

# The Gods of the Hills -- and the Occasional Valley

## *How We Got Religion*

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# **The Gods of the Hills – and the Occasional Valley**

## ***How We Got Religion***

Amariah Chandler and Benjamin Wait were about as different as two men could be.

Chandler was a young man who lived simply and loved only two things in life as much as his family: going barefoot and serving his God. Wait, a retired general and veteran of dozens of military battles, loved his family, too, but was a religious backslider who'd long since stopped attending church. If he served anything, it was the town he had hacked out of the wilderness in a Vermont valley where no white man had ever lived.

Chandler was 28, married with a young family; Wait was 74, his family raised and settled on the land around him. Chandler was idealistic, filled with fervor and hope. Wait had seen, and survived, some of the worst things man could do to man – including his first battle at age 18 when nearly a thousand men in his regiment were slaughtered in the French and Indian War to an enemy who only lost twenty-three men.

Chandler ministered to the souls of man; Wait had spent his life saving their skins.

They became friends through what Wait would probably have labeled a lucky break and Chandler would have called fate. Religion was the coinage of their friendship, just as it was one of the basic building blocks of life in pioneer Vermont. "Vermont," says one historian, was "a particularly spiritual place."

Despite that, Waitsfield's own religious future was clearly imperiled in 1810 when Chandler mounted the thirteen steps that led up to his pulpit

in the town's first church high on the town Common. Could Chandler reunite a congregation torn apart by anger, short of money, and without clear leadership? Could he rebuild a congregation that had dwindled to nothing and that was living in what church observers called its "present unhappy difficulties"? Could he bring the town's leading citizen back into the fold?

Chandler and Wait's story, and the story of many others like them scattered around the four towns of the Mad River Valley, helps explain how religion became the backdrop for the hopes of immigrants from as nearby as New England and French Canada and as far away as Europe. It describes how a belief in God set the tone for a state that more than two hundred years later celebrates itself as a unique place in the American landscape.

And, like many things in Vermont, it begins with a bunch of people who looked at life just a little differently.

### **The Two Unmentionables**

Religion and politics may be the two unmentionables at some family dinner tables, but Vermonters have never been ones to shy away from a good fight.

Their state was built on the revolutionary spirit. Their politics have, even before Vermont became a state in 1791, been wide-flung and rich.

And their religion? Theirs was the state that hosted a "Convention for Moral Lunatics" in 1858; was the birthplace of the two men who formed the



Mormon church; was the place where Freewill Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Quakers, Episcopalians, Seventh Day Adventists, and Universalists all rose despite an almost mandated “state church.” Theirs was the state where the first Catholic mass was held on American soil, and a state that became and remains heavily Catholic, despite America’s longstanding trend toward Protestantism.

Theirs was the state that spawned the occasional unusual sect like the “Dorrities,” strict vegetarians who wouldn’t wear leather shoes or the furs of animals and whose pacifist leader was knocked to the floor by a member of the congregation while he was preaching about his God-given invincibility. It was also the state that hosted the “Holy Rollers” of Woodstock and Hardwick, people who rolled in the dirt to make themselves holy, attracted crowds of people in 1837, and were arrested for making a disturbance on the Sabbath Day.

Theirs was the second of nine states in the new United States to establish some form of separation between church and government – despite being settled almost exclusively by descendants of the Puritans, who put God into everything and demanded that everyone worship the way they believed or face a little time in the stockades. Or worse.

Vermonters allowed questioners and invited revivalists. They fought over where churches should go in villages just starting to have a shape, and they often declared their independence from the largest, most prominent church in New England, the Congregational Church. When they didn’t like that state law taxed them to support and attend a certain church, they rebelled and swore in elegantly hand-written declarations in old town records that they did “not agree in religious opinion with the majority of the inhabitants of this town.”

Yet, they shared their church buildings and cemeteries with other denominations, willingly broke apart established churches to form new ones, had epic battles that left some of the most prominent leaders in the towns and villages standing outside the embrace of the church, and occasionally locked up church members who had either gotten too

carried away with their religion or who had not gotten carried away quite enough.

In the Mad River Valley alone in the first half of the 1800s, just a few years after the settlement of the valley's four major villages, there were Catholics worshiping in Moretown, Quakers in Fayston, Congregationalists in Waitsfield, and Methodists in Warren. Where there were no formal churches, there were consecrated burial grounds – three of them alone in Fayston, which never built a church – religious societies, and itinerant preachers traveling into towns to hold services in barns, in rocky fields or in the homes of the welcoming and the curious.

By the time Vermont became a part of the United States in 1791, its citizens had already built about one hundred churches. A few decades later, Vermonters entered what historian Randolph Roth calls an Age of Reform that brought “thousands of young and old...dedicated to ushering in Christ's thousand year reign of peace on earth.” During the 1830s, Vermont became the most churchgoing people in the Protestant world, with eighty percent of the population attending church regularly. One historian declares in his book about religion in Vermont, “Every single, solitary or associated Vermonter has practiced some kind of religion, from Day One as the ice receded.”

### **Legislated Spirituality**

Religion in pioneer days was dictated by law and regimented by society. Vermont's approach to religion was a blend of repression tempered by a strong independent streak – the yin and yang of its own state motto, Unity and Freedom.

The state's leaders took their religion seriously, and expected their citizens to do the same. A convention of leaders of the Republic of Vermont, two years before Vermont's admission to statehood, includes a proclamation recommending “a day of fasting and prayer that may humble our hearts before God.” The preamble of Vermont's original constitution described “the goodness of the greater governor of the

Universe,” set aside land in every chartered town for a place for a minister to live, and ordered the citizens to support with taxes the church the town leaders chose to make the official denomination. The second session of the General Assembly, held in 1779, prohibited any labor, game, play or recreation on Sunday or Fast Day or on Thanksgiving, with a hefty financial penalty.

Other laws followed: Disturb “divine worship” and you could get whipped on your naked back; stay outside a worship service and expect to be put in stocks; swear or curse or blasphemy in the name of God and spend more time in the stocks. Even taking a walk the night before the Sabbath services or the evening afterwards could get you in trouble.

All these were enforced by a Grand juryman, a “tithingman,” or constables who were allowed to “inspect the behavior of all persons on the Sabbath,” and received an allowance of six shillings a day for time spent in the prosecution of the acts. The legislators let the town fathers decide which would be the official village religion, but then ordered every town member to support the meetinghouses that were often the original churches, and the clergy hired to preach in them.

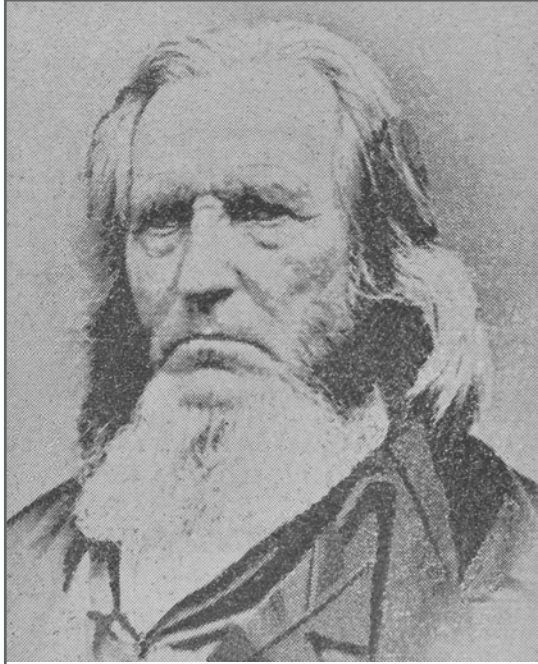
At the same time, they gave Vermonters an out: if you didn’t agree with the religion your town supported, you could claim membership in another church, and avoid the taxes; in Waitsfield, men with names like Samuels, Tewksbury, and Jones all claimed that right in 1804.

### **The Barefoot Preacher**

Amariah Chandler was brought into this religious stew in 1787 when he was five years old and his parents moved to Shelburne, VT. He was born in Deerfield, Massachusetts, the youngest child of a man who ran a store and was keeper of a river ferry. His father had served in the military during the French and Indian War and transfixed Amariah with stories of the hardship and suffering of the early settlers and soldiers. Although he was a delicate child, Amariah became convinced he’d need to “toughen up” if he was to withstand what he presumed would be a life of hard times. He began to dress lightly, sleep on the

floor, in barns, or even on the ground, go barefoot until the ground froze, and work at hard manual labor.

As it turned out, Chandler wasn't meant to be a soldier when he grew up. Instead, he turned down an appointment to West Point and dedicated himself to the ministry. For two years he studied with Dr. Theophilus Packard of Shelburne, who would later help organize Amherst College and was one of the prominent thinkers of the era.



*Amariah Chandler*

In 1805, he tied all his worldly goods into a handkerchief and walked into Burlington to attend the University of Vermont, then called the University of the Green Mountains. His choice of footwear – none – befuddled his classmates at the university, as it would people for the rest of his life. On one of his first days at the university, he'd shown up barefoot. When the class voted that all students must have footwear, Chandler brought his in a bag. When the class voted that all students must have footwear *on their feet*, he taped his shoes to the top of his feet. After a friendly professor took him aside, he wore the shoes. Years later, he preached the election sermon before the General Assembly of Vermont, arriving at his hotel in Montpelier barefoot, where he was made the butt of many jokes – until people heard him preach the next day. "I guess I was just born barefoot," he once said with the wry sense of humor for which he became known.



He spent two years at the university, graduating in 1807, and was ordained into the Congregational Church in 1808. With the help of friends, he and his young wife, Abigail, found their way to Waitsfield, where he was confirmed as the second full-time minister in the town and the first one to occupy a new church just completed on the town Common.

Religious services had been conducted in Waitsfield almost from the founding of the town. A deacon from the Shelburne Congregational Church – the one Chandler, himself, may have attended – organized Sunday services as early as 1793. Itinerant missionaries preached at least a few times in 1794, according to town records, holding services in various barns and homes.

Town leaders formed the Congregational Church of Waitsfield in 1796, the first church of any denomination organized within Washington County. A town committee was immediately authorized to “lay out a Meeting House...and other Public Yard.” Benjamin Wait and William Joiner, a farmer who later bought a sawmill built by General Wait, were authorized to find a preacher and offer him twelve pounds of wheat.

When they weren’t successful at either initiative – controversy over location stymied town and church leaders for years – they continued using the traveling preachers. These men were missionaries, passionate in their beliefs and almost always well read and well educated, bringing in both the word of God and the word of the outside world. Although they only stayed a few days or a few weeks at a time, they often made strong connections with the villagers.

They were people like Elija Lyman, who was so deeply loved by those he served that they called him by the fond name of Father Lyman. He had been converted to religion early in life and had both attended and taught at Dartmouth College and became a pastor at the Congregational Church in Brookfield, where he spent thirty-nine years.

Or Jedediah Bushnell, who came to the church after a life of hardship: his father died when he was seven, he was apprenticed to a tanner and shoemaker at 16, and he started his own business when he was twenty-one with little more than “half a set of shoe tools and not leather



enough to make two pairs of shoes,” as a fellow preacher described him. He experienced a religious epiphany when he was twenty-four, entered Williams College, and became known during his missionary years as having “an unusual share of common sense and unconscious power to bring the naked truth to bear on the conscience.”

Bushnell spent several weeks in Waitsfield in the winter of 1799-1800, and his successful preaching doubled the membership of the church and inspired town leaders to form the Congregational Society of the Town of Waitsfield to handle all financial matters of the church and to try to again hire a full-time minister. Although their first effort in 1796 failed, this time they got luckier, hiring William Salisbury, who had already been preaching in Waitsfield for weeks.

Salisbury was a native of Braintree, Massachusetts, a graduate of Harvard College, and a man who knew his own worth. He was offered the full-time position as town minister for \$166.66 a year, half to be paid in produce. Since he would be the first “settled” minister, he was also given a piece of land set aside in every town for that purpose. Salisbury tried to negotiate himself into a better deal, asking among other things that his first year’s salary be reduced to \$100 in return for having ten acres of land cleared, but he was by and large unsuccessful.

Salisbury, like other traveling ministers, preached in the homes and barns of various town residents. Which barn and what home seems to have been the source of irritation for all – the services moved from Wait’s barn to other homes on a regular basis, then back to his barn. From town records, it seems that either all or none wanted the services on their property. The location never seemed quite perfect: More convenient for Wait’s family? For Salah Smith’s family? For Ezra Jones’ family? For the Joslins?

It was the same debate that plagued town leaders trying to decide where to put the first church. The town Common had been established high on Joslin Hill. It was the usual practice to locate the commons on hills, either for protection or for the sweeping vistas. As the town began to grow, however, Wait became convinced the location of the church

should be closer to the current town center, where the sawmills were being located, and more convenient to nearby Fayston, whose settlers had close ties to Waitsfield. The argument over location was acrimonious and continuous.

Town leaders had already tried to build a permanent church in 1797. That year, town leaders attempted to join with the Northeast School District to build a combination meetinghouse and schoolhouse on the Common. They hired Salah Smith as the contractor, and he erected a frame for the new building. When the school district withdrew and the plan collapsed, the town refused to pay Smith for the work he'd done.

Now, with a settled minister, the town turned its attention again to building a proper church. They got as far as sketching out the pews – which in those days were sold to families to help support the church – and planning for a building that was to be 54 feet by 46 feet, and to be located on the Common.

Although Wait bought seven pews, at a cost of \$628, it was clear he was agitated by the continuing feud over the location of the church. Additionally, he later acknowledged that he had long since “been in a state of great backsliding” in his religious practice; now, his disagreement over location of the church grew into a full-fledged feud. He withdrew from the Congregational Society altogether after the town voted 40 to 18 to put it on the Common.

Finally, in 1807, ten years after they'd first started talking about building a meetinghouse for church services, a plain, unpainted two story building – at first minus a steeple until some pew owners kicked in the money to build it – was erected a little to the



southeast of the cemetery on the Common. (Since that period, the current cemetery has grown to encompass the spot where the church existed.) The church took two years to construct, and it wasn't until four days before Christmas in 1809 that it was dedicated.

The pews were high and straight, with spindle-work around the top of all four sides. The pulpit stood at the rear end of the building, elevated up a flight of thirteen stairs. The young people sat in the loft, the girls on the minister's left, the boys on the right, and the singers in front. Among the deacons, who sat beneath the high pulpit, was Moses Fisk, a devout farmer who was among the first to be admitted to the Waitsfield church. Three of his sons became ministers and a daughter was a minister's wife. One son, a printer, edited and published a series of "Union Sunday School Question Books," the first of its kind in America. His sixth son, Lyman, later served forty years as a deacon in the church when his father retired; Lyman's own son, Perrin, subsequently became a minister, describing his father's coopering shop as the "neighborhood meeting-place, where...I became acquainted with the ... arguments and the leaders in the anti-slavery, second advent, and temperance questions, as well as many a local issue."

There was no heat in the church, and the women brought foot stoves filled with coals to keep their toes from freezing. Horse sheds were built on the westerly side between the meeting house and the cemetery. Church went for hours, so that the congregation adjourned to the "nooning" building to have their lunch, before going back for more preaching.

Despite the new building, the town was hardly united in its religion. Church leaders had dismissed Salisbury after only two years, following what Matt Bushnell Jones in his *History of Waitsfield* calls "a lack of harmony between the departing pastor and his flock." Many of the town's settlers protested paying taxes to support a minister and the church. General Wait, who had left the church in anger five years earlier, had not returned.

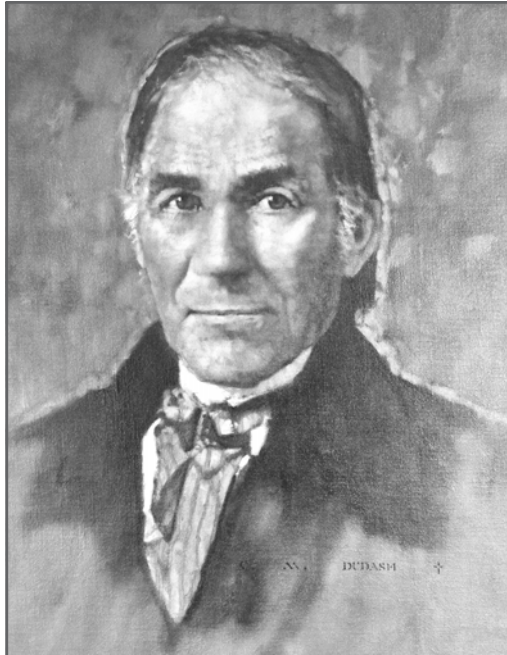
The church was clearly disintegrating.

Church and town leaders – one in the same in most cases – were so disturbed they called a general meeting and invited the women to come, the first recorded meeting where women were asked to participate. Was Waitsfield to “reinstate a preached gospel” or die?

### **Wait's Burden of Leadership**

None of this was officially of concern to General Wait – and, yet, all of it was.

Wait had not set out to conquer the wilderness at an early age when he had moved to the Mad River Valley from



*General Benjamin Wait*

his comfortable home in Windsor, like so many pioneers. He was a wealthy 53-year-old war veteran whose accomplishments as both a soldier and a statesman were considerable when he settled the town that now bears his name. He was also the epitome of the New England spirit as described by one writer, “a vigorous, bold, unforgiving, fighting race (of people), hard and stern even beyond the ordinary standard of Puritanism.”

Wait was born in Massachusetts and lived his first years in his father's inn, a popular destination for travelers and soldiers. The environment produced a family of soldiers; all seven sons served in either the French and Indian or Revolutionary wars. Wait spent thirty years fighting after his bloody introduction to battle as a teenager at Fort DuQuesne, near present-day Pittsburg, during the French and Indian War. These years were spent in danger and high adventure – running a gauntlet through two rows of young warriors armed with clubs when he was captured by Native Americans; hiding in a wine cask before becoming a

prisoner of war who was deported to France and rescued by a British warship; dressing in bear skins and attacking a village where six hundred scalps of his countrymen were found hanging on poles; most probably fighting with Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys at the first significant Revolutionary War victory for the fledgling colonial army.

Between battles, he settled in Windsor with Sarah, his nineteen-year-old wife, and became a respected member of that town during its development. He stayed there for the next twenty-two years, until 1789, when he returned to the wilderness.

Life had not been particularly easy since he settled in Waitsfield. He'd lost his wife in 1804 and one of his sons in 1807; he'd lost his church – the cornerstone of social life in such a tiny village – and because of the intertwining of religion, politics and business, he'd no doubt lost much of his standing in the community.

When the preacher and the general first met is unclear. Chandler had apparently come to Waitsfield in the summer of 1809 as a visiting minister. He made an immediate impact, as Jones describes in the *History of Waitsfield*: "From the beginning the wonderful influence of this strong man made itself manifest...dissent gave place to united effort and lack of interest became eager enthusiasm." In late October, town residents were asked to come to a meeting to express their opinions about hiring Chandler full-time. Some time after this, Wait seems to have renewed his allegiance to the church.

Chandler was deeply loved by his congregation and admired for his wit. Once told to take a little tablespoonful of alcoholic spirits every day to boost his energy, he told his physician he'd had to stop "when I found myself hunting for the biggest spoon in the house." Another time, when asked if there was much vital piety in his parish, he'd replied, "Not enough to boast of."

He spent twenty years in the pulpit at Waitsfield, quadrupling the congregation. He buried dozens of people in the cemetery next to the plain, unpainted church he'd accepted as his first religious home, and in the two other cemeteries that grew up in Waitsfield. Yet it is the

passage he wrote in the church records in 1822 upon the death of his friend, General Wait, that seemed filled with both joys and tears:

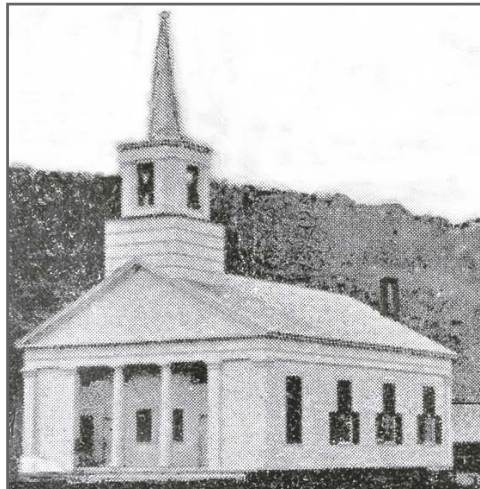
*“June 28, 1822, General Benjamin Wait from whom the town was named. . . . In early life he made a profession of religion of Christ. But for many years was in a state of great backsliding. About ten years before his death his graces seemed to revive. His remaining years he lived lamenting his former lukewarmness, and died in the joyful hope and expectation of a happy resurrection through the abounding mercy of the Great Redeemer.”*

Wait was 86 years and four months when he died. He had known Amariah Chandler just a little more than ten of those years – the years in which he’d reclaimed his “joyful hope.”

Chandler himself left Waitsfield and its church in 1829, when he felt his usefulness there had ended. He then spent thirty-five years as a pastor in the Greenfield Congregational church, visiting Waitsfield at least once when he preached and was greeted as “their good minister” and with a “warm love,” according to a diary kept by his wife. No other minister was to remain in the church on the Common longer than a few years at a time after Chandler left, or even in the other two churches the Congregationalists built in Waitsfield, one on Mill Hill and one in the Village, currently the Waitsfield United Church of Christ.

### **The Valley Adopts Other Beliefs**

Although the Waitsfield Congregational Church was the first church in Washington County and would remain the largest one for years, Vermonters seemed fascinated by all sorts of religions.



*Second Congregational Church on Mill Hill built in 1833. “Location never proved convenient or satisfying”. It was demolished and used in the construction of the village church.*



Chandler left Waitsfield after a growing number of town leaders began, as Jones describes it, “to embrace more liberal theological views” than those of the orthodox church. After he left – in great part because of his belief that he was being challenged by this new evangelical liberalism – eighty of his congregation signed as members of the Universalist Society.

The Universalists’ denomination originated in America during a religious revival called the New Light Stir which took place in New England during the revolutionary period and was a revolt against

Calvinism. It was brought to Vermont by traveling ministers who preached religious tolerance and political rights. The Universalist doctrines provoked strong reactions from the Calvinists who saw them as an invitation to moral decay and damnation as well as a challenge to the established order.

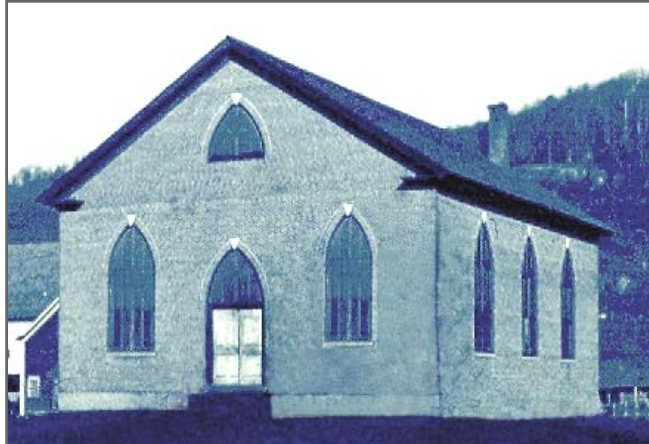
Universalism swept through free-thinking Vermonters, many of whom had for years grumbled about the taxes they were forced to pay to support churches worshipping in ways they didn’t accept, despite reforms that had allowed them tax relief. At first, the Universalists’ meetings were held in private homes, schoolhouses or churches willing to share their sanctuaries. In Waitsfield, services were held for years in the home of Roderick Richardson, a prominent businessman who was instrumental in erecting mills in the village. Eventually, the Universalists – who were also instrumental in helping start a meetinghouse in Warren — erected a new, brick meetinghouse in Waitsfield village. (The building was eventually turned over to the local lodge of Odd Fellows.)



*Third Congregational Church built in 1875 at a cost of \$8,600.*



Interest in Universalism in Waitsfield peaked in 1864, when there were eighty-two members, and then their numbers began to decline. Yet, other congregations were making their mark around the Valley.



The conversion of two brothers who became disgruntled with the

*Union Meeting House for the Universalists, Baptists and Episcopalians, a brick meeting house 54 x 42 feet in size, built at a total cost of \$1,800 in 1837. The price of each pew was fixed at \$28.00.*

Congregational church brought a new type of religion to Vermont, and left its mark on Washington County in another, more personal, way.

John and Aaron Buzzell's religion, the Freewill Baptist Denomination, had emigrated from England, but their numbers grew, particularly in rural areas, because of resentment against the more strict Calvinist's conception of the Christian way of life – what one man who quit the Congregational church in disgust called the “thorough-going, rigid and bigoted” faith.

The Freewill Baptists were revivalists, people who believed you should be brought to God by strong preaching and relentless evangelism. They also believed in open communion, that anyone of any faith could take communion in their church.

Two of those who heard the message, and carried it directly into Vermont, were brothers John and Aaron Buzzell of New Hampshire. Together, the two brothers formed the Freewill Baptist Denomination in 1793 that grew to forty-nine churches with 2,445 members. John was the leader of the denomination until 1801, noted for both the vigor of his sermons and their length – a famous one in Vershire lasted two

and three-fourths hours. Later, Aaron took over from John, remaining as head of the denomination until 1837.

The beautiful Warren United Church, on the hill above the tiny village, was built as a meetinghouse for four denominations in 1838, and was reorganized in 1885 by uniting Freewill Baptists, Methodists and Congregationalists.

Twenty-two people joined the newly organized church. Among those members was John Buzzell, great grandfather of Eleanor Farr Haskin, whose family has owned and run Waitsfield and Champlain Valley Telecom for more than a century. Farr's mother, Eunice Buzzell Farr, was one of six brothers and sisters who lived with their parents on a farm on what is now Sugarbush Access Road. They were known at the church in Warren as the "singing Buzzell family.

They also established a congregation in



*East Warren Four Corners, the first settlement of Warren, showing the church built in 1839 with horse shed and school.*



*In 1928 the Warren Meeting House Society (Methodist, Congregational and Baptist) built this edifice in the village, now the Warren United Church.*

Fayston in 1870, when a Freewill Baptist church was formed with fifteen practicing members.

By far the largest denomination after the Congregationalists were the Methodists. Vermonters had first heard the word as it was interpreted by the Methodists in the late 1700s, when Jesse Lee, a pioneer itinerant Methodist minister, preached his first sermon in Barre. By 1801, there were ten Methodist circuits in Vermont, with eleven preachers and 1,044 members in the state. The religion had proven popular in all four Valley towns, and the Moretown Circuit voted in 1824 to provide a parsonage in Waitsfield for its preachers, then a church and a cemetery. As the town grew, the Methodists built a second church, which burned down in 1894, and then a third church – clearly, eager to keep their congregation strong.

In Warren, religious meetings were held in the homes of Joseph Eldridge and James Richardson until a Methodist Church was built on Old Stage Coach Road (now the Roxbury Mountain Road) in 1833. The lumber for the beams was drawn by oxcart from Ripton, and the original box pews, which seated fifty people, came from Middlebury. The church was used for almost one hundred years, until it was abandoned and left to fall into ruin, and a new meetinghouse was constructed on the town Common, to be shared by the four congregations.

The first settled minister in it was Nathaniel Stearns, paid \$100 a year in grain, who had been instrumental in getting the Methodist parsonage constructed in Waitsfield. Because state law gave a piece of property to the first church with a full-time minister, and because the Warren meetinghouse had been built by four denominations, the Methodists met in the middle of the night to install Stearns and beat out the other congregations. History does not record how the other denominations felt about this.

Other Methodist churches were built in both South Duxbury and Moretown. Yet it was also in Moretown where the most revolutionary change in religion in both Vermont and the Valley was taking place, one that would almost two hundred years later make Catholicism the number one religion in the state.

## The French and Irish Influence

It began with the French Canadians.

Small groups or individuals of French Canadian descent had been settling in the United States since the major periods of the wilderness exploration in the seventeenth century. However, most Franco-American settlements were established from the 1860s to the 1880s, with estimates as high as 600,000. Vermont, because of its location, was a favorite stopping spot, and some areas of Vermont had high numbers of French-Canadian Americans as early as 1815.

The Canadians were young, many with large families, and handicapped by the dismal economic conditions of their own country and the discrimination they often faced because of their language and their religion. The large number who crossed the border in the mid 1800s were drawn by work in the textile mills and the logging industry; later, the granite quarries of Barre and other towns where small scale industries were creating a mini industrial revolution in the state.

By 1850, about 20,000 French Canadians had settled in the New England area, with the majority living in northern Vermont. They sometimes



*Antique French Canadian flag.*

made their way to the villages of the Valley, where their names – LaBelle, LaMorder, Tremblay, Viens, Vasseur, Lareau, LaRock – became forever a part of the history of the community.

They were Catholics who had relocated to a country that had all but been founded to give Protestants freedom of religion, and whose own religion wasn't ready for them. Until 1808, there was only one Catholic diocese to serve all of the United States east of the Mississippi River (with the exception of Florida, still under Spanish sovereignty). Four new dioceses were formed that year, including the Diocese of Boston.

The church, hampered by language and location issues, more or less ignored the Catholics in Vermont. It wasn't until the 1820s that the bishop of Boston made the first of two trips to Vermont. After that, he began to send itinerant priests into the state, circuit riders who hunted out, then tended to, parishioners on an irregular schedule. The situation was hardly ideal. Without priests, too many Catholics were being married by justices of the peace, and many drifted away from the Church altogether. Historian Vincent Edward Feeney tells the story of one Catholic who, under the instruction of a powerful Congregational minister in South Hero, Vermont – a man who was said to have preached a lifetime without pay and yet died the richest man in his county – converted and became a prominent Congregational pastor.

By the time the diocese began to pay attention, it was faced with another situation, this one of the Irish persuasion.

The Irish had been immigrating to the Americas in small numbers even before the Potato Famine of the 1840s. Historian Feeney quotes a visit in 1832 by writer Nathaniel Hawthorne to the town of Burlington – where nothing impressed him more than “the great number of Irish emigrants” he saw “lounging” around the wharves and “swarming in huts...near the lake.” Between 1815 and 1844, before the six-year Potato Famine drove one million out of their homeland, somewhere between 800,000 to one million other Irish had already made their way to the New World.

Because it was cheaper to get to the New World by landing in Canada, the Irish booked passage to the Maritime provinces, Quebec City, and Montreal. Many of them didn't get any further than Lower Canada. But many of the Irish immigrants used their Canadian landing as the first step in a journey to the United States. Unlike the arduous journey from Ireland to Canada, the trip from Canada to America – and, most specifically, to Burlington – was an easy steamboat trip or a bit longer trip by wagon and foot across the Vermont border and into America.

By 1850, almost at the end of the famine, the Irish were the largest foreign-born group in Vermont, numbering 15,377. Although many had come in through Burlington, they'd often and quickly moved inland, with large Irish settlements in the railroad towns of Bellows Falls, Northfield, Rutland, and St. Albans. Craving both work and land, they'd found their ways to places like Moretown, drawn there by the logging and the farming.



*Irish immigrants in search of a better future.*

Samuel McLaughlin had followed the path from Ireland to

Montreal, then Burlington. The last leg of his trip involved a foot hike through Huntington Gap to his final destination in the Valley. He stayed a year or two before retuning to Ireland and bringing back nine family members. They settled on a farm in Waitsfield, and then bought land in South Fayston, high on a knoll above Waitsfield village.

With pockets of Irish now almost everywhere in Vermont, and the French Canadians still streaming into Vermont and other areas in New England, the Catholic Diocese of Boston was hard pressed to keep up.

The bishop needed a priest who could take charge of Vermont. The perfect candidate was one who could speak English, Gaelic, the official language of Ireland, and, in a pinch, a bit of French. The priest needed to be energetic, since he would need to move in and out of pockets all over the mountains of Vermont. And he would need to be passionate about his religion, willing to face discrimination, threats and the danger of real bodily harm.



The old line Vermonters – descendants of Brits, born into Protestantism, fighters for freedom – distrusted these new, funny-speaking residents, in great part because of their religion. They believed the allegiance to the Pope meant the allegiance to a foreign power, and they had already fought more than one foreign power to create first their nation, then their state. As early as the 1830s, there were complaints about the Irish, who were “elbow(ing) the native citizens out of work.” A few years later, a tavern keeper swore, “The Irish will soon have five to one against us.” By the mid 1850s, more than one hundred members of the Vermont House represented the Know-Nothingism, an anti-foreign sentiment pledged to end the spread of Catholicism.

None of this kept the Irish from coming. It only made it harder for the priests in charge to keep up.

### **“Upon This Rock”**

The Bishop of Boston was something of a desperate man when he met Father Jeremiah O’Callaghan in 1829.

So was O’Callaghan.

The Rev. O’Callaghan was fifty years old, Gaelic-speaking, and one of seventeen children of a poor family from County Cork in Ireland. He was ordained a priest in 1805 and had ministered to a church in Cork for fourteen years. As he watched the economic problems of his country grow, he became convinced it was because the people were having to borrow money and pay interest. He believed all money lending was a form of usury – the practice of charging exorbitant interest rates – and was contrary to the teachings of the Bible. He became so radical in his beliefs that he refused the last rites to a dying man unless he promised to return his “ill-begotten” profits.

O’Callaghan was dismissed from the diocese for his actions and his views. For ten years, he wandered from diocese to diocese looking for a posting – Italy, back to Cork, North America. Bishops, desperate for priests in the New World, continually rejected him. He was living on



alms from other priests, sick and homeless when he returned to New York one more time, hoping that a new bishop there would find him a position. It was when he'd been turned down again, and was preparing to leave New York, that Bishop Benedict Fenwick chanced to meet him and name him Vermont's first full-time priest.

That summer, O'Callaghan made his way to Burlington, which was to be the center of his church mission. Along the way, he said mass wherever he happened upon Catholics, describing them as "sheep without shepherds, scattered through the woods and villages, amidst the wolves in sheep's clothing."

He reported back to Boston that in Burlington alone there were a thousand Catholics. And, "amidst fanatics of all creeds...enticing them by bribery and menaces..." there were eight other congregations, varying from ten to one hundred members, from twenty to thirty miles apart. "I was hardly able to visit them all in two months."

O'Callaghan was an energetic, ambitious priest. At the same time, he had not left behind his penchant for promoting controversy. The historian Feeney reports that one bishop who worked with O'Callaghan in the 1840s and 1850s privately remarked that many churchmen "considered (O'Callaghan) crazy. In fact, he was."

He got into feuds with Protestant clergy, convinced they were trying to convert his Irish and French-Canadian Catholics, preaching against the "clouds of false teachers rushing out of their lurking places" to wage war on his faithful. While fighting off the Protestants, he raised money and oversaw the construction in Burlington of the first Catholic church built in Vermont, and rebuilt it when it burned in 1838. (Today, it is the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.) Although the editor of the *Burlington Free Press* labeled him a "shatter-brained disorganizer," and although his own bishop recognized that O'Callaghan had a tendency to alienate the French Canadians in his parish, he spent twenty-four years in Vermont, earning the nickname "The Apostle of Vermont." His flock grew larger each of those years; by 1853, there were 20,000 Catholics in Vermont.

He was for years the lone Catholic priest in Vermont, traveling by stagecoach, horse and buggy, and horseback to hold masses wherever



Father Bernard Bourgeois at the “altar rock”.

he landed. He was everywhere – in Rutland, Wallingford, Pittsfield, Vergennes. These were towns without churches where mass was celebrated in the homes of the Irish and French Canadians.

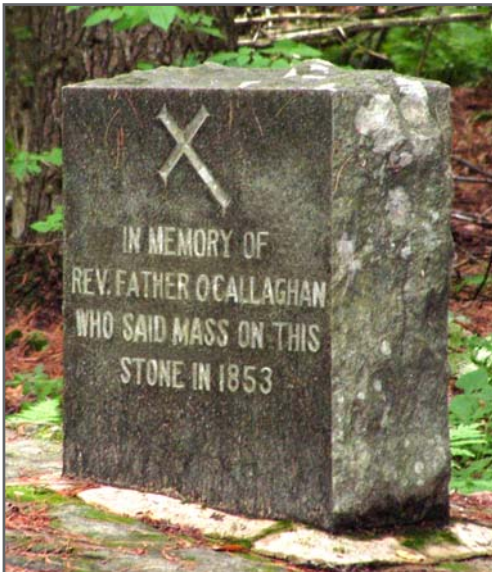
He celebrated the first mass in Waterbury in 1847 for Irish laborers constructing the Central Vermont Railroad that

connected Burlington to Montpelier and Windsor.

It would be 1853 before he made his way to a pasture in Moretown, where a flat rock served as an altar and the Vermont sky as a sanctuary.

### **Tolerance and Diversity in Moretown**

By the late 1830s, a dozen or so Irish families lived in Moretown, making up about four to five percent of the population – the Goss family and the Flanagans, the Lees



Photos courtesy of the Vermont Catholic Tribune.



and Lynches, Costellos and Cashmans, Keltys and Kerins, Devines and Donahues, McCormicks and Murphys.

Most of them made their homes on South Hill, which quickly became known as “Paddy Hill.” When the railroad arrived in nearby Northfield in the late 1840s, even more Irish moved to Paddy Hill. Moretown became a central point for the Catholic population of South Duxbury, Fayston, Waitsfield and Warren, each of which had growing Irish communities. In nearby Fayston, one in every three families in Fayston in the 1860 census were Irish, or a total of thirty-one percent of the 152 households.

They were ambitious and eager to become involved in town affairs – one, John B. Thompson, became a local teacher, superintendent of schools and finally a state representative. Among them were also people like Elias and Elizabeth Hoffman who came from County Kerry, lived for a time in Fayston and then bought 118 acres in adjacent Duxbury. Today, a genealogical search done by a

family member shows they have descendents living nearly all over the United States.

Most of these families had escaped the grinding poverty of Ireland. Many of them arrived in Vermont with limited skills and in desperate situations. They had most certainly faced some religious persecution. As in Moretown, they lived amid Protestant families who continued to worship in their own way. The early settlers of Moretown had organized a Congregational Church in the early 1800s and held meetings in a log schoolhouse. Between 1836 and 1840 – the same time that the Irish were starting to move to Moretown – the membership dwindled so much that it merged with the Congregational Church in South Duxbury.



United Methodist Church  
in Moretown.

A preacher, Joshua Luce, who came from Pittsfield, Massachusetts, settled in Moretown in 1809 and started a Methodist class within the so-called Barre Circuit. Several other ministers held services in various homes or locations until the first Methodist Church was built on Moretown Common in 1832, not far from Paddy Hill. Twenty years later, the present Moretown Methodist Church was constructed in the village, with ministers like Joshua Gill, a young family man who wrote to his parents in 1861 of “the pleasant village and very pleasant parsonage...nice church edifice, and quite a large society” he found in Moretown.

“Religion is at a discount, but I hope to see the church quickened and sinners saved,” he added. He finished the letter with a bit of a flourish, describing Moretown as “a democratic town and as a consequence, there is some rum and a good deal of worldliness.”

Strangely, Gill states in his letter that there was “no other meeting” in the town, ignoring a goodly number of the town’s residents: the Irish Catholics.



Despite outside influences, the Irish clung to their families and their beliefs, eager to build churches to help replicate the best of the lives they'd left behind.

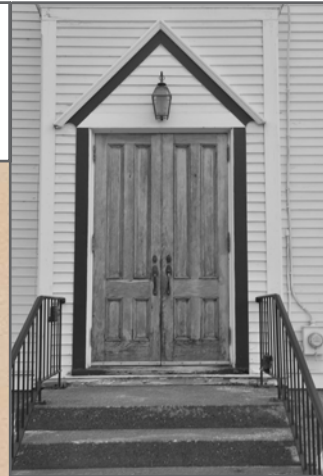
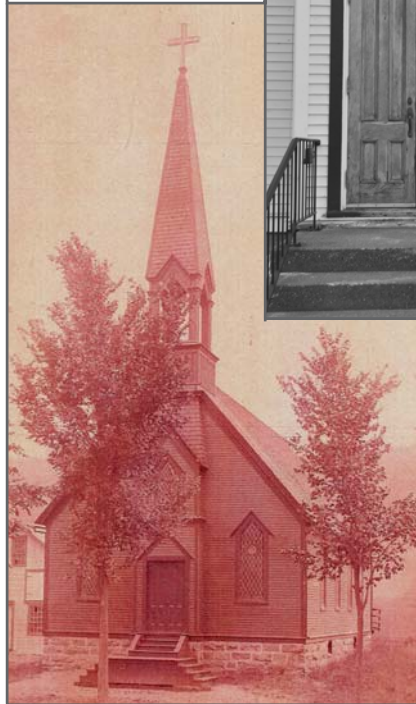
Moretown records show that one acre of land for a church and cemetery on Moretown Common was donated in 1841 by three men, including an army colonel named J.P. Miller of Montpelier, Francis "Frank" Lee and Peter Lee. It took until 1857 for Moretown and Irish neighbors in other communities to begin building St. Patrick's Church and another year for it to be completed.

St. Patrick's Church housed the Irish Catholics until 1882, when the present St. Patrick Church, located in the village, was built. Although the village church was new, parishioners continued to honor their past. The stained glass windows in the present church were given by or in memory of ancestors of church



*The exquisite antique stained glass windows in the sanctuary at St. Patrick's Church are from the original church on Paddy Hill.*

*St. Patrick's Church in Moretown Village.*



members such as Mary Cashman, which made a connection from Ireland to Boston to Moretown.

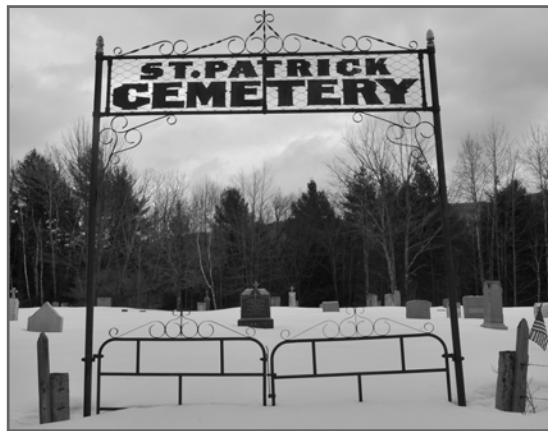
The growth of Catholicism in Vermont has made it the most widely practiced religion in the state today. Additionally, the growth of the Mad

River Valley as a major ski resort – and the arrival of a skiing priest named Father Louis Logue – led directly to the building of Our Lady of the Snows Church in Waitsfield. Logue was appointed the curate of St. Andrew Church in Waterbury in 1954 and became a regular celebrant for Sunday Mass at Saint Patrick's. He began saying mass at the basebox at the Mad River slopes that winter, and then in about 1958 offered mass in the cocktail lounge at the Sugarbush Inn after the Sugarbush Resort opened. Seeing the interest and projecting the growth, Logue began a fund drive to build Our Lady, with the land given by Philip and Fleurette Lareau and a \$50,000 gift from the estate of Jane Foley Martin as the two largest donations.

The first mass at the chapel was offered on Christmas Eve 1963. The pews had not yet been installed, and the congregation was lined up along the outside walls, moving forward en masse as Logue and the acolytes entered the sanctuary from the sacristy in what Logue later remembered as an emotional experience for him.



Our Lady of the Snows Church



### Echoes from the Past

Old cemeteries throughout the area attest to the lives of the settlers, and often tell much about the beliefs of those buried there.

The steps of the original St. Patrick's Church on the Moretown Common remain, leading to the cemetery and now marked by a black wrought iron gate. The cemetery includes the 1854 grave of Francis "Frank"



*The Rising cemetery.*

Lee, who was one of the three men to donate land for the church and cemetery. The northeast corner of the cemetery holds the remains of Irish Catholics who had worked on the railroad in Northfield and died in a diphtheria epidemic of the 1870s. The graves are unmarked, but the memories remain.

The large cemetery along the East Warren Road has graves going

back to the early 1800s, yet the Rising family chose its own burial ground across the Roxbury Mountain Road and next to the old East Warren school. The graves there, enclosed by a wrought iron fence, include the one for Amos Rising, who was appointed by legislators in 1802 to collect a land tax for roads and bridges in the town and named a constable in Warren in 1824.

Three cemeteries hold the remains of those who settled in Fayston, including the largest one, the North Fayston Cemetery. Among the dead there is Mary Folsom, daughter of John Folsom, who had tutored the children of U.S. Senator William



*Warren United Church cemetery.*



Dillingham in Washington, D.C. Dillingham sent Mary back to Fayston when the Civil War began in April 1861 with the firing on Fort Sumter. Her grave is marked with an iron chain fence and an elaborate gate.

The old cemetery on the Waitsfield Common is the only one in Waitsfield that was from the beginning under town control. Its oldest tombstone bears the date March 19, 1797, though as Jones points out in his *History of Waitsfield*, it would not have been impossible for burials to have begun even earlier. Many of the town's settlers are buried there, though three other cemeteries were added as the village changed shape, testaments to the growth of the village. Some old homes even hold the remains of loved ones, buried in basements when the ground was too frozen to dig the graves.

Elizabeth Joslin, writing in the early 1950s about the Waitsfield village cemetery, describes one curious scene she came across:

*In the village cemetery, there is a rather conspicuous shaft bearing the name Joslin. The small stones on either side of it intrigued me. One bears the word Capitalist, and the other the word Farmer. . . . My husband's great grandfather, Stephen Perry Joslin, was the farmer; and the capitalist was his brother, Hubbard. Stories have been handed down through the family which show that both these men possessed a certain frugal quality that, no doubt, helped them become the prosperous men they were.*

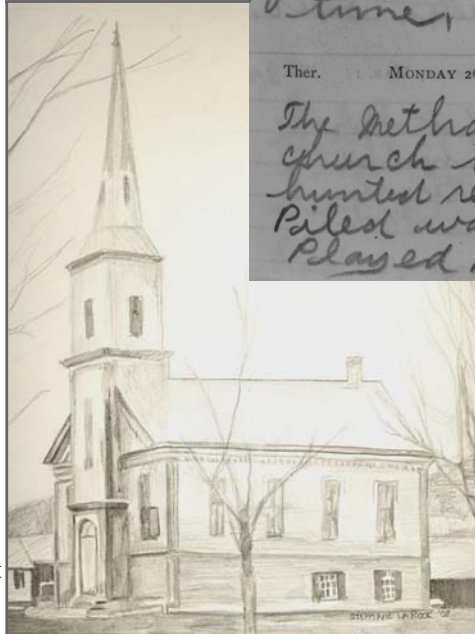
*Hubbard was the proprietor of a shoe store in Brownington. When Stephen went to call on him, his brother was not in the store, so he inquired about him. Someone answered dryly, "Oh, he just sold a pair of shoes, and he has gone over to the bank to deposit the money."*

But, beyond the burial grounds, there are other ways to measure the Valley's historical dedication to its gods.



*By 1832 the Methodist society had outgrown the school house and was frequently compelled to hold its services in "Squire" Barrett's spacious barn. Need of a suitable meeting house was imperative. The work was undertaken in 1833. It was a barn-like structure that served until 1852 when the building was remodeled, painted and a spire added. At this time many members of the church desired to have it removed to the village as a more central and convenient location.*

Rufus Barret, who had land in both Fayston and what became known as Irasville just outside Waitsfield Village, grew deeply committed to the Methodist Church and donated the land for the cemetery, parsonage and the first Methodist church. The parsonage was a two-story, flat-roofed, wooden house, with a wood shed on the back, built at a cost of only \$26.05. Eventually, the first Methodist Church in Waitsfield was built next to it, and the cemetery next to that.



Ther. 9 SUNDAY 25 Wea. good  
21  
*The coldest morning  
 this winter.  
 Went to this church  
 for the last  
 time.*

Ther. MONDAY 26 Wea. good  
*The Methodist  
 church burnt up  
 hunted relics.  
 Piled wood and  
 played.*

*Diary entries of  
 a 12 year old  
 boy, Alton Farr,  
 when the second  
 Methodist  
 Episcopal  
 Church burned  
 on Feb. 26, 1894.*



*Present building (Cabin Fever Quilts)  
 rose over the ashes of the old church  
 and was dedicated on Oct. 11, 1894.*

The parsonage is now the Waitsfield Inn, and the Methodist Church, started in 1834 and finished a year later, is now The Store. The church was shaped and built exactly like a barn, with pews and a gallery for the choir, and the “bones” of the old church are still clearly visible in The Store.

Although both these buildings have passed out of the hands of churches, more modern day “believers” have had a way of honoring the past as well.

### **Gifts of the Believers**

Emma Ford was a fixture in Warren. In her opinion, as one town report notes, “you have to deal with the Town Clerk from the cradle to the grave, whether you like it or not.”

That suited Emma, who served in the Warren Town Clerk’s office as either an assistant or the clerk for forty-three years, just fine. She was born in South Hollow on Lincoln Gap Road in 1904, married Lawrence Ford in 1925, and lived in the same house for sixty-eight years.

She was married in the Warren United Church, and she was eulogized there when she died.

So it was only fitting that she bequeathed a large portion of her estate to the church, including the addition of a building where the activities of the church are done. The house she lived in from her marriage through her death in 1993 is now the church parsonage.

At the other end of the Valley, another town resident continues to honor both the past and the future.

Evelyn Goss was not born to St. Patrick’s church, but she has spent all fifty years of her married life making its history a part of her every day life. Along with her husband, Ozzie, she inherited the informal role of sexton from Mary and Raymond Reagan. Along with tending to the church itself, she and her family made the old cemetery on the Common something of her own personal mission.



*Emma Ford*

For years, her entire family, including her five children, spent summers mowing and maintaining the cemetery. They walked every inch, studied every gravestone, and made a list of all the dead. In 2007, she was honored by the Diocese of Burlington as “the source of blessing for others” – women who do their work because “there’s a light in them.”

For Evelyn, that light has been a beacon to the past and a link to the future: “I just love this little church.”



*Oswell "Ossie" and Evelyn Goss*

**Thank You  
to all those who helped make this  
history possible:**

**Leon Bruno  
Evelyn Goss  
Rita Goss  
Rachel Hartshorn  
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**Fayston Town Clerk's Office  
Moretown Town Clerk's Office  
Saint Andrew Church  
Vermont Catholic Tribune  
Vermont Historical Society  
Waitsfield Town Clerk's Office  
Warren Town Clerk's Office**