

Finding Ancient Roads with Old Maps

by David Allen (d/b/a “Old Maps”)

November 2007

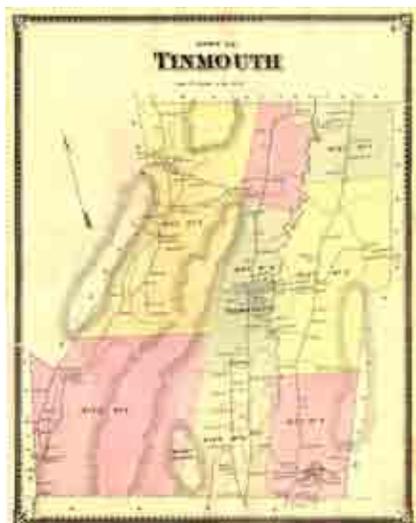
Have you ever walked down an old road in the woods and wondered about who built the old stone walls? Or what sort of building stood on the ruins of a foundation by a mountain brook? Answers to these questions can be found on old maps of Vermont, many of which show the routes of old roads. Some 19th century maps even name homeowners and show the locations of sawmills, schools and other sites.

Right now Ancient Roads are a hot topic in Vermont, because of recent legislation requiring that towns identify all their old roads by 2009. Many of the roads used by our forebears centuries ago are now just footpaths in the woods. Some aren't obvious on the ground, and only appear as paper records from the past. The new law will dissolve all such “ancient roads” which the towns do not publicly identify by the deadline.

The simplest way to check out an old road is to look at one of the mid-19th century town maps – notably the “Walling” and “Beers” maps. These maps – which covered every town - show all roads and the names of all homeowners – a remarkable gift to history. Many people know about the “Beers” because they came in atlas format and are fairly easy to copy. There are 12 atlases (actually 11 atlases and one map) made by the F.W. Beers company of NYC between 1869 and 1878. But before these atlases came the county wall maps – large affairs measuring about 5 feet square which were the first complete road maps of Vermont. Businessmen from New York – most prominently Henry F. Walling – sent their agents to Vermont to make maps of every road and every house site.



Tinmouth in 1854 - Scott wall map



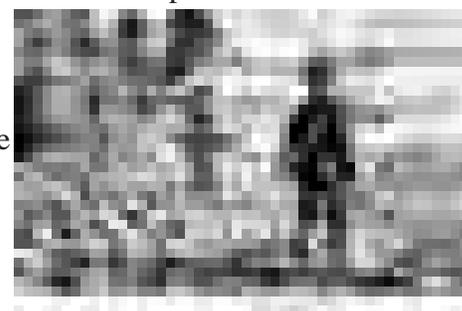
Tinmouth in 1869 - Beers atlas



Close-ups of Tinmouth Centre - 1854 (top) and 1869. Beers map (1869) more accurate & detailed

The 1850s mapmakers would travel down a road with a compass mounted on a wheeled odometer which looked like a wheelbarrow. Every turn of the wheel was recorded in a clock-like device which kept track of the distance traveled. The surveyor would get out the compass at every bend in the road to measure direction which he wrote in a notebook. Maps made by this method are generally accurate, typically more so in a small area than over an entire town. Maps made of level areas such as the Champlain Valley are more accurate than those made of mountain towns.

The 1850s surveyors would tell the farmers that their names would be on the forthcoming map – and that they should order a copy to be sure they would get one of these remarkable new maps. The cost for a typical county map was \$5.00 per copy – a sizeable amount of money. Some of the advertising stressed that all property owners would be shown on the map, “...carefully including those who order the work...” (1856 advt in Middlebury Register). The later “Beers” atlas mapmakers would have used similar measuring and sales techniques.



These maps are the best evidence that a road was public in the past. The Beers and Wallings are quite accurate and, because they show farmsteads, indicate that the roads are in fact public. Most roads leading to or past houses are public roads.

There are other maps besides these two, but fewer details come from them. These include the old USGS topographical maps, the 1880s “Gazetteer” maps”, the 1860 map of the State of Vermont, and several less detailed maps – such as the 1810 and 1796 “Whitelaw” maps and the 1789 Blodget map. Principal villages also had bird’s eye views (1880s) and fire insurance maps (early 1900s).

The old USGS topographical maps are quite useful, especially the early ones. These are the federal government’s highly accurate maps which mapped all the roads and land forms – the shapes of the land. It took a long time to make a good topographic map, so was almost 60 years before the whole state was mapped.. The southern and western towns were mapped first, starting in 1895 (Brattleboro).



A useful aid to studying old roads is to compare, side-by-side, the old USGS maps with the Beers atlas maps and the 1986 Vermont state AOT map, as all three of these are fairly accurate - they show the same roads in about the same locations, and all three show house site locations. The state’s 1986 maps - unfortunately not maintained any more - depict every house and barn and show the public roads which served them by different patterns depending on the road. If you see a modern road on the 1986 map which is notably different than one shown on the 1870s Beers map or the 1900s USGS, it is likely that the road was moved. In a case like this, you should go out to the actual road site and see if you can find evidence of the older road. Be careful using old maps, because they can be inaccurate, but the following general statements apply. The old USGS maps were made to quite exacting standards for the time, and the Beers atlas maps are close behind them in accuracy. The Beers atlases are typically more accurate than the older wall maps from the 1850s.

Another series of maps are the county “Gazetteer” maps – small road maps bound inside books published in the mid 1880s. These maps were probably copied from the earlier Beers maps (most mapmakers copy other maps - why not?), but they do help with homeowner and business names. Every road is given a number on the map, and the text of a gazetteer has business listings and various other facts which refer to the roads (eg John Aldous, farmer, lives on road 18; rents 200 acres of farmland from Luke Hulett of Wallingford.)



TINMOUTH.

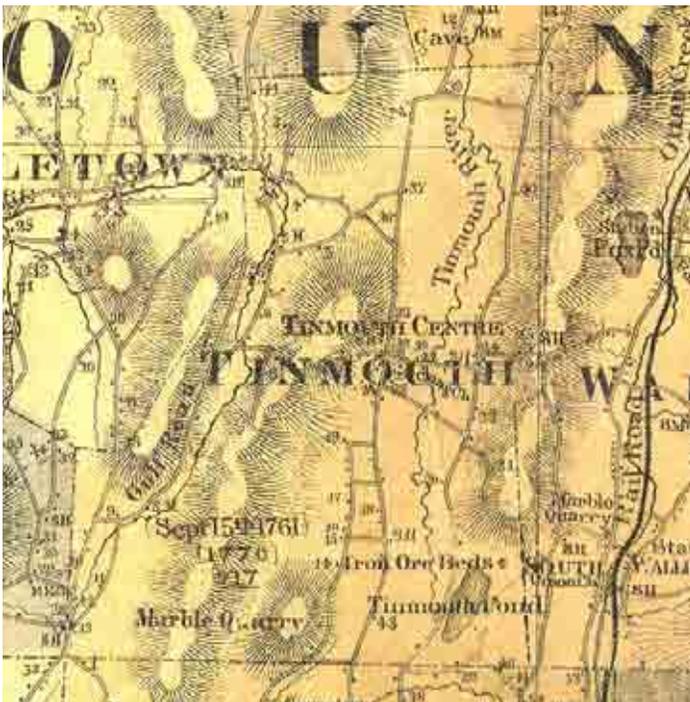
Railroad Stations are Clarendon, seven miles north-east; Wallingford, four miles east; West Rutland, eleven miles north, and Rutland, thirteen miles north-east.

(For Abbreviations, &c., See page 257.)

Aldous John, (Tinmouth,) r 18, farmer rents of E. and Luke Hulett, of Wallingford, 200.
 Allen Oliver, (Tinmouth,) r 27, farm laborer.
 Baker Elias S., (Danby Four Corners,) r 26, carpenter.
 BALLARD JOHN T., (Tinmouth,) r 5, dairy 30 cows, breeder and dealer in Hambletonian and Black Hawk horses, and farmer 280.
 Ballard Wm. (Tinmouth,) r 26, farmer.

The Gazetteer maps have road numbers, and the landowner listings include the road (“r 18”) they live on.

There is a very detailed state map produced in 1860 (the first edition was 1859) by H.F. Walling, the publisher of 8 of the county maps. This state map shows every road but because of size limitations, only shows a few owner names on the map itself. Even though it is based on the county maps made during the previous six years, there are differences. Walling added a number of site names, especially manufacturing sites, and identified by name the subscribers to the map – via a table keyed to numbered house sites. For some towns there are quite a few subscribers. He also shows historical features, prominent among them the Crown Point Military



TINMOUTH.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 O. Cramton, Farmer. 2 J. & J. Newton, Sawyers. 3 H. Thomson, Farmer. 4 C. Cramton, Farmer. 5 T. B. Norton, Farmer. 6 A. C. Norton, Farmer. 7 L. E. Woodruff, Farmer. 8 C. A. Young, Farmer. 9 L. W. Day, Farmer. 10 R. Coleman, Farmer. 11 B. Cook, Farmer. 12 William Grover, Farmer. 13 E. E. Lillie, Farmer. 14 A. N. Cramton, Farmer. 15 Anna Valentine, Farmer. 16 J. B. Valentine, Farmer. 17 William Rogers, Farmer. 18 M. Nicholson, Farmer. 19 L. Cobb, Farmer. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 20 S. Phillips, Farmer. 21 D. Clark & E. Clark, Farmers. 22 L. Cobb, Farmer. 23 H. D. Noble, Farmer. 24 Waldo, Farmer. 25 H. Hopkins, Farmer. 26 R. Hopkins, Farmer. 27 M. Capron, Farmer. 28 J. B. Valentine, Farmer. 29 L. Rice, Jr.'s Store. 30 T. Johnson, Shoemaker. 31 M. A. Gates, Farmer. 32 N. B. Congdon, Farmer. 33 George A. Jackson, Farmer. 34 L. Rice. 35 H. H. Clark, J. Willmoth, Farmers. 36 A. S. Cramton, Farmer. 37 H. Woodruff, Farmer. 38 A. Noble, Farmer. 39 A. Noble, Farmer. 40 J. H. Round, Farmer. 41 S. D. Williams, Farmer. 42 Henry Crosby, Farmer. 43 J. E. Woods, Farmer. Ulysses Crosby, Farmer.
--	---

The 1860 state map by H.F. Walling has subscriber lists keyed to the map. Walling used the 1854 Scott map as the basis for this map, but made some corrections and additions. The geographical features are helpful, as are occasional road names, such as “Gulf Road”.

Road, the east-west road built a century earlier to link the Connecticut River with Lake Champlain. The road networks within towns are for the most part the same as the county maps, but there are changes – notably for the four southern counties mapped between 1854 and 1856. Those first county maps - notably the “non-

Wallings” (Windham, Windsor and Rutland county) seem to have been somewhat poorly drawn. It is especially worthwhile to consult the 1860 state map to augment the county wall maps for those counties.



1789 Blodget Map



1796 Whitelaw Map

EXPLANATION.

— County Divisions	□ Grist Mills
— Contested Lines	○ Saw Mills
— Publick Roads	♁ Iron Works
♁ Melting Houses	F. Falls
♁ Forts	⊕ Mountains or Remains

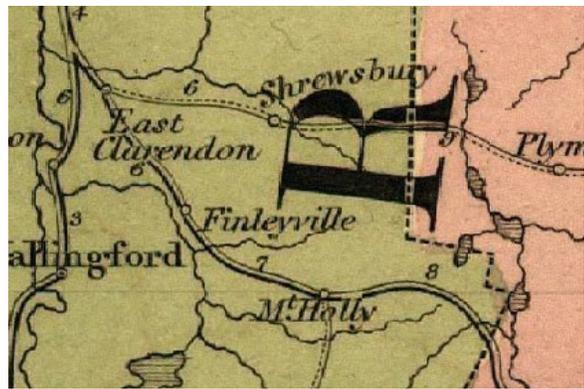
it

The pre- 1850 maps of Vermont have much less detail - as was very expensive to produce maps in the early 1800s. Walling’s 1860 map was the successor to the Whitelaw state map – first published in 1796, and revised several times later. The Whitelaw map and several other early maps are useful for seeing major roads and town outlines

only. The Whitelaw map was reissued in 1810, 1821 and xxx. There are differences among these editions, but not in every town. For much of the state, the engravings are unchanges through the years, even though roads were being built, so you must be careful using general maps like these. The “main road” feature of these state maps is quite important for studying old town roads as it helps road researchers isolate possible turnpikes and very old roads from the more common town roads created in the early 1800s.

Vermont’s 1789 “Blodget” map - a remarkably detailed map for its time period - should be used by anyone doing old road research. It is similar in nature to the 1796 Whitelaw map - but it is quite different. It is really the first good “road map” of Vermont, because it shows major roads in much of the state. The map also shows prominent mills, taverns, and even doctors houses - many with the names of the owners. It is not comprehensive - there are may blank towns shown where we know roads did exist, and has different information than Whitelaw’s but even less. It is useful because of its age and the fact that it maps Vermont before it was a part of the USA. It is in fact the first “state” map made of any of the United States after British rule was ended.

There is also a 1839 “Post Office” map of New England by David Burr which shows the mail routes – also presumably the main roads. The Burr map is also useful because it highlights the principal villages, Distances in miles are labelled on most roads. No town lines are shown.



In closing, remember that these maps are just clues to Ancient Roads. They aren't official documents, but because they were made in the early days they are wonderful evidence for anyone wondering about Ancient Roads in their town.