

# Montpelier's State and Main

With a little practice, you can learn how to peel back the layers of time. First, look at dozens of old photographs of the same place over many years. Scrutinize them closely for the telltale details that are your detectives' clues: buildings since gone or altered, denuded hillsides now lush with canopy (or visa-versa), lampposts, utility poles, machinery/materials, and architectural fashions. No date? All the more delicious: are there cars yet? Are those electric or (the earlier) telegraph poles? Once upon a time only scholars could luxuriate in such contemplation—access to delicate resources like brittle old photos had to be restricted to protect them, and the public only got to glimpse what was published or displayed in exhibits. The Internet, however, has opened a door not only to the future; it has given us windows we can peer through at the past. The University of Vermont's Landscape Change Program has image and data archives that provide Vermonters with an ex-

ceptionally rich and accessible historic resource. Now anyone who wants to know Montpelier better can begin to recognize the layers, added over time, that make Vermont's capital city what it is today—and influence what it will become tomorrow. Towns and cities evolve in an organic, human-made process. To oversimplify just a wee bit, Montpelier's face changes over time primarily because of fires, floods, utilities, traffic, trees, and (the obvious) construction/renovation. There are forces at play that have preserved Montpelier's historic face, as well; most notably the Montpelier Heritage Group. Using any of these "event or invention" elements, we can assess the approximate age of an undated photograph by asking "was it before or after \_\_\_?" Understanding what shapes our landscape (and when and why) is important: we do it every day, whether we're paying attention or not! What will it look like in 100 years?

—Loona Brogan



State Street Fire, 1875. Notice the horse-drawn sleds. LS05321: UVM Bailey-Howe Library Special Collections.

## Fire

After a string of devastating fires wiped out the better part of both State and Main Streets in 1875 (arson was suspected), it became a requirement that new construction downtown be brick with slate roofs, not wood. Other fires would plague the city into the 20th century. Puzzlingly enough, it was only after a fatal hotel fire in 1924 that a central fire station was built to serve the entire city; prior to that, equipment and firefighters were scattered at various locations. It was at that time that the last horse was replaced with a modern ladder-truck and equipment.

## Poles

The telegraph came to Vermont in 1849. Streetlights: gas, 1853, electric, 1866. Telephone lines: 1880.



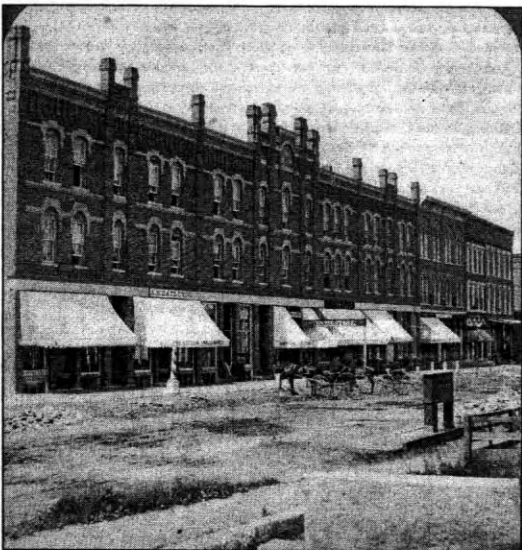
State Street, during the installation of trolley tracks, late 1890s. Here we see utility poles crossing over the street, and the thick canopy of State Street's elms in the distance. UVM Landscape Change Program. LS05638: Vermont State Archives.

## Floods

Montpelier is geographically predisposed to flooding because of the convergence of the North Branch with the main artery of the Winooski (combined with human-constructed damlike bridge abutments that can catch ice flows and cause huge jams). This has been a detriment to residents on a number of occasions. However, it was in part due to the structural and economic impact of the flood of 1992 that funds became available for many of the buildings in Montpelier to be restored or renovated. There was a ready group of forward-thinking citizens, which had formed in the 1960s (the Montpelier Heritage Group), who spearheaded the preservation and restoration efforts that would return downtown to the look it sported 100 years ago.

## Traffic

Foot and horse-drawn carriage were the primary means of transportation early on, of course. The earliest photos of Montpelier show wide dirt streets to accommodate the bustling trade the legislative session brought each year. Note the sidewalks. Starting in 1875, passenger train service became available between Montpelier and Barre. A trolley line was installed downtown in the late 1890s. It ran down State Street from Bailey Avenue, on the other side of the State House, all the way to Barre via Barre Street and the Pioneer Bridge. There was a spur that went up Sibley to Sabin, Kemp, College, Prospect, and Heaton Hospital. The 1927 flood damaged the tracks, and it was discontinued not long afterwards. The first car drove into Montpelier in 1900. Downtown had parking meters by 1963.



1875: The French Block. UVM Landscape Change Program. LS05302: UVM Bailey-Howe Library Special Collections.

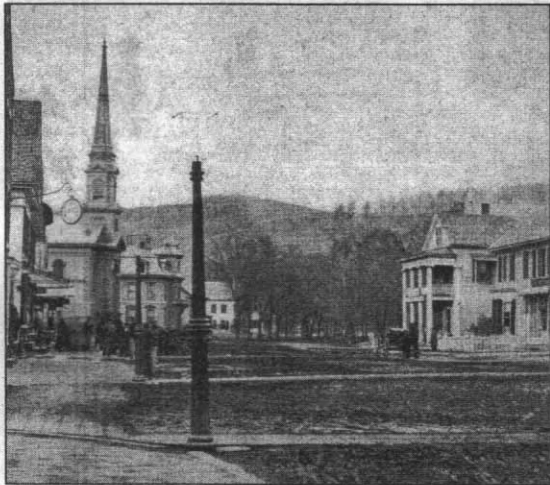


2006: Close-up of the French Block. Photo by Grimm.

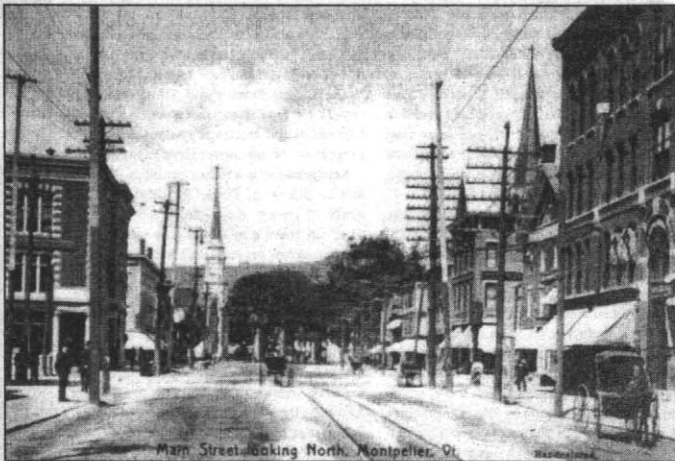
The French Block, Main Street, after 1875 (left) and today (above). Some things don't change much. We like it like that. In the 1970s, gawdy signs and vinyl siding were common downtown, but when the nation's bicentennial was celebrated with a bicentennial train coming through town, an infusion of grant funding made it possible to research, restore, and celebrate downtown.

# The Face of a Place

## *a photo tour through time*



**Likely after 1886:** A metal streetlight post, no utility wires, young elm trees are visible past the downtown block. The Unitarian Church and 136 Main are on the left. A large tree lives close to the same spot our library maple lives now. Wide dirt street, one visible horse-drawn carriage, pedestrians crowded around what is now Yankee Spirits. *UVM Landscape Change Program. LS04737: UVM Bailey-Howe Library Special Collections.*



**After 1890s:** Montpelier, with trolley tracks and utility poles. Are these electricity lines? Some are telegraph. Can you tell which are which? Multiple-armed poles are probably strung with telephone lines, maybe others. Light traffic, dirt streets, a healthy tree canopy in the distance. The spires of the (first) Bethany, the Methodist, and the Unitarian Churches are visible. *UVM Landscape Change Program. LS00834: (band-colored postcard).*



**Late 1950s:** A towering elm grows at the site of the (rebuilt) Bethany Church. Where are those ugly poles and wires? Buried out of view. Plenty of parking, but no horses in sight. The Unitarian spire marks its spot, but the others are not visible. Decorative streetlights are the only visible poles, and what appears to be an antenna is atop the roof of what is now Main Street Bar and Grill. The Langdon Block is cut out of the frame of this photo. Notice the buildings on the left are taller than today and most of the buildings on the right are gone; fire is responsible for most of these changes. Today's crosswalks and signage have not yet been installed. *UVM Landscape Change Program. LS08025: Vermont State Archives.*



**August 2006:** A mixed canopy of street trees (ash, maple), no utility lines, black metal street light poles, a traffic light mounted at the corner, colorful banners decorating the streets, and a delivery van parked near the intersection in the right-turn-only lane. The spires of the rebuilt Bethany Church and Methodist Church (right) and the Unitarian Church (left) can be seen behind the roof lines. *Photo by Loona Brogan.*

**Acknowledgments:** University of Vermont's Landscape Change Program is supported by the National Science Foundation and the Lintilbac Foundation of Vermont. Photo permissions: UVM Special Collections, Vermont State Archives. Thanks to Esther Munroe Swift, Vermont Historical Society, UVM Historic Preservation Program.

To contribute to the Landscape Change Program's archives, visit their website at [www.uvm.edu/perkins/landscape/submitting/submitting.htm](http://www.uvm.edu/perkins/landscape/submitting/submitting.htm) or the archive website at [www.uvm.edu/perkins/landscape/menu.html](http://www.uvm.edu/perkins/landscape/menu.html).

**Conceived, written, and assembled by Loona Brogan**

Loona Brogan is currently pursuing a master's degree at the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Vermont (UVM) in the newly formed Environmental Thought and Culture Program. This summer Brogan is serving as a research assistant for Paul Bierman who is the creator and director of the UVM Landscape Change Program.

## Montpelier Timeline

- |                                        |                                           |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Montpelier Chartered, 1787             | Electricity service to homes, 1886        |
| Montpelier becomes state capital, 1805 | Catholic Church, 1882                     |
| Tremendous flood, 1830                 | First fire alarms installed, 1893 or 1894 |
| Telegraph poles, 1849                  | Montpelier becomes a city, 1895           |
| First trains (not passenger), 1849     | Electric trolley, 1898                    |
| First streetlights (gas), 1853         | City Hall construction, 1909              |
| First electric streetlights, 1866      | Tragic hotel fire/Lawrence block, 1924    |
| Catastrophic fires, 1875               | Fire department modernized, 1924          |
| Passenger rail service to Barre, 1875  | Tremendous flood, 1927                    |
| Telephone service, 1880                | Tremendous flood, 1992                    |
| Unitarian Church, 1886                 |                                           |