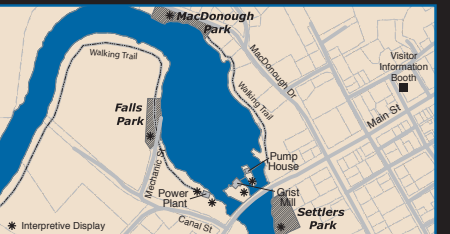


Early Life Along Otter Creek in Vergennes



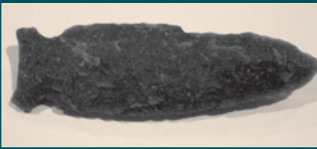
The Wilderness

Shhh. Imagine Otter Creek 300 years ago when it was pristine wilderness. The river teems with fish, herons, ducks, and other waterfowl. Deer and moose tracks dot the river's edge. Downed trees, trampled shrubs, and mounds of mud, branches, and twigs are the work of industrious beavers. Sleek river otters slide gracefully through the water. Otters were so plentiful that the Native Peoples named this river Wonakake-took, Otter River.



Lifblood of Native Peoples

The river flows 102 miles to Lake Champlain from its source near the town of Dorset in Bennington County. Iroquoian and Algonquian Native Peoples traveled on the river and lived in its fertile valley for more than 8000 years. They fished, hunted, and gathered edible plants for food. Animal pelts and skins were used for clothing and shelter. Clay was dug and formed into pots and utensils. Tools, bows and arrows, and baskets were made from the native ash, white oak, willow, swamp maple, and basswood. Deposits of chert yielded stone for projectile points and tools.



A large number of documented Native Peoples' sites in Vermont are along Otter Creek. The distinctive Otter Creek type of projectile point dates from 5,000-6,000 years ago. Courtesy of Langdon Smith.



"A View of the Falls at Otter Creek, Lake Champlain, North America" by Thomas Davies, 1766. The Pangbom sawmill was the first known building on Otter Creek falls. Collection of the Royal Ontario Museum.

Exploration and Settlement

French trappers and fur traders journeyed to Lake Champlain in the mid-1600s in search of beaver pelts, which were made into fashionable men's hats in Europe. Much of northwestern Vermont, including Vergennes, was part of New France until after the

French and Indian War (1754-1763). Colonists began settling along Otter Creek near the falls in the 1760s, following the defeat of French forces in the Champlain Valley. Some acquired land through grants made by the royal governor of New Hampshire, while others claimed

their land under a New York charter. Throughout western Vermont, land disputes flared up. Ethan Allen erected a blockhouse near here in the mid-1770s to protect the New Hampshire grants. Vermont was an independent republic from 1777 to 1791 due, in part, to these conflicts.