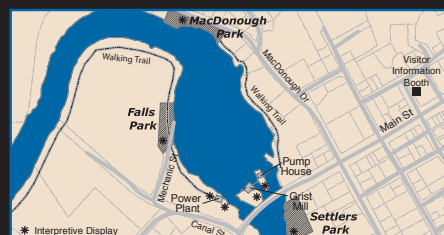
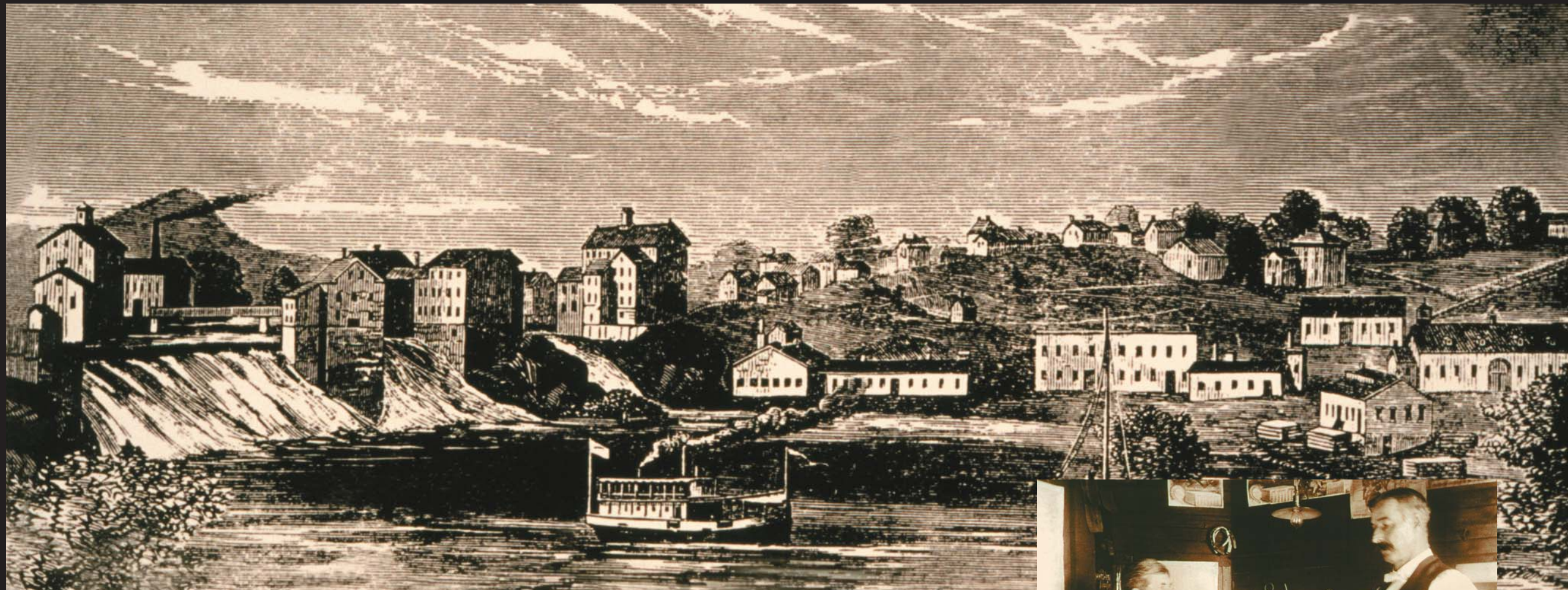


Water Power Fuels Vergennes Factories



City of Vergennes
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Shoreline factories along Otter Creek. Drawing by Rowland Robinson, circa 1870, courtesy of the Rokeby Museum.

Try to envision this place in 1870. It's a bustling industrial area. Factories and mills line the riverbanks and two islands on Otter Creek falls. The air is filled with smoke, soot, and sawdust. The roar of the falls mixes with the whine of heavy machinery and the shouts of dock workers loading and unloading the steamers and canal boats tied to long timber wharfs.

The Vergennes Water Power Company, created in 1866, leased water rights to businesses on the banks of Otter Creek. These industries used local and Canadian lumber to manufacture furniture, cabinets, wooden doors, sashes, window blinds, roller shades, ax handles, poles, farm wagons, sleighs, and cutters. Canal boats and large steamers transported these and other products down Otter Creek to Lake Champlain, then on to distant ports.

The National Horsenail Company, shown in the center of the drawing along the riverbank, was the City's chief manufacturer in the late 1800s. The Company used river water to generate 180 horsepower and produced 2-3 tons of National Nails daily. Through a unique process, nails were cut from cold iron plates to a sharp point, making them ready for driving. The Company was the principal supplier of nails for New York City horse cars.

The flat-roofed machine shop and iron foundry to the right of the Horsenail Factory housed the Vergennes Machine Company. Owner J.P. Flanders was an inventor who designed, cast, and patented an 18-ton piston pump used to supply river water for fighting fires along Main Street. The square stone 1874 pump



J.G. Hindes, proprietor, (on left) confers with co-worker at the National Horsenail Company, circa 1900. Courtesy of Robert Norton.

house, located on the island above the falls, still houses Flanders' first pump.

Vergennes' manufacturing economy began to suffer in the late 1800s. Steam-powered electrical generation allowed for the construction of larger factories closer to population centers. New tariffs on Canadian lumber in 1890 caused a decline in wood manufacturing in Vermont. By 1902, most of the factories along Otter Creek had been destroyed by fire or abandoned.