

Chapter One

“A delightful prospect of my Nativity”

In February 1822, twenty-one-year-old Phebe Orvis journeyed back to Vermont after spending nearly a year away from home with maternal relatives, the Durfeys. The interlude with her aunt and uncle at their tavern in Saint Lawrence County, New York, had not been of her own choice. Instead, Orvis was more or less coerced into the trip and then held there by the conventions of obedience to parental authority. The evening after traveling down from the Lake Champlain Islands to Burlington and onward toward home she wrote, “I have not thought much about returning to my native place but [in the view] from Burlington and Williston I could discover the Mountains rising with majestic grandeur, their snowy tops mingling with the clouds spread a delightful prospect of my Nativity.”¹ Despite her disclaimer that she had “not thought much about” her return, earlier entries in her journal imply otherwise. During her stay in New York State, Orvis often longed for her Vermont home and felt exiled for most of her time away. The small villages of her “native place” and the foothills of the Green Mountains that cradled and defined them were important to her, and she returned to them with no small measure of joy.

Orvis clearly clung to an overly romantic vision of her childhood home in Vermont. She considered the small triangle of territory that encompassed the villages of Bristol, Vergennes, and Middlebury the epitome of refined, civilized beauty and order; yet, in reality all three villages that made up the bulk of her “home place” were hardly that. Despite mid-eighteenth-century town charters that established their legal existence—Bristol was chartered in 1762—the bulk of Vermont, especially northern Addison County towns, were “paper towns” that did not see actual settlement until the period following the Revolution. Most of the work wrestling order from the chaos of the wilderness was done by her father’s generation, who were part of the generation of families whose migration to the frontier represented an attempt to establish a new kind of independence.² The delay in settling the region was largely due to two major impediments: land grant disputes between colonial New York and Massachusetts over the actual placement of the New Hampshire Grants territorial boundary; and decades of military clashes between the French who claimed the Champlain Valley by right of exploration, the British in the Revolution, and Native Americans who continued to live in their traditional communities. Despite limited attempts—mainly by New Englanders—to colonize the area in the years between the end of the French and Indian War and the Revolution, there were very few permanent settlements able to hang on in such a

marginal territory. One of the issues was its isolation. The Champlain Valley is ringed by the Adirondacks on the west, the Green Mountains on the East, and the rising escarpments of the Catskills to the south. Roads from the south and east were merely rough footpaths that followed ancient native trails and were impractical for the habitual movement of goods and livestock. There were few white settlements in the Adirondack region, except for the scattered logging camps seasonally occupied by French Canadians. By far the largest population on the western side of Lake Champlain were the Iroquois villages—mainly Mohawk. The only viable economic connection with an established series of travel routes into the valley was from the north. The outlet of Lake Champlain is the Richelieu River, which flows north to the Saint Lawrence. Even this connection was tenuous in various seasons. Frozen winter ice could be traversed, sometimes quite easily, but spring freshets swelled the shallow rapids and shoals along the Richelieu's course and made even established portages difficult and dangerous. So, the first major wave of Americans determined to stay began to filter into the Addison County area with great difficulty in the last years of the Revolution. These indomitable settlers were most likely lured by the recollections of the militia who served with the Continental Army in its attempts to capture Quebec, and then to hold the valley against British invasion. Many of these men saw promise in the thick forests and rich river bottomland in the Champlain Valley and brought their families north and west from New England.

As members of the first surge of post-Revolution settlement in the area, Orvis's father, Loren, and his brother, Philander, purchased several hundred acres of land bordering the east side of Bristol township and straddling the nearby townships of Starksboro and Lincoln in 1790.³ The land they acquired was undeveloped dense woodland bisected by the fall of Baldwin Creek and situated on the west side of a ridge that runs north to south along the east side of Lewis Creek; here was where they were determined to create homes for themselves and their future families. The "hill farms" the Orvis brothers envisioned seemed to hold promise; there were plenty of trees to fell—the gold of new settlers. These massive old-growth trees provided the building materials for their homes, animal sheds, and barns, while the detritus of the logging provided for the manufacture of potash and pearl ash for sale in the Montreal market. Moreover, the newly cleared land was very productive. At first that fertility yielded crops that fed families, their livestock and held promise for commercial pursuits. However, that initial flush of enthusiasm was dampened when in less than a decade of continuous cultivation, the thin, mainly acidic soils quickly declined in fertility. Consequently, most of these farms were not destined to develop into lush centers of agricultural bounty; instead, as the soil eroded and failed, they tended to produce more rocks to build the stone walls that surrounded the fields than needful crops in the "improved" postglacial soil. Yet for the Orvis brothers, the potential of their farms drove them to tremendous efforts. They felled trees, wrenched out stumps, used the logs to build their cabins and cowsheds, plowed the cleared land, and attempted to wrest a living from the newly opened fields. Often, the byproducts of their land clearing—lumber, potash, and pearl ash—was the most valuable marketable produce.

At the time of the Orvis brothers' arrival, the land they purchased was reputedly so wild that family traditions attest that the first night Loren Orvis spent on his land he slept in a tree to avoid being attacked by wolves.⁴ Other accounts indicate that Orvis was not alone; perhaps he and

Philander sheltered in the tree limbs together that first night. Whatever their initial experiences, the two men set about the work of creating their new home that first season. Once the first log house was completed and enough ground for a potential kitchen garden plot was cleared, Loren Orvis took the next step in establishing his independence: he married. Philander, five years Loren's junior, remained in his brother's household and worked alongside him for eight more years until 1799, when he also married and set up separate housekeeping arrangements.

The original land purchase of 1790 was eventually subdivided by 1798, perhaps in anticipation of Philander's independence, into two separate farms facing each other across Baldwin Creek. These homesteads became the core of a small settlement along what became known as the Quaker Road. Indeed, an early map of the area indicates that the Orvis farm was the first to be created in that area. Other families, the Delongs, Purringtons, Heddings, and Varneys, located along the new road over the next few years. Finally, in 1798, there were enough people living in the Lincoln township to call it a settlement and the first annual meeting was held in March of that year. By then, six families were officially listed as resident in the town with a total population of about fifty individuals. This was the kernel from which the Orvis family's new society would grow.

At this first annual town meeting in 1798, Loren Orvis's status as a “freeman” and local leader was established. He was elected selectman, lister, sealer of weights and measures, fence viewer, and tithingman. Clearly, he was now a town worthy. Yet, his multiple offices likely had more to do with the small settlement size than his actual status. There were few fences to view, only a handful of properties to value, and limited commercial activity to measure. So, the various municipal responsibilities did not hinder him as he continued to develop his farm and expanded the family fortunes. As for most early pioneers, the bounty of trees yielded important profits for the Orvis brothers. As they developed their homesteads, they also took advantage of the considerable timber resources and constructed a saw mill on the steep fall of Baldwin Creek. This new business venture gave them the ability to convert the ash, cedar, beech, maple, chestnut, and oak trees they harvested from their farms into lumber, timber beams, and shingles as well as barrel staves, furniture, and other household items to supply the new settlements of Lincoln, Starksboro, and Bristol.

Eventually Philander Orvis took the helm of the lumber business and Loren Orvis used his share of the profits to acquire more farmland, some better situated than his original holdings, and expanded his livestock holdings of cattle and kine, including the purchase of a team of oxen. The team allowed him to clear and plow more land and, as a consequence, reap greater benefit from his newly opened fields. In addition, he rented the oxen to neighbors. This surge of activity quickly expanded the farms, fields, and families who lived along Quaker Road and beyond.

In December of 1791, when Loren Orvis brought his new bride, Elizabeth Brooks, home to the rough hill farm, he hadn't traveled far to find her. Brooks was the daughter of another early proprietor, Samuel Brooks, who settled in nearby Bristol.⁵ Together, the couple worked to build their family, improve their homestead and the outlying farmland, and create an established community. When Philander Orvis married in 1799, he chose Phebe Chase, a young Starksboro woman from another Quaker family settled in the neighborhood. By 1800, the Orvis clan was well established on farms that faced each other across Baldwin Creek.

Both couples proved fruitful. According to the federal census and town records, their combined households included nine children by early 1801.⁶ As the ninth child born into the extended family, Phebe Orvis joined a rapidly expanding circle of kinfolk with marriage connections that tied them to the growing neighborhood along Quaker Road. These expanded connections also created important ties that linked the communities of Starksboro, Lincoln, and Bristol. There were also extended family relationships in the nearby settlements of Monkton, Vergennes, and Middlebury. At the same time that the attenuated network of Orvis family relationships helped to populate Addison County, the physical hallmarks of civilization had begun to transform its rough appearance. Roads, bridges, homesteads, schoolhouses, churches, and commercial ventures reshaped the landscape into the conventional, orderly setting Orvis came to cherish.

The expansion and development of her beloved “native place,” romanticized by Phebe Orvis at nineteen, was so new it had not developed a true patina; in fact, it was still very much the New England frontier. Even Middlebury, by far the most cultured of the village centers in Orvis’s estimation—and in the consciousness of its citizens—was barely settled, with most residents arriving in the previous two decades.⁷ Indeed, it is generally held that the decision of the Vermont Legislature to meet in Middlebury for their fall session in 1800 offered them an opportunity to “arrive.” The impending legislative session sparked a vigorous effort on the part of Middlebury citizens to make their community worthy of being chosen for such an honor. Houses were painted, fences repaired, the official courthouse structure was finished, and the main thoroughfare graded. Pride of place, its role as a shire town, and a not-so-secret hope it might be the state capital, likely kept Middlebury’s citizens vigilant about their care of the community’s appearance. Consequently, the admiration that Orvis held for Middlebury as the epitome of order and beauty was somewhat misplaced.

Although not quite as cultured as Middlebury—they lacked the college and the female seminary—the villages of Bristol and Vergennes had also achieved veneers of respectability that Orvis esteemed. In reality, all of these communities were only a short generation more venerable than the Saint Lawrence County settlement that Orvis found so primitive. The paint applied to the rough boards over hewn logs was barely dry.⁸

In the opening pages of her journal, Orvis describes a well-traveled triangle of territory that encompassed the three main town centers of Bristol, Middlebury, and the new city of Vergennes. She visited friends and relatives widely and freely, attended regular worship at area Friends’ meetings, borrowed books from the Sabbath School library, drove her Grandmother Brooks (referred to in her journal as “Grandma’am”) all over that immediate area for regular shopping trips, and contracted outwork mainly in textiles for a number of merchants and neighbors. The northern quadrant of Addison County and southern edge of Chittenden County, including the townships of Hinesburg, Ferrisburgh, Monkton, New Haven, Bristol, and Middlebury, comprised the outward boundaries of her world. That is not to say she never traveled beyond them, but rather it was within these bounds that she most comfortably and easily moved, frequently alone or in the company of her friends. For her, these villages and their surrounding woodlots, fields, and farms became the standard she compared all others against, often unfavorably. It was also

the place she deeply mourned when Samuel Eastman took her to his farmstead in the crude wilderness of north central New York State.

Some of her disdain for the Saint Lawrence County region was the result of the circumstances of her birth and childhood. Although Orvis was born on the hill farm along Baldwin Creek, she did not grow up there. In early 1802, Orvis, a tiny infant, was transferred to her maternal grandparents' home when her mother suddenly died, likely from puerperal fever. The Brooks' home was located in the area of Bristol Township locally known as the “Flats.” While her father and older siblings remained on the farm along Baldwin Creek, the child named for her Aunt Phebe Chase Orvis was folded into the life of her grandparents, Ruth Sawyer and Samuel Brooks. From that spring onward, the Brooks' Bristol Flats farm became the childhood place she most treasured. Too young to have memories of the Orvis homestead, she identified with the older, better established farm of her grandparents. When she traveled to her father's farm in September 1822, she wrote in her journal that this was when she met her uncle Philander's family, whom she had not “seen before.” From her perspective, the Orvis homestead was a strange place populated by unfamiliar people; her return to her grandparents' place in Bristol at the end of this visit was a “return home.” Her adoption by the Brooks couple brought her into a world that was better established, less frontier and more respectable. It also made them her guiding lights and the primary authorities in her life until she married.

So, Orvis's sense of the superiority of Bristol and its environs was related to her life in the Brooks household. Her grandfather Samuel Brooks was one of the original settlers of Bristol Township in the mid-1780s. A member of the group who purchased proprietor shares in what was originally called the Pocock Settlement, Brooks chose to settle on the level, fertile land west and south of Bristol village along the banks of the New Haven River. This area was likely open meadowland (or only lightly forested) at the time Brooks made his purchase, as it was in these same meadows that the Abenaki grew their maize, beans, and squash gardens. These alluvial soil deposits along the New Haven river were favorite settlement areas for the native Vermonters before successive seventeenth- and eighteenth-century wars and waves of disease brought by soldiers and settlers disrupted their lives.¹⁰ According to Samuel Swift, who published an early history of Addison County, stone arrowheads, knives, and axes were ubiquitous in the area soils and farmers collected baskets of them in their fields after every plowing. In his *Early History of Bristol, Vermont*, antiquarian Harvey Munsill wrote, “In many places when the first settlement commenced in Bristol in 1786 there was to be found many places having the appearance of having been cleared and afterwards grown up and covered with a second growth of timber.”¹¹ Although the nineteenth-century histories of the area all claim that Native people were gone by the time that American colonists arrived, Abenaki families persisted. Indeed, Samuel Brooks's eldest son married an Abenaki woman named Betsey Rorapough.¹² The Rorapoughs lived somewhere near the Brooks's place along the “Flats,” contradicting the supposed native “absence” from the land.

Similar to the Orvis brothers' settlement on Baldwin Creek, the Brooks homestead was a raw frontier homestead in the 1780s. When Nathan Perkins, a young Connecticut missionary, visited the area in 1789, he was not impressed. Perkins later wrote that in his opinion, Vermont,

in the vicinity of Monkton, Bristol, and New Haven towns, had “a bad appearance.” In New Haven he slept in “an open log house, where it rained on me, in the night. . . .” He rode on to Monkton and Bristol where he found “mud belly deep to my horse” and people who “dressed coarse, & mean, & nasty, & ragged.” As he made his way across the state, he “thought I should have perished; felt warm gratitude to heaven that my life was spared.”¹³

Perkins was not far off the mark; the early community had rude cabins, bad roads, and was certainly unhealthy. In the first decades of settlement, smallpox, influenza, scarlet fever, typhus, and an unspecified illness locally referred to as “spotted fever” flashed through the town in succession. Smallpox made two documented visits in the period (both times imported from urban centers outside the state), first in 1798 and again in 1820. During the 1798 epidemic, the Brooks farm hosted the “pest house,” which was constructed on a corner of the farm property. By this period, although smallpox was greatly feared, many attempted to immunize themselves by infecting themselves with the disease. In the case of the 1798 visitation, neighbors who wanted to be inoculated shared space with Cyprian Eastman, who had contracted the disease “in the natural way” and died from his illness.¹⁴ The arrival of this dreaded disease prompted the community to quickly organize, ask for help from a Middlebury physician, and isolate those who were ill or exposed. The immediate response, isolation of the sick, and careful monitoring of people’s movements in the town averted a major outbreak of the disease and limited the mortality connected to it. This successful outcome was in part due to the history of smallpox outbreaks in New England generally. Most towns had strict laws governing their citizens’ behavior in the face of such a crisis. Now here in Vermont, the citizens of Bristol reacted in a time-honored, established method to contain the contagion and protect its citizens.

Other epidemic disease events were more deadly. In the first years of the nineteenth century there were epidemics of scarlet fever, measles, whooping cough, and influenza. As one antiquarian observed, “[these diseases] prove[d] to be very destructive of human life, especially among children.”¹⁵ The regular wave of epidemics coupled with the seasonal illnesses that afflicted frontier settlements took a toll on the inhabitants, especially infants and the elderly, of northern Addison County and the Orvis/Brooks family.

Despite the unwholesome conditions of the early days, the growth and expansion of the early settler families as well as the arrival of new settlers over the next two decades created the more polished, mature community of Phebe Orvis’s teenage years. It was an admittedly thin veneer of civilization; yet, the adjacent communities grew, expanded, and became more solidly established. Between 1790 and 1820, the population of Bristol township grew from 211 people to more than 1,200 families. In a little more than three decades, the community transcended its rough origins and assumed the civility of a seasoned, well-ordered, if modest, New England village.

Located on a plateau of land lying above the New Haven River and nestled against the foothills of the Green Mountains, Bristol village spread out in a grid pattern around four principle streets laid out in compass directions. According to the observations of travelers in the 1820s, Bristol had a respectable, even well-appointed, appearance. The center of the village contained a grass commons enclosed by a rail fence. The town common was surrounded by stone, brick, and frame buildings with commercial establishment sharing frontage with fine residential homes.

By 1820, Bristol possessed a significant commercial manufacturing economy founded on lumber, potash, grain, wool, leather, and a small iron forge. Shoemakers, harness makers, coopers, cloth dressers, and shopkeepers of all kinds set up business in the expanding village.

When Orvis strolled along the common with her friends (Orra Copeland or Harriet Charter, for instance), she could shop in establishments such as the dry goods store owned by Sidney Dunton. There, a customer could purchase anything available in a moderately sized town along the New England coast.¹⁶ Orvis could take tea (and no doubt did) at Robert Hawley’s public house known as the Bristol Hotel.¹⁷ She could also purchase medicinal items at the drug store, as well as a pair of shoes from the local cobbler. Dry goods, machine-made fabrics or thread, and millinery supplies were also available. The produce of the Industrial Revolution was readily available in the shops and businesses of Bristol village.

As we have seen, Orvis’s grandfather purchased land in the Bristol township and his principal farm—and the homestead—was conveniently located adjacent to the commercial center of the town. Perhaps more propitious, the Brooks’s farm was situated on the principle road connecting Bristol and the expanding industrial center at New Haven Mills. This was also the route that linked Bristol with Middlebury. There, along one of the first improved roads in the county, the Brooks farm was an ideal location for both business and farming ventures, including the expansion into sheep husbandry that began to dominate Vermont farms by the 1820s.¹⁸

Aside from livestock, Brooks alternately engaged in raising various grain crops, including wheat and Indian corn, and vegetables, including potatoes. In addition to the farm produce, Brooks also sold lumber cut from his woodlot as well as manufactured potash for the Montreal market. His economic prosperity and social success is reflected in the deference accorded to him by fellow town citizens. Between 1786, when Bristol organized its municipal government, and his death in 1831, Brooks served as selectman, constable, fence viewer, road viewer, and various other political roles multiple times.¹⁹

Thus, Orvis’s childhood home was not just a center of domestic production, but was also a place connected in significant ways to the economic, social, and political life of Bristol village and the surrounding communities of Middlebury, Vergennes, Monkton, New Haven, and New Haven Mills. This connectedness and the ambiance of social success probably helped to nurture Orvis’s mental image of her Vermont home as cultured civilization personified.

Within the Brooks household, Orvis was clearly a cherished daughter. Though never indulged immoderately, she was certainly encouraged to pursue her own interests. As her journal demonstrates, she did constant and important work to sustain the household and, as her grandmother aged, probably took on a great many of the domestic demands. While she also shared these duties with her uncle John Brook’s wife, Lovina, it is clear she remained essential to the labors of the household. When she proposed to relocate to her cousin Benjamin Clapp’s home in Monkton to spin wool, her grandmother forbid this plan.²⁰ It is unlikely that her grandmother’s objection was over the suitability of such a plan; many young women moved in and out of neighbor’s homes to do this kind of labor. Indeed this was a well-established process of sharing important female skills that harks back to seventeenth century and the coastal settlements of New England.²¹ Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that Orvis’s labor was too important to lose; she contributed a

significant part of the housework necessary to the comfort and operation of her grandmother's household. Yet, despite the demands on her time for various tasks, Orvis also found time to read, and kept up a wide ranging correspondence with family and friends away from Bristol. Moreover, she found time to perform paid textile work—sewing, spinning or weaving—for neighbors and local merchants.²² All this outwork eventually made it possible for Orvis to attend Willard's female seminary in Middlebury in the fall of 1820.²³

This freedom of movement seems to have been accepted behavior for adolescents such as Orvis; in many ways, her life was surprisingly mobile, almost modern in its fluidity. Rather than being tied to the “door yard” of the Brooks farm, she traveled widely in the immediate area. Often, Orvis hitched up the horse and wagon and went off to nearby communities for work, visiting, and parties. For instance, in August 1820, she recounted such a day:

*I took horse and wagon in company with Miss Copeland. Drove to the Borough in Middlebury. called at Mrs. Gowdy's shop. Mr. Stewarts Store, Mr. McDonald, Mr. Hough Mr. Hegers, Mr. Woods, Mr. Gison, Mr. Hooker and Brewsters, bought a thimble. Mr. McDonough purchased a comb and Lemay. Mrs. Kilburns Shop, Orra bought a bonnet. had to wait for it to be trimmed. Went to Mr. S. bought white crape made it for ruff. had two crimped. Saw a gentleman from Georgia. called at Miss Olmstead saw Mr. Calvin Cook. called at Mr. Tars to see Miss Alpha and Almeda Olmstead. Drove through the river and spent the afternoon at Mr. Nashes saw Mr and Mrs Munsill. invited to visit them, hard shower, called at the carding machine. came home heard we had fourteen visitors . . .*²⁴

As a young woman from a respected household, Orvis easily navigated the landscape of her community in social, economic, and geographical terms.

Another of the revealing aspects of her journal is the frequency and duration of the social activities held by and for Orvis and her unmarried friends, male and female. The young people of Bristol enjoyed a lively social life that included group parties and individual courting, both experimental and permanent, a host of weddings, and a surprising freedom to associate away from the scrutiny of adults. On the surface, it would seem that the rhetoric of the Revolutionary generation had permeated their approach to and philosophy of child rearing. This more liberal attitude explains the wide-ranging, even freewheeling, travels around the neighboring towns for shopping or social events.

One of Orvis's frequent destinations was the nearby city of Vergennes. If Bristol was the ideal New England village center, Vergennes was an exciting new incarnation of the commercial capitalism evident in the New Republic.²⁵ Located on the lower falls of Otter Creek, the mechanical water power potential of the falls attracted entrepreneurs who harnessed it for a variety of lumber, sash, textile, and other types of commercial manufactures. The falls also marked the farthest extent to which the Otter Creek could be navigated by larger lake vessels. Indeed, it was at the Vergennes fall-line of Otter Creek that Thomas Macdonough built the American fleet destined to trounce the British in Plattsburgh Bay in 1814. The height of the falls and the breadth of Otter Creek inspired many to take advantage of the site and numerous entrepreneurs vied for space

along the banks and especially at the falls. As the commercial center began to expand outward, the mercantile interests at the falls became concerned that their general well-being may not harmonize with those of the farmers in the broader townships of Ferrisburgh and New Haven. The merchants, entrepreneurs, and mechanics of the “Falls” commercial district became convinced that the demands of the majority of the townspeople, mainly farmers, might overshadow their needs; this prompted business leaders to petition for a city charter in 1788. When the legislature granted their request, Vergennes became the first city in the state to be created by charter and only the third in New England.²⁶

Vergennes quickly developed into an early nineteenth-century manufacturing powerhouse fueled by Otter Creek. Along the river frontages, a densely packed assemblage of mills ground grains, tanned leather, cut lumber, fulled cloth, as well as a host of other water-powered manufactories developed. As we have seen, the city also became a center of shipbuilding for eastern Lake Champlain. Along with warships built for the American Navy during the War of 1812, shipwrights also manufactured ferries, lake schooners, steam-powered vessels, and, eventually, specialized craft designed for the transport of goods and people on the Champlain Canal.²⁷

Economic success in the era of the Republic made Vergennes a patriotic city and the city often hosted Fourth of July parades and celebrations. It was also the hub where the region’s militia engaged in training exercises. In the first years recorded in the journal, Orvis visited Vergennes frequently to take part in the festivities, admire the uniformed officers, and patronize the shops. Indeed, as an important lake port and trans-shipping point, Vergennes served the entire Brooks/Orvis family. Her uncle John Brooks, her father, and her grandfather regularly brought produce, lumber, and other goods to be shipped to markets around the lake or more often into Canada via the Richelieu River. When the Champlain Canal opened in 1832, they also shipped produce down the Hudson River into New York.

Vergennes was not the only industrial center close to the Brooks’s farm. New Haven Mills was only a short walk to the south. The “Mills,” as it was locally known in Orvis’s day, provided her access to the newest of factory-made products of her time: machine-spun cotton warps for her loom. She also took advantage of the carding mill to prepare her wool for spinning at home, the fulling mill to “finish” her woven cloth, and purchased factory-woven cloth. New Haven Mills was also the home of Noble and Ira Stewart’s general store. There, Orvis could choose from local manufactures, imported goods from the larger New England towns, as well as internationally imported wares, such as China silk, French brandy, or Indian cotton.²⁸

Farther south and west of New Haven Mills, was the village center of Middlebury. This was the cultural and intellectual heart of Orvis’s world. The home of Middlebury College, a school for young men established in 1800, it became a center of liberal education in the early nineteenth century. Indeed, Middlebury prided itself as a progressive community invested in its self-image as a seat of learning. The College not only trained young men, it also provided teachers and tutors to common schools and grammar institutes for girls and boys throughout the region. The educational aspirations of Middlebury businessmen also extended to their daughters; it was this first girls’ school that brought Emma Hart Willard to Middlebury as a young teacher in 1807, and later inspired her to establish her own version of female higher education in the Middlebury

Female Seminary. Consequently, Middlebury was the place where Orvis was able to embark on a more fully realized intellectual life.

Similar to Vergennes and Bristol, Middlebury was an important commercial center, especially in the antebellum period. The Page cotton mill, as well as a number of other commercial mills and businesses took advantage of the upper falls of the Otter Creek. Just as in Vergennes, the town center developed around this natural source of economic power. The rapid growth of Middlebury in the first decades of its settlement was measured by the number of constructed buildings by a local resident, Jabez Rogers. He observed that in 1793 the settlement contained a total of sixty-two buildings “of all kinds.” By 1813, the inhabitants of Middlebury had expanded that number to more than three hundred, many of which were commercial. As one town historian observed, “the period from 1810 to 1820 was one of particularly rapid growth in the village in all its material interests, while at the same time farmers of the town were transforming their homes [and fields].”²⁹ It was this confluence of rapidly paced expansion and economic prosperity in Middlebury that informed Orvis’s estimation of the village and its environs’ gentility. Eventually, Middlebury was bypassed by the heavier industrial development of the latter half of the nineteenth century since it lacked good transportation and did not have a navigable connection to Lake Champlain, but in Orvis’s time the village was a vital economic, political, and social center.³⁰

While many settlers were drawn to make their permanent homes in the Champlain Valley region of central Vermont, some paused only briefly before they moved on. Of these peripatetic families, a number were drawn farther west into the territory of northern New York. Many of these families relocated as a result of their menfolk’s military service on the Niagara frontier during the Revolution and later in War of 1812. Vermonters who served in the New England militias saw action between 1812 and 1815 in the Saint Lawrence Valley under the leadership of Alexander Macomb. Under the immediate command of General Ezekiel Dunton, Addison County militiamen, many of whom were recently settled in the county, fought at the Battle of Plattsburgh with Macomb and his regular army forces.

As Bristol militia recruits, the Eastman and Durfey menfolk were among those who served in actions taking them into what would become Franklin and Saint Lawrence Counties in New York State. For those men who struggled to make productive farms on the stony, thin soil of the Vermont hill towns, the wide, level, and fertile plain of the Saint Lawrence River Valley proved to be a revelation. At the end of the war, many of these former soldiers helped to found new towns on the New York frontier, including Parishville and Hopkinton.³¹ Among others, Samuel Eastman Sr. and his sons joined the rush to take up the newly opened western lands; indeed, Eastman drew on his militia contacts, including General Alexander Macomb, the son of one of the original land patentees in that region,³² to make their claims to the new frontier.³³ Of particular importance to the Orvis saga, Samuel Eastman Sr. purchased a large tract that he eventually divided between his six sons (Samuel Jr., Stephen, Lee, Roswell, David, and William), giving the three eldest each a one hundred acre farm and dividing other lands as the three youngest came of age. Together, the family worked to build cabins as well as to clear and improve their land. Just as in the first days of Vermont settlement, the combination of land clearing, potash manufacturing, and general purpose farming occupied the first generation of farmers in the region. Economic

conditions in the new settlements of the Saint Lawrence Valley were such that according to a town historian, potash stocks became a local currency. Farmers traded their potash to merchants and traders for seed, equipment, and a little cash. The merchants then consolidated the potash, and more valuable pearl ash, to ship to Fort Covington for trans-shipment up the Saint Lawrence to the Montreal market. In exchange, Montreal merchants sent manufactured goods back down the river for payment.³⁴ Engaged in this regional market as well as participating in the rounds of work bees and barn/house raisings in their neighborhood, the Eastman sons collectively developed their individual farms and prepared for adulthood. By 1819, two of the Eastman sons, Lee and Samuel Jr., were ready for the next phase of their lives and actively looked for brides among a sparse set of frontier homesteads much like their own, but eligible young women were scarce.

Despite the postwar land rush on the New York frontier, there were few families within the circle of the Eastmans' settlement with suitable daughters. This shortage of single young women on the New York frontier propelled many of the former Vermonters, including the Eastman brothers, back east to Vermont and Addison County to find wives. This is precisely how Orvis eventually came to live along the road between Hopkinton and Parishville as a married woman.

Despite the timelessness that Orvis invested in the notion of her genteel “native place” in Vermont, the region was actually in a state of almost constant flux during the years she lived on her grandparents' farm. Bristol and the surrounding communities of northern Addison County found themselves caught up in the dynamic shift from the older, more static culture of general purpose farms dominated by the mentalité of subsistence living to the recent market-oriented consumerism of the New Republic. For many Vermonters this was not a reluctant shift as much as it was an enthusiastic plunge into this newfangled socioeconomic milieu drawn by the vibrancy and allure of the new republic's chattering factories and the goods they produced. In many ways, Orvis was herself a human reflection of that dynamic conflict between old and new, rustication and sophistication, self-sustaining and entrepreneurial.