mr. Dan Thayer to come open a singing school for town residents (SHS Collection).

Although socializing at the store and the school created a sense of individual village identity among the Falls residents, other affairs drew the Falls inhabitants out of their smaller community to nearby Shelburne Village. One distinguished Falls' resident, Joshua Isham, who ran both mills and the Falls store for many years, served as town clerk between 1793 and 1803. Other Falls' inhabitants must have regularly gone to the Village to attend town meeting day and similar political gatherings in the Village.

Church activities drew Falls residents to the Village more than any other social institution. As in most New England communities, the church probably played a large role in the lives of Falls' inhabitants. The weekly church service and gatherings such as church suppers and choir practice likely constituted the residents' primary community activities. Yet these types of affairs which helped to form a social tie between community members occurred in the Village and away from the Falls, either at the Union "White Church", the Episcopalian church, or the Methodist Church.

When Shelburne Falls had developed into a thriving economic center by the 1830's, why did its residents choose to attend church in the other town center, rather than constructing their own meeting house? One reason pertained to the timing of the settlement of each of the two centers, since Shelburne Falls had begun its development more recently; another, to the ambitions of a wealthy Village resident, Captain Benjamin Harrington. During the late 1790's, a time when the first settlers at the Falls were still clearing land, original Shelburnites such as Harrington had already developed prosperous farms to the west, and were ready to consider building public structures. Harrington worked vigorously to improve his village.

Under his hand, a road was built through Shelburne Village to connect the southern town of Middlebury and the northern town of Burlington to the center of Shelburne Village. Over time, this road would eclipse the route which had been built by James Hawley over the eastern bridge at the Falls and on to Spear Street, another north-south road to Burlington. In 1796, Harrington paid for the construction of a town public house in the village, which still stands today as the Shelburne Inn. After a flurry of town committees met to choose a preacher and a site for a common church, Harrington founded the Union Church in Shelburne Village to serve all denominations and town residents. The residents at the fledgling community Shelburne Falls found it practical and economic to travel to weekly services in the Village, just one mile up the road. In fine weather, families to the north probably walked to Village services.

With such fine public buildings and the New England tradition of centering the community around the church, the more prosperous new residents in the town of Shelburne, such as the Tracy family, chose to settle in the Village rather than the Falls. Soon the town approved the construction of other churches in the Village rather than in the Falls: the Episcopalian Church in 1819, and the Methodist Church in 1833. Although Shelburne Falls remained a viable community of its own through the first years of the twentieth century, Shelburne Village had emerged as the dominant center in the town of Shelburne, due to the efforts of Benjamin Harrington

The fact that Shelburne Falls had been developed later than Shelburne Village need not have warranted its more minor community position relative to the town of Shelburne. The southern town of Middlebury, which developed near Otter Creek in the same decade as Shelburne Falls, actually shifted the location of its major town center away from a previously settled

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*All photographs (except the two personal color snapshots) were taken at the town hall from the Shelburne Historical Society Collection with permission of the town clerk.

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