

HOW DO YOU GET A WHALE IN VERMONT?

The Unlikely Story of Vermont's Official State Fossil

by
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Chapter 4 -The Walk Along the Tracks

Retired ship captain George Thorp had spent a lifetime at sea. He was not a rich man but he had managed his money well, and when the land winds blew him to a small farming settlement in western Vermont, he made the voyage gladly. The year was 1799. He had come to the small village of Charlotte in the Champlain lowlands to settle the estate of his late cousin, John Thorp, who had emigrated from Ireland four years earlier and had set up a mercantile and lumber business along the main road between Burlington and Rutland. The choice lands along Lake Champlain were being settled rapidly and Thorp's business prospered.

In addition to settling the estate, George Thorp sweetened the deal by marrying his cousin's grieving widow and settling down on the fertile lowlands adjacent to Thompson's Point. Very quickly he adapted to the life of husband, farmer, entrepreneur and country gentleman, building a house and small store on a quiet lane about a mile east of the lake in the morning shadow of Mt. Philo.

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In August of 1849, the last stretch of the Rutland-Burlington railroad was nearing completion a short distance west of the Thorp farm. Two rail companies, the Rutland-Burlington and the Vermont Central were in fierce competition to complete the first railroad through the Green Mountains, connecting Boston to Burlington and eventually to Montreal. The Vermont Central was following the mid-State route through the Winooski Valley while the Rutland-Burlington was following the old stage coach route, crossing over the southern pass at Mt. Holly.

Both crews were composed primarily of hard-working, hard-drinking Irishmen driven from their homeland by the potato famine that had decimated northern Europe. Spurred on by promises of whiskey and bonuses, in two short years they had pushed west from Bellows Falls, penetrated the core of the Green Mountains at Mt. Holly and then dropped down into the Champlain Valley at Rutland. The port city of Burlington, the final terminus, was now less than 20 miles away.

In 1849, the Thorp family business was run by Captain Thorp's son, John. The farm and store remained a prosperous enterprise. Work on the railroad proceeded adjacent to his farm and over the course of the summer, John Thorp developed a friendly relationship with the railroad workers and often wandered down from his house to chat with overseers and observe the on-going construction.

Just north of Thorp's home, the railroad encountered a particularly bothersome grade over a small rise leading towards Burlington. William Wright had been contracted to grade and fill a three mile stretch of track from Thorp's Crossing northward through what was then known as Barber's Swamp. It was a wet, mucky area, where the thick vegetation retained much water. The workmen were moving slowly through the heavy wet sand and sticky-blue clay that underlay much of the area. The clay was thick and wet, sticking to their shovels and boots and threatening in spots to suck them in like quicksand. Almost as quickly as they dug, the area beneath their feet would fill with water. Their pickaxes and shovels would often strike submerged roots and rocks which impeded their progress, requiring them to drive the pick into the mud with all their weight and then quickly hurl whatever they had struck into the growing pile behind them. In this manner, the process of filling the swamp with a long straight ribbon of sand and gravel proceeded slowly and laboriously.

The warm August afternoon was pleasant. Cicadas buzzed in the tall green grass as Thorp strolled along the worksite amidst the clanking of tools and the labored shouts of workers. July had been an unusually hot month, with many days into the 90's, rare for Vermont. The weather in August had been more seasonal, although a bit wetter than normal. But with no recent stretches of hot sticky weather, the hordes of mosquitoes that had made life so unbearable in the spring and early summer were now greatly diminished.

With the sharp eye of a nosy Vermonter, Thorp walked slowly, scanning the piles of sand and clay unearthed by the busy workmen. After traveling about a quarter mile from the road his attention was drawn to what appeared to be an odd bone or a shattered root protruding from the pile of drying muck. It was smooth and leathery and fleshy brown in color. As he brushed clay from it, it had what appeared to be unusual indentations and grooves. It seemed to be part of a skull, although the skull of *what* he couldn't imagine. Some of the workers noticed him examining the objects, and mentioned how they had struck upon the skeleton of an animal earlier in the day and were perplexed as to how a horse or cow could have become buried at such a depth. Thorp asked the workers to show him the spot where the bones had been found and after further examination, he could see that the remains of what appeared to be an entire

skeleton were still encased in the mud extending roughly perpendicular to, and away from, the tracks - into the blue clay.

As a farmer, Thorp knew immediately that these bones were not those of a horse or a cow, or for that matter, of any other animal that he had ever encountered. Thorp recalled reading that the bones of a fossil elephant had been discovered the previous summer in Mt. Holly during construction of the same railroad. The bones had been sent to Harvard University for examination by renowned geologist Louis Agassiz, and then had been returned to naturalist Zadock Thompson at the University of Vermont in Burlington.

Professor Zadock Thompson had already developed a reputation as an astute authority on natural history in Vermont and had authored a number of books and almanacs on the subject. He was the local expert on everything from birds to weather to physical geography. Whenever an answer or identification was required, Thompson was the authority to be consulted. Thorp approached Wright with the bones and asked if work might be discontinued at that particular site until Thompson could be contacted and shown the remains. Reluctantly Wright agreed and moved his crews to a different portion of the cut while two men were dispatched by wagon to Burlington with the box of bones for Professor Thompson.