Introduction

Many towns in Vermont, and the Otter Creek Watershed in particular, are located on or near natural falls. This method of town siting may seem like a peculiar choice today, but at the time of settlement, natural falls were a highly desirable commodity. These falls provided a location for mills to be built, and towns themselves were often built up around mills.

Towns grew up around mills because they provided an avenue for industry—beyond agriculture. Mills were the first non-farming method of revenue, and opened the door for the next tier of development.

Mills

Mills require a drop in elevation in order to create the energy from falling water that provides power to turn a waterwheel. Although it is possible to dam a waterway to a millpond, and the necessary height differential, many mills in Vermont were placed on natural falls, which saved would be millers the time and effort involved with damming their chosen waterway.

Mills are not always found at the center of town—in fact they are often closer to the outskirts, but nearly all towns in the Otter Creek watershed have a mill nearby.

The presence of a sawmill provided an affordable means for procuring boards for housing (the alternative being shipping boards from the distant sawmills in New York or New Hampshire—an undertaking that was not a realistic option for the initial settlers of Vermont). Houses built with sawn boards were more desirable and easier to build than houses built out of full logs.

Gristmills also provided an invaluable service to early Vermont settlers. A local gristmill provided a way for area farmers to mill their grain into flour. Gristmills were essential facets of early Vermont society since bread was a chief component of a farmer's diet.

Mills initially provided settlers with products they were otherwise unable to get. Later on mills, particularly woolen mills, in the Otter Creek watershed provided a major source of employment for Vermont residents.

Mills: the Link Between Hydrology and Town Citing

Madison Stebbins

References

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Middlebury Mill History

Middlebury has some of the best falls for mill citing in the Otter Creek Watershed. The town history references cotton and gristmills on the East side of the falls in town (Middlebury Upper) and on the West side a wool mill, gristmill, sawmill and pail factory. Three quarters of a mile down stream at Paper Mill falls, there is a furnace and machine shop on the East side and a paper mill, of mill, sawmill, carding machine and trip hammer shop.

This extensive list of mills all provided for by the falls on a one-mile section of Otter Creek is evidence for the fact that Middlebury has had both the largest population size and highest population density in the region for the vast majority of history. The mills on Middlebury and Paper Mill falls alone provided the industry to create employment and economic opportunity for Middlebury to grow dominantly in the region both in population and economically.

Geology