A History of Vermont

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Introduction

Vermont, often celebrated as the “Green Mountain State,” is a place where history is written not just on parchment, but etched into the very mountains and valleys that have shaped its people and their destiny. The state’s story begins long before the first European explorers glimpsed its landscape—millions of years ago, when ancient seas and shifting tectonic plates formed the bedrock that gives the Green Mountains their name. The very shape of Vermont was then refined by colossal ice sheets, the slow retreat of glaciers, and the rise and fall of glacial lakes—a natural history that created the setting for all that would follow.

Long before colonial ambitions crossed the Atlantic, the land that would become Vermont was home to indigenous peoples who established rich and enduring cultures. The Abenaki, the Mohawk, and their ancestors hunted, fished, and farmed Vermont’s river valleys and upland forests for thousands of years, developing intricate relationships with the natural world and leaving a legacy that continues to echo across the region today. The arrival of Europeans—first the French, then the English—marked the beginning of profound and often tragic changes for these original Vermonters.

Vermont’s colonial period was defined by struggle—between indigenous nations and settlers, between rival European powers, and between claimants to land and authority. Unique among its neighbors, Vermont boasted a brief but remarkable period as an independent republic. From the embattled Green Mountain Boys to the revolutionary conventions at Windsor, the quest for independence left an indelible mark on Vermont’s identity. Its early constitution was among the most progressive in North America, taking a stand against slavery and laying the groundwork for inclusive civic life.

As Vermont joined the fledgling United States, it quickly carved a distinctive path through the nation’s most tumultuous eras. The 19th century brought waves of change—industrialization, the rise and fall of agricultural fortunes, the arrival of immigrants from far and wide, and fierce debates over abolition and civil rights. Vermont’s granite and marble helped build America’s cities, while its farms fueled its people and its ideals inspired abolitionist leaders and soldiers alike.

The 20th and 21st centuries delivered new challenges and opportunities. The state weathered periods of economic hardship and renewal, shifting from an agricultural heartland to a place increasingly defined by tourism, craftsmanship, and environmental stewardship. Vermont became a beacon for those seeking natural beauty, community, and a tradition of civic engagement embodied in its famous town meetings. Yet, like all places, Vermont’s history is not without its darker

chapters—moments of exclusion, discord, and injustice that demand honest reflection and public reckoning.

Today, Vermont’s story is both local and global, rooted in its distinctive landscape but intertwined with larger currents of American and world history. From the movements of ancient glaciers to the vitality of its present-day towns and communities, Vermont’s resilience and spirit of independence remain ever-present. In the chapters that follow, we will journey through the full sweep of Vermont’s remarkable past, exploring the people, places, conflicts, and ideas that have shaped this small but singular state.

CHAPTER ONE: Ancient Seas and Mountain Building: Vermont’s Geological Foundations

Long before human footsteps marked its terrain, the land that would ultimately become Vermont was shaped by colossal forces and submerged beneath ancient waters. The geological narrative of the Green Mountain State stretches back over a billion years, a timescale almost incomprehensible to our fleeting existence. This deep past is etched into the very rocks that form the spine of the state, telling a story of continental drift, volcanic activity, and the slow, inexorable power of erosion and ice.

Imagine, if you will, a vast, warm, shallow sea. This was the reality for the region over 500 million years ago, during the Cambrian and Ordovician periods. This ancient body of water, known to geologists as the Iapetus Ocean, covered much of what is now the Champlain Valley and western Vermont. Sediments, eroded from ancient mountains to the east and west, accumulated on the ocean floor over millions of years.

These accumulating layers of sand, mud, and the shells and remains of early marine life created thick deposits. These deposits, over vast stretches of time, were compressed and hardened into sedimentary rocks like sandstone, shale, and limestone. The fossilized remnants of the creatures that inhabited this ancient sea can still be found in these rocks, offering tangible proof of Vermont's submerged past.

One remarkable example of this ancient marine life is the Chazy Fossil Reef on Isle La Motte. Formed over 500 million years ago, it is considered the oldest known coral reef in the world, though the earliest reef builders were not corals as we know them today, but organisms like bryozoans and stromatoporoids. This ancient reef provides a unique window into the biodiversity of the Iapetus Ocean.

The relative tranquility of this oceanic period was not to last forever. The Earth's crust is not a static shell but is composed of massive tectonic plates constantly in motion. Around 450 million years ago, these plates began to converge, and the Iapetus Ocean started to close. This collision of continental masses initiated periods of intense mountain building, known as orogenies.

The Taconic orogeny was the first major mountain-building event to significantly impact the Vermont region. As the plates collided, the layers of sedimentary rock that had accumulated on the ocean floor were subjected to immense pressure and heat. This process, called metamorphism, transformed the original rocks into new forms. Limestone became marble, and shale was altered into slate.

These metamorphic rocks, often dramatically folded and faulted by the immense forces involved, form a significant portion of the bedrock we see in Vermont today, particularly in the Green Mountains and the Taconic Mountains. The Taconic orogeny uplifted the western part of the state, creating a mountain range whose roots are still present.

Following the Taconic orogeny, another significant mountain-building event, the Acadian orogeny, occurred between approximately 375 and 335 million years ago. This was another period of intense collision and metamorphism, further shaping the landscape and contributing to the formation of the Appalachian Mountain chain, of which the Green Mountains are a part.

These orogenies did not just fold and fault the existing rock; they also involved the intrusion of molten rock, or magma, from deep within the Earth's crust. As this magma cooled and solidified beneath the surface, it formed igneous rocks like granite. Vermont's famous Barre granite, a significant economic resource, is a product of this period of intense geological activity.

Over millions of years, the towering mountains created by these orogenies were subjected to the relentless forces of erosion – wind, water, and ice slowly wearing them down. This lengthy period of erosion sculpted the peaks and valleys, laying the groundwork for the landscape we recognize today. Even as the mountains were being uplifted, they were simultaneously being worn away.

Then came the ice ages. Beginning approximately 2 to 3 million years ago, a series of glacial periods dramatically reshaped the Earth's surface, including Vermont. Massive continental ice sheets, sometimes over a mile thick, advanced and retreated across the landscape multiple times. The last major glaciation, the Wisconsinan, reached its peak around 25,000 years ago, burying all of Vermont under a vast sheet of ice.

These glaciers were not static, but enormous, slow-moving rivers of ice. As they flowed, they scraped and scoured the bedrock, picking up rocks and sediment. This abrasive action further smoothed and rounded the mountain peaks and carved out valleys. The sheer weight of the ice sheet also depressed the Earth's crust beneath it.

As the climate warmed, beginning around 15,000 years ago, the last ice sheet began its slow retreat northward. The immense volume of melting ice released torrents of water, leading to the formation of large, temporary proglacial lakes. These lakes were often dammed by the retreating ice itself or by piles of glacial debris.

One of the most significant of these was ancient Lake Vermont, which occupied the Champlain Valley. This vast freshwater lake was considerably larger and deeper than the present-day Lake Champlain. Sediments carried by meltwater streams settled in

the quiet waters of Lake Vermont, forming layers of clay and silt on the lakebed. Beaches and deltas formed along its shorelines as rivers deposited sand and gravel.

As the ice dam in the St. Lawrence Valley finally melted and retreated, the water levels in Lake Vermont dropped dramatically. With the weight of the ice removed, the depressed land began to slowly rebound, a process known as isostatic rebound. However, for a period, the land remained low enough for saltwater from the Atlantic Ocean to flood the Champlain Valley, creating the Champlain Sea.

The Champlain Sea existed for a few thousand years, a brackish to saltwater inlet that extended as far south as the present-day location of Lake Champlain and into parts of Quebec and Ontario. Evidence of this marine invasion is found in the sediments deposited during this time, including the fossilized remains of saltwater creatures.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the Champlain Sea is the discovery of beluga whale bones in the Champlain Valley, most famously the skeleton found in Charlotte, Vermont, in 1849. These fossils, along with those of marine mollusks and other sea life, confirm the presence of a saltwater environment hundreds of miles from the current coastline.

As the land continued to rebound, the connection to the Atlantic Ocean was eventually severed, and the saltwater was gradually flushed out by freshwater input from rivers and melting ice. The Champlain Sea transitioned into the freshwater body we know today as Lake Champlain. This geological history, spanning eons of time, created the physical stage upon which all subsequent human history in Vermont would unfold.

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