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 possible, and humbled State a mighty abode 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 Fair Haven 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 1849 with additional quarries opening in that vicinity. In 1851 John Humphrey and other Welshmen began business operations. (Smith & Raun, 1886: Ch. XIII online). As of 1894, there were 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 existence 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 1865 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

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

Conclusion

Vermont’s plenitude 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 escape unpleasant circumstances 2) New communities are formed abroad that support the influx of emigrants 3) Emigrants utilize financial resources to reestablish cultural institutions abroad 4) Emigrants take on entry-level roles in low skilled jobs 5) Emigrants seek other employment and create vacancies for new installments of immigrants.