

The Impact of the Slate Industry on Population Growth and Ethnic Diversity in Vermont in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries.

Introduction

For centuries, the abundance of quality, natural resources in the State of Vermont has proliferated commerce, and enabled people to build lives. More specifically, the slate industry made this meek and humble State a mighty obsidian of hope for locals and those abroad in transitional times. The purpose of this project is to explore how the slate industry in Vermont worked to inspire emigration and population growth over the past two centuries. The Welsh, Slovak, Irish, and Italian people worked symbiotically within the slate industry and inadvertently increased the ethnic diversity of the region. A combination of transportation advancements and a skilled, multi-ethnic work force bolstered the State. Sudbury, Hubbardton, Castleton, Fair Haven, Poultney, and Wells become some of the most important slate areas in the state (Meeks: 1986: 131).

Where is Slate Found in Vermont? (Refer to Figure 6.1)

Rutland County constitutes the most slate-rich region in Vermont. Quarrying began in Fairhaven by Colonel Alanson Allen in 1839 at Scotch Hill. Next F. W. Whitlock opened a quarry there in 1848. Daniel and S.E. Hooker opened the first quarry in the town of Poultney in 1851 with additional quarries opening in that vicinity. In 1851 John Humphrey and other Welshmen began business operations. (Smith & Raunn, 1886: Ch. XIII online). As of 1984, there were still 17 companies engaged in either slate quarrying or milling in the Western Vermont-eastern New York slate belt; 6 in Vermont.

First-Wave Emigrants: The Welsh (refer to figure 1.0)

The Welsh were pioneering in their transatlantic endeavors. And created an intricate, transnational template for future waves of wayfarers to follow. Also, they were mostly responsible for establishing the economic infrastructure (i.e. slate companies) that future emigrants (both Welsh and non-Welsh) were able to take advantage of. Their commitment to continued expertise in the industry abroad were the beginnings of what remains a solvent industry in the 21st century.

Welsh Emigration Patterns in Vermont

Population growth through emigration increased exponentially over a tri-decade period. In 1845, a mere 62 Welshman came to the Northeastern US. In 1849, 300 persons emigrated via the Jamestown. By 1965 the number had grown to 769 Welsh migrants. Slate quarries were the primary attractions. According to the 1870 census report, 574 men and twenty seven boys were engaged in slate production in the New York-Vermont slate belt that year, compared to 477 men and two women in 1860.

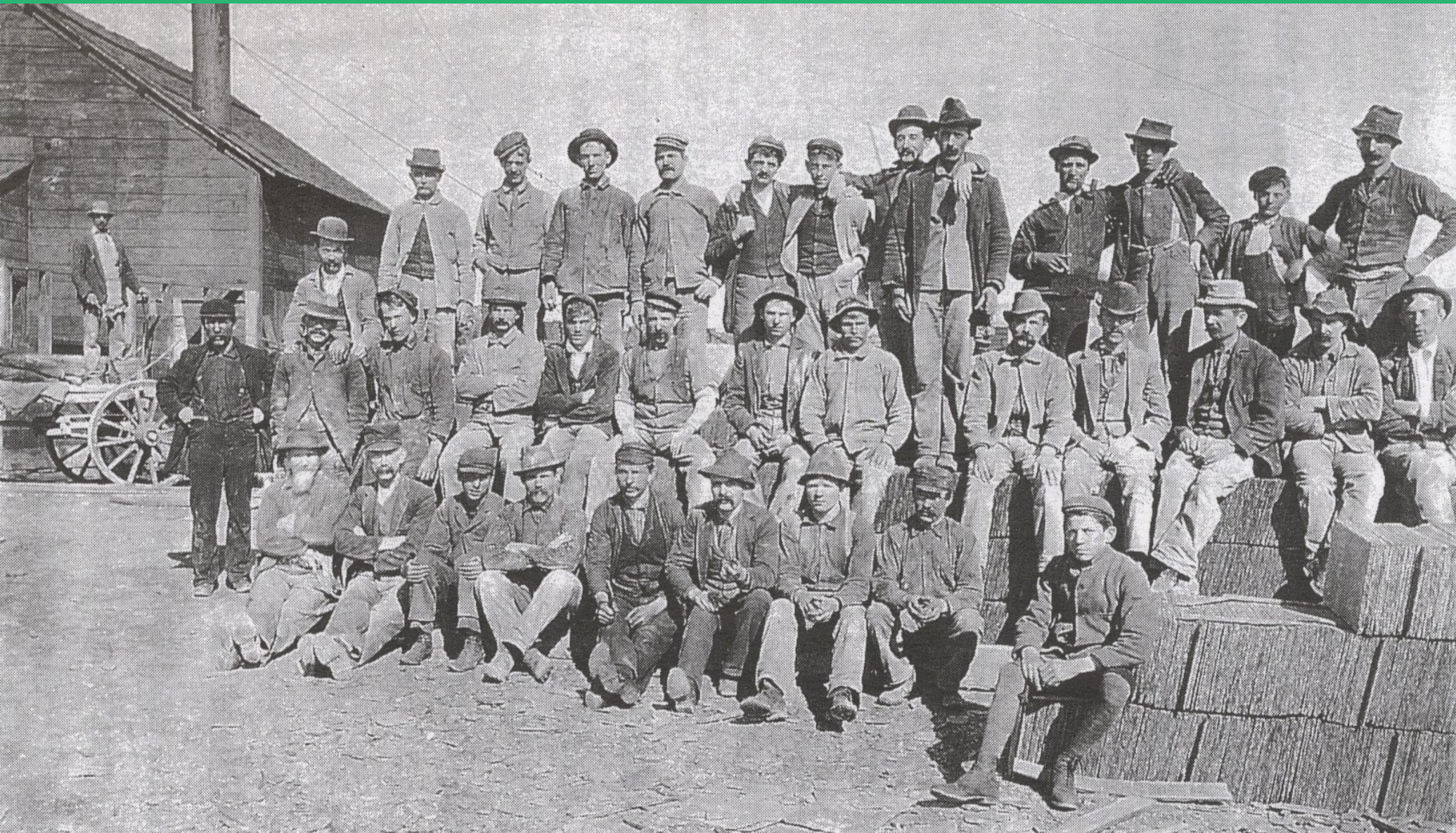


Figure 1.0 (left) Owens Brothers slate workers c. 1920s, arrive from Wales

Motivation for Emigration

Inspired by perceived opportunities out West, the Welsh collaborated to extricate themselves from oppressive feudalistic regimes, economic depression, and unwelcomed religious change (Roberts 1998:20, 131) (Ellis 2003: 3 per Slate Valley Museum). The Lord Penrhyn Slate Company, headquartered Bethesda is an example of the inequality that galvanized many to leave. Company housing was sub-standard and unsafe from a health standpoint. And remained unimproved with the instatement of commissions. The Lord's unrivaled wealth enabled him to control politics and silence dissenting workers by terminating them (Roberts, 1986: 70-76). These inequalities intermingled with the economic downturn and taxes imposed by the Church prompted many to head west.

Prominent slate entrepreneurs such as Eleazer Jones created jobs for emigrants and worked with the community to establish secure pathways across the Atlantic. These networks protected emigrants from being defrauded, provided shelter upon arrival, and established religious institutions integral to their culture. Welsh quarries and boating services institutionalized systems where citizens could request pay advances or have savings plans for bringing over family members. These circumstances facilitated the steady flow of Welsh emigrants who made rural towns more populous and ethnically diverse.

Slate Brings Transitory Ethnic Diversity

Albeit the Welsh-centric nature of this project, it will be noted that the Welsh did not migrate in isolation. The 19th century in America brought with it waves of ethnic diversity at the intersection of the slate industry and the idealized west. The Welsh constituted the majority in the 1850s, however, and made the most noteworthy contributions to the industry. Welshmen discovered most quarries, and the techniques of quarrying and processing were long lasting.

The Irish (refer to figure 2.0)

Established flourishing communities and also thrived. "The Irish and Yankees comprised practically the whole slate mill labor force of 287" (Roberts 1986: 249) in the early 1900s. When a blight caused by a potato fungus destroyed the harvest between 1845 and 1851, Ireland experienced widespread famine, mass mortality and large-scale emigration to America, impacting farmers and quarrymen alike. Like the Welsh, the Irish drew from old-country skills to establish themselves. Moreover, several became owners of slate mills and quarries, particularly in the northern part of the valley around Fair Haven, Castleton and Poultney (Jordan and Ellis 2005: Per Vermont Slate Museum). Catholic universities in the Slate Valley such as Fordham and Holy Cross "benefitted" from the influx of Irish emigrants. Whilst not as numerable as Welsh or the later Eastern European worker, they formed an important ethnic community in the Slate Valley.

The Slovaks

The Slovaks emigrated to America in search for work amidst a period of uncertainty resulting from their freedom from serfdom in 1848. They found unskilled work in steel mills and oil refineries of the Northeast. By 1920, a few hundred found employment in the slate quarries of Vermont. As the American-born Welsh and Irish left the quarries in growing numbers in the teens and twenties to pursue other occupations, the Slovaks replaced them, particularly in the southern part of the Slate Valley. Through the fragility of the great depression of the 1930s, some Slovaks stayed in the Slate Valley. After World War II, they regrouped and bought 17 of the 30 quarries that remained open, and became successful quarry operators who have sustained the industry through boom and bust times. (Stolarik 2003: Per Vermont Slate Museum).

Figure 6.1 (right)- Vermont Mineral Distribution Map

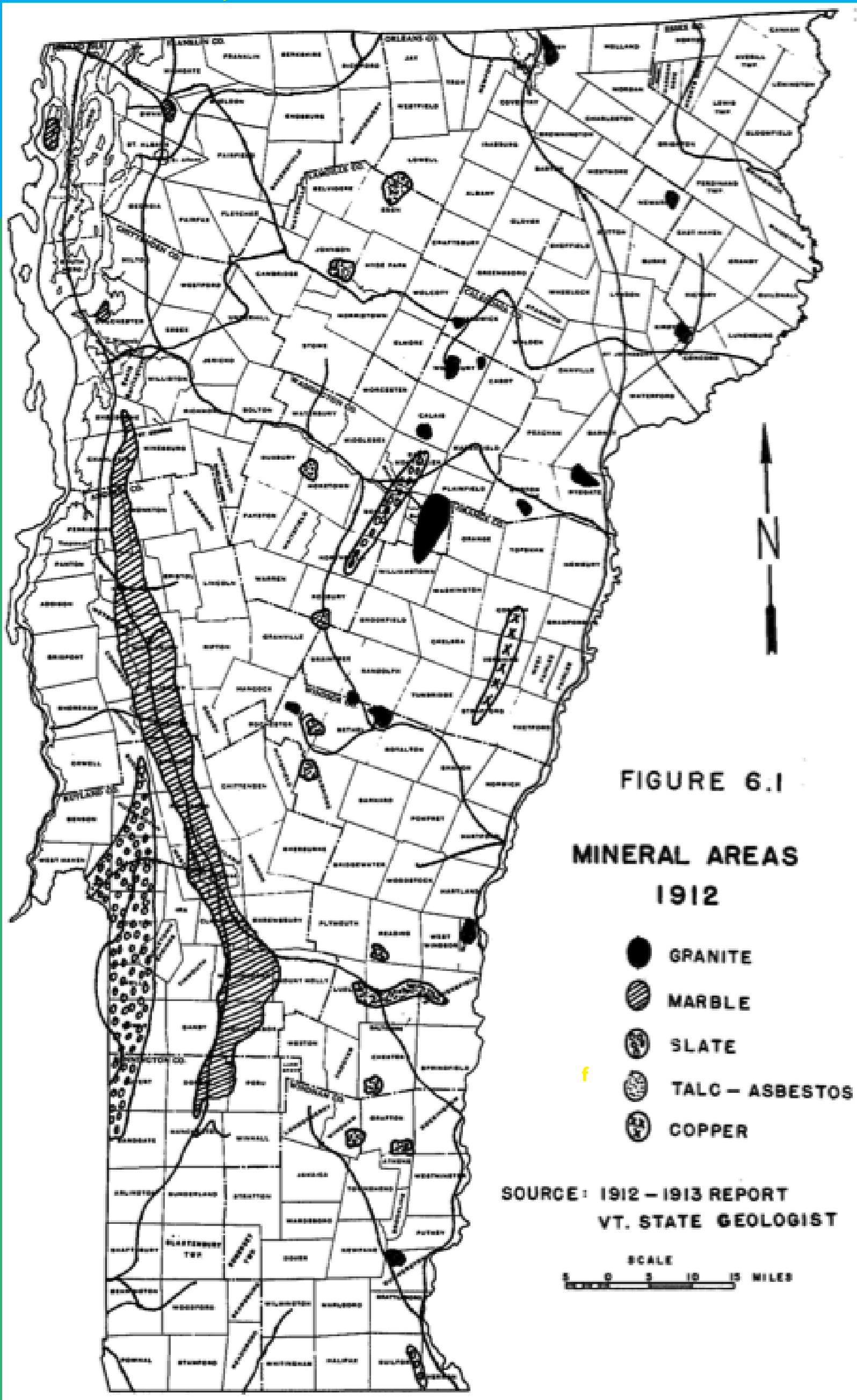


Figure 2.0 (below) Irish Slate Workers Delight in Castleton, Vermont.



Conclusion

Vermont's plentitude of slate created conditions that fostered emigration and population growth. The slate industry has a unique historical genealogy whose lineage is pan-ethnic. The Welsh, Irish, Slovaks, and later Italians worked in tandem to produce what remains a solvent industry in the 21st century. Historical accounts of emigration histories reveal patterns in experiences: 1) Ethnic groups leave their homelands in search of new opportunity and to escape unpleasant circumstances 2) New communities are formed abroad that support the influx of emigrants 3) emigrants utilize financial recourses to reestablish cultural institutions abroad 4) Emigrants take on entry-level roles in low skillset jobs 5) Emigrants seek other employment and create vacancies for new installments of immigrants.