

The Settlement and Evolution of the Fairfax Community

The written historical record of northwestern Vermont begins in 1609 with the exploration of Lake Champlain by Samuel de Champlain. At that time, he took note of the lands intermediate between the lake and the Green Mountains, and named the Lamoille River. In the eighteenth century, these and other lands claimed by Champlain for France were assigned as land grants (seigneuries) to noblemen for the purpose of promoting their settlement. The Fairfax area was

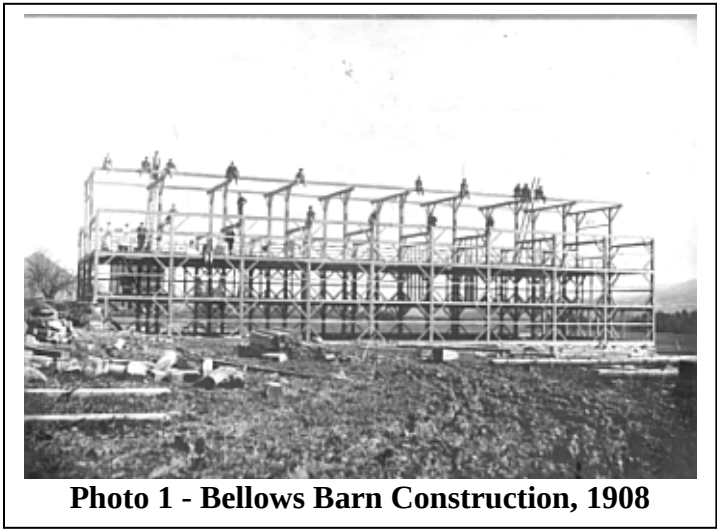


Photo 1 - Bellows Barn Construction, 1908

included in a tract assigned to the Raimbault Family. It appears, however, that any French settlement in this tract that did occur was restricted to the shores of Lake Champlain and its immediate environs. Actual settlement in Fairfax did not begin until after the establishment of British control of Vermont.

In August of 1763, Governor Wentworth of New Hampshire granted a land parcel of 23,000 acres for the purpose of establishing a new plantation to be named Fairfax. In August of 1786, a town meeting voted to survey out these parcels, most parcels being square lots of 100 acres each, with 64 people drawing for the lots. It's doubtful that many of these people ever saw or settled in Fairfax, it being determined that a tax would be imposed to pay surveyors for laying out the highways. Being unable to pay the tax, most of the original landowners lost their parcels to either the tax collector or the surveyor. The first settlers then bought their land from them.

"Voted: That the proprietor will lay out as soon as may be, one Hundred acres as each might for the first Division in such a manner that the length of the lots shall not more than twice exceed the Breadth of the same."
- From meeting of the Proprietors of the Town of Fairfax 1786

When the early settlers arrived in Fairfax, Western Abenaki Native American groups inhabited western Vermont. Subsistence strategies for the Abenaki people entailed alternating between living in a village setting where crops were grown and surplus foodstuffs stored, and periodic dispersion into smaller groups that traveled to other locations, primarily for hunting purposes.

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The Western Abenaki were organized into several major bands or organizations, each occupying its own village site. No doubt, the first European settlers to the area encountered the Abenaki on their hunting expeditions.

The first settler, Captain Broadstreet Spafford, found the land which today is the Town of Fairfax in virgin forests which were the Abenaki hunting grounds. Captain Spafford, and his two sons Asa and Nathan, arrived in 1783 from Piermont, New Hampshire and built a cabin on the north bank of the river, on what is now called the Goose Pond Road. Gradually, other settlers arrived, coming by way of the lake and the river.

Joseph Beeman and his son were the first to settle in North Fairfax. The first actual settlement in the village area was by Thomas Belcher, a hunter, in 1787. Stephen England, who arrived a year later, purchased the land and later built the first hotel in the village at the corner of Main Street and Hunt Street, where the St. Luke's rectory was formerly located. Hampton Lovegrove purchased the hotel from England and it remained in operation for over 100 years. In 1791, Gould Buck and his wife, Abigail Hawley, from Arlington, settled Buck Hollow. The first Town Meeting was held at Captain Spafford's house on March 22, 1787, and before the century was out, such issues as roads, schools, and the regulation of swine were being addressed.

The initial growth of Fairfax was fueled in part by access to waterpower. Throughout the history of this area, the Lamoille River and several of its tributaries in the immediate vicinity were utilized to drive mills. With its 88 foot descent, Fairfax Falls has been the most heavily utilized hydropower location in the Lamoille drainage. The first mill at Fairfax Falls was constructed in 1791 by Judge Amos Fassett. This was undoubtedly a major economic development, as prior to this time, residents had been forced to rely on facilities in Burlington and Vergennes for milling. Tributaries of the Lamoille in and around the Town of Fairfax itself were also quickly utilized for power. In 1792, a fulling mill was constructed on Mill Brook, which flows through Fairfax before emptying in the Lamoille. By 1800, Fairfax had a substantial population of 778.

Fairfax village was actually first settled in the Plains, south of its present location across the Lamoille River. In addition to a tavern, shops, schools and potteries, the Plains had a parade ground where the men bivouacked before leaving to go off to war.

The war of 1812-1814 was in one sense a war of convenience; the men planted their crops, then left for Plattsburgh, leaving their wives and children to tend the farms. They returned in the fall to harvest, wait out the winter, and repeat the cycle the next year. The convenience; however, was far outweighed by the death and disease suffered.

In 1826, a man by the name of Woodward established a saddle and harness business for the Town in return for a free house and the position of toll collector at the Lamoille River bridge. In the

spring of 1832, a flood called the Great Freshet carried off the first clothing mill at the Falls, and Fairfax's pride and joy, the Toll Bridge. A ferry boat joined the Town of Fairfax until 1833 when citizens voted \$1,500 to build a new arched bridge a few rods upstream. As businesses grew in the town center, taverns sprouted to serve the entertainment and resort needs of weary travelers. One of these, the Valley Hotel, still stands at its original location in the center of town after several renovations.

In 1853, the New Hampton Institute moved to Fairfax from New Hampshire. Rev. Eli B. Smith was the first President, and the school enrollment totaled nearly 300 men and women. The Institute provided an excellent education, graduating lawyers, teachers, and ministers for over 50 years before being destroyed by fire. However, the Institute was not the only school in town; Fairfax had grown from having only one school on the Plains to seventeen district schools with 475 students by 1861. In fact, the school enrollment in the 1800's equaled that of the early 1970's.

The Civil War took a much greater toll than the War of 1812. Five commissioned officers and 139 enlisted men left; 26 native sons were lost in battles such as Bull Run, Brandy Station and at Andersonville. Some who returned again brought disease, and epidemics swept the town.

The end of the war also brought prosperity. By 1870, there were ten general merchandise stores, a drug store, two hotels, four shoe shops, two butter dealers, a tannery, a harness shop, three wagon and sleigh shops, nine blacksmiths, a wagon, tub and coffin manufacturer, four saw mills, two grist mills, a planing mill, a woolen mill, two carpenters, a brickyard, a saloon and shortly thereafter there were three potteries. In addition, there were two lawyers, three doctors, and several professors. The next 20 years saw tree nurseries, new stage routes, and post offices in the Village, North Fairfax, Beaver Meadow, Buck Hollow, and Huntville, as well as carrier deliveries provided.

Fairfax was most prosperous in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Wool, lumber, and cattle were the most important industries at the time. In 1871, the Town of Fairfax contained 84 dwellings and 31 commercial establishments. The Lamoille River at Fairfax Falls was heavily used for a range of hydropower facilities throughout the nineteenth century. The Beers Atlas of Fairfax Falls (1871) depicts four mills at this location. Three of these, a woolen mill, a planing mill, and a grist mill, were situated along the east bank of the falls. Because of the shallowness of the soil over the steep ledges along the east bank, an excavated headrace to power this last facility would not have been feasible. Instead, this saw mill was probably powered by an above ground flume or penstock construction drawing water from the Falls above. In addition to the three mills, Beers Atlas (1871) also depicts a store, a blacksmith shop and five residences along the east bank of the Falls at this time.

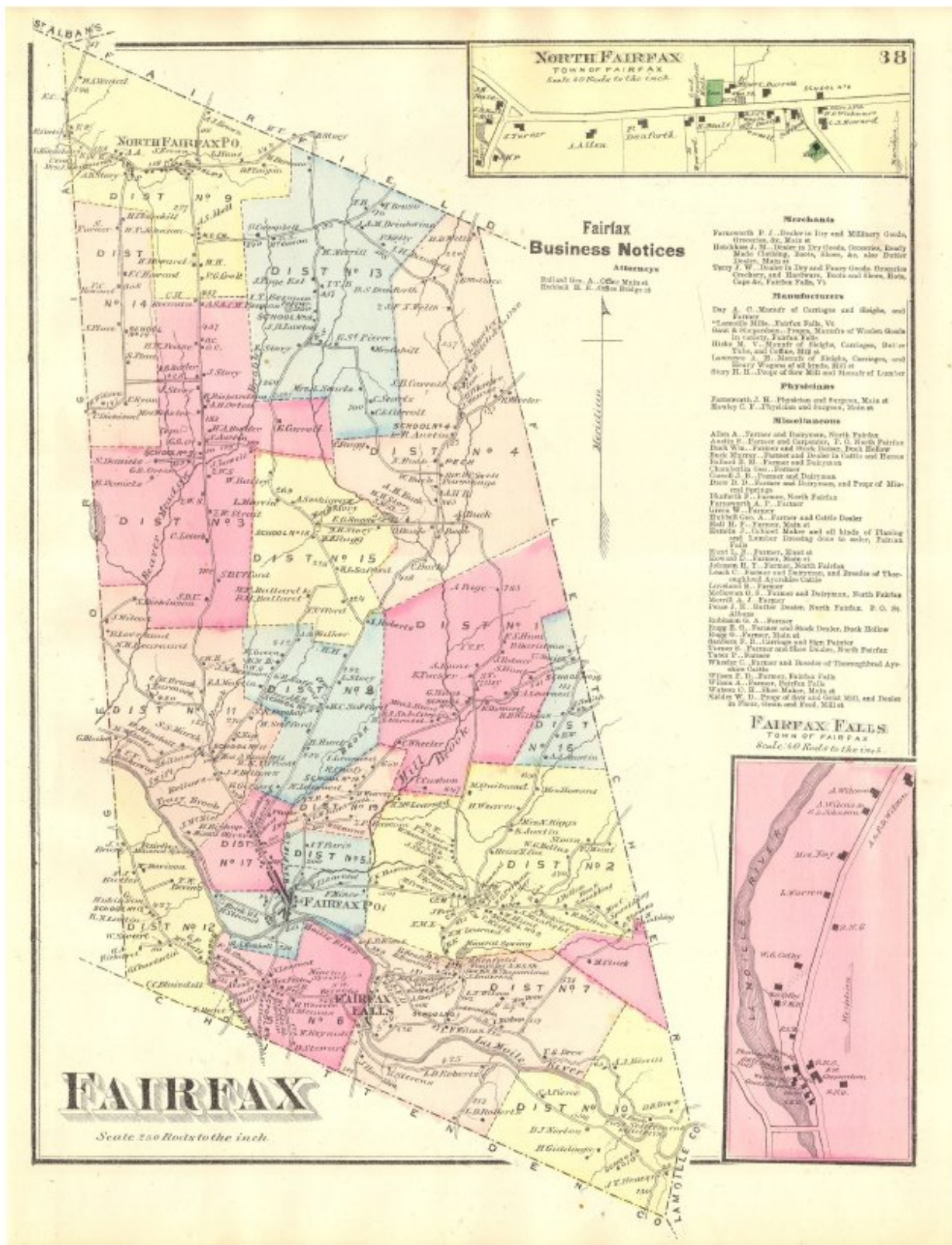


Figure 1. 1871 Map of Fairfax – F.W. Beers Atlas

The reason for such a diversity of enterprises was that the emphasis on lumber and mill manufacturing which had grown enormously was beginning to shift to the dairy industry. By the 1880's, there were four cattle breeders and four cattle dealers listed and many farms. However, the dairy industry at this time was oriented to the production of butter rather than milk, due to the capability of the railroads. Yet the Village continued to thrive, in the next years adding dress shops, millinery shops, and jewelry stores, and around the turn of the century further boasting a skating rink, dance hall, theater, cheese factory, candy factory, and ice cream parlor.

The gold rush and the availability of homesteads attracted many residents westward to California, Oregon, Michigan, Iowa, and Kansas. The population began to decrease and soon after, the area fell into economic decline. During this time, there was a shift from heavy reliance on the wool industry to dairy farming in the area. In large measure this was due to the increasing dependence of economies of the Champlain Valley on manufactured goods, with the larger settlements of Burlington and St. Albans becoming the centers for such production. Although railroad connections in the Lamoille Valley did exist at the time, they extended no further than East Georgia, four miles west of Fairfax, requiring transport along the 104A corridor of any goods produced for export. In 1897 and 1898, major fires accelerated the population decline of Fairfax and destroyed several important buildings in the town.

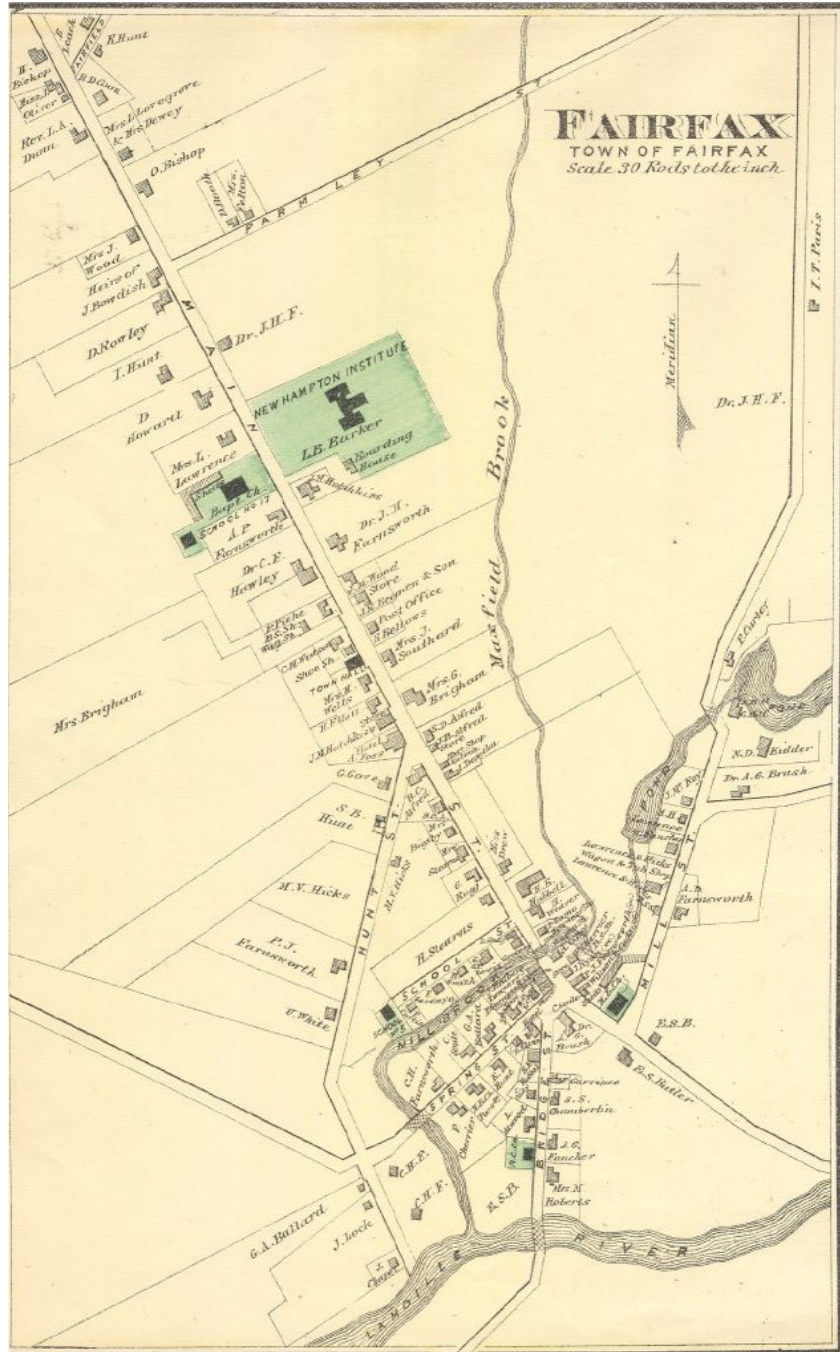
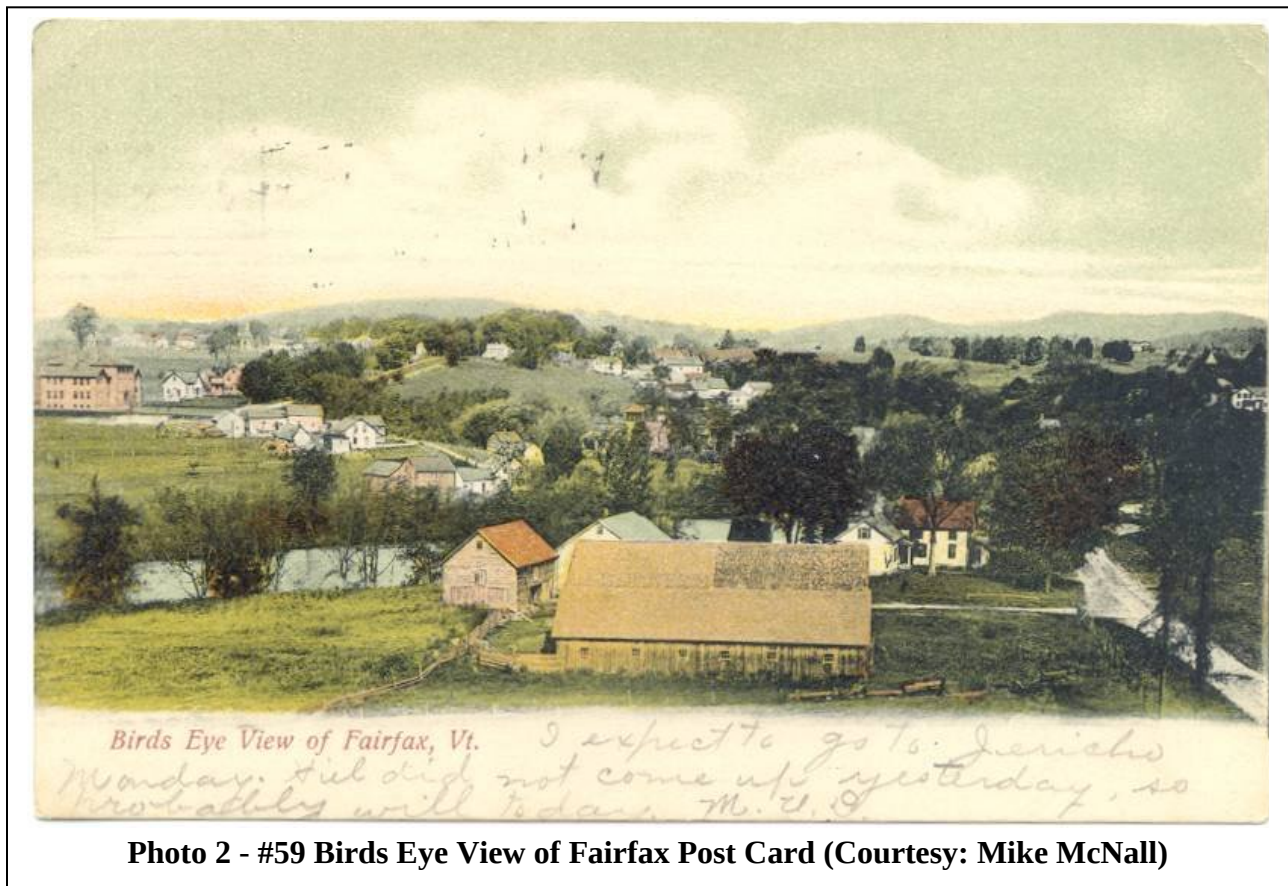


Figure 2. 1871 Map of Fairfax Village – F.W. Beers Atlas



In the early twentieth century, electricity came to Fairfax, with the construction of the Lamoille River dam at the Falls. Vermont Power and Manufacturing Company completed construction of the Northside underground hydroelectric plant in 1904. In 1916, VPMC and its Northside Station was purchased by Public Electric Light Company. PELCo subsequently constructed the west bank hydroelectric plant, completing the existing building with one generating unit in 1919. A second unit was added to the works in 1921. A severe flood in the Fall of 1927, precipitated by four days of heavy rain on the frozen ground, heavily damaged the Northside Station facility on the east bank, resulting in its abandonment at that time.

It was also about this time that Hiram Bellows, a St. Albans businessman, provided the money for schools in Fairfax and St. Albans, both to be named Bellows Free Academy (B.F.A.). Thus, by 1906 (after the fire at New Hampton Institute) Fairfax once again had a beautiful school, but it too was destined to burn 40 years later. A portion of the present B.F.A. was built following that fire, with later additions.

The fact that Fairfax has a water system in the village was also due to the generosity of Mr. Bellows. The system was built in 1911 chiefly to serve the school, with the reservoir (in the woods

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off the Fletcher Road) replacing the wind-driven pump (which stood behind the school) as the new supply. The annual fee charged the first customers was \$2.00.

The 1927 flood miraculously took no lives in Fairfax. It did, however, destroy many roads and buildings. Most of the wooden mill buildings were destroyed, as well as all but one bridge. The covered bridge on Maple Street, built in 1865, was turned end for end in the flood, but was saved. A steel bridge was erected two years later to replace the two lane bridge.

Perhaps more damaging was the stock market Crash of 1929. With the closing of banks, Fairfax returned for a period to a barter economy; many people were forced to exchange work for goods and goods for food. Many also were unable to hold onto their homes and farms, and structures which burned were rarely replaced. Soon afterwards, the Second World War saw an exodus of young people leaving for military service, and for better paying jobs in other states. The population in 1940 was 1,229 residents. At the same time, there were 80 farms with a total of 2,400 milking cows.

It was not until 1947 that town officials embarked on capital improvements for better fire protection. The Town received a trailer-mounted pump from civil defense, and voted to purchase a used truck and firefighting equipment. A new truck was put into service in 1948, and a Volunteer Fire Department was founded.

For several years more, family farms continued to dominate Fairfax's economy and land use. While a few shops remained, most of the others such as the potteries, mills, and the blacksmiths had vanished. The 1950's saw an out-migration of young people in Fairfax due to the lack of employment opportunities. Fairfax's employment base began to diminish and the Fairfax Branch of the Cooperative Creamery shut down.

With the 1970's approaching, roads improved, I-89 was being built, cars went faster, and the cities of St. Albans and Burlington seemed much closer than they had before. Nearby production facilities such as IBM attracted a growing workforce to the area, and Fairfax's convenient access contributed to a reverse in previously declining population trends.

Development prompted town officials to study the feasibility of a public sewage treatment system in 1965. A year later, the first zoning bylaws were adopted, after a series of previous defeats at the polls.

The 1970's continued to witness a steady growth rate. Among major projects were new residential developments in North Fairfax, and in Fairfax Plains. A new high school was completed in 1975 while preservation of the old continued with the renovation of the Maple Street covered bridge. In 1977, the passage of a village pollution control bond was finally set in motion.

The 1980's marked a time when the population level of the town rose to that of the late 1800's. The 1990 census showed Fairfax's population to be 2,486, the highest since 1850. More people meant more homes being built, especially on back roads. This led to a need for an increase in services provided by the town, (i.e. road repair, town water system, fire department and rescue squad, and especially BFA Fairfax). Most services are housed in new buildings: (1982) - The new Town Garage was built on the Fletcher Road, (1984) - The Town Clerk's office moved from BFA to the old principal's house, (1987) - The old iron bridge across the Lamoille River on Main Street was replaced by a modern concrete bridge, (1990) - The Fairfax Fire Department and Fairfax Rescue moved to a new, larger building, (1989-90) - BFA Fairfax added its second major addition in 20 years to house grades 5-8, and (1998) the new Elementary Wing was constructed and the old middle school was rehabilitated.

A few more essential services were added in the 1990's, such as a local doctor's office, pharmacy, hardware store, and restaurant along with a small grocery, convenience stores, and auto repair shops. In addition, a community recreation park was completed in 2007 that includes athletic fields and a recreation path.

Well into the Information Age, Fairfax continues to change. The wires that first carried electricity to Fairfax in 1904 now carry high speed internet to the computers of home offices and cable television to home entertainment centers. Although a strong focus on agriculture is still present, the number of family farms continues to decline. Industry is expanding in neighboring towns and Chittenden County, further increasing development pressures. Population increase is bound to continue, as a growing number of families discover Fairfax's unique combination of convenient access to major cities and towns, its small town atmosphere, and peaceful environment.