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Life in the Past Lane: Courtesy of Vermont's 1 percent


By Mark Bushnell

Great wealth usually is mostly about luck: the luck to be born into the right family, know the right people or go into the right line of work at the right time. Perhaps it's no coincidence that "fortune" can mean either luck or money.

But often the recipients of great fortune (both kinds) don't see the role luck plays and feel no compulsion to share the wealth. That was certainly the case with many of the super-wealthy during the Gilded Age (the late 1800s), an era of great financial inequality. It was a time when financiers and industrialists amassed stunning riches and there was no federal income tax.

Yet there were some in Vermont during this era who saw that their great fortunes had given them the tremendous power to help others. You might call them the good guys of the Gilded Era. (I'll get to the bad guys in my next column.)

A park



Take, for example, Frederick Billings. Born in Royalton in 1823, Billings grew up there and later in Woodstock. After attending the University of Vermont, he studied law and was admitted to the bar in Woodstock. But he wasn't ready to settle down.

He traveled to California, arriving in San Francisco in the spring of 1849 just as gold was discovered. He set up a law practice, supposedly San Francisco's first, and had as an early client Gen. John Sutter, on whose property that first gold was discovered.

Billings returned to Woodstock in 1861 and brought with him an interest in the growing field of railroads. He purchased one-twelfth of the Northern Pacific Railway, which was cutting a route to the Pacific, and later served as its president. His law practice had made him wealthy; his railroading investment made him fabulously so.

But Billings maintained an interest in Vermont. As a boy in Woodstock, he had lived near the mansion of George Perkins Marsh, the pioneering environmentalist. Billings had read his groundbreaking book "Man and Nature" and accepted its thesis that humankind has having a devastating impact on the land.

How could he not? Billings saw it when he looked at the nearby hillsides that since his childhood had been denuded of their trees, the soil left to erode. The degradation reminded him of mining towns out West. He purchased the former Marsh homestead from its later owners and began practicing principles Marsh had preached.

Billings worked to reforest Mount Tom, which looms over Woodstock, and introduced European tree species — the European larch, Norway spruce and Scots pine — to the mix of trees that eventually spread across the hillside.

He also sought to find ways to help move Vermont agriculture away from sheep farming, which was in steep decline. Vermont farmers couldn't compete with Western farmers, who could produce wool more cheaply. Billings bought Jersey milk cows and established a scientifically managed herd on his land. He saw dairy farming as the future of Vermont agriculture.

Billings also thought of his alma mater and his hometown. He built UVM a library and donated Marsh's personal library to its collections. In Woodstock, he paid for reconstruction of the old Congregational Church; he paid for construction of a new church in Billings, Mont., which had been named in the railroad man's honor.

His Woodstock home eventually passed to his granddaughter Mary French. It is now the site of Vermont's first and only national park, which honors the conservation ethic of its previous owners, Marsh, Billings and Mary French and her husband, Laurance Rockefeller.

A farm

Webb

William Seward Webb left a similar legacy in Vermont, though that might not have been his intention. Webb was interested in horses and, like Billings, wanted to show Vermont farmers a better way. It's just that those farmers didn't agree that his way was better.

Webb believed the Hackney's versatility made it a winner. Farmers could use it by day to pull their plow or by night and on Sundays to draw their carriage in style. Webb built a magnificent horse-breeding barn large enough to hold nearly four football fields on his vast Shelburne estate. But Vermonters were wedded to their Morgan horses and saw no reason to switch.

Perhaps it's no surprise that Vermonters cast a wary eye on Webb's grand agricultural experiment. He wasn't like them, by a long shot. Born in 1851 in New York City to a wealthy family, Webb was educated by private tutors and later at a military school and at Columbia College. He then studied medicine in Vienna, Paris and Berlin. Upon his return to the United States, however, he practiced medicine only for a few years before forming a Wall Street brokerage with one of his brothers.

He married the heiress Lila Vanderbilt, whose father asked him to quit the brokerage to run the Wagner Palace Car Co., which made train cars. Once in the world of railroading, Webb founded the Adirondack & St. Lawrence Railroad and later became president and principal shareholder of the Rutland Railroad.

Webb began creating his estate in Shelburne during the mid-1880s. He bought up area farms and combined them to form his 3,800-acre property, which became known as Shelburne Farms. At the center of the property was that centerpiece of Gilded Age life, a grand mansion.

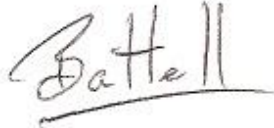
Webb eventually became interested in state politics. His wealth and station in society earned him respect. He won election to the state Legislature and announced plans to run

for governor. But Republican leaders saw the move as presumptuous: He hadn't paid his dues. So Webb withdrew.

Things went more smoothly on the farm, which the Webbs insisted promote the latest agricultural practices. Operating as essentially an agricultural research center, the Webbs' farm produced everything from eggs, meat and dairy products to fruits and vegetables.

Shelburne Farms continues today. Now it is a nonprofit environmental education center with a focus on sustainable agriculture. So what if the Hackney horse never caught on?

A mountain

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Battell". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the word "A mountain".

Money came easily to Joseph Battell. Perhaps that's why he was so generous with it. Battell grew up in Middlebury, where he was born in 1839. At a young age, he inherited a fair fortune. The money apparently came from his grandfather, also named Joseph, who had been a wealthy merchant in Connecticut. The grandfather was said to be publicly minded, as was Battell's father, Philip. Perhaps that partly explains Battell's later generosity.

While a student at Middlebury College, Battell was diagnosed with weak lungs and sent to the nearby hill town of Ripton to recuperate. He was so enraptured with the beauty of the slopes surrounding his rented house that he decided to buy it. He would later buy the hills as well.

He began inviting friends to visit him at his new farmhouse and eventually turned the home into an inn, which he named the Breadloaf Inn.

One day while at home, Battell supposedly watched in horror as a logger cut trees in a nearby woodlot. The state was 80 percent deforested at the time, and loggers were doing almost no replanting. Battell's worldview, like that of Billings, had been transformed by Marsh's book. He approached the logger and bought the woodlot on the spot.

It was the beginning of a career in conservation. Battell used his great wealth to buy all the land visible from his inn, a swath running from Brandon to Waterbury. He would eventually amass more than 34,000 acres.

Late in life, Battell, who never married, began to give away his possessions. He gave the state the top of Camel's Hump. And upon his death in 1915, Battell left Middlebury College the rest of his landholdings, roughly 30,000 acres, most of which is now part of the 629,000-acre Green Mountain National Forest.

Blessed with a fortune, Joseph Battell chose to spend it in a way that mystified some contemporaries.

"Some folks pay \$10,000 for a painting and hang it on the wall where their friends can see it," Battell explained, "while I buy a whole mountain for that much money and it is hung up by nature where everybody can see it and it is infinitely more handsome than any picture ever painted."