

# Vergennes, Vermont

## *A Walking Tour*



*Your Vergennes Walking Tour  
is being presented in three phases:*

*1. Train Station, Kennedy  
Brothers, and Lower Main Street*

*2. Historic Downtown Vergennes and Residential District*

*3. Otter Creek Basin and Falls*



*Brochure created and designed by OCBSHC members Marissa and Courtney Andersen. Historic images, maps and photography provided by the Ferrisburgh Historical Society, photographer Rod Case and the works of Vergennes artist and historian David Aubin.*



Nestled in the Champlain Valley, Vergennes is the smallest and oldest chartered city in Vermont and the third oldest in New England. With sawmills and settlers near the falls of Otter Creek as early as 1764, Vergennes is named for Charles Gravier, the Comte de Vergennes, who served as the French Foreign Minister during the American War for Independence. Due to his personal, financial, and political contributions to the American cause, Ethan Allen suggested the town carry Gravier's name.

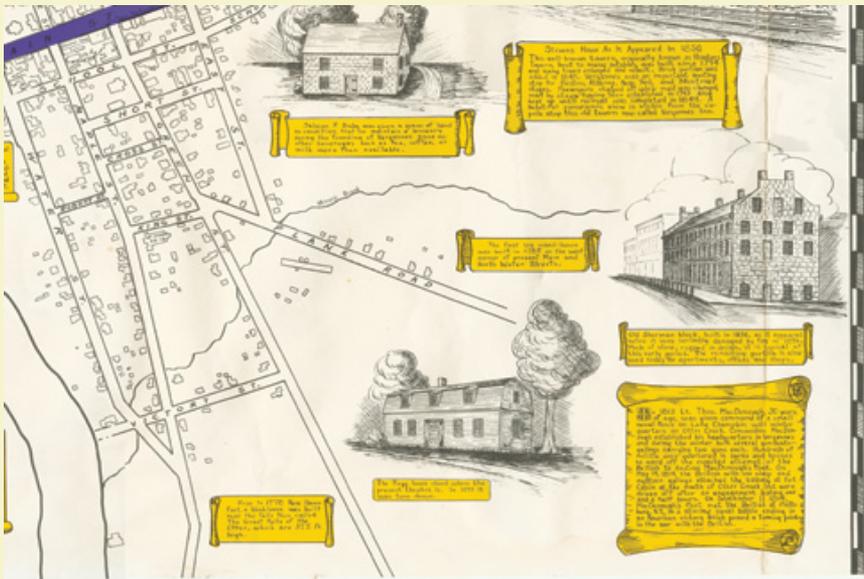
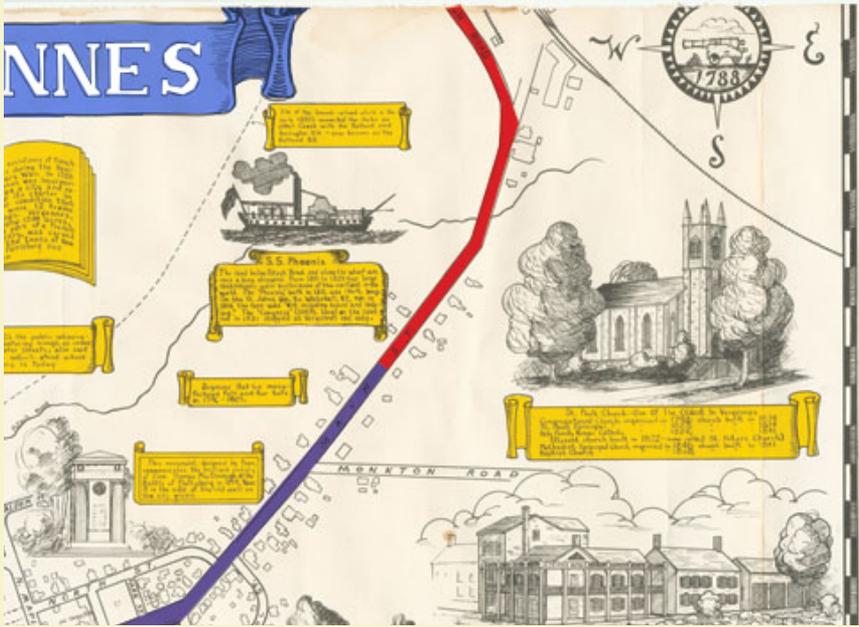
Located 7.7 miles from Lake Champlain on the Otter Creek, the city is located at a junction of an Old Indian trail through the region. Vergennes grew and many manufacturing businesses spanned the banks of the Otter Creek at the falls. Early businesses included the Shade Roller Factory, the Grist Mill, the Monkton Iron Works, the Nail Factory and the Daniels Steamship Line.

The War of 1812 brought national issues to the streets of Vergennes when Lt. Thomas McDonough was assigned to defend Lake Champlain from the British. Choosing the Otter Creek Basin as the site to build his fleet, McDonough brought great activity and enterprise to Vergennes. The ensuing Battle of Plattsburgh in 1814 is still considered one of the greatest victories of the early history of the nation.

Construction of a bank, the federal arsenal and the commercial blocks in Vergennes cemented its future and the commitment of its citizens. By 1834, a long legislative debate between Vergennes and Middlebury had begun growing and merchant needs added to the population of the town. Stone sidewalks were laid and trees planted. In 1838, the town celebrated July 4th with cold water, lemonade and a promising future.

Covering approximately 1,200 acres and home to close to 2,600 people, Vergennes represents American History through the deeds of individuals such as Commodore Thomas McDonough, Philomene Daniels, Matthew Lyon and more. The city's borders form a rectangle, nearly a square with Otter Creek flowing north to Lake Champlain. The falls at thirty-seven feet high serve as a barrier to river traffic and a marker for events both historic and modern. Whether you stay a day or a month, we welcome you to the "Little City" and thank you for exploring the city we proudly call home. You will be touched by the heart, history and openness of the residents that call the Little City their home.



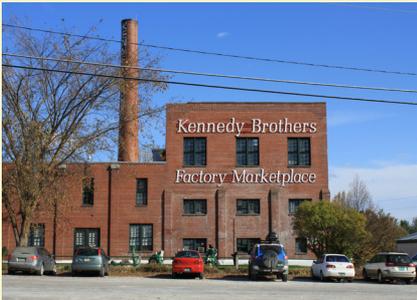


Hand Drawn Map By David Aubin (1960's)

# TRAIN STATION, KENNEDY BROTHERS, AND LOWER MAIN STREET

## *Vergennes Train Station (1849)*

Vermont's oldest train station was constructed in the northeast corner of the town shortly after the Rutland and Burlington Railroad began serving passengers at the Vergennes stop in 1849. Male passengers entered through the left hand door and the ladies had their own entrance to the right of the main window. This wooden structure is the oldest known in Vermont and slated to be restored and moved to a new location one-half a mile a way.



## *Kennedy Brothers*

Originally a creamery and built to ship Vermont dairy products via railroad, this building has been a pottery and woodware factory. Today it houses an intriguing collection of original crafts from many talented Vermont artists and artisans. It also houses several local businesses.

## *Herrick Stevens House*

Arguably one of the most ornate homes ever constructed in the Little City and once owned by national hotel magnate Herrick Stevens, whose brothers ran the Steven's House in town, this house was built in 1869 and is an exceptional example of Italianate style construction with a belvedere roof and matching carriage house.





### *French Second Empire Home (1850)*

Next to the Stevens House and just as unique a home is this 1850 French Second Empire home with a mansard style roof. Today, as a local bed and breakfast, the owners welcome visitors to stay and enjoy their visit to the Little City. Legend has it that the homes were originally built by two ship's captains competing for the love of the same woman.

### *First Cemetery*

This cemetery contains many notable graves including General Samuel Strong (1814 Battle of Plattsburgh), Sherman "Steamboat" Franklin, and the honorable W. Woodbridge. Also buried here are several American Revolution soldiers, including Phinneas Brown, a survivor of the Battle of Saratoga.



### *St. Peter's Catholic Church (1874)*

Constructed in 1874, this church features high Victorian brick Gothic design, with buttresses, pointed arch windows and a spire. It is one of the many impressive and welcoming places of worship that is a part of life in Vergennes.

### *Congregational Church (1835)*

The Vergennes Congregational Church, with its stained and leaded glass and arched wall panels reflects Greek revival styling and is located on South Water Street just down from the Little City Market. The parish buildings now house the Vergennes Food Shelf and the Evergreen Nursery School.



# HISTORIC DOWNTOWN VERGENNES AND RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT



## *Vergennes Opera House (1897)*

Constructed in 1897, at a cost of \$ 12,000, this building continues to serve the dual purpose of City Hall and second-story performance hall. Restored by a grass-roots community effort in 1994, the theater is again alive with music, plays, films and community functions. The stage features a hand painted full-colored vaudeville era style canvas stage curtain. The building hosted such visitors as Presidents Garfield and Hoover and was the site of the Edison Company's premier of the Project in Kinetoscope.

## *St. Paul's Episcopal Church (1835)*

The initial Episcopal Society in Vergennes met in 1811 and following a twenty year effort to raise funds, the City of Vergennes donated the land and at a cost of \$ 3,092, the church was built and subsequently consecrated on January 18, 1835. The bell in the tower, which still calls the parish to worship, rang for the Vermont Legislature in 1798 when Vergennes was the capital of Vermont.



## *Methodist Church (1841)*

Constructed in 1841, this Greek Revival style church includes 1898 Queen Anne styled stained glass windows. Following the War of 1812, this period of Vergennes history was a remarkable time of growth and activity. A recorded carillon plays from the tower every day at 4:30 p.m.



## *Franklin House Stage Hotel (1848)*

The Franklin House Stage Hotel was built by Hiram Adams. The Hotel was a center point for tourist, railroad and steamship passengers who came to stay and to dance in the third floor ballroom. The building features the late Victorian period design, including windows and facing design. It also houses local businesses that have been a part of the Main Street for over 100 years.





## *Monument to Commodore Thomas McDonough*

Resting on the town green, the Commodore Thomas McDonough Monument provides brief information about the critical role played in Vergennes with the building of the fleet at the falls and the Battle of Plattsburgh in 1814, which was the turning point in the War of 1812. During the summer and fall months, the park is the scene for farmers' markets, the Strawberry Festival, French Heritage Day, Vergennes Day and weekly concerts given by the Vergennes City Band at the Susan O'Daniel Bandstand. Homes surrounding the park feature Gothic revival style and pointed details with ornate cut-outs.



## *Stevens House (1797)*

Originally constructed in 1797 and added on to by C.J. Stevens, who purchased it in 1848, the Stevens House has been a gathering point during all phases in the life of the historic Little City. Restyled in 1870, the building now boasts an Italianate design and



has lost its original Greek revival look. Adding the brick building next to it and the livery attached to it increased the destinations for those who stayed there of came through town to meet and do business within its walls. The Stevens House was one of three hotels ran at the height of county business during the late 1800's and has welcomed presidents and even the body of historic figures like John Brown on its way home a burial in New York State.



## *Ira Bingham's Home (1879)*

Situated and built in 1879, the French Second Empire styled home with dormered mansard roof is today an apartment complex for many local residents. Occupying a key corner of Main Street, its many windows look out at life in the Little City.

## *The Colonel Walter Scranton Farmer's National Bank (1880)*

History records that after being denied a loan from the Vergennes National Bank, Colonel Scranton organized the Farmers' National Bank in 1880 with start up capital of \$ 75,000. While the bank eventually closed in 1901, after Scranton was convicted of embezzling \$ 90,000 of funds, the building is a wonderful example of Italianate porches and brackets and Queen Ann windows.





### *The Bank of Vergennes (1842)*

While the entry way has changed several times since 1842, this brick building continues to serve the Little City as a bank. Each season, the array of flowering plants and blooms outside the bank delight locals and visitors alike.

### *Historic Basin Block & Russell Block (1836)*



The Historic Basin Block was once three stories high. It was ravaged by the Fire of 1958, and has seen many different businesses use its space to welcome visitors to the Little City. In three blocks of shops in brick or gray stone current storefronts offer a diversity of goods and services. Many of the shops are located along a unique elevated sidewalk and range from— a plumbing and heating company, a fuel company and two charity thrift shops — to a bistro, two art galleries, and a dress boutique.



### *Federal Style Home (1860)*

This 1860 Federal Style Home reflects the changing uses of the buildings in town but also the residents' preserving the unique heritage of New England's third oldest city.

## *Bixby Memorial Library (1911)*

In 1911, Vergennes business man William Gove Bixby left a \$ 300,000 estate gift to the town to build a library that would honor “an aged colored woman” who started a library in the earliest days of the town. The building was designed by New York City architect G. Frederick Frost to reflect the neo-classical Greek Revival style and features a Tiffany-styled stained-glass dome, Indiana sandstone brick columns at a cost of \$80,000, and Italianate marble. Today the library houses a collection of books, and other media plus a museum of local artifacts that delight visitors of all ages with its unique program offerings.



## *Red Brick Store (1825)*

Constructed as a store in 1825, the building today serves as an apartment complex and the store has moved to new quarters across the street. Its windows face the Vergennes Falls and Basin area as well as serve as a perfect vantage point witnessing festivities in the Little City.

## *Strong House Inn (1839)*

Built in 1839 in the Federal style with Greek Revival influences, the Strong House Inn welcomes visitors, tour groups, cyclists, and those seeking a wonderful site for a wedding or a stay in New England’s third oldest city.



## *General Samuel Strong Inn (1796)*

The Strong family was one of the first to come and invest in the future of the Little City. Besides building the oldest home in Vergennes, John Strong established the first grist and saw mills on the galls in 1763, and his sons Asa, Samuel and Luke build some of the earliest homes in the city. Featuring a Georgian and Federal style, the landmark is due to be renovated.



## *Double Brick Greek Revival Homemaker (1847)*

This main street home has served many generations and was long linked to agriculture and a large farm that is no longer operating.



# OTTER CREEK BASIN AND FALLS



## *Hydroelectric Powerhouse (1911)*

This Hydroelectric Power House was a part of Vermont's earliest hydro electric system and is currently used by Green Mountain Power to merge water and power for community needs.



## *Shade Roller Factory (1865)*

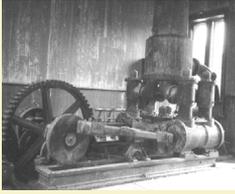
The Shade Roller Factory was once a part of a larger complex of buildings that made shades for windows.



## *Gristmill (1878)*

The Gristmill was an earlier mill site and is now restored for apartments and offices.





### *The Pumphouse (1874)*

The Pumphouse contains the only existing Flanders Pump left in America and was recently restored.



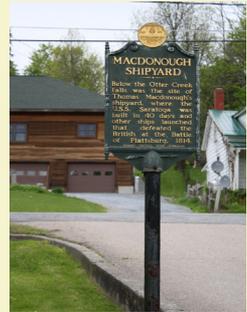
### *LF Benton Office (1865)*

The LF Benton Office has been in use for over a hundred years of the history of the Little City. Currently in use by a direct descendant of the original family, the building continues to serve as an anchor point of interest on the falls and in the vitality of the Vergennes community.



### *McDonough's Shipyard (1813)*

Located at the base of the falls in Vergennes, McDonough's shipyard was the scene of the building of a fleet used by Commodore Thomas McDonough in the Battle of Plattsburgh, a turning point in the War of 1812, linking Vergennes to a pivotal moment in the early history of our nation.



Lit up for a special occasion, the Vergennes Falls welcomes all. (Rod Case Photo)

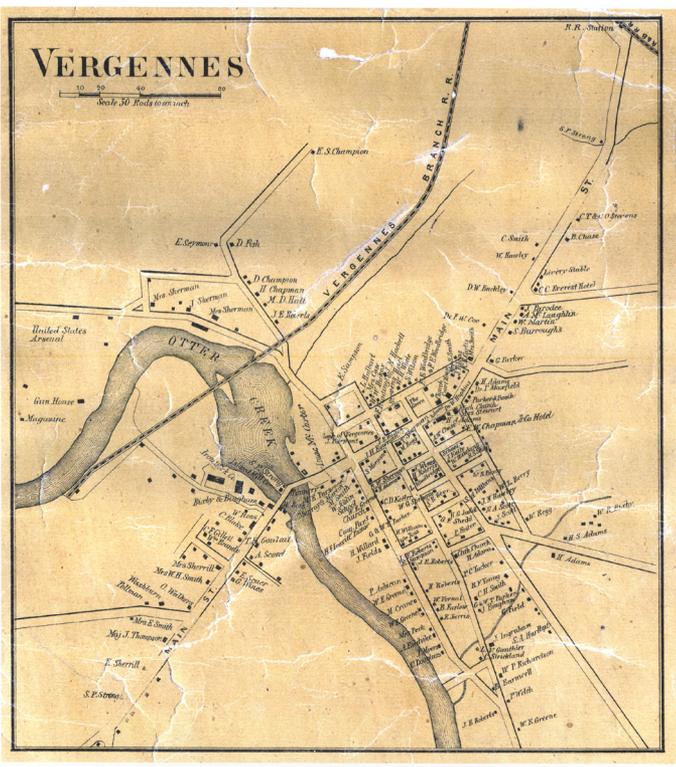
# HISTORIC BACKGROUND OF THE LITTLE CITY...

The new nation of America was at war with England in 1812. The British Navy had “pressed” sailors into their employ and America had provided Napoleon with materials of war. Using its superior naval forces to blockade the Atlantic seaports and attempting to control all shipping, a battle front loomed on the great waterways of The Great Lakes and Lake Champlain.

On October 8, 1813 Thomas McDonough enters into the fracas when he was given command of the forces on Lake Champlain by U.S. Navy Secretary William Jones. He was to gain control of the lake from the British who not only outnumbered but outgunned the small U.S. force on the lake. Selecting Vergennes as the site for the construction of a fleet, McDonough commissioned boat builders Adam and Noah Brown to proceed with all due haste and the result was that the 26 gun sloop Saratoga was built in forty days from standing timber to completed ship. Concerned that British firepower would still be superior, McDonough also petitioned Navy and got an additional 20 gun brig, the Eagle that was also constructed in record time of 19 days from the laying of the keel at the falls.

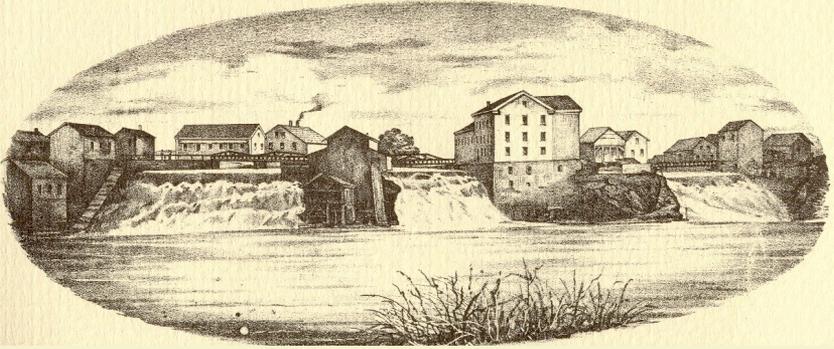
On September 11th, 1814, with favorable winds and the American fleet consisting of the Saratoga, the Eagle, the Preble and other assorted smaller boats, the McDonough was able to defeat Captain George Downie’s British fleet in a battle that lasted two hours and twenty minutes. News of the British defeat was sent to England on September 11, 1814 in a communiqué from Captain Pring, Commander of the USS Saratoga of the British Navy. He wrote, “Sir, the painful task of making you acquainted with the circumstances attending the capture of His Majesty’s squadron yesterday, by that of the American under the Commodore Thomas McDonough, it grieves me to state, becomes my duty to perform, from the ever to be lamented loss of that worthy and gallant officer Captain Downie who unfortunately fell early into action.”

While military historians hail the significance of this event, most of us are left to wonder why there is such fanfare about a two hour battle on Lake Champlain. The answer comes from the lake’s location and the role it played in the British plan for victory. The British had planned to seize and have power over the seacoast of Maine and seize New Orleans as well, preventing the use of the Mississippi and blocking off the northeast by controlling the waterways leading to and connecting with the ocean. McDonough’s victory forced the British to retreat northward and secret peace negotiations were already underway in Paris, France. Control of Lake Champlain and the valley gave the American delegation bargaining tools to assist in their cause. As Historian Ray Bearse remarked, “It was the base of Naval activities at McDonough’s fleet on Lake Champlain that Vermont was most vitally involved on the struggle... in the yards at Vergennes, on the navigable Otter Creek, as the place in which to winter (1813-1814), and above all added to his fleet. Vermonters appropriately played an important part in the engagement and the naval victory.” Even President Theodore Roosevelt would attribute great significance to the event when he penned, “McDonough—Down to the time of the Civil War, he is the greatest figure in our naval history.”



“The Little City With The Big Heart”

The Vergennes Falls Circa 1853



# Notes



Vergennes is a destination in all four seasons.



World's First Steamboat Captain Philomene Daniels and the Water Lily.