

# CAUSES & CONSEQUENCES:

## *The Civil War Home Front in Woodstock, Vermont*



*“You can’t have Gettysburg, Antietam, and Manassas without Woodstock.”*

– Howard Coffin, Civil War historian and author

Nestled in the foothills of Vermont’s Green Mountains, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park offers the first-ever National Park Service walking tour interpreting the Civil War Home Front. This walking tour through the historic streets of Woodstock explores the experiences of civilians swept up in the maelstrom of civil war. The tour is also the inspiration for a larger collaborative effort between the National Historical Park, educators, students, and civic organizations to better understand the indelible mark left by the Civil War on this small community and on the nation.



*Elderly veterans on Central Street,  
Woodstock, Vermont, 1907.*

COURTESY WOODSTOCK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# HOME FRONT:

## *The Civil War Walking Tour of Woodstock, Vermont*

*284 boys left Woodstock to fight in the Civil War; 39 never came back. A generation of veterans spent a lifetime healing their physical and psychological wounds. They returned to a state where exhausted fields made farm life harder than ever. In the end, as many as half of the soldiers that did return to Vermont left for factories and greener, deeper fields elsewhere. As for African-American veterans, many of their gains, particularly in the South, were reversed by segregation and disenfranchisement. Abraham Lincoln's promise at Gettysburg of a "new birth of freedom" would take another century of struggle to be fully realized.*



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**T**he quiet aftermath on the bloodied Gettysburg battlefield, the echoing gunshot in Ford's Theatre, and the solemn quiet of Appomattox Court House at the close of four years of war are the Civil War images familiar to many Americans. Less familiar is the home front experience of civilians caught up in those extraordinary times.

To bring those home front stories to life, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in Woodstock, Vermont offers the first-ever National Park Service walking tours of the Civil War home front. The tour route includes some of Woodstock's most significant historic sites, including sites associated with the Underground Railroad, abolition meetings, the town's free African-American community, and Woodstock's pivotal role in Vermont's mobilization to war. Most of the buildings along the tour were standing when the first shot was fired on Fort Sumter in April of 1861. "I don't know a better place in the northern states to examine home front history," declared Howard Coffin, noted Vermont Civil War historian and author.

***This is the story of the severest test of American democracy.***

On Elm Street stands the home of former Senator Jacob Collamer, who committed himself to preventing a breakup of the republic and then to restoring the union. Next door is Woodstock's First Congregational Church, which, in 1836, declared slavery "a violation of the law of God altogether and at variance with our Declaration of Independence."

***This is the story of a village, state, and nation at war.***

In the center of Woodstock is the former office of Vermont's Adjutant General, Peter Washburn. Acting effectively as the "Pentagon of Vermont," Washburn's office was the nexus for recruiting and deploying troops and distributing casualty lists to every corner of Vermont.

***This is the story of those left behind.***

Woodstock was the center of commerce and community for the surrounding areas. With fathers, brothers, and sons gone, the task of managing farms or businesses and raising funds and supplies for troops was left primarily to women.

***This is the story of "a new birth of freedom."***

In River Street Cemetery, granite and marble headstones memorialize African-Americans such as Austin Hazard, a Woodstock laborer and butcher, and Charles Wentworth, the town barber. Both Wentworth and Hazard went to war in 1861 in the only capacity they were permitted to serve, as officer's servants. Two years later, Wentworth, Hazard and 9 other Woodstock African-American men fought with courage and distinction in the Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> (Colored) Regiment.

***This is the story of stewardship and the beginning of a national conservation ethic.***

Across the Ottauquechee River in Woodstock stands the boyhood home of conservation writer George Perkins Marsh, who promoted the Union cause in Europe as Lincoln's Ambassador to Italy. The Marsh property later passed into the hands of Frederick Billings, an important supporter of the United States Sanitary Commission (the Civil War's forerunner to the Red Cross). In the midst of the Civil War, Billings' California associates successfully pressed for the preservation of Yosemite. Frederick Law Olmsted, Chair of the Yosemite Commission, described this great step forward for conservation as "a refinement of the Republic."

**For information on the tour, please visit our website at [www.nps.gov/mabi](http://www.nps.gov/mabi) or call 802-457-3368 ext. 22.**

# Connections to Conservation

Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park (NHP) is the only national park to tell the story of conservation history and the evolving nature of land stewardship in America. The Home Front tour examines the park's special connection to the Civil War, and the ways this terrible struggle also provided an opening for seminal thinking on natural resource stewardship and guaranteed public access to great landscapes like Yosemite.

Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller NHP was once the boyhood home of George Perkins Marsh, who, in 1864, described a global vision of postwar stewardship in his landmark book, *Man and Nature*. That same year Frederick Billings' California associates persuaded the Lincoln Administration to protect the lands of Yosemite in perpetuity as a public park.

Robin Winks, in his book *Frederick Billings: A Life*, wrote, "The creation of a park in far away California was a statement about national unity, continental status, and hopes for an optimistic future in the midst of a devastating civil war: Yosemite was a monument to union, democracy, and long-term goals for the nation, the product of a great national need."



Cathedral Rock, Yosemite by Albert Bierstadt, 1870.



courtesy Woodstock Historical Society

## A PATRIOTIC SOUL: *George Hart and the Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment*

*"In this village, he was a character known to everyone. A patriotic soul, it was his delightful privilege to take vocal part in the annual town meetings... He was industrious, honest, courteous, and...a very worthy citizen."*

These lines describe George Hart, "worthy citizen" of Woodstock, on his death in 1917. Records show that before his arrival in Woodstock in 1864, George Hart had been born a slave in Louisiana and had traveled North with Captain Edmund Morse of the 7<sup>th</sup> Vermont Regiment during the early days of the Civil War. There are many unanswered questions about George Hart's life.

How did he escape from slavery and meet Captain Morse? What were his thoughts during his 1,500 mile journey from South to North and from slavery to freedom?

Woodstock was home to the second largest African-American community in Vermont in 1860. How did Hart adjust to life in a community with African-Americans who had been free and literate wage-earners their entire lives? After joining the Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment, how did Hart and his fellow Woodstock comrades react to combat's added risk of enslavement or re-enslavement, should they be captured?

After the war, George Hart spent his life laying stone in Woodstock and exercising his "delightful privilege to take a vocal part in the annual town meetings."



# The Civil War and Civic Engagement at Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park

“Our nation’s history is our civic glue”

— National Park System Advisory Board report *Rethinking National Parks for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

Through the Civic Engagement Initiative, the National Park Service is finding new ways to preserve and interpret our nation’s natural and cultural heritage, enhancing the relevance of National Park Service resources and programs. The Home Front tour at Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park adds value to the efforts of Civil War sites through-

out the National Park Service, providing a broader context to public interpretation of the Civil War. The Home Front Program encourages an on-going dialogue on the resiliency of democracy and the role of compromise and tolerance in strengthening civil society.

Using first person accounts and real places, Home Front program activities include:

- Ranger-led walking tours through the streets of Woodstock.
- A “Speakchorus” written by Harriet Worrell, director of the theatre at Woodstock Union High School, and performed by her students. This “Speakchorus” is an original poetic dramatization based on the themes of the Home Front tour.
- The development of a student newspaper. Working with student researchers at Woodstock Union High School and community members at the Woodstock Historical Society, the National Park Service is capturing perceptions and perspectives of Woodstock’s Civil War era citizens through the words and articles of Woodstock’s 150 year-old newspaper, *The Vermont Standard*.



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NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

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To learn more about the National Park Service and Civic Engagement, please visit [www.nps.gov/civic](http://www.nps.gov/civic).

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