

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

19th-Century Lithograph Offers a Bird's-Eye View of Vergennes

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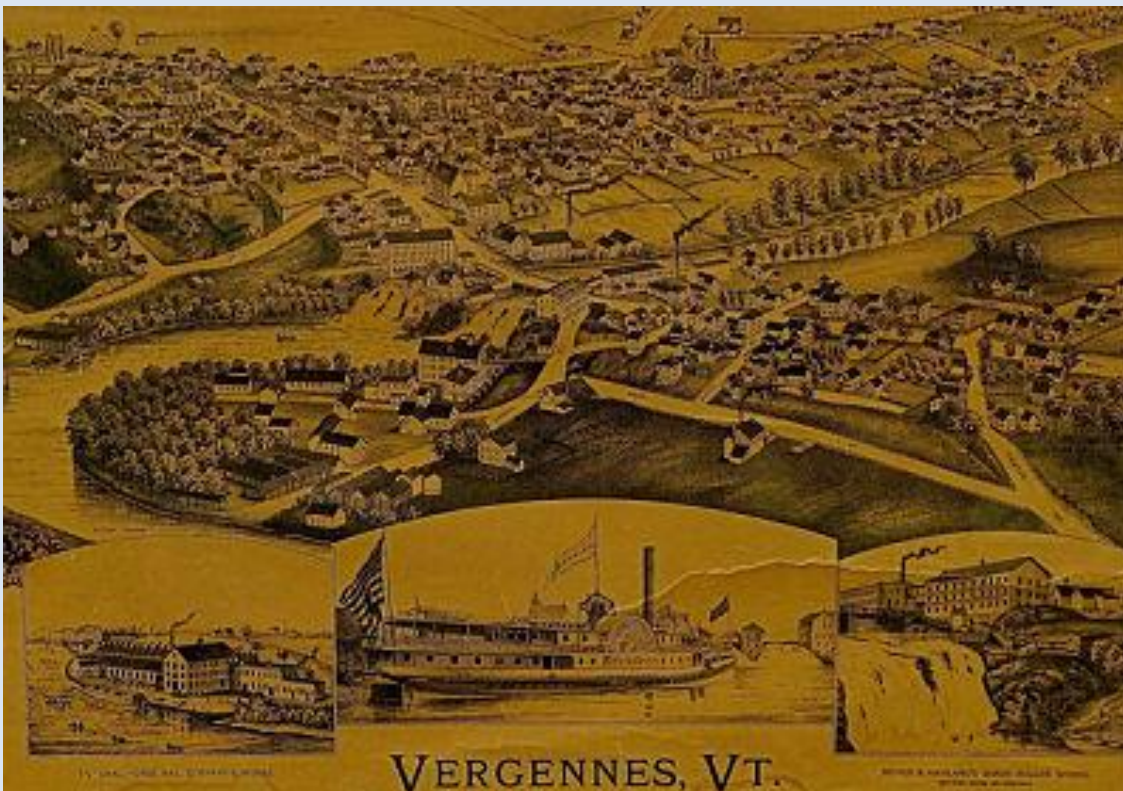
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For centuries, it was thought that God was the only one who could see the earth from the air, looking down on his little people below as they altered the world he had given them. Now most of us have had the experience of looking out of the airplane window and wondering about the lives of the humans in those toy houses and the movements of those tiny cars on the freeways far below us.

We live in the age of Google Earth, when we can do a cyber-swoop to any place on the planet. Yet there is still something intrinsically fascinating about gazing at the 19th century lithographs known as 'birds-eye views.' These were prints showing the towns of the period as only a bird, or God, could have seen them.

The Sheldon Museum recently acquired a wonderful birds-eye view of Vergennes in 1890. There is the little city below you in all its glory. At first glance it looks surprisingly

familiar—the great split waterfall with its little island, the main drag with its shop fronts, the bridge flanked by its large, white clapboard factory buildings. The town lies snugly in its bowl, ringed by the surrounding hillsides.



Birds-eye View of Vergennes, 1890.
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

You cannot help wondering how they did it? How could artists of the period create these drawings from a perspective they could not have seen? Luckily, historian Kevin Graffagnino, outgoing head of the Vermont Historical Society, explored local birds-eye views in his lovely book, *Vermont in the Victorian Age* (1985), and made some interesting discoveries about how they were done.

The Vergennes birds-eye was drawn by one of the great practitioners of the art, Lucien R. Burleigh of Troy, New York, who created views of 18 Vermont towns between 1885-1891. He reached Vergennes in 1890. While earlier artists had used the perspective they gained from standing on a hill outside of town, masters like Burleigh made their drawings from the ground. Burleigh came to a town intending to stay for two or three weeks. He would choose the most advantageous direction for showing off the place's attributes and then maintained it as he walked from building to building, making small sketches.

How did he keep them straight? It is likely that he worked from a local map, like those in the Beers atlas, matching his little drawings to their positions on the plat. Once he had images for all the natural and manmade features, he began his drawing, using his imagination to reproduce how he believed each would have looked from above at a precise angle. Graffagnino tells us that the usual perspective for a small town was meant to be from a height of about 1500 feet. As a lithographic image, it was drawn on a stone with a greasy crayon, covered with ink and then rinsed with water. The ink would only stick to the oily image, which could then be pressed to paper and printed.

Burleigh was a businessman as well as an artist, and so was out to make money on these novel pictures. Before he left town, he would hire a local person to find buyers who would subscribe to purchase the final product. Graffagnino estimates that it took about 100 copies at \$2.50-\$3.00 each to break even. This was no small price, but the fact that birds-eye artists kept churning them out indicates that they were luxuries affordable to a ready market.

What can we learn by looking at Vergennes from the air? Birds-eyes provided a Chamber of Commerce view of a place. One glance and you could see why anyone would enjoy living in Vergennes. There is a commodious Graded School, five churches, a City Hall, the elegant Stevens House hotel and many shops. The town is so rich it takes two banks, the National and the Farmers, to hold all the money. It is as neat as a pin. From up here we see no muddy holes in the streets, no blowing trash, no peeling paint.

Look more closely, and a different view starts to emerge. This is the late 19th century and people want to see signs of progress. Sure enough...there they are! The waterfalls are powering all manner of industries. Black smoke—black gold—belches from the tiny smokestacks. There's the humming of the National Horse Nail Company's Works and the teeming hive of Nevius & Haviland's Shade Roller factory. The legend points out Norton's Flouring Mills and Smith & Ketcham's Furniture Factory. If the image had sound, it would produce a productive din.

In a residential district, a house is labeled 'Laboratory Ingham's Nervine Pain Extractor.' This is where the local homeopathic luminary, Dr. Harvey Ingham, manufactures his patent medicine, meant for the nerves and 'Blood Purifying.' (Historian Kenneth Degree says that Ingham hired 'legions of children' to comb the fields collecting the plants he needed for his concoctions).

The town is nestled among hills that are almost completely bare of trees. How tidily they have been cleared! The hand of man has rendered them so neat and productive! Enjoy the views!

For the industrious entrepreneur who cared to invest in such a place, transportation of his goods would be no problem. The center bottom of the print, just below the map, is devoted to a large drawing of a modern steamship, the 'Reindeer,' shown approaching the falls. It is a straight shot down Otter Creek from here to Lake Champlain and the rest of the world. The steamboat landing is abuzz with business. In case you have missed the point, the lower right of the image is devoted to 'River Statistics,' including the height of the falls (38 feet) and their total strength (3000 horse power). The only clue that Burleigh is not a local comes in the labeling of the waterway, which says, "Otter River." If you do not want to ship by boat, you are in luck! A modern CVRR train sends up a cloud of smoke as it chugs by.

What the birds-eye view does not show you is that the Vergennes of 1890 was in trouble. The population of Addison County had decreased by nearly 10% in the preceding decade—this on top of a 30% decline over the course of the mid-century. Little Vermont towns were finding it hard to compete with the more favorable business and tariff climates of the opening West. Buy a birds-eye of your town and show it around. Maybe someone will want to invest in a place like this.

A local person once said to me that the Sheldon Museum was like, 'Addison County's Victorian attic.' It was said with affection—and we certainly have a full attic. But we also have a collections policy that guides us in choosing what to acquire and a collections manager trained in how to preserve what we have in the best conditions our limited budget allows. We want to be able to tell the stories of this region as well as we can, with the objects and documents that will make them intriguing and meaningful.

So when the Vergennes birds-eye view cropped up in a local antiques store recently, we decided it was so special that we should scrape together the funds to buy it. The dealer told us that the day after our purchase, a man came in anxious to acquire it and was very disappointed to find it gone. We understand his feelings perfectly. But we are happy that now everyone can enjoy it. Today it has pride of place over the fireplace in the little room off the Sheldon kitchen. Come in when you fancy a quick flight over old Vergennes.