

Vermont: Fertile Farmland, Green Mountains, Revolutionary History

This Is America Visits the "Green Mountain State"

From VOA Learning English, welcome to This is America! I'm Steve Ember.

Today on our program, we take you on a trip through the northeastern state of Vermont, part of the area known as New England. Each fall, people travel to Vermont to see the colorful autumn leaves. In winter, people come to ski and snowboard in the mountains. In the warmer months, they go on river-rafting trips and camp and enjoy camping and other outdoor activities.

Come along with us, as we visit the "Green Mountain State."

Only about 600,000 people live in Vermont. That makes it the second least-populated state in the country after Wyoming. And the state is small not just in population. Vermont is 45th out of the 50 states in territory. It has just 24,000 square kilometers of land. In addition, it has almost 950 square kilometers covered by water.

What Vermont lacks in size, it makes up for in beauty. It is known as the Green Mountain State. The name comes from the Green Mountains, which divide the state up and down the center. In fact, the name Vermont comes from the French "verd mont," meaning green mountain.

Along the northern border of Vermont is the Canadian province of Quebec. Vermont is bordered by Massachusetts on the south, New Hampshire on the east and New York on the west.

A century ago, forests covered less than one-third of Vermont. Trees were being cut down for farmland and forest products faster than they could be replaced. That has changed. Today forests cover more than three-fourths of the state.

But Vermont is known not just for its natural resources. It is also known for a strong sense of independence.

During colonial times, Vermonters fought off territorial claims by bordering colonies. Ethan Allen led most of the fighting with help from his brother Ira and an armed group known as the Green Mountain Boys.

Ethan Allen became a hero of the American Revolution. But Vermont was not among the 13 colonies that declared their independence from England in 1776.

Vermont did become the 14th state, however, when it joined the Union in 1791. And it became the first state to declare slavery illegal.

By 1777, Vermonters had written their own constitution declaring themselves free and independent. Their constitution also made slavery illegal in Vermont.

The capital of Vermont is Montpelier, in the center of the state. But the largest city is Burlington, on the shores of Lake Champlain. Lake Champlain and the fertile Champlain Valley are in the northwestern part of Vermont. They are named for Samuel de Champlain. The French explorer arrived at the lake in 1609.

Vermont's Educational Heritage

Burlington is busy and fast-growing. It is also home to one of the state's oldest and largest schools: the University of Vermont. The university was established with a financial gift from Ira Allen in 1791.

Vermont has strong roots in education. Emma Willard was teaching in Vermont when she became an activist for women's rights in education. Martin Henry Freeman, the first black college president in the United States, was born in Rutland, Vermont.

And the philosopher John Dewey was from Burlington and attended the University of Vermont. Dewey is considered the father of modern progressive education in the United States.

Dairy farming is the main agricultural industry in Vermont. But the travel industry and manufacturing are also major employers.

General Electric manufactures airplane engine parts in Rutland and North Clarendon, Vermont. IBM makes computer equipment at a factory in Essex Junction. And the computer software developer IDX Systems is based in Burlington.

Food producers also help drive the Vermont economy. Local companies include Green Mountain Coffee Roasters. The Cold Hollow Cider Mill is the largest producer of fresh apple cider in the northeastern United States. More than 300,000 people visit the mill each year to see how fresh apples get crushed into cider.

Please Pass the Maple Syrup...

Vermont is the leading producer in the United States of another liquid that many people enjoy: maple syrup. The sweet, golden syrup is made from the sap harvested in spring from Vermont's sugar maple trees. The four grades of Vermont maple syrup differ somewhat in color and taste. But they can all be enjoyed on a morning meal of pancakes and eggs.

Community support for local farming is strong in Vermont. Burlington and its surrounding communities, for example, hold local farmers markets several times a week.

Many people who sell goods at these markets are members of a cooperative farming program supported by the Intervale Center. This is a nonprofit group that helps develop land and farm-based businesses in and around the city of Burlington.

One of its most successful operations is the farm incubator program. Through the program the Intervale Center provides low-cost land to new and established farmers. In addition, members share equipment, business services and technical assistance. Each incubator farm is required to use organic growing methods.

Intervale does not support dairy farming, but Shelburne Farms near Burlington does. The nonprofit working farm is one of the biggest and oldest cheese producers in Vermont. Its award-winning cheddar is made from the milk of Brown Swiss cows.

Shelburne Farms also supports community education programs. Each year more than 100,000 people visit the farm which overlooks Lake Champlain.

Lila Vanderbilt Webb founded Shelburne Farms in 1886. The Vanderbilts are an important family in American history. She was the granddaughter of Cornelius Vanderbilt, who built his wealth in shipping and railroads.

Would you like sprinkles on your Chunky Monkey?

One of the best-known companies in Vermont is Ben and Jerry's. It sells ice cream around the country with names like Cherry Garcia and Chunky Monkey. The British-and-Dutch company Unilever bought Ben and Jerry's in 2000.

Ben and Jerry's even has a small graveyard with markers for flavors that have been retired. The graveyard is behind its factory in the small town of Waterbury.

Hold me, squeeze me, I'm guaranteed for life!

Also in Waterbury is a store operated by the Vermont Teddy Bear Company. Toy bears sold in the United States, called teddy bears, are commonly made in China. But the company says it hand-produces the only bear made in America and guaranteed for life. And it ships its products around the world. The bears can come specially dressed -- for example, for events like weddings, birthdays or holidays.

No matter what road you take to the Ben and Jerry's factory or the Vermont Teddy Bear store, chances are you will cross a covered bridge. Bridges protected by structures that look like barns represent historic small-town America. There are just over 100 covered bridges remaining in Vermont. Most were built in the 1800s.

Our trip to Vermont would not be complete without a stop at Huntington Gorge. This is a deep, narrow cut in the earth. Water from the Huntington River flows through the gorge at a high rate of speed.

Huntington Gorge is another reminder to visitors that nature has made its mark on Vermont. It is perhaps the best example of water sculpture in Vermont. It is truly a natural work of art. A series of deep drops along the gorge end in pools of dark blue, green and clear water.

Smooth white rock formations force the water through the path of the gorge. Rainbows of color fill the air along with the music of bubbles and rushing water.

And speaking of music, if you've been wondering about the song we've been playing from time to time, perhaps you'd like to imagine a large full moon rising over the Vermont landscape...as songs writers John Blackburn and Karl Suessdorf must have done.

[Margaret Whiting sings "Moonlight In Vermont"]

Pennies in a stream, falling leaves, a sycamore

Moonlight in Vermont

Icy finger waves, ski trails on a mountain side

Snow-light in Vermont

Telegraph cables, they sing down the highway

And travel each bend in the road

People who meet in this romantic setting

Are so hypnotized by the lovely

Evening summer breeze

Warbling of a meadowlark

Moonlight in Vermont

You and I, and moonlight in Vermont

This song became Vermont's unofficial state song. It's unusual in that the lines do not rhyme. And it doesn't seem to matter one little bit. By the way, Vermont doesn't really have a lot of sycamore trees, or meadowlarks, for that matter. John Blackburn, who wrote the words, can be excused – He was actually from Ohio. Margaret Whiting recorded this classic version of the song the same year it was written, 1944.

Evening summer breeze

Warbling of a meadowlark

Moonlight in Vermont

You and I, and moonlight in Vermont

I'm Steve Ember, hoping you've enjoyed our visit to the Green Mountain State and even some of that Vermont moonlight with us, and inviting you to join us next week for another This is America from VOA Learning English.