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Remembering Richard Colburn

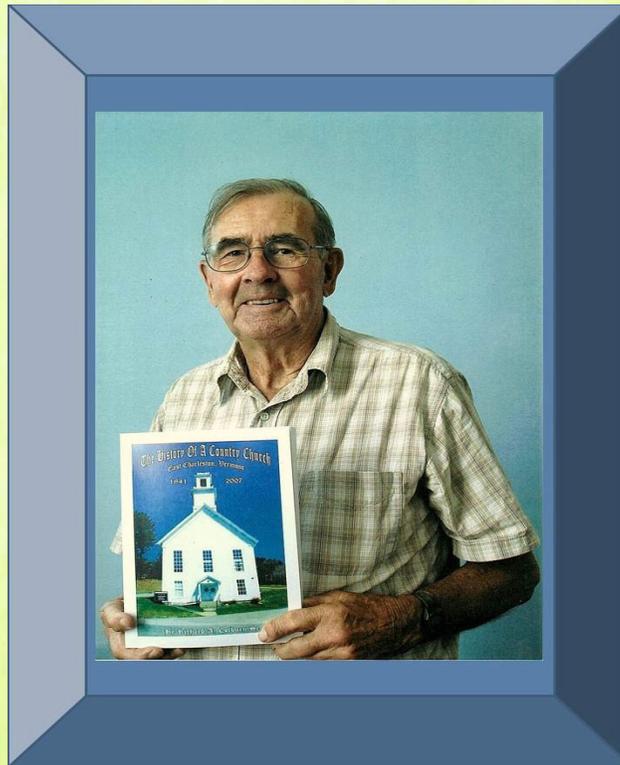
By: Scott Wheeler, Editor, Vermont's Northland Journal

(Editor's Note: Richard was a great friend of the Gardner Newsletter and a contemporary of the four boys in the Original Gang of Ten – Earl, Clayton, Adelbert and Raymond. They even attended Sunday School together at the Plymouth Congregational Church. Richard even has his own page on the Gardner Newsletter website – www.gardnernews.org/Richard%20Colburn.htm. You can read all the back issues of the Charleston Historical Society's newsletter by clicking on that link.

If you read Scott Wheeler's article in its entirety, you will get a wonderful encapsulation of the interesting history surrounding the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. This article has been reprinted from Vermont's Northland Journal's Facebook page.)

Richard passed away on October 1, 2019. Funeral services were held at 1:00 p.m. on Wednesday October 9, 2019 at the Plymouth Congregational Church in East Charleston with Dr. Fred Barker and Rev. William Cotte officiating. Memorial Contributions in Richard's memory may be made to Plymouth Congregational Church, P.O. Box 42, East Charleston, VT 05833, or the Charleston Historical Society, P.O. Box 46, East Charleston, VT 05833.)

The Northeast Kingdom has lost a humble, good man, a walking textbook of the region's history, a true community servant – Richard Colburn of Charleston. Besides being a man I respected immensely, Richard was a huge resource for me, and for many other people who love the history



of this region. He always had time to talk history and to share his knowledge. Although no longer with us, his memory will live on within us, and his historical research will live on for eternity. My deepest sympathy to his family. Rest in peace, Richard.

The following is an article I wrote about Richard more than a decade

ago.

The Beloved Grave Digger of Charleston—Richard Colburn

It's an essential job but one that few people want, a fact that has kept Richard Colburn of Charleston hefting shovelfuls of dirt for about 65 years, digging deep rectangular holes serving in probably any community's least glamorous role—as the community grave digger.

"If I remember right, I dug my first grave in 1943," he said. "I was probably 15 years old. I took over for my father probably when I was 17. I needed the money." Since that first grave, he has buried countless people, including his own parents.

"My parents would have wanted that," Colburn said, noting that burying friends and family is never easy but something that is as important for him to do as any other burial. The one

person he couldn't bring himself to bury is his wife, Alta, who died in 1988.

There are five cemeteries in town. Hillside Cemetery, Bly Cemetery, and Buck Cemetery are located in East Charleston. In West Charleston are West Village Cemetery and Crawford Hill Cemetery. Colburn knows all the

cemeteries like the back of his hand.

"I can tell you almost where every person is buried," Colburn said. As for the people he helped bury over the last six and a half decades, he still remembers most of them, especially the ones that had roots in Charleston. He has an anecdote about just about all of these people, some who have been gone for many years.

In addition to knowing which person is buried in which cemetery, he even knows which cemeteries contain what kind of soil. For example, the sandy soil at Hillside Cemetery makes for easy digging, but the clay-based soil at West Village Cemetery is heavy and becomes a sloppy mess when it is exposed to the rain.

"It takes me about twice as long to dig a grave in the West Village Cemetery as it does in the Hillside Cemetery," Colburn said. "It takes me about two hours in the Hillside Cemetery."

The East Charleston man's official title is "Sexton." The job entails far more than digging graves. It also includes the general upkeep of the cemeteries including mowing lawns and repairing broken gravestones. While Colburn completely oversees four of the five cemeteries, Wayne Bowen of Charleston mows the West Village Cemetery. The rest of the work in that cemetery is Colburn's responsibility.

Colburn takes his job very seriously. He has great reverence for the cemeteries, and for the people who are buried there, and for the people he is burying. It is not just a job for him. When it comes to death, no person is more or less important than anyone else. They all deserve great care and dignity.

Some people think of cemeteries as morbid, scary places to avoid at almost any cost, or at least until the bells toll for them. Horror movies play upon and increase this morbid view of these sacred places of eternal rest. But for Colburn, a cordial man with a Vermont accent and a dry sense of humor, the cemeteries, particularly the ones that he maintains in Charleston, are places of peace, - reminders of the people who passed before, and a reminder of one's own mortality.

"They are kind of like parks," he said. "They are quiet places where people can come and think." Cemeteries are far more than places to bury people and a place for their loved ones to mourn, he said. They also provide a historical timeline of the community and region in which they are located.

Since retiring as the maintenance man at Camp Winape in Morgan and as a bus driver for the Charleston Elementary School, Colburn has dedicated thousands of his retirement hours to documenting Charleston's past, a past that he enjoys sharing with the people of today. As the treasurer of the Charleston Historical Society, he is determined to keep the community's history alive for future generations. He is sought by people near and far for his knowledge of the region of his community, its early pioneers, and historical happenings.

The father of two grown children, Richard Jr. [who has passed away since I wrote this article] and Grace Frizzell—both who live in town—he is proud of his community's history and enjoys sharing it with people.

In addition to his work as a sexton, he has been a town auditor since 1953, and the treasurer of Plymouth Congregational Church since 1969. He took over for his father as justice of the peace in 1972; and in 1989 he was one of the founders of the Charleston Historical Society, serving as that group's treasurer since the beginning. He is also preparing to publish a book chronicling the history of the Plymouth Congregational Church.

Charleston was chartered on November 8, 1780, to Commodore Abraham Whipple, an American Naval officer during the Revolutionary War, and to 50 or 60 of his shipmates, Colburn explained. The chartered land was originally called Navy simply because the men to whom it was chartered were all Navy men. The name was changed to Charleston in 1825 in recognition of a naval battle in which the men had fought off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina.

Commodore Whipple's records seem to indicate he never visited the land chartered to him, Colburn said. However, there is evidence that one of his shipmates did. This unfortunate sailor went into the Brownington swamp and



Cross symbolizing everlasting life overlooking the Vermont landscape that Richard Colburn so loved - a fitting tribute.

became so lost that he didn't want anything further to do with Charleston.

Other than the Abenaki, who have called this region of the state their home for thousands of years, historical evidence suggests that Charleston didn't see its first permanent resident until 1802 when Abner Allyn, who had traveled from nearby Barton, Vermont, cleared a plot of land in what is now a piece of land off Crawford Hill Road in Charleston. He began homesteading in the unsettled town. The following year, in 1803, he and his wife, Anna, along with their six-month-old son, Alpha, moved to Charleston. "Abner was quite a land baron," Colburn said. "He laid out all the roads and just about everything else in the town at the time."

Life in the Kingdom brought many trials to the early settlers, including Abner and Anna. Death came knocking at their house not once, but three times during a several year period, taking three of their young children. Abner Jr. died on March 28, 1810; Albra on June 21, 1819; and Alwin died on March 18, 1824. The settlers survived off the bounty of the land, weathering the long, cold, desolate weather away from civilization. Settlers kept coming, attracted at least in part by the low price of land.

One interesting side note about the Allyn family is that one of their children, Rachel Allyn, went on to become a doctor when women doctors were a rare sight. She lived and practiced most of her adult life in and around Lowell, Massachusetts. However, when she was in the twilight of her life she returned to Charleston and died at 93 years old. She is buried in Bly Cemetery, a small cemetery located on Route 105.

Today Charleston is composed of two villages, West and East Charleston, both communities on the Clyde River and with little industry to speak of. Instead, many of its 900 inhabitants travel to nearby communities to work, while others still work the land for their livelihood.

Looking at Charleston today, it's difficult to imagine it as a bustling place to live with two lively villages and 1,700

residents; but, according to Colburn, that's just what Charleston was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

"They were booming mill towns," Colburn said. Gristmills, sawmills, and numerous other types of mills sprang up along the banks of the Clyde. The waterpower that produced the energy needed to operate the mills brought prosperity to Charleston. The villages boomed and businesses flourished. Visitors could stay in any one of a handful of hotels—all gone long ago.



The Charleston Historical Society's home in West Charleston, Vermont

It was river power that helped build Charleston, Colburn said. And it was a new type of power—electricity—that was partially to blame for the unraveling of the town's prosperity. When electricity arrived in town in the early 1900s, mill operators no longer needed to rely on the Clyde to power their machinery. Many mill owners in Charleston and other communities that relied heavily upon water-powered mills saw electricity as more reliable than fluctuating

water flows. Not only was electricity more reliable, it also meant businesses could locate wherever they wanted, free from the bonds of the river. Mills began to shut down, taking with them jobs and prosperity.

To make matters worse, two great fires swept through the villages, and they never fully recovered. East Charleston was decimated by fire in 1921. Only three years later, in 1924, a fire swept through the heart of West Charleston. While working in the cemeteries, Colburn knows that he is working among some of the many pioneers of the community—pioneers who helped make the history of the community what it is today.

A large number of veterans are also buried in the town's cemetery.

"There are veterans from almost every war buried in them," Colburn said as he rattled off some of those wars including the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the

Spanish American War, World War I, and World War II. The Charleston icon has been bringing students to place flags on the veterans' graves for about 20 years.

Born on the family farm on May 3, 1927 to Ernest and Eunice (Taylor) Colburn, Richard Colburn has deep roots in Charleston and the surrounding area. A number of family members are buried in the community's cemeteries, including his great-great-great-grandfather William Sawyer, a Revolutionary War veteran who is buried in West Village Cemetery.

It seems that maintaining the cemeteries are a bit of a family tradition in the Colburn family. His father maintained some, but not all, of the cemeteries in town. In past years Richard Colburn's son, Richard Jr., has helped him with the cemetery duties.

The way cemeteries are maintained has changed drastically during the last few decades, Richard Sr. said. Probably the most noticeable changes occurred when gas-powered lawnmowers with rotating blades came into popularity in the region, probably during the early 1960s. Until that time they'd wait for the grass to grow into hay then used a scythe, a hand-held tool with a long blade, to cut it. A swinging motion cuts the hay.

"After we got done haying on the farm in August, about Barton Fair time, we'd come over and cut the hay in the cemeteries with a scythe," he said. "We'd then bring the hay back to the farm."

Another major change in the cemeteries, probably also in the 1960s, was the use of cement vaults. The caskets are encased in the vaults, in part to protect them from the elements, but also to prevent the soil on top of them from collapsing downwards when time took its toll on unprotected wooden caskets. Colburn can easily identify the burial lots which contain caskets not enclosed in vaults. The lots have sunken into the general shape of the casket.



View from Hillside Cemetery, Richard Colburn's final resting place. In the distance, you can see the workmen preparing his gravesite. Grandpa and Grandma Gardner are also buried in this cemetery.

One part of his job that is mixed with sadness and humor is selling burial lots. There is no humor in selling a lot to somebody who has lost a loved one unexpectedly, especially when it is a young person, he said. If the family doesn't already own a lot, it has to rush out and buy one and prepare for the burial. That is a very painful task for the family during an already emotional time. Then there are the people who carry feuds to the grave. They are very particular about who they or their loved ones are buried

next to. With an increasing number of people buying their burial lots years in advance of their intended deaths, he now sells lots to people who are able to still look at death with a bit of humor. Some of them joke around as they tour the cemeteries trying to find the perfect lot that will serve as their eternal resting place. He recalled the words of one fellow who was buying his plot.

"I want it up on the hill," the buyer remarked. "I want to have a view. I don't want to be down there in the bushes."

Other people don't want plots on side slopes fearing that hundreds of years following their burial the slope will shift and slide, leaving their remains exposed to the elements. Then there are those who insist they don't want sloping sites because they want to lie flat for eternity, not with their heads low and their feet pointing up the hill. Colburn said he tells this latter group of people not to

worry because even graves dug on slopes are made flat at the bottom so the vaults and caskets will be perfectly level.

Another interesting fact about many cemeteries, including the ones in Charleston, is that they all face east. He suspects that the origin of this tradition is based on a verse in the Bible which says at the time of the resurrection all those buried will sit up and look east toward the sunrise.

One thing that amazes him is the

increase in cremations in recent years. Of the 15 or so burials at the cemeteries last year, he said about 75 percent of them were cremations. "Years ago, I never heard of such a thing as cremations." He noted that while he is paid \$200 to dig and fill in a full-size grave, the cost of burying a cremation urn is only \$50.

Another change that he has seen is in the gravestones themselves. In earlier years the gravestones were typically made of slate and soapstone. Then came marble. The rock of choice these days is granite, a stone that he said holds up far better to the weather than any other stone. Besides the actual stones, the wording placed on them has also changed. Modern stones often have little more than the name of the person and his or her birth and death dates.

Some of the earlier stones contain a virtual genealogy of the person. And others have poignant sayings engraved into them. Inscriptions might be biblical in nature, while others pay tribute to the deceased. For example, the gravestone that marks Anna Allyn's grave, the first woman settler in town, has the following words inscribed on it: "Her price was far above rubies. She was the first permanent woman resident of this town and for a long time the only one. Her house was the weary traveler's home."

For years Colburn has wondered why

the monument lists Abner and Alpha Allyn, who died on April 4, 1879, as the first settlers in town. Alpha, who was Abner and Anna's son, who is also buried in the family lot, was only six months old when his family settled in Charleston. Why did the monument not mention that Anna was also one of the first settlers? Colburn said some of the students

He explained what prompted him to begin his mission. With each passing year, he said he noticed the wording on many of the stones, particularly the earliest ones typically made of slate and soapstone, were beginning to vanish. And he has noticed the rate of deterioration, even in the harder stones such as marble and granite, is happening at a faster

pace. He suspects this is due to acid rain.

"Over the years I have watched the old stones deteriorate to where the words were difficult to read," Colburn said. Instead of simply mourning the loss of the words he began his mission, recording those words. He

can quickly rattle off the list of towns that he has visited on this continuing odyssey: Barton, Brownington, Charleston, Concord, Derby, East Haven, Holland, Island Pond, Irasburg, Morgan, Newport, Newark, Orleans, and Westmore.

who have toured the cemeteries with him have suggested that Anna's name was omitted because in her day the successes of women were not notable.

These inscriptions are the reason that in 1988 Colburn started a hobby that has now spanned the better part of two decades—recording every legible word of writing that appears on the gravestones. He has expanded his hobby beyond the cemeteries in Charleston to include cemeteries in several other North-east Kingdom communities.



Here is another picture showing a Vermont landscape so beloved by Richard Colburn. This picture shows the fall foliage of 2019 on full display. See the next article about the Vermont "leaf-peeping" travelers.

Josh Griffes is "Livin' his Dream!"



2nd Generation Gardner Cousin Josh Griffes
This article was taken from his Facebook page.

So I did something super awesome! I flew an airplane BY MYSELF!

Growing up near the airport, I was always excited to have airplanes fly over our house, but never thought that *I* could, or would, ever fly one.

A few years ago, I decided that I really wanted to learn how to fly and I would find a way to overcome the obstacles to do it. I would drive up to the airport whenever jets were flying in just to watch them. I'd stand at the fence

dreaming of being able to fly those beautiful birds. It's been a bit of a bumpy road up to this point, but finally I hit my first major milestone on my way to becoming a pilot and I couldn't be more excited.

It is an exhilarating feeling; one that I'm having trouble finding words to describe. I can't wait to see where aviation will take me, literally.



"Leaf Peeping" on "Siri - ous Steroids" - Experiencing the Fall Foliage in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont

By: *Paul Gardner*

Have you ever wanted to just get in the car and go? Like the three wisemen mentioned in the Bible who came from afar and allowed the bright star in the heavens to guide them to Bethlehem, our three intrepid sojourners, the brother and sister team of Paul and Jean Gardner, and their friend, Paulette, simply got in the car and followed Siri's advice on how to arrive at the best places to see the peak fall foliage vistas in the Northeast Kingdom. Along the way, Siri also helped them to arrive at destinations where they visited with Gardner relatives.

It all started when Siri told

the travelers to drive up Route 89 on the way to Cousin Rod and Irene Ames' house in Holland, VT. On both



The three intrepid travelers: Paulette Heguilustoy, Jean Gonzalo, and Paul Gardner with Irene Ames

sides of the highway, the leaves on the trees had turned bright crimson and orange. It was, indeed, a sight to behold!

The following morning, Cousin Rod Ames loaded up the three excursionists in his SUV and off they went on a tour through the towns of Derby, Newport, East Charleston, Holland, Morgan and Island Pond. The views of the fall foliage did not disappoint! Cousin Rod took the pilgrims to his "secret" places where even the locals never go! A case in point is the CCC road where many of the views of Lake Willoughby have hardly ever been visited by anyone. This road was built by the U.S. Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which was a public work relief program that operated from 1933

to 1942 and was designed for unemployed, unmarried men during the Great Depression.

Another memorable place where Rod took his guests was to Centennial Rock on Westmore Road. Here lies a great expanse of fields and foliage, along with more views of Lake Willoughby. What's interesting about this place, in addition to the huge rock left by glaciers



View of Lake Willoughby from the CCC Road

from the ice age millennia ago, and which has been chipped away by long-ago builders desiring granite foundations for their buildings, is that years ago folks who lived on one side of the hill - their children went to school in Charleston, while folks who lived on the other side of the hill - their children went to school in Morgan.

Those children who were enrolled in Buck School lived on the Charleston side of Westmore Road. Jean and Paul Gardner attended that school for a few years. (See the class photo in the previous edition of the newsletter.) Cousin Rod took them by the location where the building once stood right beside Mad Brook. Curiously, the only indication that there ever was a building at the site is the ruins of the girls' and boys' sections of the outhouse that was once attached to the school. Cousin Rod shot a "provocative" video of Jean investigating the crumbling outhouse. The video is not x-rated, - just "yucky!" Should you keep insisting, I'm sure Cousin Rod can be persuaded to show it to you. Good thing Jean is a good sport!

Behind Buck School on the hillside rests Buck Cemetery. Here you can find the gravestones of the Lang family and many other settlers of the region. As mentioned in the previous article, Richard Colburn of the Charleston Historical Society was responsible for cleaning and restoring many of these gravestones.

After the wonderful visit with Cousin Rod and the breathtaking tour, Siri (like the Christmas star) guided Jean, Paul, and Paulette across the border into Canada. While there, they visited Montreal and Old Quebec City. While the foliage further north could not match that of the Northeast Kingdom, both cities offer many attractions, from tableaux of modern metropolitan life in the big city to quaint village settings along the St. Lawrence Seaway.

Siri had one last surprise in store for the three gaddabouts. She directed us to Jed's Maple Farm. There Steven Wheeler and his son, Jed, run a sixth generation Vermont maple syrup farm. Steve is a loquacious, friendly fellow who enjoys sharing the day-



Jean, Paulette and Rod Ames at Mad Brook near where Buck School once stood

to-day details of his tree-tapping operation with the public. He talked about the on-going feud between farmers and the environmental scientists. He said both sides should learn from each other. For instance, the scientists taught him new procedures regarding his tap lines that help to extend the sugaring season by more than a week, thus increasing his profits. He

is a wonderful steward of the land plus a forward-thinking environmentalist! The trio of wanderers went on their way having learned a lot about Vermont's maple sugar industry.

As much as everyone enjoyed the astonishing vistas and impressive panoramas of the foliage, nothing can compare to the people the three tourists met along the way, - especially family members. In fact, Discoverer Paulette has a standard practice of not taking any pictures at all unless they capture images of people. Here are a few "tidbits" the sightseers learned about the Gardner family during this fall foliage excursion:

- Cousin Rod Ames and his daughter Jackie Patenaude have embarked on a partnership to restore an old farmhouse on Lackey Road. This house already sits in a beautiful setting where the fall foliage is on full display.
- Cousin Sheryl Hosford's husband, Gary, has a second job working for Garelick Farms. He hauls milk in a tanker truck to destinations throughout Vermont and Massachusetts. This is in addition to his regular job at Nevtec where

he has worked with Cousin Len Griffes for many years.

- Cousin Teresa Vasko has just returned with a friend from a vacation in Maine where

do any damage to her recent implant.

- Sheryl and Gary Hosford's son, Cole, is a senior in high school. He will be joining the U.S. Navy and has already been accepted into a program to become a Navy Seal! We wish him the best of luck in this noble pursuit.
- Cousin Rod has confirmed that the 2020 Gardner Family Reunion will be held at the Northwoods Stewardship Center on July 11, 2020. The bunkhouse will be available for those who would like to use it for a place to stay for the night. There will be no elaborate RSVPs this time around. Just let Paul or Rod know if you will be attending.



Gardner Cousins Teresa Vasko, Jean Gonzalo, Rod Ames, Paul Gardner and friend of the family, Paulette Heguilustoy, eating lunch at a restaurant in Lyndonville, VT

she enjoyed many seafood dinners. Her trip took her somewhere near Old Orchard Beach where they rented a cabin.

- Aunt Beulah went apple picking with her daughter, Sheryl. Unfortunately, she took a tumble and felt pain in her leg where she had recently undergone knee replacement surgery. We hope she gets an x-ray to make sure she didn't

return to Logan Airport in Boston where Jean and Paulette boarded an airplane to take them to Bakersfield, California. Who knew that the Apple avatar, Siri, could be such a helpful companion for Jean, Paul, and Paulette to experience this incomparable journey through the fall foliage in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont!?

Siri had the last word, illuminating the way for the voyagers to

*Happy Thanksgiving
Merry Christmas
Happy New Year*

Be the first to send in an article in 2020