

Bethel, Vt.

An Old Mill Town Looks to Its Past for Its Future

By KIM J. GIFFORD

Photography by NANCY CASSIDY

In the late 1980s, the town of Bethel, Vt., launched a popular street festival with the slogan “Bethel Isn’t Dodge City Anymore.” Some people say that slogan referred to the numerous pubs that inhabited the town throughout its history, much like the infamous saloons of Dodge City. Others say the slogan was an effort to move the historic mill town out of the dark ages into a new way of thinking. While the street festival recently came to an end, the push to rejuvenate this central Vermont community continues.

In recent years, business owners have invested in Main Street, refurbishing buildings, such as the Levere Building, and establishing new enterprises such as Cockadoodle Pizza Café,

Used and Unique Home Boutique and Lukana’s Dream. Last fall, work was completed on the Church Street Bridge and \$85,013 has been raised as part of a capital campaign to renovate the Town Hall. Last summer, Bethel held its first farmers’ market. The Bethel Business Association (BBA) has also been conducting a study on the benefits of branding and is looking into ways to establish a brand image for the town. One of the possibilities is to focus on Bethel’s rich history. Bethel has an active historical society, which recently found permanent headquarters for its offices in the former Guy Wilson Agency building.

Bethel was first chartered on Dec. 23, 1779, and is believed to be the first town chartered in the Independent Republic of Vermont. The charter was issued to John Payne, John House, Dudley Chase and 43 others. Chase was one of the original Bethel settlers who came to the region from Cornish, N.H. The group followed the White



Nancy Cassidy

The White River winds alongside Main Street in Bethel, Vt.

Stats & Facts

Largest employers:

- GW Plastics, 300
- CFM US Corp., 150
- Whitcomb High School, 60
- Bethel Mills, 52
- Ultramotives, 30

Population in 2000: 1,968

Population 1830: 1,240

Population in 1791: 473



Bethel Historical Society

The Bethel Inn (center), circa 1920, was a focal point of Main Street.

River, resting for the night at the mouth of Gilead Brook. The town received its name when Chase awoke the next morning and recounted a dream based on the story of Jacob in Genesis 28:11-22. Like Jacob, Chase and the men resting at Gilead Brook used stones for pillows and, also like Jacob, they decided to name the place where they had stopped “Bethel,” meaning “House of God.” It is rumored that in 1824, stones from around this site were used to build the foundation of one of Bethel’s churches.

Newspaper accounts suggest that over the course of Bethel’s history, churches rivaled bars for prominence in the community. In fact, Mary Floyd, owner of Bethel’s Brick Store and a former Randolph, Vt., resident, recalls that even as late as the 1950s Randolph residents would travel to Bethel as it was a “wet” town and Randolph a “dry” one. Today, Bethel’s bars have waned but several churches remain. Residents from nearby towns also traveled to Bethel in those days to visit the movie theater housed in what today is Spaulding Press.

The Gilead Brook area is famous for its monument marking the birthplace of Brigadier General Stephen Thomas, one of Bethel’s more famous military persons. Thomas, who received a Congressional Medal of Honor for

“If you say nothing else about this town, it needs to be said that the people here help each other. I think the town has a lot of potential and I just love living here.”

—Amy Bergamo, chair of Town Hall Financial Committee

“distinguished services in a hand-to-hand encounter” at Cedar Creek, was appointed Brigadier General of Volunteers in 1865.

Bethel’s early settlers built Fort

Must Sees in Bethel



Bethel’s Brick Store: Owned by Bill and Mary Floyd, Bethel’s Brick Store is a clothing and gift shop, and also a dealer of Vermont Castings stoves. Upstairs is dedicated to crafts and most recently housed an extensive quilt exhibit of about 40 quilts, including some dating back to the mid 1800s. The store is housed in a brick building constructed in 1878, following a historic 1877 fire.

Used and Unique Home Boutique: This used furniture and gift store, owned by Ron and Heidi Andress, opened last fall in the former Richardson’s Country Store building.

Cockadoodle Pizza Café: Another new addition to Bethel’s Main Street, Cockadoodle Pizza Café opened this past summer and was so successful it doubled in size by winter.

Lukana’s Dream: In addition to used clothing and gifts, Lukana’s Dream sells items created by impoverished people in Peru and Zimbabwe. Proceeds from the store go toward helping these people and other worth-

while charitable causes. The store is run by Margret Daniel, her daughter Madelaine Wigglesworth and a group of volunteers.

Ketner’s Second Cup Café: Ketner’s Second Cup Café opened this past winter in the former Randolph National Bank building. Owned by Rhonda Ketner, the restaurant offers a wide range of country cooking from breakfasts to grilled cheese sandwiches and Shepherd’s pie.

Tozier’s Restaurant: Tozier’s Restaurant has long been a mainstay on Route 107, offering visitors a place to buy ice cream, hotdogs, hamburgers and fried clams and scallops each summer. The Campbell family now owns the business, which has been around for over 60 years.

Peavine Park: Peavine Park, located on the banks of the White River, features a gazebo and tables and benches for visitors to sit and relax in the shade. Spearheaded by the Bethel Business Association and the efforts of Louis Gaiko, Peavine Park opened in 1991.

Fortitude in 1780 to protect themselves from the Indians. Historians believe that a fort in the nearby town of Royalton may have been torn down to build the one in Bethel and, according to history books, 19 men and 19

yokes of oxen were employed for the endeavor. In August 1780 a raid by a band of 21 Indians resulted in the captivity of three Barnard, Vt. men including David Stone. At the time of his capture, Stone was clearing his land along Gaysville Road. He escaped



The youth of Bethel participate in the Bethel Forward Festival.

captivity three years later, making his way back to Bethel only to discover his land had been sold for taxes. He moved to Connecticut, but eventually returned to Bethel, stopping on the return trip and sampling an apple at a cider mill.

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He brought the seeds from the apple back to Bethel, and he was able to redeem his land. He used the seeds to grow an apple tree, the fruit of which became known as “the Bethel Apple.”

By 1783, the frontier had moved northward, making the need for Fort Fortitude obsolete. Logs from the fort were eventually used to construct a dam across the branch of the White River and then for Bethel’s first mill. The flood of 1927 destroyed the dam and covered bridge, taking with it the last remnants of Fort Fortitude.

One of Bethel’s most famous businesses, Bethel Mills, had its early origins when Colonel Joel March was issued 450 acres, called “The Great Mill Lot” to build a saw mill and a grist mill. In 1781, he built his enterprise on the third branch of the White River next to the waterfalls to power the mills. Twice the mill was washed away by floods and rebuilt. More than a 150 years after the first dam was constructed, Raymond Durfee, then owner of Bethel Mills, decided to build a small hydroelectric



The Great Flood of 1927 caused devastating damage in Bethel, washing away bridges, buildings and railroad tracks.

plant to supply power to the sawmill. He did his own engineering and used his employees to build the concrete dam and powerhouse. The Durfee family continues to run Bethel Mills to this day, and it remains one of the largest businesses in town.

The railroad also played a part in Bethel’s history. On July 4, 1869, the first steam train rolled into Bethel from White River Junction, Vt. From 1900 to 1933, the 19-mile White River Valley Railroad operated between Bethel and Rochester. The line became known as

the “Peavine” because of its meandering course. Today, Bethel’s park, which sits on the banks of the White River, is also named “Peavine” and there is a neighboring restaurant in Stockbridge bearing the same name.

Throughout the years, fires and floods brought devastation to the town. The most famous natural disaster was the Great Flood of 1927, which wiped out large portions of not only Bethel, but also many area river towns. Like many other early communities, Bethel suffered as mills and railroads became less prominent. Active community organizations are seeking to build on the community’s potential and Davis L. Dimock of the Planning Commission says, “Bethel needs to feel more hopeful about its future.”

Kirk White, BBA president, agrees. “I think Bethel has turned a corner. There are a lot of visible signs now of revitalization and a real viable quality to the community.” UVL

Did You Know?

Over the course of its history, Bethel has been visited by three United States presidents. According to Nick Nikolaidis of Bethel’s Historical Society, **President William H. Taft** came through Bethel, probably on a campaign trip. Nikolaidis says that according to longtime Bethel resident Dick Edmunds, Taft drove up in his car, stopped in front of the Town Hall, said “it is nice to be here,” then hopped in his car and left. **President Teddy Roosevelt** also made an appearance at Bethel’s train station as part of a journey through New England and, in 1928, **President Calvin Coolidge** visited Bethel as part of his inspection of the reconstruction following the 1927 flood.





Bethel Historical Society

Bethel's history is closely tied to the railroad.

Freelance writer Kim J. Gifford resides in Bethel, Vt. This friendly central Vermont community gives her easy access to towns throughout the Upper Valley where stories abound. Although other small communities may afford similar pleasures, Bethel is a town where she can walk her pugs, Buffy and Vader, down the street and everyone waves and remembers their names. After all, it's their hometown, too.

Nancy Cassidy of Randolph, Vt. is familiar as the VT History Expo and Bethel Festival photographer. Her photos have been in the Vermont Country Sampler, The Herald of Randolph, Seven Days, Vermont Life, and The New York Times.



Nancy Cassidy

Max and Madison Stearns hold up the flag during the Bethel Forward Festival.

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Bethel White Granite

Bethel's primary claim to fame may be Bethel White Granite. Bethel is the only source for this particular type of granite, favored for its color, strength and durability. It is reported to have a high percentage of clear quartz and white feldspar to black mica, giving it its unique white color.

Bethel White Granite was first quarried for millstones in the late 1700s. In 1901, the E.B. Ellis Granite Company of Northfield, Vt., purchased the land from Chester Dingman and registered the trade name Bethel White. When the Ellis Granite Company went



photograph courtesy of Rock of Ages

Bethel White Granite is prominent in the Grand America Hotel in Salt Lake City

bankrupt, the Woodbury Granite Company, which had purchased land around the quarry in 1902, took over, becoming the primary granite company in the area. In 1958, Rock of Ages purchased the Bethel quarry and retains ownership today.

Bethel White Granite has been used in a number of prestigious buildings in the United States and internationally in such countries as Japan, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Austria, Germany, Italy and France. Famous buildings abroad created in Bethel White include the Fujii Keori Building in Japan, the Administrative Building for Parliament in Vienna Austria and the Mormon Church of Germany in Friedrichdorf. In the United States, Bethel White Granite has been used in the American Bank Note Company in New York City, the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C., and the First National Bank of Seattle.