

MEMORANDUM

TO: Richard Brooks
Norman Williams

FROM: Peter Lavigne

DATE: 3/11/83

RE: Commons in Randolph Center

First settled in 1778 by a frontiersman from Hanover, New Hampshire, Randolph Center was, until 1891, the religious, educational and social center of the area which now encompasses the town and village of Randolph. What is now known as Randolph (Village) was West Randolph until the town meeting was moved from the meetinghouse on the commons in Randolph (now Randolph Center) in 1892. The town of Randolph was chartered by the State of Vermont on petition of Capt. Aaron Storrs and 70 proprietors, mostly from the Hanover-Dresden area.

". . . 5 equal shares or rights to be appropriated to the public uses following, vis, one share or right for the use of a seminary or college within the state; one share or right for the use of the county grammar school throughout this state; one share or right for the first settled minister of the gospel in said Township, to be disposed of for that purpose, as the inhabitants thereof shall direct; one share or right for the support of the ministry; one share or right for the benefit and support of the school or schools within said Township.

The several purposes of these common shares were met, for the most part within the small area now known as Randolph Center (see attached map and notations). The first "meetinghouse" was a log structure built in 1784 on Sunset Hill in Randolph Center "as near as possible" to the geographical center of the Township. The trail running north and south crossed the one running east and west about where the present Randolph Center elementary schoolhouse is located. At this crossing of the trails, the town laid out a cemetery and, just north of it, a three acre Common.¹ In 1791, a new meetinghouse was begun on the east border of the Common and the Town meeting in March voted to move "the Stocks and Sign Post" to the meetinghouse.

"In August of 1791, Mr. John Farnham gave an acre of land and the town bought two acres adjoining and voted to have the three acres cleared "as a parade". This land became the present lot around the meetinghouse through which the present South Randolph road now passes."²

In 1791, when the meetinghouse was constructed, the road was below where the elementary school is now and it crossed alongside the cemetery. From 1791 until 1837 the meetinghouse served both as the meeting place for town affairs and as the church for the Congregational Society. In 1837, the meetinghouse was sold to the Congregational Society and the town secured meeting rights to the basement of the new Church of Equal Rights which was built across the way.

In 1795, 15 - 20 horse sheds were built on the Common near the meetinghouse and served to shelter farm horses until automobiles entered Randolph. Like the pews of the meetinghouse, the sheds were

personal property, frequently transferred by deed as real estate, although the land was never deeded to the owners. "The meeting-house stood on town land; if the structure were removed, [the] site would have reverted to the Town - until 1969, when the Town gave a deed of the site to the Church.³

Until a few years before the Civil War, the Common was occasionally used as a "parade ground" to drill the local militia (able-bodied males from 16 - 60) under their elected officers. Other uses included grazing of the horses, a playground, and a public place of punishment as mentioned above. In 1880, the Church of Equal Rights burned and was rebuilt in 1881 as the present Methodist Church building. A new Town Hall was built on the Common where the school house now stands. The Town Hall burned in 1893; two years after, town meetings were moved to (West) Randolph.

The present elementary school was built in 1903 and the physical layout and use of the Common has changed little since then. Bisected diagonally by the road, the Common now consists of one small triangle behind the schoolhouse and bordering the cemetery and a larger triangle behind the Congregational Church.

The triangle behind the schoolhouse is used as a playground and contains a swing set and sandbox. There is a section of chain link fence along the road, here, to keep the children from wandering. Until recently, 27 maples lined the edge of the road from the schoolhouse nearly to the end of the cemetery. They were removed within the past few years because of damage from road salt. The stumps are still visible.

The triangle behind the church receives little use now. It borders, on two sides, the campus of Vermont Technical College (a subject I will turn to shortly) and is also missing several border

trees. One large stump at the north corner is prominent. The major, and perhaps only, use of this section is summertime softball games by students and community residents. The Common receives almost no maintenance and resembles a hay pasture gone to seed. It is cut once or twice yearly by a local farmer (paid by the Town); the cuttings left on the ground to rot. No Town ordinance refers specifically to the Common.

Two other historical items deserve mention. First, because of the Town's location in the center of the State, early citizens were hopeful that it would be named the State capitol. In anticipation of this, the Main Street right of way was laid out 10 rods (165 feet) wide. Main Street is now off-center in this right of way and the right of way overlaps portions of the Common. Second, the most important, because of the original grant in the Town charter for the use of "a seminary or college", the areas immediately north and east of the Common have, over the years, served as sites for a succession of educational institutions: the Academy in 1804; Randolph State Normal School in 1867; State Agricultural School in 1911; and the Vermont Technical Institute in 1957 which has evolved into the present two year Vermont Technical College. The College campus now extends from the north and east sides of the Common north to the intersection of Main Street and Route 66.

Because of the wide right of way, there is a strip of open grassy "common area" starting from the Congregational Church north along the college campus. A section next to the church is maintained by the College as a community skating rink in the winter

and green benches line the edges. Use and maintenance of the rest of the common area has been a point of dispute between citizens and the College at times. According to Wesley and Miriam Herwig, the College decided to build a "stone wall" along the front section of the campus on Main Street in the mid-1960's. After approximately 300' of the "stone wall" were constructed, the town citizens were up in arms. The "stones" were waste slabs from the Barre granite quarry which were hauled in by large trucks and set in place with cranes. Townspeople were vehement about their ugliness and concern was expressed that it would "wall off" the campus, as well as provided a place for potential rapists to lurk behind at night. Because the wall was within the Main Street right of way, the Town forced the College to remove the wall before it was completed.

I talked at length with the Herwigs about the Town and the Common. Wes is the current president of the Randolph Historical Society and came to Randolph in 1944. Miriam is a native of Vermont and is a past president of the Historical Society. Together, they operate Greenhills Books (which published the books listed below) and live in a large brick house on Main Street which was originally the Lieutenant Governor's residence. According to the Herwigs, the growth of the College has had the biggest impact on the Center over the years—from the early 1950's with 140 - 160 townspeople and 125 students to the present where students far outnumber residents. College cooperation with the Town has largely depended on the personality of the college president and the watchfulness of town residents. Currently, relations are good and joint water and sewer projects have been completed in the past several years. There is talk now about the college eventually expanding to a four year school

and the Herwigs feel that this will exacerbate current community problems affecting the commons and the quality of life: increased traffic and thievery/vandalism, etc.

Traffic impact on the town is substantial from two sources – commuter traffic to and from VTC, and commuter traffic from Brookfield, Chelsea, etc. to I-89 and Randolph. Concurrent with the increase in traffic and growth of the college over the years has been a gradual increase in thievery and vandalism. One of the Historical Society's main events used to be walking tours of historic residences and homeowners are now so afraid of burglary that many homes are no longer available to tours. Construction of a diagonal "bypass" relocation of Route 66 along an old town route, proposed 10 years ago, would alleviate most of the traffic problems and help preserve the community atmosphere. The State highway department has yet to include this project in its planning, however.

The Herwigs expressed a strong desire to preserve the common areas in town and to improve conditions. A suggested first step was planting of salt resistant oaks along the cemetery to replace the lost maples. The last time trees were planted on town property was 1976 when four were funded and planted as a Bicentennial grant. Wesley feels strongly that the Townscape study will be a big help in preserving the Center and expressed strong interest in getting VLS help in planning for the community. He feels that the community is aware of the need to act to preserve the older buildings in town and to solidify the "commons" area.

Notes

- 1 Cooley, p. 15.
- 2 ID. @ p. 49.
3. ID @ p. 52.

Notes on Sources

The following three books were helpful references:

Randolph Vermont Historical Sketches

by Harry H. Cooley, edited by Miriam Herwig
Greenhills Books, 1978.

Potash and Pine --The Formative Years in Vermont History

by Leigh Wright
Greenhills Books, 1977.

Randolph Beginnings

By Miriam Herwig
Greenhills Books, 1981.

Kimball Public library in Randolph has the books mentioned above along with many others on Vermont History, and an up to date folder of municipal ordinances. Hours:

M - Th 2 -5:30

Fri. 2 -8:30

Sat. 9 -12:30

Thurs. 10 -12 noon

Miriam and Wesley Herwig are also curators of the Randolph Museum which open on Sundays from July first through September. They are great sources and anxious to help. Their Books (Greenhills) also published several other town histories and reports which may be useful in the future.

Town Records

Town Clerk's Office
Randolph Village

RANDOLPH

TOWN OF RANDOLPH

Scale 20 Rods to the inch

