

THE INDUSTRIES ON KIMPTON BROOK
WILMOT CENTER, NH

By

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Wilmot Center, N.H.

1830-1900

Introduction

The Village at Wilmot has changed from a fairly populous, industrial, rural town located on the Fourth New Hampshire Turnpike to a small bedroom town for the Concord and New London areas. Wilmot once contained manufacturing plants and mills located along the many brooks and rivers flowing within her borders. Today there are none.

However, as one walks along the brooks, some of the foundations of these mills are plainly visible. Using a study of Kimpton Brook as a basis, I will reconstruct the industries, plants or mills which were located in the Wilmot Center area. In solving this problem, I hope to learn:

What industries were located on Kimpton Brook.

Why has the population of the Town dwindled?

Why has the center of activity moved from Wilmot Center on 4a (the fourth New Hampshire Turnpike) to Wilmot Flat, formerly just a section of the Town?

What businesses are currently located in Wilmot?

What is the difference between previous industries compared to the present businesses?

How has this affected Wilmot Center and Wilmot Flat?

To compile this information, I have interviewed key informants, examined relevant documents, and garnered personal information.

In 1928, a newspaper in New London, "The Highlander", offered a prize for compositions concerning the mills along the brook in Wilmot Center. The three boys who entered the contest consulted the elderly people in town who could still remember the mills operating during their youth. Much of the information about the location and the type of mills comes from these three compositions.

Wilmot Background

In 1806, the construction of the Fourth New Hampshire Turnpike from Concord to White River Junction, Vermont, opened up the territory between these two towns and accordingly changed the lives of those who lived along it. About half-way between the two towns lay the territory of North New London. The inhabitants of North New London and Kearsarge Gore had difficulty traveling over the meandering footpaths, private cartways or 20 miles of open public highways to reach the areas in their towns to conduct town business and to vote. Therefore, these citizens applied to the New Hampshire Legislature for an act to form a separate town. This act was approved on June 18, 1807, and 9,230 acres of North New London (Fig.1) and 6,700 acres

of North Kearsarge Gore became the Town of Wilmot. In 1832, 3,300 acres of New Chester were also annexed. The Town of Wilmot was now complete (Fig.#2).

When the Fourth New Hampshire Turnpike was first opened in 1806, it was a toll road. Although it was the main road between Concord, NH and White River Junction, VT, it was not until 1840 when it became a free road that it was heavily travelled. Between 1840 and 1860 there was a steady stream of traffic on the Turnpike.

The steady stream of traffic and the availability of shipping freight easily caused Wilmot to grow into a thriving town with a number of industries.

It was during the years 1830 through 1880 that the mills on Kimpton Brook sprang up and offered employment. The wage earner moved to Wilmot, bringing his family, and within a short time the population increased from 835 to 1,080. (see Table #3).

Table #3 - Census of the Town of Wilmot

Year	Population	Year	Population
1810	423	1890	840
1820	670	1900	763
1830	835	1910	614
1840	1,212	1920	536
1850	1,272	1930	495
1860	1,195	1950	370
1870	1,072		
1880	1,080		

LeVarn 1957, 203

According to The Highlander (September 29, 1928) a Mr. Balch owned a freight line during these years which daily hauled freight along the Fourth New Hampshire Turnpike – although the newspaper didn’t reveal what kind of freight. The products of the mills along the brooks were sent on to other towns, farming implements were brought up from Boston and Concord, and foodstuffs were moved from town to town.

The newspaper presents a typical picture of what must have been a daily sight along the Fourth New Hampshire Turnpike; the freight wagons were pulled by “eight well-groomed white horses.” The heavy pieces of single freight were taken by four- or six-horse teams, while the miscellaneous freight was carried by three-horse or “spike” teams, two-horse or “pod” teams, or even by one horse. In the winter when the snow covered the road, “pungs” (sleighs) were used.

This flow of traffic on the Turnpike allowed industries, mills and factories to spring up all through the territory. Because Kimpton Brook flowed alongside the Turnpike, it was a natural

turn of events that the industrious early settlers would use the water power to set up mills and shops.

Kimpton Brook, also called Center Brook and Quickwater Brook, starts up by the pond in East Springfield, about a mile and a half above the Wilmot and East Springfield line. Several small brooks flow into it. The Brook then becomes larger just above the Springfield line. It flows alongside the Fourth New Hampshire Turnpike until it turns to flow toward Eagle Pond. The brook ends at Eagle Pond which in turn then feeds the Blackwater River. Kimpton Brook was called Quickwater Brook by the early settlers, because when it rains the water rises in the Brook very rapidly, even to this day.

“The original industry of the early settlers was farming. Everyone did more or less farming, even the mill operators, store keepers and mechanics... Farming was the occupation of all, and wherever people assembled in the small towns, conversation was sure to include farm talk... there have always been some people who could do certain things better than the majority, either through training or a natural aptitude, and these people became the tailors, tinkers, cordwainers (shoemaker), singing masters, dressmakers, weavers, carpenters, blacksmiths, millwrights, carriers (tanners), millers, etc.; they were the mechanics, and where financial circumstances permitted they became the owners of mills, factories, shops and stores.” (LeVarn 1957:139)

Thus, during the agriculture off-season, the mills provided work for the men in the area.

The Mills

According to a plaque erected by the State of New Hampshire at the Gilman Sawyer site, the history of the Town of Springfield indicates that in 1933 Gilman Sawyer of Springfield built a shingle mill just across the Wilmot town line (mill #1). Josiah Johnson owned a sawmill (mill #2) close by, and the lumber for the shingles became easily accessible. Records show that Johnson operated this mill from 1846 to 1859. The tax records in the early days were vague, and oftentimes the mills, shops and homesteads were all taxed with one amount. The Springfield town history indicates that Johnson’s mill was already there in 1833, and I believe that Comey operated it for a much longer time than just one year. He paid taxes in the Town of Wilmot for a much greater length of time but the mill was not shown separately.

James S. Dodge, and later his son Edward B. Dodge, operated Mill #3, a clapboard mill; Mill #4, a large sawmill; and Mill #5, a shingle mill. James began the operation in 1876, and the mills were still operating into the 1900s. According to Bertagna, Dodge’s sawmill was one of the best and most powerful of all the mills in the area. It had a dam with a flume of 125 feet with a drop of 50 feet. The water that flowed through the flume furnished the power that operated the millwheel which in turn operated the saw. Although Dodge built a dam at Butterfield Pond

and along one of the smaller brooks to preserve the water, low water levels and the resultant loss of water power was a problem. When it rained, filling the brook, the men sawed day and night while the power lasted. When the water lowered in the brook, they sawed lumber in the sawmill only during the day, The Shingle and Clapboard Mills apparently needed less power to operate. The men worked those mills at night in order to preserve the water for the big sawmill during the day.

Horses and oxen were used to haul the logs to the sawmill from the woodlots. Dodge charged 60 cents a thousand for sawing the shingles: a real contrast to the price of shingles today.

Dodge was not merely a mill operator/owner but he also was involved in a number of other enterprises. He owned several wood lots around the fourth turnpike, and he had 50 or more men working for him full-time. In the middle of the summer when the brook was very low, Dodge shut down the mills and his men either farmed or chopped lumber and pulp. In addition to the mills Dodge owned a blacksmith shop where he shod the horses and oxen and repaired the parts of his mills whenever necessary. He also maintained a boarding house for his help. As many as 40 men boarded there. There is no trace, however, of the boarding house which was located a short way above the North Wilmot Road (Bertagna 1928:4).

In the vicinity of Pedrick's Corner, Mill #6 was located. This sawmill belonged to two brothers, George and Charles Whitney. This mill was started in 1853, and the Wilmot Tax Records show John Batchelder owned it from 1872 to 1876 and James Shepard of New London operating it from 1892 into the 1900s. The Whitney brothers sawed lumber and made laths. They also employed several men.

The next mill down the brook was a grist mill. Grist mills were another type of mill, and these mills used large granite mill wheels: stones whose surfaces were cut with differing patterns. Some had whirls, straight lines or curves. These patterns took the grain from the center of the stones and pushed it out completely ground at the outside edge of the two stones. Many old timers seeing the pattern could tell who cut the stone (LeVarn 1957:207) Today we occasionally see some of those millstones decorating a yard or doorway.

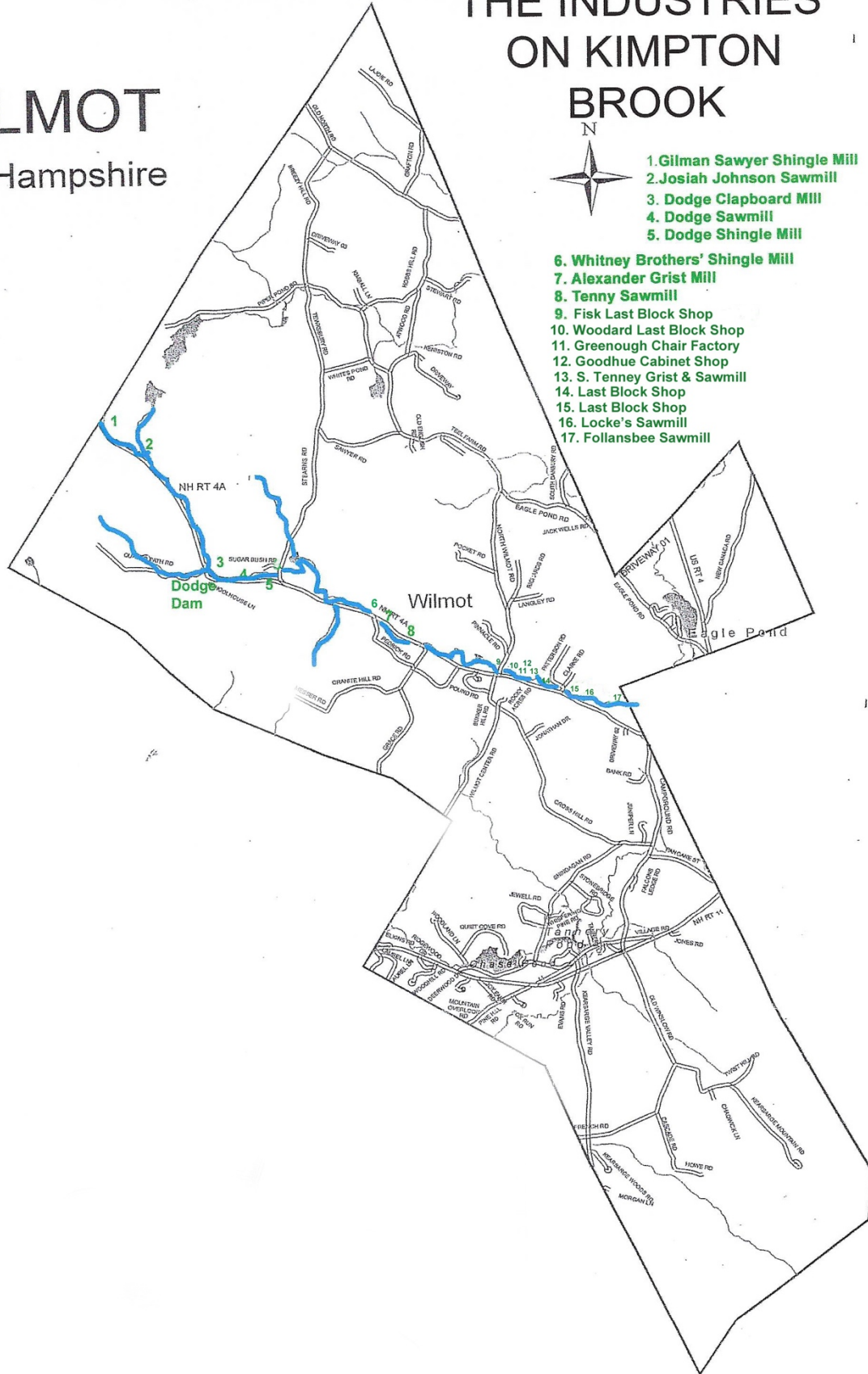
William Alexander owned this grist mill, Mill #7 from 1846 to 1856. His huge stone mill wheels were operated by the water power of Kimpton Brook. He had a grinding plan for his mill, and he ground more than corn for his johnnycakes. One day the mill ground lime, the next day it ground salt and the rest of the week it ground wheat, oats or corn. (I imagine they would have had to thoroughly clean between the millstones before each operation.)

Just up the brook from the bridge near Grace's Road, Samuel Tenney operated Mill #8, a sawmill, from 1842 to 1845. This mill had an up and down saw, which was like a bucksaw in a frame rather than the regular circular saw blade.

WILMOT

New Hampshire

THE INDUSTRIES ON KIMPTON BROOK



- 1. Gilman Sawyer Shingle Mill
- 2. Josiah Johnson Sawmill
- 3. Dodge Clapboard Mill
- 4. Dodge Sawmill
- 5. Dodge Shingle Mill
- 6. Whitney Brothers' Shingle Mill
- 7. Alexander Grist Mill
- 8. Tenny Sawmill
- 9. Fisk Last Block Shop
- 10. Woodard Last Block Shop
- 11. Greenough Chair Factory
- 12. Goodhue Cabinet Shop
- 13. S. Tenney Grist & Sawmill
- 14. Last Block Shop
- 15. Last Block Shop
- 16. Locke's Sawmill
- 17. Follansbee Sawmill

The old mills used wooden mill wheels, either over- or under-drive. The shaft that transmitted the power from the wheel to the mill was also wood, with iron bands around the ends to keep them from splitting. Gears were ingeniously made with chain-recessed-into-hardwood wheels, held together with two bolted cheek plates of iron. If more than one operation was desired, leather belting was used.(LeVarn 1957:139-140)

The type of water wheel used by a mill was generally determined by the flow of water. Where the water was constant, overshot wheels* were used, and undershot wheels* were used where the stream was too level for an overshot wheel. The overshot wheels were 75% efficient, whereas the undershot wheels were only 30% efficient*

Where the water was scarce and had to be dammed in order to run a mill, a breast wheel was used. A mill using a breast wheel was shut down part of the year. However, when used, this wheel was 65% effective. (LeVarn 1957:207)

Following the brook down through Wilmot Center to the outlet of the meadow in the back of the Town Hall, Charles or Calvin Fisk operated Mill #9 from 1852-1862. This was a Last Block Shop. When people used to repair their own shoes, they needed a "last block" to insert inside the shoe while it was being tapped. The "last block" was formed from a piece of hardwood in the shape of a foot from the ankle down to the toes. Some were made of a solid piece of wood and some had two pieces held together with a leather thong. (I recently saw one, and you could see little indentations where the nails hit the "last block" while the shoe was being tapped.) Last blocks were fashioned from metal later on.

The brook now runs under the bridge on the North Wilmot Road. A short distance below the bridge there was another Last Block shop, Mill #10, operated by John Woodward, 1878-1883. The tax records show Clark Woodward operating a shop and cider mill in the Center from 1883 to 1885. They may have been the same mill.

The cascades start here and the brook drops rapidly many feet. The shops were off the brook side by side all down through this section in order to take advantage of the water power generated by the drop of the brook.

In 1859-? John Greenough operated a chair factory, Mill #11. According to Bertagna, in 1928 some of the chairs were still being used by some of the residents of Wilmot Center.

George Bates, a resident of Andover, operated a blacksmith shop and cabinet shop in the Center from 1877 to 1880. Blacksmiths in the early days were important men, and many towns gave free land to any man who could and would set up a shop in their town. Everything made of iron was turned out by the blacksmiths of early times – wagon tires, chains, skates, cranes, trammels, besides the shoeing of horses and oxen.

**Overshot wheels refer to the water flowing over the wheels, whereas water flowed on the bottom of the undershot wheel.*

The blacksmith shop was the 'he man's' club years ago. Town gossip, law, politics and crops were freely discussed, horses were swapped and perhaps a game of horseshoes enjoyed. (LeVarn 1957: 141)

The sound of the anvil and wheeze of the bellows were heard in the several early Wilmot blacksmith shops. Records show that Charles F. Gove operated a blacksmith shop in the Center from 1885-1889, location unknown. There were other blacksmith shops also located in other parts of the town.

Seth Goodhue operated Mill #12. It was a cabinet shop which was started in 1851 and was still in operation in the early 1900s. This shop had two long stone walls for a flume (Bertagna 1928:7) "Mr. Tenney ground salt on Mondays, lime on Tuesdays and grist on Wednesdays, then repeated the process." (Langley 1928:7) The walls of the flume can still be seen.

According to the three young authors, Mills #14 and #15 were Last-Block Shops. The owners are unknown. In the Wilmot Tax Records, there were several men listed as owning shops in Wilmot Center during this period, but as the type of shop was not recorded, it is not possible to determine which of the men owned these Last-Block Shops.

From 1863-1876, John P. Follansbee operated Mill #17, the next mill on the brook. This sawmill also had an up-and-down saw. Follansbee's mill produced wheelbarrows as well as sawed lumber.

The last mill on Kimpton Brook was Locke's Sawmill, Mill #16. It was located near the Eagle Pond Bridge. I could find no mention of Locke being a resident tax payer of Wilmot, but it may have operated after 1900, as the residents of 1928 remembered it's being there.

Tax records show Nathaniel Parker owning a sawmill at Wilmot Center from 1888-1891, location unknown. There were numerous mills on other brooks throughout the town: shingle mills, sawmills, tanneries and clapboard mills. These mills were owned by members of the families of Stearns, Atwood, Langley, Tewkesbury, Chase, Westcott, Jones and others.

In 1847 the Northern Railroad opened between Concord, NH, and White River Junction, Vermont. It was completed in 1848, but it did operate through Wilmot in 1846. The nearest railroad station was in Potter Place, a section of Andover which was two and one-half miles from Wilmot Center.

"It was a source of profit and wonderment to all the townspeople. It was profitable because railroad ties were in great demand. Labor and all beasts of burden found a ready market. It was an object of wonderment; the arrival and departure of a train never failed to draw a crowd in those early days... the early steam cars, so called, could make the amazing speed of 15 to 20 miles per hour. In 1888 the Northern Railroad became the Boston and Maine." (LeVarn 1957:122)

The opening of the railroads was the beginning of the end for the animal-hauled freight lines along the Fourth New Hampshire Turnpike. The trains could carry more freight per load in a much shorter length of time. The three taverns on the Turnpike which serviced the old freight lines surely felt the loss of business with the lessening of the heavy traffic on the Turnpike. Now the mills must haul their products to the railroad station for shipment rather than the freight lines stopping at their door. This would create a greater expense for these small mills.

A stage line which ran from the Potter Place Railroad Station to New London ran through the Wilmot Flat section of Wilmot. This road became more active than the Fourth New Hampshire Turnpike. The woolen mill and the tannery were now the largest industries in Wilmot, and they were located in Wilmot Flat. The center of activity was gradually changing from the Center to the Flat. In 1872, Wilmot Flat boasted of "... a post office, a church, a schoolhouse, two stores, a large tannery, one hosiery manufacturing plant, lumber mills, a tailor, a carpenter, blacksmith shops and 50 dwelling houses".(New Hampshire Gazetteer 1874:371).

Wilmot Flat was beginning to show the effects of a busy road and the opening of the railroad.

In 1872 Wilmot was still considered a principal manufacturing town in the area. But the manufacturing plants were operating in other areas of the town, no longer most of them on Klampton Brook.

Farming is the principal employment of the inhabitants, although manufacturing is considerable and valuable. The value of woolen hose and other woolen goods annually made over \$30,000; leather tanned, \$40,000; 100,000 shingles and 1,500,000 boards and dimension timbers sawed, besides various other small shops. The value of goods of all kinds, annually manufactured, is about \$96,000. (New Hampshire Gazetteer 1874:371).

As the population in the rural New Hampshire towns dwindled, so did the farming and the manufacturing. There were several reasons for this:

During the Civil War there was an actual decrease of inhabitants [in New Hampshire] from 326,073 in 1860 to 318,300 in 1870. But the prevailing check to a gain so large as from 1790 to 1810 was the constant stream of emigration flowing from New Hampshire to the new land of New York, Ohio, and farther west, and from the rural towns to the cities of southern New England. As those new lands became settled for cultivation, and gained the means of sending their products eastward, the good markets of the New Hampshire farmers and foresters were gradually lost, in the greater cheapness of western production; and the near local markets could not take enough of the products of gardening and dairies to make farming in general a profitable industry. The introduction of cotton and woolen mills for a time favored the farmers by giving them a home market; but of late, even manufacturers have been deserting many of the mill-streams of the hill regions, to concentrate in cities... (Sanborn 1904:241). The cities of

Berlin, Concord, Keene, Manchester, Nashua and Dover became the state's leading manufacturing centers.

The close of the Civil War found New Hampshire deeply in debt. The stony acres of the Granite State farms diminished in value with the competition of the prairie farms. The Homestead Law, passed in 1862, gave every applicant 160 acres after five years of residence. New Hampshire population fell off. There was also a great change from a rural population, engaged in small manufactures to a population more devoted to manufactures in the large factories or workshops, and these were concentrated in the cities more and more (Sanborn 1904:318). Wilmot's population seemed to dwindle more and more for the same reasons as the other New Hampshire towns. Wilmot sent 177 men to the Civil War. Some left their bones on the battle fields while seeing the prairie lands, emigrated. "As the gold fever swept through the country, Americans of every class and occupation dropped whatever they were doing and headed for the Pacific Coast." (Hofstadter, Miller, Aaron 1958:283) Some Wilmot men became infected with this craze and left for the gold fields. Thus, the steam age, the gold-fever and the westward surge had their effect on Wilmot.

Today in Wilmot we find no industries as such. There are only a few small businesses. Wilmot houses gift shops operated by the owner only; a restaurant/motel operated by the owner; a small engine shop employing one or two men; a florist/nursery operated only by the owner, surveying businesses, and Freedom Acres. This latter business is a shop which sells and ships jams and jellies all over the country; it employs five or six people. The small industries located in the town are gone.

The citizens of Wilmot find their employment in other towns. They sometimes drive many miles to work and to shop. Because of this factor, the salaries are usually spent in other towns which boosts the economies of towns and cities other than Wilmot. Wilmot has become a residential area.

The post office in Wilmot Center has been closed. The town post office is now located in Wilmot Flat, primarily because of the business from Freedom Acres; the majority of the incoming town mail is sent out on rural routes. The Community Center is located in Wilmot Flat, thus most of the local social activity takes place there. There is beano on Wednesday night which draws a large crowd during the year from the whole area, and various meetings are held there. A play is produced here to raise money to support the summer recreation program for the children. Other social services located in Wilmot Flat are the fire house, the largest church congregation, and the town offices located in a renovated one-room schoolhouse. Wilmot Flat is now the focal point for the population of Wilmot. The only two public buildings located in Wilmot Center are the Town Hall and the Library. The citizens of Wilmot come to the Center only for a few special occasions now.

The greatest change of all has taken place on the Fourth New Hampshire Turnpike. Since the construction of Interstate 89, the Turnpike is no longer the direct route from Boston to White River Junction, Vermont. The traffic on this historic route has dwindled to a few passing cars when compared to the "mill era" and the preceding Interstate 89 period. Interstate 89 is now the direct route from Massachusetts to White River Junction and to all of upper state Vermont. There is now no industry on the Turnpike, and once Wilmot Center is left behind, the area to the northwest is desolate but beautiful. The State of New Hampshire now owns the 6,500 acres of Gile Memorial Forest. The Fourth New Hampshire Turnpike runs through this forest for many miles. In the future there will be no industry on this road, and the area will remain one of natural beauty.

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