On the Banks of Otter Creek
How hydrology dictated early settlement patterns

Phebe Meyers

Historical Overview

The banks of Otter Creek remained unsettled until the late 1760s. Prior to the European exploration and settlement, Otter Creek was a major transportation route for the Native Americans that inhabited the region, known as the “Indian Road” and later as “The Settlement’s Road,” as the only route into the valley. The French were the first to discover the creek after navigating through Lake Champlain, but did not venture up beyond Vergennes falls (Petersen 1991). At first only a few brave pioneers ventured into the wilderness along Otter Creek, yet the number dramatically increased between 1769 and 1775, creating an in-migration of settlers looking to claim land, farm, or build an industry. Following town charters in 1765, Settlers attempted to use Otter Creek to the best of their ability, improving their quality of life by cultivating their crops on the fertile, flat landscapes of the middle section. Those that did not use the river for transportation used it as a guide, bushwhacking a trail along the banks. It became a major transportation corridor during the 18th century. By the end of 1775, every town along Otter Creek had settlers (Petersen 1991).

Early settlement occurred from settlers coming in from Champlain, finding the flats that produced power. This section was navigable from about twenty degrees to the right and left, yet is shaded with what is still considered to be the largest, due to the area covering the entire area of the creek. The valley remained unsettled until the 1880s. Once towns were established and the Crown Point town charters in 1761, Settlers attempted to use Otter Creek looking to claim land, farm, or build an industry, following the settlers were from. The road network also ended right at the falls in the northern and southern ends of the creek. This transformed many frontier settlements into established industrial towns and commercial centers. What was a subsistence lifestyle gave way to a more “entrepreneurial mode of existence (Sheldon Museum).”

Prime Settlement Locations

Even though the creek provided a throughway for travelers, the banks along the path were not navigable providing a clear path instead of trekking through unfamiliar wilderness (Sheldon Museum). In the winter, the ice created a surface, transforming the flowing river into an actual road.”

Settlers who wanted to have their own farms and sought the fertile soils of the lowlands lying between the lake and the Green Mountains. After clearing the forested landscape for agriculture, hypodermics of commercial value could be produced and transported down the river (Sheldon Museum). The annual flooding of the banks of Otter Creek, taught settlers early on to build their houses so that they would not be overpowered by water in the future. This section was navigable the first eight miles to Vergennes falls (Petersen 1991).

Figure 3: Map of the soils of Otter Creek Watershed. The soils along the banks of Otter Creek are the most productive in the state, and are black soils in clay, silt, clay, and sand. Glacial till dominates the southern end.

Figure 4: Otter creek is Vermont’s longest river, flowing 130 miles north of Darsey Vermont into lake Champlain, as is highlighted in Ferrysburg, as well as the drainage system for most of Addison County (Smith 1866, Peterson 1991).