

Rush to the Countryside, by Alan F. Rumrill

One of the unanticipated responses to the coronavirus pandemic seems to have been a growing rush of people to the countryside. Many individuals have tried to escape from urban settings where large numbers of people live in close proximity to one another. In the Monadnock Region and across New Hampshire seasonal residents have been taking advantage of second homes since early March to avoid more heavily populated towns and cities where the virus might spread more quickly. Some school districts are anticipating growing enrollments, and growing costs, as families decide to remain in rural New Hampshire this fall rather than return to more crowded communities.

This move to the country has also affected the real estate market. The market dropped during the early days of the outbreak as the number of sales and the number of properties available declined precipitously. The number of sales has increased since May, but the number of properties on the market has not kept pace. There have been reports of bidding wars on specific properties, sales occurring within hours of listing, and people buying houses sight-unseen. The northern Cheshire County town of Stoddard realized the sale of seven properties totaling more than \$1.2 million for the week ending July 17. This is a rare occurrence for this small hill town that often goes several weeks without a single sale.

This is not the first movement of large numbers of immigrants into the bucolic setting of southwest New Hampshire, however. Several times over the past three centuries there have been rapid movements of settlers to Keene and the surrounding countryside. The reasons for these relocations have varied considerably and are interesting to investigate in comparison with the current situation.

The first great wave of European immigration to southwest New Hampshire came as a result of economic factors, as has been true of many mass migrations throughout history. Several towns were successfully settled here between the 1730s and 1750s. This early success, coupled with the end of warfare in the area and the inexpensive land available here, encouraged others to settle in the region. Towns to the south and east in Massachusetts, Connecticut and eastern New Hampshire were filling with families as new generations arrived and overtaxed numerous family farms there. Many families moved to the “wilderness” of the Connecticut River valley to create new farms and new opportunities for their families.

Historians have dubbed the years 1760 to 1775 as the “swarming time” in the upper Connecticut valley due to the large number of settlers coming into the towns in the region. The population of Keene increased more than 75 percent during the eight-year period from 1767 to 1775. Walpole’s population more than doubled from 308 to 658 residents during the same period. Towns such as Marlow and Stoddard on the northern border of the region had no European settlers in the mid-1760s, but were home to hundreds of residents by the time the Revolutionary War began 10 years later.

Economics was also the chief factor in a post-Revolution push of people flowing into southwest New Hampshire. Following the war there were thousands of young men throughout New England who had traveled through the region while serving in the military as they marched to Bennington, Saratoga, Ticonderoga and other points to the west and north. They had seen successful farms and thousands of acres of available land, which was still relatively inexpensive. Many of these veterans probably had military bounties to invest. As had occurred before the war, thousands of families came to the region to start anew and to build better lives for themselves and their children.

The end result was a population explosion as hundreds of new farms were developed in almost every town in the area. Most towns doubled in population and many almost tripled the number of inhabitants between 1790 and 1820. Cheshire County realized a golden age of agricultural production during this time as more land was cleared and farms were fashioned from the former forests. These farmsteads grew enough produce to support the local population and to sell excess in large towns and cities outside the region.



The automobile allowed tourists to visit and residents to commute

The first large scale migration to the Monadnock countryside in the 20th century was aided by the introduction of a new technological development. By the 1920s the automobile was relatively inexpensive and readily available, making it easier for large numbers of people to access the rural towns of southwest New Hampshire. Several of these towns had been all but abandoned during the exodus of farm families during the second half of the 19th century. This abandonment had resulted in precipitous population declines in many local towns, but now people were making a conscious decision to return to these

rural areas. This was a lifestyle choice, as visitors came to escape from their hectic lives in the city to relax surrounded by the quiet beauty of the nature and history of the Monadnock Region. As automobiles continued to improve and become more reliable, these visitors became seasonal residents and then many became permanent residents as autos allowed them to travel weekly or daily from the small towns of Cheshire County to their work and other responsibilities elsewhere.

One additional move into the local countryside also involved a lifestyle decision. During the 1960s and 1970s the region experienced an influx of “back to the land” arrivals. This did not involve a huge flow of new residents, but it illustrated a shift in values of many in the country at that time. These newcomers were also here to escape from a more urban setting, but they wanted to avoid the stress resulting from the pressure to advance in their jobs, make more money and

have more personal possessions. In short, they were fed up with modern American societal expectations. These people came individually or in groups. Many of them literally went “back to the land” for their livelihoods, setting up communal type living arrangements, growing crops, and getting by with few superfluous possessions or expenses in their lives.



Many newcomers in the 20th century were attracted by the rural landscape

These past moves to the countryside were very different from today’s focus on low density living. Economic circumstances, new opportunities and lifestyle changes were among the factors that drew people to our region in the past. During the current pandemic they are coming for safety and more easily accomplished social distancing. These old and new factors may intersect in the long term, however. Those who have arrived seeking a safe haven in recent months may come to appreciate the economy, opportunities and lifestyle offered by the Monadnock Region and the state of New Hampshire.