

## **The Labor Movement in the Vermont-New York Slate Industry**

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### **Introduction**

Making labor a commodity was perhaps the defining moment in the emergence of a capitalist market system. It shook human society to its roots. As Karl Polani emphasized in The Great Transformation, "...To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings ... would result in the demolition of society."<sup>1</sup>

There was no more immediacy to this transformation than at the historical threshold when one society was shedding its feudal ties while another was fully clothed in a wage labor system. The slate workers who migrated from Wales in the mid-nineteenth century to the Vermont-New York border were drawn to the area's slate quarries because that was the work they knew. The arrangement between management and labor they found in America was far less secure even if wages and living conditions were somewhat better than what they had known in the old country. This paper will tentatively explore the transformation those workers and their families experienced and the attempts they made to establish a labor organization that would protect them from the vicissitudes of life in the quarries.

### **An Emerging Industry**

By the end of the 1850s, the slate industry in western Vermont was just emerging from almost twenty years of backyard quarries operating on a part-time basis by individual farmers. The first slate had been quarried near Fair Haven, Vermont in 1839. The first roofing slate was produced in 1847 by Col. Alonson Allen of Fair Haven. Allen was considered the first manufacturer of slate products in Vermont.<sup>2</sup> The impetus to rapid growth of the industry occurred as a result of a number of forces. Demand for slate had been high on the eastern seaboard in the United States for roofing material since the early part of the century. In the 1930s it had been reported that as much as one-half of the roofs in New York City and one-third of those in Baltimore were covered with slate. Almost all of this slate was supplied by imports from Great Britain. The prices were competitive, in part, because transportation costs were offset by the use of slate as ballast in ships crossing the

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Polanyi, The Great Transformation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 73.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew N. Adams, History of the Town of Fair Haven, Vermont (Fair Haven: Leonard & Phelps Printers, 1870), 301.

Atlantic.<sup>3</sup> The high demand for slate and the resulting attempts to exploit the known resources domestically were missing another ingredient sufficient to launch this new industry. That ingredient was a skilled labor force. Developments across the Atlantic would supply this last element.

At the time, the largest slate quarry in the world was the Penrhyn Quarry in Wales. It employed some 5,000 workers. The quarries, owned by Lord Penrhyn, were operated under near feudal conditions. Workers were paid piece wages, tremendous inequality in earnings existed and overseers extorted money from workers who sought more secure positions. Workers were routinely evicted from company-owned housing if caught organizing unions. Lindsey reports that by 1873 workers wages were no more than 3 pounds a month, while the monthly budget for an 8-person family was 6 pounds.<sup>4</sup>

According to R. Merfyn Jones, well-paid quarrymen received 4 pounds 11 shillings a month, while "less fortunate" quarrymen received 1 pound 7 shillings in 1865. The difference in wage rates was often determined by the favoritism wielded by corrupt setting agents.<sup>5</sup> Labor disputes in Wales were almost continuous during the period from 1848 to the 1880s.<sup>6</sup> The suffocating paternalism of the Penrhyn quarries both sheltered workers (employers financed hospitals, pensions, charities etc.) and proved infertile ground for effective trade unionism. Eventually, although other organizations were more effective, the North Wales Quarrymen's Union established a standing policy of promoting emigration.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the 1850s, a flood of Welsh immigrants, skilled in the slate trade, had arrived in the Vermont/NY slate region. New slate mills and quarries were opened near Fair Haven and the village of Poultney. The Welsh immigrants were followed by Irish, French-Canadian and Slavic immigrants, all of whom brought their cultural traditions.<sup>8</sup> By 1855, over 45,000 squares (one square equals 100 sq. ft.) of slate – over twice the amount of imported slate for that year – had been produced.<sup>9</sup>

The Welsh immigrants who came to work in the slate quarries were quite literate. Poetry readings were frequently held in Poultney. In a WPA interview in the 1930s, a ninety-three year old Welshman talked of musicians, composers and poets who worked in the quarries – one of whom wrote odes on pieces of waste slate. "A few were published in Welsh-American newspapers and magazines."<sup>10</sup> These skilled workers were likely conscious

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<sup>3</sup> . Jeffrey S. Levine, "A History of the United States Slate Industry, 1734 – 1989" (Master's thesis, Cornell University, 1988), 80, 83.

<sup>4</sup> . Jean Lindsey, *A History of the North Wales Slate Industry* (North Pomfret, VT: David and Charles, 1974), 210-11.

<sup>5</sup> R. Merfyn Jones, *The North Wales Quarrymen 1874-1922* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1981), 91.

<sup>6</sup> Lindsey, *North Wales Slate Industry*, 132.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, *North Wales Quarrymen*, 123, 288.

<sup>8</sup> Gwilym R. Roberts, *New Lives in the Valley: New Lives in the Valley: Slate Quarries and Quarry Villages in North Wales, New York, and Vermont, 1850-1920* (Somersworth, NH: RM Distributors, 1998); Jeffrey S. Earney, "The Slate Industry of Western Vermont," *The Journal of Geography* (October 1963): 301; Vermont State Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, "Bomoseen Slate History Trail," 3.

<sup>9</sup> Levine, "United States Slate Industry," 87.

<sup>10</sup> Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, "Mr. Evans Morris Jones," *American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940*.

of their working class status and able to formulate criticisms of the developing capitalist economy. In turn, the Irish came from a tradition of militant class conflict and solidarity. This prepared them for trade union activity in industrial America, even though many of them were unskilled initially.<sup>11</sup>

The industry they came into was just emerging – finding its markets with difficulty and facing stiff competition from abroad. In an 1865 Poultney slate company prospectus, a Vermont State geologist openly complained of foreign competition:

As is too often the case with those benefactors who originate new and valuable enterprises, those who first opened slate quarries in Vermont were but ill rewarded for their noble efforts; for foreign slate flooded the market, and prices ranged so low, that, when sales were made, the amount received was generally barely enough to cover the cost of manufacture, freight and commissions.<sup>12</sup>

There are no reliable statistics available for the number of slate companies or quarries, and the production or employment in the industry prior to 1880. Some information can be teased out of data from a special report on the stone industries in the 1880 census and from sundry sources acquired from local records.

Of the thirty Vermont companies and the eleven New York companies operating in 1880, none opened business before 1850, eight started between 1850 and 1860, nine between 1861 and 1870, while the remaining twenty opened in the decade leading up to

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[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?wpa:63:./temp/~ammem\\_eSDd](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?wpa:63:./temp/~ammem_eSDd); This level of cultural attainment can be exaggerated. Jones argues that although the quarries were cultural centers in Wales, "There has been a certain mythologising about the cultural attainments of the quarrymen..."; see Jones, *Quarrymen of North Wales*, 57.

<sup>11</sup> It should not be ignored that considerable financial support for the Fenians during this period came from Irish laborers who had immigrated to the United States. Even though no industrial working class existed in Ireland at the time and Fenianism was fundamentally based on a national political consciousness, Hobsbawm argues that this armed insurrection was initially begun in the 1850s among the popular masses "...entirely independent of the middle-class moderates." Even though the movement would eventually become wholly absorbed by a leadership drawn from a coalition of the middle-class, the agrarian gentry and small-town merchants, this genesis cannot be dismissed. Even Karl Marx had great, though misplaced, hopes for Fenianism as a potential working class movement – he was in correspondence with their leaders. As Hobsbawm argues, the leadership of labor organizations around the world often had its roots in nationalist movements. Indeed, the Fenians, without a well-developed concept of socialism, were willing to join forces with socialist revolutionaries and, according to Hobsbawm, "...in the case of political refugees, [had a] ...readiness to participate in the struggle wherever they found themselves." Wilentz claims that the conflicts with employers, absentee landlords and tax collectors prepared these rural Irish immigrants for labor-management struggles in America.; see Kim Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism: The Knights of Labor and Class Formation in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 5; E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital: 1848-1875* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 92-94; Sean Wilentz, "The Rise of the Working Class, 1776-1877" in J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris, *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problems of Synthesis* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1990), 110-111.

<sup>12</sup> A.D. Hager, J. Joslin, and Wm. L. Farnam, *The Green Mountain Slate and Tile Company Reports* (Boston: Alfred Mudge, 1865), 6.

1880.<sup>13</sup> This must be weighed, however, against the knowledge that the industry has experienced a volatile boom and bust cycle throughout its whole history. That same state geologist discussing the prospects for the Evergreen Slate and Tile Co. in 1865 claimed the burst in post-war demand for slate products had "...emptied every slate yard..." and caused prices to triple.<sup>14</sup> Five years later, the boom was over and a great shakeout occurred. According to Levine, "There were more abandoned slate openings than active quarries."<sup>15</sup> Only 101 firms were operating in the United States in 1870. More than 1200 quarrymen lost their jobs during the period. By the late 1870s, the serious decline in domestic construction forced slate prices so low that quarries were shipping most of their production to Europe. Soon another boom had begun that would carry to the end of the century. The number of quarries and the number of employed quarrymen in the United States doubled from 1880 to 1890.<sup>16</sup>

These dramatic fluctuations in the slate industry activity caused considerable hardship for workers and their families. The State of Vermont's laws afforded no protection for the insecurities of employment, wages, working conditions, or unjust termination. In addition, many of the owners of the quarries and mills were small operators who were quick to open a quarry and just as quick to abandon it during periods of economic slump.<sup>17</sup> Some evidence of this can be glimpsed through period newspapers, census figures on employment, prices and production, and the occasional prospectus that hints of the checkered history of a

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<sup>13</sup> N.S. Shaler, "Description of Quarries and Quarry Regions," in U.S. Department of the Interior, Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Vol. 10 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1884), 60.

<sup>14</sup> Shaler, "Quarries and Quarry Regions," 7.

<sup>15</sup> Levine, "United States Slate Industry," 104.

<sup>16</sup> Shaler, "Quarries and Quarry Regions," 169.

<sup>17</sup> This fickle character of the early Vermont quarry operators was evident in the methods they used to work the slate formations and their disinterest in alternative uses of waste slate. A report of the building stone industry in the 1880 census included a scathing account of the quarrying methods of these companies: "Experienced slate quarrymen show unusual sagacity by the manner in which they take advantage of the position of the rock as determined by the cleavage, grain, and natural joints, and by manipulating the blast so that it will produce just the effects desired. In the Vermont slate region the cleavage dips at an angle of about 45 degrees, and, if the quarries are opened at the butt (where overlying rock just touches the slate formation), one face cut will be sufficient for taking out all the rock which can be obtained without carrying the excavation under the overlying strata; but small quarries are often opened in the nose (where underlying rock just touches the slate formation), where there is but a small amount of slate above the underlying strata, and when this is taken out a new face cut must be started from the top. There are a great number of small quarries opened in this region without regard to future workings and without any idea apparently of developing large operations. The debris is thrown on good slate rock, and the progress of large quarries has already in some instances been stopped by these piles of debris." A concurring view was expressed in a 1922 report by the Department of the Interior in which it was said, "Lack of capital has been the chief excuse given for improper quarry planning. The most obvious error observable in all slate districts is insufficient removal of waste. In some places the waste is so disposed that it covers valuable slate deposits and thus retards development; in others the waste dumps are so close to quarry openings that lateral expansion is prevented; and in several quarries rock slides into the excavations have undermined the spoil banks and precipitated them into the pits." A 1980 study cited this work, which reported that slate powder was a superior filler in road surface material and in plastics, and even as resin-bonded slate powder to make roofing slates and sheet products, among numerous other uses for slate waste. See George W. Howe, "Report on the Building Stones of the United States and Statistics of the Quarry Industry," in U.S. Department of the Interior, Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Vol. 10 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1884), 39; Oliver Bowles, The Technology of Slate (Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines. Washington D.C.: 1922), 25; K.L. Watson, Slate Waste (London: Applied Science Publishers Ltd., 1980), 32-34.

quarry's ownership. *Table I* reveals that there may have been only eleven firms employing about 321 workers in 1855 in the United States. By 1880, there were over 90 slate quarries in the U.S. employing over 3,000 workers – almost ninety percent being employed in Pennsylvania and Vermont/New York.

In an 1865 prospectus, owners of the Green Mountain Slate and Tile Company in Poultney, Vermont, reported that prices of slate per square had increased from \$2.36 to \$9.00 over the previous five-year period. Wages for skilled labor had increased from \$1.62 to \$3.37 per day and from \$1.50 to \$2.25 per day for unskilled labor.<sup>18</sup> By 1870, there were only forty-one slate workers in Castleton (a major slate capital) and only two to three firms.<sup>19</sup> The bust had apparently had its effect. The usually conservative, pro-management local paper in Fair Haven, Vermont, sounded a somewhat radical note when it reported that after not being paid from December 1869 to June 1870, the workers of the Scotch Hill Slate Co. just south of Fair Haven had refused to work. The company had been paying them with "orders" on local merchants, which after a time the merchants refused to accept. The Fair Haven Journal reported, "A company composed of heavy capitalists, as we learn the Scotch Hill Company is, deserves severe censure for inflicting such hardship upon honest, hard-working employees."<sup>20</sup>

As the paper revealed, the owners lived in Boston, so perhaps it was easier to sound a clarion note than if the action had been undertaken by a local capitalist. The Scotch Hill quarry was originally opened by Alonson Allen and had been held in Welsh or English ownership until the Boston firm acquired it. As the Fair Haven Journal was founded by Welsh immigrants, it is likely that they would have been more sympathetic to the Welsh quarry workers. This cannot be said for the company that I will turn my attention to now.

### **The Economic Lives of Slate Workers**

For much of the rest of the paper, I will discuss the West Castleton Railroad and Slate Co. (WCR&SC)– one of the largest and most technologically sophisticated slate operations in the slate belt of Vermont/New York. In 1851, the Newell Sturdivant & Co. firm was granted a charter to purchase 500 acres of land in West Castleton, Vermont between the shores of Lake Bomoseen and Glen Lake a few miles east of Fair Haven. The firm reported that it would invest a million dollars in the operation. By 1855, the Rutland Herald reported that the firm consisted of:

...several mills, and some thirty dwelling houses; the employing of over one hundred and fifty men; the manufacture of over fifteen thousand tons of slate and slate ware; and the outlay of over one hundred thousand dollars. It is well worth a visit to see the novel manufactures, the extensive and nice machinery, the thrift, cleanliness and good management everywhere apparent in the colony, and the beauty of the scenery.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Hager, Reports, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Schedules 1-8 for Castleton, Vt. in U.S. Department of the Interior, Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Vol. 9 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1874), 1-8 (Rutland Free Library).

<sup>20</sup> Fair Haven Journal, June 4, 1870.

<sup>21</sup> Rutland Herald, August 31, 1855.

By 1868, the firm was doing so well that the owners expanded further. Again, the Herald expressed great enthusiasm:

The West Castleton Slate Co. is erecting an immense mill for their business. It is over 800 feet long, 50 feet wide and not very high, and built of stone...it has become exceedingly profitable under the superintendence of Mr. Samuel L. Hazard.<sup>22</sup>

After 1870, the collapse of the slate market forced the firm to close its doors. After the property was sub-divided, leaving a "two hundred acre farm, slate quarry, large slate mill with machinery, forty or fifty dwellings, a large store edifice and any quantity of personal property," it was sold to Samuel L. Hazard. The paper reported the property "had been valued at \$900,000" and that the "business will be resumed."<sup>23</sup> Hazard would also purchase the Scotch Hill quarry in 1883 – an operation that had also declared bankruptcy. The West Castleton mill and quarries continued in operation until the 1940s. S. L. Hazard and his descendents held ownership for most of that time. "The mill was powered by a waterwheel twenty-four feet in diameter. It had seven circular saws, a band saw, a jig saw, five planers, two rubbing beds and a jointer."<sup>24</sup> The ruins of the mill (see image on left) still stand next to the foundations of the tenement houses that were owned by the company and leased to the workers. The company store is now used as a residence.

What is of interest for the purposes of this paper are the ethnic and age composition of the workers, their wages, conditions of employment and standard of living. Using census records, local newspapers, and a company store ledger that covers two months in 1883, we can tentatively explore these questions. In the 1870 census, just five years before Hazard would buy the Castleton Slate Co., forty-two slate workers were listed ranging in age from eleven to seventy-five. Of the forty-two, twenty-seven were born in Ireland, the remaining listing Vermont as their place of birth. All the Vermont-born workers listed one or both parents as foreign born and most of these had Irish last names. Samuel Hazard, the superintendent at the time, was listed as English born.<sup>25</sup> These quarrymen and mill-workers from Ireland settled in the company-owned housing in West Castleton near Glen Lake (what used to be known as "Screwdriver Pond"). They came to be frequently referred to in the local papers as the "Screwdriver Irish." The newspaper report of a particularly brutal murder on St. Patrick's Day in 1854 began, "The fight was commenced by John Kennedy and some Screwdriver men."<sup>26</sup>

Seven of the forty-two slate workers in the 1870 census were fifteen years of age or younger. Even the hard, dangerous jobs of quarry and mill work were done by children. Two brothers who were fourteen and eleven worked side-by-side in the slate mill. Most of these same forty-two workers turn up as slate workers in the company store ledger for 1883. In the 1880 special report of the census, Vermont slate workers were reported to earn \$1.59

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<sup>22</sup> Rutland Herald, September 1, 1868.

<sup>23</sup> Rutland Herald, June 13, 1875.

<sup>24</sup> Vermont State, "Lake Bomoseen," 11.

<sup>25</sup> Ninth Census of U.S., 1-8.

<sup>26</sup> Rutland Herald, March 31, 1854.

a day for skilled labor and \$1.23 a day for unskilled labor (see *Table I*). Assuming they worked six days a week, skilled worker's earnings would come to \$38.16 a month and probably less than \$400 a year (since quarry workers rarely worked more than nine or ten months a year due to the severe weather).<sup>27</sup> Unskilled workers would make \$29.52 a month and probably less than \$300 a year. Vermont and New York slate companies paid the lowest wages in the industry at the time. These were poverty level earnings no matter where one lived in America at the time. Wage statistics gathered at the time revealed that "The average annual living cost of a working class family in 1883 was put at \$754.42, while the average income of a worker was \$558.68."<sup>28</sup> The West Castleton Slate workers undoubtedly suffered great deprivation and had to scramble during periods of unemployment. Living in company-owned housing and buying from the company store put them even further in debt.

The average monthly bill for the fifty names listed in the company store ledger for the West Castleton Railroad and Slate Co. was \$22.86.<sup>29</sup> The range was from a few dollars to one bill that was over \$66.86. In comparing these bills with the workers' wages certain assumptions are being made. One assumption is that all the customers in the ledger were quarry or mill workers. Further down we will have reason to doubt that anyone who was not a worker would willingly run a tab at this company store. Secondly, it is assumed that none of these workers were supervisors or clerks. Even if we relax this assumption it would not diminish the average bill appreciably.

These assumptions aside, the workers were spending just under sixty percent of their earnings at the company store for the barest of provisions – items that mostly were used to cook, bake, make clothes, or provide light. The luxuries amounted to "smoking", "chewing" and the occasional pair of shoes. But these were not the only expenditures workers had to make out of their wages to their employer. They lived in company-owned housing. Although I have no figures for rent directly, it is known that company-owned tenements in nearby New Hampshire were renting for \$5.00 per month.<sup>30</sup> Adding that to the \$22.86 average bill raises the total owed to the company to seventy-three percent of the skilled workers' monthly earnings. In addition to the standard of living suggested by these figures,

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<sup>27</sup> In a letter to me on 8 August 2000, Slate Valley historian Gwilym R. Roberts expressed his understanding that quarrymen worked all year with reduced hours during the winter. At least for the period since the 1930s, this was confirmed as well by William "Doc" Williams, an elderly slate worker, in an interview conducted on 2 June, 2000. References I have found indicate that at least some quarries at the turn of the century operated only during the summer and autumn. It is certainly probable that work continued in the mill through the winter months.; see J.N. Nevius, "Roofing Slate Quarries of Washington County." Fifty Third Annual Report of the New York State Museum, Vol. 1 (1901), 143.

<sup>28</sup> In 1884, Voss reports that thirty-seven percent of surveyed workers in New Jersey made less than \$500 annually – an income that was "...insufficient to provide a family of five with an adequate diet ." Still these wages exceeded what quarry workers received in Wales. Jones reported that Penryn Quarry workers received about five pounds a month (\$29.35) on average from the 1880s on. This amounts to less than \$400 annually even if workers were employed twelve months a year. See Philip Foner, History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Vol. I. (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 498; Voss, American Exceptionalism, 112; Jones, North Wales Quarrymen, 113, 128-129.

<sup>29</sup> 1883 Company Store ledger for the West Castleton Railroad and Slate Co., manuscript in possession of Peter Patton, Fair Haven, Vermont.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Report of the Committee of the Senate upon the Relations between Labor and Capital and Testimony taken by the Committee, Vol. III. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1885), 6.

the company store ledger provides us with further opportunity to comment on the living condition of these workers and their families. *Table II* compares the price lists for goods in the company store ledger for July and August of 1883 with the same commodities advertised in the Poultney Journal (Poultney is seven miles to the south) and in the Rutland Herald (Rutland is fifteen miles east). Many of the items listed in the company store ledger were not advertised in local papers, partly because they were more common, low-end commodities. The local stores advertised oysters, potatoes, sirloin and porterhouse steak, ham, silk and brocades. Goods such as these were not bought at the company store.

The significantly higher prices at the company store might be explained by the extension of credit by the store – monthly bills were either settled at the end of the month or taken out of the workers' wages. But an average difference as great as 42 percent in prices for standard commodities is not so easily dismissed. Workers may have even been coerced into buying at company stores at the risk of termination.<sup>31</sup>

These workers in the slate mills and quarries had significant grievances if one were to judge by their standard of living and the working conditions they endured. Child labor, long hours (between 10.5 to 11.5 hours a day) and hazardous conditions marked life in the quarries and mills. During the year 1920, the Bureau of Mines reported that five men were killed and 364 injured in slate mining or about one man in each 10 employed in the United States.<sup>32</sup> To be a reportable injury, the worker had to lose one or more days of work. Vermont reported no deaths that year and a lower injury rate of one in thirteen workers. The numerous accidents in the mills and quarries were reported in the local newspapers, but no systematic effort to collect records was ever made prior to the modern era. The mineral composition of slate, almost seventy percent silica, shortened the lives of workers by perhaps decades.<sup>33</sup>

The incidence of strike activity and the strength of any labor organizations in the 19th century are difficult to assess. Other than a brief mention of a work stoppage, as previously discussed, the local papers provided little evidence of a sustained effort at union organization in the 19th century. During the 1907-08 strike in Fair Haven, the local paper indicated that a strike had not occurred in the village for 40 years.<sup>34</sup> This is contradicted by Roberts who reports of the occurrence of a small strike in a Fair Haven quarry in 1881. Other than a bitter strike by the New York and Vermont Slate Workers' Union in 1894 that lasted several months, Roberts writes that there was no "effective union" during the 1880s

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<sup>31</sup> In a telephone conversation on February 2, 1998, Gwilym R. Roberts, a historian of the Vermont-New York Slate Valley, indicated that this was practiced.

<sup>32</sup> Bowles, Technology of Slate, 117.

<sup>33</sup> A study completed in 1930 of 120 quarrymen in Wales reported that pulmonary fibrosis was found in 56 workers, while 14 of 96 millmen studied were found to have silicosis. The report cites two studies as far back as 1895 that warned of this deadly connection, one of which stated that "...an unduly high death-rate from phthisis experienced by slate workers in Merionethshire was, to some extent, due to inhaling slate dust." None of the newspaper articles or literature researched for this paper reported any such findings in the Vermont/N.Y. slate industry. Work on this topic will be the subject of subsequent projects. See C.L. Sutherland and S. Bryson, Inquiry into the Occurrence of Disease of the Lungs from Dust Inhalation in the Slate Industry in the Gwyrfa District (London: The Health Advisory Committee of the Mines Department, 1930), 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> Fair Haven Era, September 19, 1908.

and early 1890s.<sup>35</sup> We can, through discussion of two events, draw some tentative conclusions about the absence of a vigorous union effort.

In 1890, Terrence V. Powderly, President of the Knights of Labor, visited Rutland to speak in the Town Hall. The Fair Haven Journal reported that the slate, granite and marble quarries and mills were closed for the day, and half fare rates were offered on the railroads to allow workers to attend, stating that "a large attendance of workingmen is expected from all over the state ... it will be impossible for all to gain even admittance to the hall."<sup>36</sup> If the workers expected a stirring speech that would rally them in the struggle with capital they were to be sadly disappointed. A week after the address, the local paper reported on the event:

It is estimated that fully two thousand people were in the hall. It was an excellent lecture and I wish more people could have heard it. I was particularly pleased concerning what he said on the land tax ... but I was surprised, while talking with people ... to find that many did not get the import of what he said.<sup>37</sup>

There is documentation that a number of local assemblies of the Knights of Labor existed in the slate belt region. Local assembly No. 8613 operated in Fair Haven from 1886 to 1893, No. 9447 operated in Hydeville from 1887 to 1899, No. 2078-b in West Castleton lasted from 1890 to 1893, Local No. 8549 in Granville was founded in 1886 and local 9876 was in Middle Granville from 1887 to 1888.<sup>38</sup> There were eleven local assemblies in Rutland and five in West Rutland. Most of these locals were of mixed occupations (although some of the Rutland locals were exclusively marble polishers, stone cutters or railroad employees). Some of the locals included women, such as the Fair Haven local. There is no documented Knights of Labor Assembly in Poultney in Garlock's guide, which includes over twelve thousand locals. Mention, however, is made of a Poultney local assembly in the Poultney Journal of 1890 as reported by Gwilym R. Roberts' well-researched book on the industry.<sup>39</sup> Although much more needs to be discovered about the reasons for the quiet labor movement in the slate belt, certainly the Knights of Labor were not interested in strikes and considerably more interested in middle class interests such as the single land tax and municipal reform. Although the leaders of the local Knights of Labor assemblies may not have provided real workplace reform, there is some evidence that they might have helped change the political climate more favorably toward the issues of interest to local working class families. The respected labor historian, David Montgomery, contends that "the influence workers could exert on the major parties in any locality was directly proportional to the level of organization accomplished there by the trade unions and the Knights of Labor."<sup>40</sup> This must have changed the political forces in the community from 1880 when

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<sup>35</sup> Roberts, New Lives in the Valley, 267, 269-271.

<sup>36</sup> Fair Haven Journal, May 12, 1890.

<sup>37</sup> Fair Haven Journal, May 30, 1890.

<sup>38</sup> Johathan Garlock, Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor (Westport, Ct: Greenwood Press, 1982), 350, 515.

<sup>39</sup> Roberts, New Lives in the Valley, 273.

<sup>40</sup> David Montgomery, Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 154.

representative-elect Samuel L. Hazard – the owner of the largest local slate company – celebrated his election at the local Bomoseen Inn by feasting on a meal that the local paper claimed must have "tasted well after the 'bloody shirt' had been waved over them."<sup>41</sup>

A second event also provides some tentative explanations for the absence of effective labor organization in the Vermont/New York slate industry. On May 2, 1907, some 500 members of the Millmens' and Quarrymens' Union walked out in the Fair Haven area. The local paper reported, "...the workmen, while fairly well paid for their services, have for sometime felt that they were entitled to more of the profits from the business than they were receiving."<sup>42</sup> The workers were demanding a nine hour day for ten hours pay (as the paper put it), time-and-a-half for overtime, double time on Sundays and recognition of the union. The Fair Haven Era actively opposed the strike and supported the slate company operators. On July 11, the paper quoted International President George B. Roberts in one-inch type on the front page that read "The Strike a Mistake." In a letter to the editor, Roberts furiously denied the report stating, "...the mistake was on the operators, and not on the men. How could I say it was a mistake on the strikers' part when our Ex-council approved of every one of their demands that they had asked for?"<sup>43</sup> In subsequent issues, the paper accused Roberts of being an outside agitator (from Bangor, Maine), remarking that, "Isn't it rather autocratic especially in what was supposed to have been a free country such as this for one man, the president of an organization, to assume such unlimited power as is assumed today by the presidents of labor organizations?"<sup>44</sup> The strike dragged on for two years and finally withered to nothing as workers either left the area or were permanently locked out by replacement workers who drifted in from other areas. There would be no resolution to the union's demands until the Wagner Act of 1935 and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1946.

Ironically, one cannot find a similar condemnation in the local press of the organizations of quarry owners who conspired to fix prices and wages or of the outright consolidation of parts of the industry. The former were typified by the Slate Mill Trust, which was formed in 1895 in Fair Haven, Vermont to regulate prices and to preserve their business. The latter were exemplified by the Boston-backed Matthews & Co., which bought up all the red slate quarries (red slate being the most rare and highest-priced slate in the world) located in Washington County in 1900.<sup>45</sup>

The lack of trade union militancy among the Welsh slate workers might also be attributed to several factors related to the distinct differences between the slate industry in Wales and that in the Vermont/N.Y. slate belt. The workers in the Vermont/N.Y. slate industry were not confronted with anything like the hegemonic power (notwithstanding the occasional efforts at consolidation discussed in the previous paragraph) of Lord Penrhyn. The bitter class feud was more pronounced in Wales. The figure of Lord Penrhyn was a

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<sup>41</sup> Fair Haven Journal, November 15, 1880.

<sup>42</sup> Fair Haven Era, July 25, 1907.

<sup>43</sup> Fair Haven Era, July 16, 1907.

<sup>44</sup> Fair Haven Era, July 25, 1907.

<sup>45</sup> Levine, United States Slate Industry, 120-121.

great catalyst for mobilization.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, solidarity was both more difficult to sustain and perhaps, from the perspective of the Welsh workers, less necessary in an industry that was much more ethnically diverse. Evidence suggests that Welsh workers were given the higher paying jobs in the industry (compared to the Irish, Slavic and French workers) and that, as seen in the discussion of the W.C.R. & S.C., the companies that were non-Welsh discovered that labor unrest found less sympathy in the community and the press.

### **Conclusion**

Workers and owners in the Vermont/N.Y. slate belt were locked in an industrial and social culture that served neither the workers nor the community. Mention has been made in the literature that owners were reluctant to make use of available technology, and that their operations were antiquated and undercapitalized.<sup>47</sup> Workers in the industry were never well paid. [Tables I](#) and [VI](#) in the appendix indicate that workers barely earned a living wage during those years for which we have data. Moreover, prices for roofing slate (the predominant use of the product) fluctuated hardly at all over the twenty-four year period (1890-1914) that constituted the boom time for the industry (see [Table VI](#)). During the heyday of the industry, absentee operators preferred to make quick profits and spirit them away, leaving little in the way of permanent infrastructure. Given that the slate quarries, mills and ancillary manufacturers supported the bulk of families in the region, the collapse of the local economies can readily be seen in the rapid decline in slate production over the five year period from 1914, when over one million squares of roofing slate were produced, to 1920 when a paltry 396,230 squares were produced (see [Table V](#)). The Poultney River was once lined with manufacturers, a major rail line ran through the heart of the city and a trolley line transported passengers from Poultney to East Poultney. One wonders what might have been if workers had been given a better standard of living and more influence in decision-making in the workplace. If employers had re-invested their profits into more advanced technologies, concentrated on marketing their product world-wide, explored the extensive research into use of slate waste and prepared to promote new industries to support their communities, how would the economies of the region have prospered?

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### **APPENDIX: TABLES**

I felt compelled to include all statistics that I was able to compile regardless of how incomplete. Substantial gaps in available data exist for production, prices and wages. In addition, some of the data have questionable values. For example, in *Table III* there are figures for the value of slate imported into the U.S. that are absurdly low from 1877 through 1882. One of the most significant points that can be drawn from *Tables III* and *IV* is that roofing slate appeared to be the more important trade category in terms of both total dollar

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<sup>46</sup> Jones writes, "Repression and victimisation were dangerous weapons for the owners, effective in the short term but building up a store of bitterness and resentment for future battles: 'Give the screw another turn', warned a correspondent from Bethesda in April 1874, 'and the people here will shout. And you look out for the consequences.'" See Jones, *North Wales Quarrymen*, 122.

<sup>47</sup> Arthur D. Little, Inc. *Study of the Slate Mining Industry of Vermont/New York* (U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines, 1980) 64-65.

volume of traffic and in its contribution to the trade surplus with the rest of the world's slate producing countries. Although some of the data do not directly relate to the topic of the paper, they provide a statistical backdrop to the historical events that transformed the Vermont and New York slate belt economies.

**TABLE I. Number of Firms and Workers in the Slate Industry (selected years)<sup>48</sup>**

	United States				Vermont State		Green Mountain Slate Co.	
Years	1844	1855	1880	1890	1880	1890	1859	1865
Firms (no.)	-	11	94	212	31	70	-	-
Workers (no.)	80	321	3,033	6,170	755	1,535	-	-
Production (thousands of squares)	-	45	457.3	950	108.9	235.2	-	-
Value (hundreds of thousands of dollars)	-	-	1,500	3,400	352.6	842	-	-
Price per square	-	-	\$3.28	\$3.58	-	-	\$2.36	\$9.00
Wage/Skilled (dollars per day)	-	-	\$1.75	-	\$1.59	-	\$1.62	\$3.37
Wage/Unskilled (dollars per day)	-	-	\$1.17	-	\$1.23	-	\$1.50	\$2.36

**TABLE II. Price Comparison of Company and Town Stores<sup>49</sup>**

Commodity	West Castleton Slate Company Store- Price per unit	Local Newspaper Advertisements- Price per unit
Coffee	.38/lb	.35/lb
Flour	10.44/bbl	7.00/bbl
Apples	.16/peck	.10/peck
Sugar	.13/lb	.075/lb
Tea	1.50/lb	1/10/lb
Pork	.16/lb	.09/lb
Beef	.16/lb	.128/lb
Butter	.35/lb	.25/lb
TOTAL	\$16.03/unit	\$9.07/unit

<sup>48</sup> Levine, "United States Slate Industry," 106; Hager, *Reports*, 49; Albert Williams Jr. *Mineral Resources of the United States* Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey, 1883, 450-452; J.W. Powell. *Mineral Resources of the United States* Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey, 1890, 376.

<sup>49</sup> 1883 Company Store Ledger for the West Castleton Railroad and Slate Co., manuscript in possession of Peter Patton, Fair Haven, Vermont; *Poultney Journal* and *Rutland Herald*, July, August, 1883.

**TABLE III. Value of Slate Products Imported into the U.S., 1867-1884<sup>50</sup>**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Structural Slate (mantels, ect.)</b>	<b>Roofing Slate</b>
1867	\$37,510	\$85,204
1868	16,045	118,776
1869	19,602	85,364
1870	19,879	107,521
1871	21,381	117,484
1872	25,925	107,192
1873	26,643	91,503
1874	27,519	80,519
1875	42,022	16,342
1876	44,266	2,051
1877	34,479	4
1878	39,935	275
1879	46,260	620
1880	51,165	72
1881	46,862	2
1882	45,774	154
1883	44,375	2,813
1884	34,640	16,090

**TABLE IV. Value of Slate Exported from the Port of New York, 1876 to 1887<sup>51</sup>**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Structural Slate (mantels, ect.)</b>	<b>Roofing Slate</b>
1876	\$87,500	\$377,233
1877	68,437	646,272
1878	88,215	308,852
1879	74,251	166,220
1880	76,709	220,292
1881	62,109	138,904
1882	68,150	153,318
1883	40,674	54,063
1884	53,023	90,262
1885	49,965	115,206
1886	40,804	79,064
1887	39,560	62,052

<sup>50</sup> Powell, Mineral Resources of the United States Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey, 1902, 403.

<sup>51</sup> Powell, Mineral Resources, 1902, 523-524.

**TABLE V. Roofing Slate Production in Vermont, New York and U.S., 1879-1901.**<sup>52</sup>

Year	Vermont (# of squares)	New York (# of squares)	United States (# of squares)	VT/NY Percent of U.S. Production
1879	No data	No data	367,857	No data
1880	115,000	19,850	382,867	35.2
1881	No Data	No Data	454,070	No Data
1882	"	"	501,000	"
1883	"	"	506,200	"
1884	85,000	"	481,004	17.7
1885	130,000	"	536,960	24.2
1886	111,385	"	536,790	20.8
1887	120,000	"	573,639	20.9
1888	160,000	"	662,400	24.2
1889	Missing data	Missing data	835,625	Missing data
1891	247,643	17,000	893,312	29.6
1892	260,000	20,000	953,000	29.4
1893	132,061	69,640	621,939	32.4
1894	Missing data	Missing data	738,222	Missing data
1895	"	"	729,927	"
1896	"	"	673,304	"
1897	225,182	17,410	1,140,651	21.3
1898	214,235	14,238	1,088,754	21.0
1899	277,463	10,912	1,100,513	26.2
1900	282,820	7,713	1,194,048	24.3
1901	330,190	15,786	1,304,379	26.5
1902	Missing data	Missing data	1,435,168	Missing data
1903	"	"	1,378,194	"
1904	"	"	1,233,757	"
1905	"	"	1,241,227	"
1906	"	"	1,214,742	"
1907	"	"	1,277,554	"
1910	"	"	1,260,621	"
1911	"	"	1,124,677	"
1912	"	"	1,197,288	"
1913	"	"	1,113,944	"
1914	"	"	1,019,553	"
1915	"	"	967,880	"
1916	"	"	835,873	"
1917	"	"	703,667	"
1918	"	"	379,817	"
1919	"	"	454,337	"
1920	"	"	396,230	"

<sup>52</sup> Powell, *Mineral Resources* ...1902, 472, 522, 547, 550, 661, 677, 710; Martha C. Clark, *Mineral Resources of the United States (Preliminary Summary)*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Mines, July 1926 [August 1927, June 1932].

**TABLE VI. Prices and Hourly Wages in the Roofing Industry<sup>53</sup>**

Year	Price Per Square	Unskilled Wages	Skilled Wages	Average Wages
1859	\$2.36	\$.15	\$.162	.133
1865	9.00	.225	.337	.281
1880	no data	.123	.159	.141
1884	3.85	no data	no data	no data
1885	3.07	.13	.20	.165
1886	3.00	.10	.18	.14
1887	3.00	no data	no data	no data
1888	3.10	"	"	"
1889	3.35	"	"	"
1890	3.34	"	"	"
1891	3.49	"	"	"
1892	3.34	"	"	"
1893	3.55	"	"	"
1894	3.11	"	"	"
1895	3.23	"	"	"
1896	3.36	"	"	"
1897	3.09	"	"	"
1898	3.42	"	"	"
1899	3.14	"	"	"
1900	3.01	"	"	"
1901	3.15	"	"	"
1902	3.45	"	"	"
1903	3.88	"	"	"
1904	3.78	"	"	"
1905	3.69	"	"	"
1906	3.66	"	"	"
1907	3.77	"	"	"
1908	3.89	"	"	"
1909	3.87	"	"	"
1910	3.84	"	"	"
1911	3.87	"	"	"
1912	3.87	"	"	"
1913	4.00	"	"	"
1914	4.08	"	"	"
1935		.30	.37	.34
1965		1.59	2.24	1.92
1966		1.66	2.31	1.98

<sup>53</sup> Powell, 472; 1893, 710; 1894, 550; 1901, 677-681; 1902, 661); Clark, Mineral Resources: Green Mountain Slate and Tile Co. Reports (Boston: A.D. Hager, 1865), 12; Howe, "Report on the Building Stones..." 51; WPA Life Histories Collection, Vermont [Quarrying], Vermont Writers Project, 1934-36, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?wpa:63:./temp/~ammem\\_eSDd 8;](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?wpa:63:./temp/~ammem_eSDd 8;) Agreement Between Fair Haven Slate Company of Castleton, Vermont and the United Stone and Allied Products Workers of America, AFL-CIO, 1965 (University of Vermont Library, The Wilbur Collection).