

Opinion

Building a partnership for progress in the NEK

by David Kelley

Working together has always been a Vermont tradition. We built our barns together. We've gone to town meetings together. We have traditionally been our neighbor's keeper, as well as our brother's keeper. If ever there was a place and time when that tradition was critical, it is here and now.

The Northeast Kingdom's agriculture and tourism are two of the sectors most severely hurt by the COVID-19 pandemic. One lodge owner in Orleans County calls the future "bleak." One of the most successful food businesses in our area has had to reduce its workforce from 26 to six. Restaurant orders for our food products have dwindled. The once healthy bookings of early spring have all but disappeared.

Historically the Northeast Kingdom has been the most impoverished corner of Vermont. We have been dependent on logging and dairy farms that have been pummeled by the winds of change in recent years. We have school districts with as many as 80 percent of our students on free and reduced lunch, while districts in Chittenden and Addison County have as few as 10 percent on free and reduced lunch.

We have an opportunity to change this picture. Growing concern for the environment, and growing awareness of health hazards and ethical questions surrounding food production elsewhere have created new opportunities for emerging food and agriculture enterprises such as Pete's Greens, Jasper Hill Cheese and Hill Farmstead Brewery. These businesses, in turn,

are creating a new support system for our communities, family farms and tourism. But our future is far from assured. We are at a crossroads, and the current health crisis has rendered the future more precarious and this crossroads even more critical. We can become a replica of the mill towns in Maine and the mining towns in West Virginia or seize these opportunities with imagination and write a new story.

To write that new story there are steps we need to take now. There is a natural symbiosis between tourism and agriculture. One of the smartest business decisions in the history of Vermont was Ben and Jerry's decision to build their ice cream factory halfway between Sugarbush and Stowe. Millions of tourists bought their products and then went home to promote them. At the same time every pint of Cherry Garcia was promoting Vermont.

Vermont was fortunate that the industrial revolution passed us by. Our landscapes, mountains, lakes, rivers and streams are still pristine and unspoiled. We have what much of the world has lost in the way of "progress" and these resources will become even more precious with the passage of time. To move to a future that is no longer defined by the poverty of our present we need to imagine new ways to strengthen this partnership born of a "working landscape." Visitors to the Northeast Kingdom are not only an important market, they also can be our most potent sales force. By the same token, as our food products find distribution here in the United States, and around the world, the

"taste of place" can be our most cost effective marketing.

Let other people have the Amazon warehouses, the computer data centers and the Tesla factories. We are better served by a working landscape. Tourism in agricultural communities in England and Italy has shown us the possibilities. Now, more than ever, we have to seize these opportunities for expanded hiking and biking in the Kingdom.

There are a lot of hands reaching out for the COVID stimulus funds, but few investments would be more cost effective than jumpstarting a new Partnership for Progress in the Northeast Kingdom — starting by bringing more fellow Vermonters from faraway places like Rutland and Bennington to visit the most beautiful corner of Vermont.

David Kelley is a lawyer who lives in Greensboro. His primary clients have been ski resorts.

Barton burn ban lifted

To the editor,

Fire burn permits are now being issued for the town of Barton. Please contact me at (802) 624-0711 24 hours before your desired burn date.

Thank you for your understanding throughout the burn ban.

Paul Sicard,
Barton Forest Fire Warden

Opinion

Juneteenth, remembering our shared history

by Molly Veysey, executive director, Old Stone House Museum

While the protests against systemic racism sweeping the country have galvanized national attention, few people may recognize the importance of this Friday, June 19, to not only our nation's history but also to our own here in Orleans County. Most of us may know that Juneteenth marks the moment in 1865 when slavery in the United States truly ended with the arrival of Union soldiers in Galveston, Texas.

This holiday might seem far away or irrelevant to Vermont. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our community would not be what is today without the contributions of African Americans. Nor can we ignore the importance of this moment.

At the Old Stone House Museum, we planned a Kids' Friday program for preschool-to-elementary aged children, online workshops for adults, and a birthday bash focused on our African American founder, Alexander Lucius Twilight, even before recent protests began. Now more than ever we must recognize the fact that black lives not only matter but also that they have always mattered — right here in Brownington.

Born September 23, 1795, Mr. Twilight led a life devoted to education and faith. As the first African American to gain a college

degree in the United States (from Middlebury College in 1823), his often noted strong will and dynamic leadership made historic Brownington Village what it is today. As the headmaster of the Orleans County Grammar School and minister of the Brownington Congregational Church, he taught a vibrant student body. He also designed and led the construction of the Old Stone House Museum's impressive granite hall.

In 1836, Mr. Twilight also became the first African American to serve in the Vermont state Legislature. He achieved all these remarkable feats despite starting life as an indentured farm laborer. In recognition, we've worked with Vermont senators John Rodgers and Robert Starr and representatives Vicki Strong, Brian Smith, and Lynn Batchelor to pass a resolution designating September 23 "Alexander Lucius Twilight Day." On this Juneteenth, the resolution will be read aloud in the Vermont State House.

But it's not enough to simply recognize this man. His struggles are the struggles of the people taking to the streets right now. On this Juneteenth, the board of trustees for the Old Stone House Museum will issue a statement recognizing that systemic racism, built on the backs of each succeeding generation of African Americans, has no place in our

society. We stand with those protesting. We also call upon our national, state, and local authorities to bend the arc of justice to a course Mr. Twilight himself set 150 years ago.

We ask that on this Juneteenth you join us in this call for equity

and justice. Let's not let this holiday go unmarked. Instead, let's honor the memory of Mr. Twilight and so many others. Together we can author a new chapter in our county's history guided by the inspiring story of a local hero.

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