

# KILLINGTON

## Seven Mountains of Commerce and History



Top of Pico 1993- Photo taken by Paul J Tucci, Mendon, Vermont

Granted by New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth on July 7, 1761, Killington covered an area of 24, 640 acres. In 1764 Ezra Stiles surveyed the new town and promoted settlement. One attempt failed in 1774. The first successful settler was Isaiah Washington. Initial settlement started in the southeast corner of the town where the Ottauquechee River created a favorable area for agriculture. Growth occurred slowly for by 1790 only thirty-two people lived within the boundaries. The figure crept up to ninety-one residents by 1800. The northwest corner of the town also provided some suitable land. The rough terrain was not friendly for settlement as in other surrounding towns. Within the town stood five mountains with heights greater than 3,500 feet in elevation.

J.A. Graham painted a picture of the town during a journey through Vermont in 1796/97. "In the quality of these lands there is but little difference, except Killington, which is principally mountain, and designed by nature more for the habitation of beasts of prey, than for the abode of man."

Contrary to that description, industry slowly grew in the community. Jabez Bennett started the first gristmill in 1805 and the first sawmill ran between 1808 and 1810. Other than agriculture, timber proved the largest commodity with sawmills taking advantage of the town's bountiful waterpower. However, by the 1880s, timber became scarce and the mills ceased operations.

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Killington changed in 1800 when settlers agreed to switch the town's name to that of one of the original proprietors, Colonel Benjamin Sherburne. It gained more acreage when the 3,000 acres known as Parker's Gore was annexed in 1822.

During the 19th Century, Killington's population never boomed. However, the town's center of attraction, Killington Peak, introduced tourists to the region.

The state's second highest mountain at 4,235 feet, its central location proved convenient to sightseers. By 1859 newspapers printed accounts of people hiking to Killington's top. A year later, a simple cabin was constructed below the summit for summer usage. Soon a carriage road stretched to the crest and visitation continued to increase, necessitating better facilities. To meet this need, the Killington House opened in 1880 a hundred yards below the peak.

The Killington House attracted visitors from far and wide. On July 16, 1882, the noted English poet Oscar Wilde spent the evening. In the hotel's register he penned this ditty:

*Kind reader, if you ever come  
In sight of old Mt. Killington,  
Leave business, pleasure, home and friends,  
Leave, if you must, whatever lends  
In life's dull scenes a pleasant glow  
Not always found so far below.  
Go up the mountain rough and high  
There glories shine eternally.  
On all sides grandeur meets the eye,  
'N eath sunshine or a cloudy sky.*

Others visitors had their experiences published in local papers and the hotel business boomed for nearly twenty-five years. Changes in transportation technology started a decline in business and by 1910, the landmark closed, eventually succumbing to weather, vandalism and fire.

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On a fall day in 1763, the Reverend Samuel Peters and a party of other Connecticut men trekked to the summit of a mountain in what then people called the New Hampshire Grants. Period maps referred to the dominant height as Mount Pisgah. Upon reaching the summit the view was outstanding on this clear day. According to Peters, "it provided a clear sight of Lake Champlain to the west, and the Connecticut River to the east, and overlooked all the trees and hills in the vast wilderness at the north and south."

So struck by this 360 degree panorama, Peters pulled out a bottle of spirits, poured some of the contents onto a rock and christened this wilderness. He presented it as "Verd Mont," a "new name worthy of the Athenians and ancient Spartans . . . in token that her mountains and hills shall ever be green and shall never die." Verd Mont—French for Green Mountains. Fourteen years later, with the dropping of one letter, the region known as the New Hampshire Grants, gained a new name, Vermont.

Vermont has remained since that day in 1777, but Mount Pisgah underwent a name change. The mountain gained the same name of the town it dominated—Killington. Known first as Mount Killington, people accept it now as Killington Peak.

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Meanwhile, the mountaintop property switched owners, from hotel owner M.E. Wheeler to Vermont Marble magnate Mortimer Proctor, who then donated the property to Vermont in 1938. Proctor appreciated the view from the summit believing, "From no spot in the state, I believe, can one obtain a clearer conception of the Green Mountain range. . . A sunrise and sunset from this peak are far too grand and superb for any amateur's pen." The marble company also owned over 3,000 acres surrounding the peak. The firm sold this parcel to the state of Vermont in 1945. The acquisition permitted Perry Merrill, State Commissioner of Forests and Parks, to pursue interested parties to consider the mountain for skiing.

Preston Leete Smith of Connecticut undertook the challenge. He met with Merrill and explained his plans to develop the area. The Commissioner approved and the project commenced on leased state land.

After four years of planning, financing and hard work, Killington Ski Area opened on December 13, 1958. Cars drove up the newly completed access road from Route 4 and saw a Civilian Conservation Corps hut converted into a base lodge, a renovated chicken coop served as a ticket booth, and an eight hole outhouse

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was the bathroom facility. Still, two Poma lifts carried skiers up Snowdon Peak. Workers had seven trails ready that day: Bunny Buster, East Glade, Killink, Mouse Run, Rim Run, West Glade and the Novice Slope. From that successful day in 1958, a giant grew.

With more skiers pouring into the new area, it was natural that associated businesses would appear. When Bigelow's Lodge opened on December 31, 1959, it featured dorm-style accommodations for fifty-five skiers. Putting faith in skiers coming to try the new slopes, the Basin Ski Shop started selling equipment in 1958. Several years later, Bill Radaker converted an old barn into Bill's Country Store at the intersection of Routes 4 and 100 and the Access Road. In his view, "location meant everything."

Now Killington encompasses seven mountains. After Snowdon had the first skiers, men and machines carved out additional trails and erected more lifts. First Killington Peak in 1960, then Rams Head Mountain in 1962, followed by Skye Peak (1969), Bear Mountain (1979), and Sunrise Mountain (1982). Killington purchased Pico Peak

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in December 1997, redesignated it Pico Mountain, making it the area's seventh mountain and bringing along its venerable history of being a ski mountain since 1937. The area has a vertical drop of 3,175 feet, greatest in New England and tenth in the United States. As the ski area has grown, so have the amenities. Townhouses and condominium grace the slopes, hotels, inns, restaurants and shops line portions of the Access Road and adjacent highways.

Since 1937, the Long Trail and Appalachian Trails have been a part of Killington. A shared path from the Massachusetts border, the Appalachian Trail veers to the east just north of Sherburne Pass while the Long Trail continues northwards.

In 1999, Sherburne evolved again. Townspeople voted to change the town name back to what it stated on the original charter—Killington. The Vermont legislature approved the alteration, but memories of Colonel Sherburne's legacy still exist in the town: Sherburne Elementary School, Sherburne Fire Department, Sherburne Library and most prominently, Sherburne Pass.

Killington—where mountainous terrain proved a boon for the economy.

Text edited by Don Wickman, October 18, 2005



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