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BURLINGTON

City by the Lake

Burlington, the "Queen City of Vermont," is beautifully situated on a three-terraced slope rising from the broadest expanse of Lake Champlain. The waterway at its feet, which has contributed so great a part to its commercial prosperity, is one of America's loveliest lakes, stretching far away to the west to the Adirondacks, while on the east, extending north and south, are the Green Mountains.

On the tree-covered summit of the city, flanked by residential districts, stands the buildings of the University of Vermont; the business section occupies the middle terrace, and below are the railroad yards and shops, the docks and warehouses. With its broad streets and avenues regularly laid out, Burlington has the appearance of a modern city, but it is also old and, never having suffered from a great fire, it has preserved many of the gracious structures of an earlier day. So it is, that even in the business districts, at the end of a modern vista, the eye is frequently greeted with the fair dignity of a columned portico or the grace of an exquisitely proportioned spire.

From the deck of a lake steamer Burlington appears as a wooded slope at the crest of which the University's spires emerge; from the tower of the Old Mill, the oldest college building, the city is a folding carpet of elms reaching down to the broad lake and pierced only by church steeples. The affinity between the college and the lake is typified in the University of Vermont song "Champlain," perhaps the only alma mater song which is entirely an anthem of praise to the beauty of the natural setting. Possibly it was the willful provincialism of William Dean Howells which caused him to declare a sunset over the Bay of Naples as second only to a Champlain sunset seen from Burlington.



Sunset on Lake Champlain

With the atmosphere of an educational center, with more than its share of libraries, museums, art galleries, and schools; with the added advantage of open country and the lake at its very doors, Burlington nevertheless has maintained its commercial importance. Threescore manufacturing establishments with good railroad and water transportational facilities send Burlington products all over the world.

In the first constitution of the Independent State of Vermont it was set forth that a State University should be established, and hardly had the little town of Burlington begun to recognize the commercial possibilities of lake navigation, when the University of Vermont was chartered in November 1791, one of the first State colleges in the country. That was the year of Vermont's admission to the Union, and, with little else to give it, the State endowed its university with 29,000 acres of wild, forest covered land, scattered through 120 townships.

Soon Burlington began to win a place as the most important of the Champlain ports. Thereafter, through an era of more than fifty years, as grew the city, so grew the University. With the coming of the railroads in 1849, there was a pause for adjustment. The opening of new markets and speedier transportation brought renewed prosperity both to the city and to the college.

Burlington was chartered in 1763 by the Province of New Hampshire and settled in 1773. The name derives from the Burling family, large landholders in this region. The astute Ira Allen, whose family name is famous in the annals of Vermont history, had established a shipyard, building the first local vessel, the schooner "Liberty," on the Winooski River in 1772.



Burlington Waterfront c. 1880
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In the Spring of 1775, which with the outbreak of the Revolution, most of the settlers left to join Ethan Allen at Bennington. From then on practically all activity ceased, particularly after 1776, when nearly all who had not answered the first call went south with the retreat of American forces from Canada.



Parade on Upper Church Street c. 1900
© Bailey/Howe Library UVM

It was not until the close of the war in 1783 that the pioneers returned, their company augmented by the lure of a veritable promised land, with every possibility of a fine fur trade, with vast supplies of standing timber and ample water-power --- and always the lake for a waterway. Clearing the land, working from the lake front up the hill, was the first necessary task. In 1797, the town of Burlington was organized. Ethan Allen himself came back to the Onion River and passed the last years of his life in lord-of-the-manor fashion on his handsome farm north of the town.

(Continued on the other side)



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BURLINGTON

City by the Lake



Waterfront

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Near the foot of King Street was built in 1808 the steamboat "Vermont," which inaugurated steam navigation on Lake Champlain the following year, and was the second steamboat successfully operated commercially in this country. One hundred and twenty feet over all, of twenty-foot beam and of 167 tons burden, "built and fitted up at great expense for the convenient accommodation of ladies and gentlemen who wish to pass Lake Champlain with safety and dispatch," the "Vermont" set out on her first voyage from Burlington in June, 1809, John Winans in command, scheduled "to make the passage of the lake, 150 miles (to Whitehall), in the short time of twenty-four hours."

Then occurred the outbreak of hostilities with England, and in 1812 Burlington became the Vermont center of military activity.

Some four thousand troops were quartered on what is now Battery Park. From here a raiding party went out to attack St Armand, Quebec, where twenty-five of the enemy were killed or wounded, and one hundred others captured and brought back to Burlington.

The remains of a parapet can be traced along the western border of Battery Park, directly commanding the lake. Here thirteen guns had been set up, and when on June 13, 1813, three British war vessels appeared in the bay and started offensive operations, they were met with great resistance and were forced to retreat.

After the victory at Plattsburg, naval operations on the lake were discontinued and eighteen months later a treaty of peace was signed between the United States and England. Burlington's merchants resumed trade negotiations with Canada and began to develop the commerce already built up to the south. Steamboats, growing constantly more dependable, appeared in increasing numbers.

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A road was put through to Winooski Falls. Pearl Street and Colchester Avenue combine to follow the route of this early thoroughfare, but it was King Street that those interested in the beginning of commercial Burlington would seek out. At the foot of this street, where there were three or four houses comprising the village of Burlington, a crude wharf of logs was chained together and moored. Gideon King (also known as "Old Gid King"), in whose honor the street was named, was probably the first to grasp the great possibilities of commercial navigation on Lake Champlain. He urged it, he initiated it, he prospered at it, until he was known in all the lake ports and far into Canada as "Admiral of the Lake." John Jacob Astor, at this time founding the Astor fortune in the fur trade, met King, appreciated him as a man of foresight, and chose him to look after his interests.

Also, it was in a room in the sizable home King had built on Battery Street that the law was administered in the early 1790's, but the lumbermen were clearing up the middle area of the town, so that in 1798 what is now City Hall Park was dedicated to the public and the first courthouse was erected.

Meanwhile the "Admiral of the Lake" and those whom he had converted to his enthusiasm were flourishing. With Montreal and Quebec there was already a fine trade. Down the Winooski and Lamoille Rivers floated seemingly endless supplies of logs to be formed into crude rafts and towed, or sometimes sailed, to Canadian destinations. The ever-enterprising Ira Allen had built a sawmill at Winooski Falls and handier rafts of dressed lumber began to appear. Many of these carried cargoes of potash, made from the ashes of wood waste.



Sleigh on Upper Church Street c. 1880

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In 1823, the opening of the Champlain Canal connected the lake with the Hudson River. Almost at once the course of a large part of Champlain Valley commerce was changed from Canada to New York. With a way open to tidewater from Canada and the lake ports to the Atlantic Ocean, well-financed companies became interested. They built steamers, and not content with single-ship capacity, sent them out at the head of long tows of canal boats which were soon a common sight going up and down the lake.

An increasing demand for passenger accommodations created lively competition among the steamboat lines. In 1826 the Champlain Transportation Company was chartered and by 1848 it had absorbed all its rivals and was triumphantly running four steamers between St. Johns and Whitehall, two for day and two for night travel. Lake travel attained its peak during the forties, for in the last years of that decade came the railroads and a swift decline in business on the water. Boston, the nearest great city, now accessible by rail, attracted by far the larger part of the commercial trade, and Burlington, recognized as a desirable shipping point, found two railroads were in a race to be first. The Rutland railroad reached its goal December 18, 1849, and a week later on Christmas Day, its rival, the Central Vermont, was in Winooski.


The Burlington Free Press, the oldest daily paper in the State, was founded April 1, 1848, by DeWitt Clinton Clarke, as both a morning and evening paper.

Two months before Appomattox, a new era of enterprise and prosperity had begun with a division of the territory of the old town of Burlington, the larger section forming South Burlington while the smaller was incorporated as a city February 21, 1865. A new unity of civic effort was at once noticeable, and Burlington began to lose the appearance of an overgrown country town.

As the population increased, the city has lost its homogenous nature through the influx of French-Canadians, Germans, Italians, and many other races, until Burlington became the most cosmopolitan of Vermont cities.


Burlington has always faced the sunset. In the 1930's the charm and repose of the city showed an economic condition that was far removed from the bustling times of the years past. Champlain became almost completely dominated by the yachtsman, the fisherman and the tourist. (Text from "Vermont" A Guide to the Green Mountain State by special permission of the Vermont State Planning Board)

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