

# ESSEX COMMUNITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE • SPRING 2020

We here in northern Vermont had a short winter and early spring. Last night the weatherman said that we are 20 days ahead of schedule for what we are seeing for weather. I enjoy winter, not that I ski or play outside, but for the beauty of the falling snow. Now unfortunately we are having to deal with COVID-19, a very scary virus that is attacking our world. I will not go into what is happening as I am sure it is front and center for all of you and your families. I bring it up because of how it is affecting us the Essex Community Historical Society and the Harriet Farnsworth Powell Historical Museum. Last month we canceled our monthly meeting and at this point it depends on how our state is doing as to when we will meet again face to face. We are looking into using ZOOM to continue our meetings. It is looking like our May program will need to be rescheduled and our June 7<sup>th</sup> opening be pushed to the end of June with no guarantee that the opening will happen then. We will be looking at our programs on a month to month basis and keep you updated via our website and FaceBook page.

Our sing-a-long on December 6, 2019 was very well attended. Many familiar faces were there from school and parents who said they look forward to attending our program every year.

Our annual meeting was held at the First Congregational Church in Essex Junction. After a brief business meeting, participants were treated to a small dining buffet of items created from historical Essex recipes.

We are still looking for new board members, our group keeps diminishing and no one is stepping forward to help us. If you know of anyone that might be interested in coming onto our board please contact one of our board members.

As I close this president's message I just want everyone to be safe and to stay healthy

*Eva C. Clough, President*



The Newsletter of the  
Essex Community Historical Society  
Essex and Essex Junction, Vermont

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# THE GREAT FRESHET OF 1830

BY HUBIE NORTON & SCOTT TAYLOR

The next time you are driving east on the River Road between Sand Hill Road and North Williston Road look over the bank to your right. There is a small field right beside the road and trees beyond it. In between the trees you will glimpse what appears to be a large gully with some standing water and past that a field of crops. The field of crops was formerly known as Fay's Island and the standing water is the former channel of the Winooski River. That former channel still marks the boundary between the towns of Essex and Williston.

*"Never within the recollection of our oldest inhabitants, has the valley of Onion River been visited with so sudden, violent and destructive a flood as that with which it has been inundated the present week."*

Unlike today, where there is a seemingly endless amount of data about weather for the last hundred years, the information available for the early 1800's is scant at best. Some information can be gleaned from town histories and a few limited references in weather history books, but newspapers of the times, like the Burlington Weekly Free Press of July 30, 1830 quoted here, provide the most details. Even though these references may be lacking in the kind of specifics available from today's rich weather data banks, one thing is certain; there was a major flood in July of 1830 that had significant impacts on a large portion of the northeast and the state of Vermont, including Essex.

The summer of 1830 had been cold and wet until late July when the temperatures were reported to be in the low and mid nineties. That changed in the early evening of Saturday July 24 when rain started to fall and continued with heavy showers off and on through Thursday noon the 29<sup>th</sup> of July. During this period over seven inches of rain fell in Burlington with the majority of that amount falling on Monday the 26<sup>th</sup>. For comparison, rain preceding the flood of 1927, which is the most notable destructive flood in Vermont, five to ten inches of rain was recorded. In Montpelier, during the 1830 flood, the water reached a height of just five feet lower

than the flood of 1927. In their book *"The Troubled Roar of the Waters"* Vermont in Flood and Recovery, 1927-1931, Deborah Pickman Clifford & Nicholas R. Clifford called the torrent of 1830 *"the most devastating flood of the nineteenth century."* Damage from the flood of 1830 was wide spread with reports of saw, grist, woolen and oil mills being washed away, along with bridges up and down the Winooski (Onion) River and its tributaries as well as other Vermont rivers that emptied into Lake Champlain.

*"The extent of the evil can hardly be conceived, embracing as it does the destruction of roads, bridges, mills, barns, dwelling houses, of much valuable interval, and all the crops of the Farmers from one end of the (Winooski) valley to the other, the labors of the present and former years."*

Another quote from the Burlington Weekly Free Press of July 30, 1830 notes the extent of damage in the Winooski

river valley but, similar damage was also reported along rivers on the New York State side of the lake. Probably the most devastating event occurred in New Haven, Vermont where twenty one buildings were destroyed and fourteen people were swept away to their death by the rapidly rising waters of the New Haven River.

Although called a flood or torrent in many news stories the most frequent name given to the inundation was "Freshet" or "Great Freshet". This "Freshet" of 1830 had immediate devastating effects on the inhabitants of Essex as it swept away all of the industry located at Hubbell Falls (Essex Junction) including saw mills, a carding manufacturing works, grist mill and a hemp mill. Below the falls the brand new two lane covered toll bridge, just built in 1825, was also washed away and a new bridge was not

rebuilt at this location for nearly 20 years.

In Essex Center Samuel Pelton had constructed a dam and saw mill in 1804 on Alder Brook a little south of the current VT Route 128. At that time Alder Brook looped easterly and northerly crossing the current VT Route 128 just beyond the present



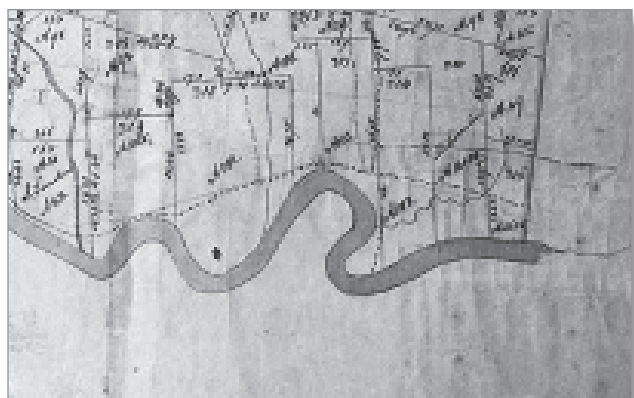
Johnson map circa 1807. Essex Center area showing Alder Brook flowing in two directions. Browns River is in upper right.



elementary school and emptied into the Browns River about a quarter of a mile north of the bridge over the Browns River. To run his mill Mr. Pelton diverted a portion of the brook with a flume from the dam to his saw mill on the south side of the current VT Route 15. John Johnson's map of 1807 shows Pelton's dam on the north side of VT Route 15 with Alder Brook flowing in two directions below the dam; one branch easterly and northerly into the Browns River and the other southerly into the Winooski River.

Any confusion about where Alder Brook should flow would be answered in July of 1830 when the "Freshet" wiped out Pelton's dam and saw mill, along with bridges and other mills in the area. At the same time the force of the water gouged out a gully nearly a hundred feet deeper than the original bed of the brook which resulted in changing the direction of the entire brook so it now flowed into the Winooski River. Echoing the lead in the Burlington Weekly Free Press, L. C. Butler in his history of Essex noted: *"This terrible freshet will be remembered as ... one of the most destructive calamities this town ever witnessed."*

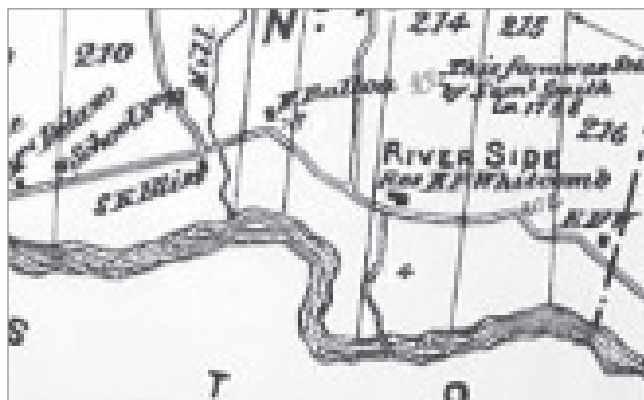
Although the changes to Alder Brook were dramatic, the Winooski River, the southerly boundary of Essex and the northerly boundary of Williston, also had a major course correction as a result of the 1830 flood. Maps produced prior to 1830 show the course of the river much closer to VT Route 117 (River road) in the vicinity of the North Williston Road than what later and current maps indicate. Just west of the bridge crossing the Winooski River on the North Williston Road the river formally made a  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile northerly sweep towards the current VT Route 117 and swung back southerly and westerly towards the lake.



Johnson Map circa 1807. Essex at North Williston Road—showing river close to the River road.

One of the earliest detailed maps made after 1830 was produced in 1869 and clearly show the results of the freshet as the course of the river is now straightened out without making the loop towards VT Route 117. This redirection of the river left water in the old river bed and essentially created an island of about 35 acres that became known as Fay's Island, named for John Fay who later owned the land. Today there is only one way onto the "island" which is via a farm road

off North Williston Road providing access to the large field where forage crops are currently cultivated. The standing water seen from VT 117 nearly surrounds the "island" and is periodically refreshed with local flooding.



Beer Atlas map 1869. Essex in the vicinity of the River Road and North Williston Road showing the River further from the River Road in Essex.

But where was, or today, where is, this new "island" located? Mr. Fay's island, formerly on the south side of the river and clearly in Williston prior to 1830, is now on the north side of the newly created river channel, and now appears to be a part of Essex. Or is this "island" still considered to be in Williston? What about recent maps showing the current Winooski River as the town line between Essex and Williston? Who presently owns the "island" and where do they pay taxes? What about the implications due to the changes to Alder Brook?

Coming in the fall issue of the ECHO part two will provide answers to these questions and more on the impacts from the "Great Freshet" of 1830.

## REFERENCES

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- Johnson, John: Map of Essex, Circa 1807, John Johnson Papers at the Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont
- F. W. Beers: *Atlas of Chittenden County VT* 1869
- Town of Essex tax maps
- Town of Williston tax maps
- Burlington Weekly Free Press: 30 Jul 1830
- 71st Congress, 3rd Session, Examinations of Rivers and Harbors, Vol. 1
- The Horn of the Green Mountains: Manchester, Vermont 03 Aug 1830
- Essex Community Historical Society, *ECHO* Spring 2019

THE GREAT FRESHET  
CONTINUED ON PAGE 6



# 1840's—WHY ESSEX JUNCTION?

BY TIM JERMAN, ECHS

An obvious question, even today, is why did the original Vermont railroad lines being built from the south come together in Essex Junction and not go directly to Burlington, the state's largest city? There is not a simple answer. Like many stories of competing business interests, the cutthroat competition among 1840's railroad builders was fierce and played out in dramatic ways.

An obscure but important recollection of the story was written by Lucius C. Chittenden in an 1893 memoir called "Personal Reminiscences, including Abraham Lincoln and others 1840-1890". He devotes an entire chapter (22) to his early work as an attorney in the rail wars of the 1840's. The chapter is titled simply, "Essex Junction". Chittenden, a direct descendant of Governor Thomas Chittenden, had already published a popular autobiography with a detailed portrait of Lincoln, for whom he had worked and known as Under-secretary of the Treasury during the Civil war. The lesser-known work discussed here touched on a potpourri of vignettes in short chapters; everything from Lincoln to ducks, hunting in the Adirondacks, hypnotism, and medical quackery.

Chittenden begins his Essex Junction chapter with humor: "There is no term in American Lexicography the mention of which raises the indignation of so many travelers to a white heat as "Essex Junction". Chittenden's law partner and friend for life was Edward J. Phelps, who wrote the famous poem "Lay of the Lost Traveler", or "The Ballad of Essex Junction", a rant against train service in Essex Junction in the 1870's, so Chittenden would have had lots of anti-Essex Jct. ammunition supplied by his law partner over the years. The chapter in the book is just seven pages long. But in it Chittenden traces the early 1840's construction of the Rutland and Central (later Central Vermont) Railroads, both coming from Boston and determined to reach Burlington and then connect with regions north and west. Before construction, the route north to Canada was of great importance, and an application for a bridge at Rouse's Point was also proposed as it would connect Vermont markets with all points west. This touched

off a multi-year legislative battle. The Rutland line attempted to kill the bridge idea to stave off the Central's dominance of the region. When that failed and the bridge was authorized, the Rutland changed tactics and procured an amendment to its charter authorizing it to build an extension from Burlington north to Rouses Point. Here is where Essex Junction and power politics enter the picture:

*"There was a lawyer who, by indorsing for a friend, had at that time become interested in a paper mill at Hubbells Falls, near the present Essex Junction. We will call his name Jacob . He lived at Stanton's Tavern [now Lincoln Hall], a hostelry on the river road convenient to the Falls. He was a diminutive creature about four and a half feet high, with an enormous head, which contained cunning and mischief enough to stock*

*the Third House or fit out the students of a university [We believe this is Jacob Maeck, a Burlington attorney whose name appears on a related Essex court document around the same time. A brief biography describes*



*him as a leading attorney of Burlington]. He was employed by the Central as counsel to prevent the construction of the Rutland Railroad north of Burlington, and he entered upon his work con amore [with love]. He discovered and forthwith purchased the services of one Stevens [This was very likely Byron Stevens, son of Essex founding father Abram Stevens and a very highly respected citizen], who lived in Essex, and who was an original subscriber for five shares of the capital stock of the Rutland Railroad Company, not then worth the same number of coppers. The Rutland was about to make a new issue of bonds secured by a mortgage of its entire line, with the proceeds of which it intended to build from Burlington to Rouse's Point.*

*As unexpected as thunder from a clear sky, Jacob came down upon it with an action in favor of Stevens for an injunction against the building of the extension, on the ground that the extension was an infraction of his (Stevens) vested rights as a stockholder in a railroad the terminus of which was at Burlington. Jacob's motion for a preliminary injunction came before Judge Milo L. Bennett at Burlington—a judge whom no inducement could swerve one hair's breadth from his judicial*



duty. No lawsuit had ever arisen in Vermont which caused greater excitement. The leading lawyers from the southern and western portions of the State were present at the hearing. They protested against the outrage of permitting a traitor to the Rutland company, who had sold himself to the enemy and whose paltry five shares of stock were worthless, to obstruct a great public enterprise in which three-fourths of the state were interested. Capitalists from Boston whose money had built the Rutland railroad offered an enormous price for the Stevens shares. Everything that legal ability and ingenuity could devise was done to resist the granting of that motion. But Jacob was inflexible. He appeared alone, without associate counsel. He wasn't "selling shares then", he said. "Some other day, perhaps; but just then he was after an injunction".

*And he got his injunction. In spite of all the opposition, his motion was granted. In the opinion of an inflexible judge he was entitled to it, and it was not withheld. I may as well say here that that injunction was never dissolved, and the railroad was never built north of Burlington."*

Negative fallout from Judge Bennett's decision cost him his job in the legislature the following year. Chittenden opines that it was the first time in state history that a judge had been turned out over a single decision. Later that same year passions had cooled and the esteemed judge was restored to the supreme court unanimously and remained by annual re-election until he died.

Now Chittenden goes on to explain the continued devious actions of "Jacob" which changed local history: *"And this mischief-making attorney made another discovery of what I always regarded as an intended fraud. It was that while the charter of the Vermont and Canada road connected with the Rutland in the village of Burlington, it had the option to connect with the Central at some point in the county of Chittenden. Very soon the report was current that on account of the steep grades of the line into Burlington from the north and east, the engineers were prospecting for a line to connect the Vermont and Canada with the Central somewhere in Essex. Even then it was not believed that any needless injury to Burlington was contemplated. Burlington was the largest town or city in the State or the Champlain valley, located on a sheltered harbor at the widest part of the lake, and midway between its two ends. She had water communication south with New York, north with Montreal and Quebec, and west with the St. Lawrence, the Ottawa, and the great lakes. She was almost the largest lumber market in the Union. Her manufactures were flourishing, her private residences beautiful, and her people hospitable. It seemed as if nature and art had combined to equip her with every quality for the natural lake terminus of three railroads. And to make her an attraction to travelers upon whose memories she would leave the imprint of a pleasant dream. She was the Queen City of Lake Champlain."*

*But an accident Which placed the control of the Central where it could be made to minister to a very small local prejudice exposed Burlington to grave and lasting misfortunes.*

*Six miles from anywhere, there was a barren sand plain that would not subsist one jack-rabbit to the square acre. The region round about it had not one attraction, and its general features could only serve to prejudice the passing traveler, and to deceive him as to the fertility of the soil of Vermont, the beauty of her valley, and the grandeur of her mountains. On this dreary spot a little brief authority decreed should be planted a public nuisance—an irritating obstruction to the traveler, which he would never, except upon compulsion, encounter a second time."*

A loving description of Essex, no? But Chittenden wasn't finished.. *"Build me here, out of the culled hemlock or the cross-grained spruce, a shanty, through which the rains of summer may drizzle and the storms of winter whirl the blinding snows. Along its walls plant benches hard and uncomfortable enough to give the rheumatism to a foundered tramp, should he be so unfortunate as to be obliged to sit upon them. In one corner build a stall, and place along its shelves the stale dough-nut, the deadly pie, and the vinegar-rotted cucumber. Let a cold decoction of burnt corn be prepared and call it coffee. Arrange all trains so as to condemn many travelers to four hours of starvation and imprisonment there, in the din of ringing bells and screaming whistles, until they shall be thoroughly prepared for suicide, and let it be called Essex Junction!"*

*And it was so. As an abomination of desolation it was an early and conspicuous success. In 1852 this dreadful place was a possession unto the residue of the heathen, taken upon the lips of talkers, and an infamy of the people. Men thought it then a superlative type of misery. But Essex Junction possessed a reserve force of discomfort unsuspected by its inventors. It has become worse with the rolling years. The only thing which has prospered in that vicinity during these almost forty years is the graveyard."*

Chittenden goes on to castigate Essex Junction in prose as Phelps did in poetry..(..And I hope in hell their souls may dwell who first invented Essex Junction!). Today, it's not hard to imagine the antipathy of Burlingtonians about losing their monopoly as a three-line rail terminus. But for Essex Junction, it is interesting to learn that the detested actions of one of its leading citizens may have been the key reason his (Stevens) hometown became the separate municipality we know today. Among other positives, it allowed the Drury Brickyard to thrive for a 100+ years and produce over a half-billion bricks, most delivered by rail. Current area readers know that the spur from Essex Jct. to Burlington now serves only the chip train to Burlington electric's wood-fired generation plant. But in its heyday there were up to 36 trains a day on four tracks (now just one) rolling through Essex Junction.

This is just one vignette from an eyewitness of winners and losers in the original construction of Vermont's rail system. Today, a conclusion might be that the location of the Junction in Essex didn't do much to slow down the growth of Burlington, but it certainly changed the history of Essex for the better and paved the way for Essex to become Vermont's second largest town.



## 2020 TALES AND TREASURES

**All Tales and Treasure Programs for this year are subject to change due to the coronavirus.**

**Due to the coronavirus the museum opening will tentatively be on:**

### **Sunday, June 28, 2020**

Harriet Farnsworth Powell Museum,  
Corner of Routes 15 and 128

1-4 p.m. Grand Opening of Museum for summer  
2-2:30 p.m. Mini Presentations on Seasonal Exhibits  
Speakers: Board members

### **Wednesday, July 15, 2020**

7 p.m., Memorial Hall, Towers Road  
Primary Care in Essex, 1786-1961  
Speaker: Jerry Fox

### **Wednesday, August 12, 2020**

6 p.m. Walk through Essex Burial Grounds, Essex  
Center

7 p.m., "Vermont's Buried History Revealed and Re-  
stored." Memorial Hall, Towers Road  
Speaker: Tom Giffin, President, Vermont Old  
Cemetery Association

Wednesday, September 16, 2020

7 p.m., Location TBA, Towers Road  
7 p.m. Land Surveying During the Early Years in  
Vermont  
Speaker: Brad Holden, LS

Tuesday, October 6, 7 p.m. Location TBA

7 p.m. Annual Meeting followed by program:  
Linda Radtke, Parlor to Polling Place – Women's  
Suffrage in Story and Song

### **Date to be announced:**

Evolution of Essex School Districts and General  
School History 1763-1867  
Speaker: Hubie Norton

**THANK YOU TO THE 2020**

**TALES AND TREASURES**

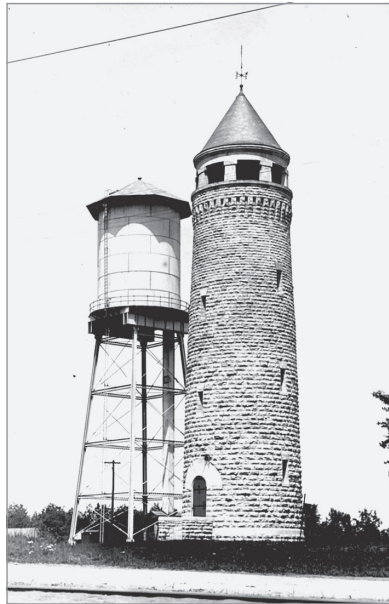
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Lee and Mary Stewart  
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THE GREAT FRESHET  
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Clifford, Deborah Pickman & Clifford,  
Nicholas R.; "The Troubled Roar of  
the Waters" *Vermont in Flood and  
Recovery, 1927-1931*

Town of Essex Land Records

Town of Williston Land Records

Butler, L. C.: *Historical Address at  
Essex 1883*

Vermont, State of; VCGI Lidar  
program

National Oceanic and Atmospheric  
Administration (NOAA)

[www.colonialsense.com/](http://www.colonialsense.com/)

[https://twitter.com/  
vtstatearchives?lang=en](https://twitter.com/vtstatearchives?lang=en)

Dunn, Russell: Vermont Waterfalls



# ESSEX COMMUNITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY BOARD OF DIRECTORS 2020

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Please take a look at your address label. The expiration date of your membership is noted. You can use the form below to update your membership.



## ESSEX COMMUNITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P.O. Box 8388 Essex, Vermont 05451

### Membership Form

**Please consider becoming a member or renewing your membership at this time.  
Or you can pass this on to someone who would like to become a member.**

**Your dues will help us add to our collection of Essex memorabilia, maintain the museum,  
publish the ECHO, and sponsor historical programs.**

\_\_\_\_\_ New member

\_\_\_\_\_ Renewal of membership

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_ Individual membership \$10.00

\_\_\_ Family membership \$15.00

\_\_\_ Senior membership (60 and over) \$5.00

\_\_\_ Lifetime: individual, married, civil union \$100.00

**Make checks payable to the Essex Community Historical Society.  
Thank You.**







ESSEX COMMUNITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P.O.Box 8388

Essex, Vermont 05451

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**[essexcommunityhistoricalsociety.org](http://essexcommunityhistoricalsociety.org)**,  
or email us at  
**[echsvt@gmail.com](mailto:echsvt@gmail.com)**,  
for any updates on our programs  
and museum opening.

We are hoping to open  
the end of June.

Thank you for your continued support  
of ECHS. We look forward to being  
together again sometime soon.



### WHAT DOES ECHO STAND FOR?

In the Fall 2019 ECHO, our readers were asked to send us their guesses of what they thought ECHO stood for. We had two responses -- Carole Ann Greig and Irene Wrenner -- and both were correct. ECHO stands for Essex Community Historical Oracle. Congregations, Ladies. Hope you enjoyed your Dunkin gift card prize.

