

2. HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT



On Feb. 25, 1782, Col. Benjamin Wait, the Honorable Roger Enos and about seventy others were granted a charter by the Governor, Council and General Assembly of the State of Vermont for the township of Waitsfield. At the time, Vermont had not been accepted into the United States of America. Vermont was a self-declared republic with its own constitution, currency and self-government.

The new township of Waitsfield was chartered into the far southeastern corner of Chittenden County, close to the geographical center of the state. In 1810, adjoining parts of Chittenden, Addison, Orange and Caledonia Counties were reorganized into a new central Vermont county called Jefferson. The county's name was changed to Washington in 1814.

First surveyed by William Strong in 1788, Waitsfield included approximately 23,000 acres of hills and valley covered in virgin woods. The valley was oriented and drained to the north by a flood-prone, 'Mad' river and surrounded by 2,000–4,000 foot mountains. The river ran in a narrow floodplain near the western town line closely guarded by steep hills.

Two of Vermont's highest peaks lay six to ten miles west, their rounded foothills forming the Town's western border. Above the hills to the east, the land flattened into a broad, mile-wide plateau which spanned the length of the township beneath the low ridges of the Northfield Mountain Range. Originally, Waitsfield included lands east of those mountains, but geographical proximity later dictated their

annexation to Northfield in 1822 and 1846. Today Waitsfield encompasses about 15,540 acres.

The summits surrounding Waitsfield belong to the Green Mountains, a backbone of double mountain ranges that longitudinally bisect Vermont. In turn, these grey ledge summits represent the northern extension of a much longer continental cordillera stretching in eastern America from Alabama all the way north through Vermont into Canada. These Appalachian Mountains are 500–900 million years old. Their worn, grandfatherly knobs are thought to be the weathered cores of an ancient mountain range which may have towered to Himalayan heights. They would have been raised from continental crusts that were buckling under the tremendous stresses of proto-continental collisions in the long, convoluted, geologic history of earth.

Perhaps the most dramatic chapter of Waitsfield's natural history was written by the great continental ice sheets that covered all of New England ten to fifteen thousand years ago. Flowing into the valley from the general direction of Camels Hump, a mile thick glacier of ice gouged the valley clean of all vegetation and soil. The islands of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard give testimony to the great piles of glacial debris scraped from New England and deposited at sea. Once climates warmed, the glaciers melted northward in retreat, redepositing the sands, silts, clays and stones that became the parent material of the valley's soils.



At one time a large meltwater lake flooded the Mad River Valley. Some glacial features can be seen throughout Town. Kame terraces and a huge glacial erratic (a boulder whose rock is not native to its resting location) can be seen just west of the elementary school. Gravel pits and clay banks along the brooks are remnants of this deposition. Channel scars from old lake bed currents and meltwater courses can be seen throughout the valley's meadows.

Little evidence of Native American activity has been discovered in Waitsfield though it is known that Algonquins, roaming on the western fringe of their tribal territory, periodically lived or passed through Vermont. Fine campsites would have been found along the Mad River, but the river's periodic flooding may have destroyed, buried or carried away any evidence of use. A recent archaeological study of the Town-owned "Munn" site, however, turned up a "chert projectile point" and a "quartz biface knife", both of which date from the Middle to Late Archaic period (ca. 5500–900 B.C.).

Archaeologists believe other sites may be found within Waitsfield in the future—a map of the Valley showing areas of high archaeological sensitivity was prepared by the state archaeologist in 1988. An initial assessment of the Valley's archaeological potential, *Archaeology in Vermont's Mad River Valley from Paleo-Indian Times to the Present*, was completed for the MRVPD in 1990.

In 1789, less than a year after Strong's survey, General Benjamin Wait led a small



group of settlers, mostly family members or friends from his home in Windsor, Vermont, into the area. By 1791, Vermont had finally been accepted into the Union, and the first federal survey of the 14th State showed 13 families and 61 people living within the surveyed lots of Waitsfield.

Wait may have built the Town's first log house upon a hillock north of the village, which now holds the cemetery bearing his grave. He soon constructed the first frame house in Waitsfield on a small terrace about half a mile west of that log cabin site. Three sons and a half-brother built upon lots nearby.

General Wait was 53 years old when he moved from the Connecticut River westward over the mountains. He had recently resigned his rank of brigadier general for the Third Brigade of Vermont Militia, the culmination of a military career that had started in the French and Indian War and carried on through the War for Independence. He had been a renowned and successful resident of Windsor, having served as a representative to Vermont's constitutional conventions. He had been high sheriff of Windsor County as well. He continued to be a civic leader in Waitsfield, being elected Selectman and representing his new town in the State Legislature. He died in 1822, at the age of 86. His home was moved off the terrace sometime near 1830 to its present location next to the village cemetery. A second story was added about that time. The Wait house is among those structures that comprise the Waitsfield Village Historic District listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

With southern New Englanders hungry for land, settlement of all corners of Waitsfield soon followed General Wait's arrival. By 1795, the poll tax list showed 50 voters. By charter, homesteaders had to clear and cultivate a minimum of five acres. A house at least eighteen feet square had to be built upon their lot. Sam and John Barnard built north along the river near the Moretown line. Samuel Pike and his sons from Brookfield, Massachusetts (General Wait's birthplace) built homes on the hillsides below Scrag Mountain in the east. Francis Dana was located on lots 143–44 in the far southwestern corner of Town, high on the western hill which parallels the Mad River upstream to Warren. Moses Chase was established at the base of Bald Mountain in the northeast.

At first, town life centered around the Wait family lots. General Wait's home was used for town meetings until 1798. The first church services were held in his barn. What little commerce was available was here as well. Slightly northeast, at the foot of nearby ledges, Samuel Chandler of Worcester, Massachusetts, and Henry Mower of Woodstock, Vermont, had the first store in town. Edmund Rice, a cabinet maker, town clerk, merchant and surveyor, lived close by. The Carpenter tannery and a potash works were within the vicinity as well. North along the old county road, another store was established in 1815 by Hebard, Baldwin and Woodward. This building held the first Post Office for Waitsfield in 1818.

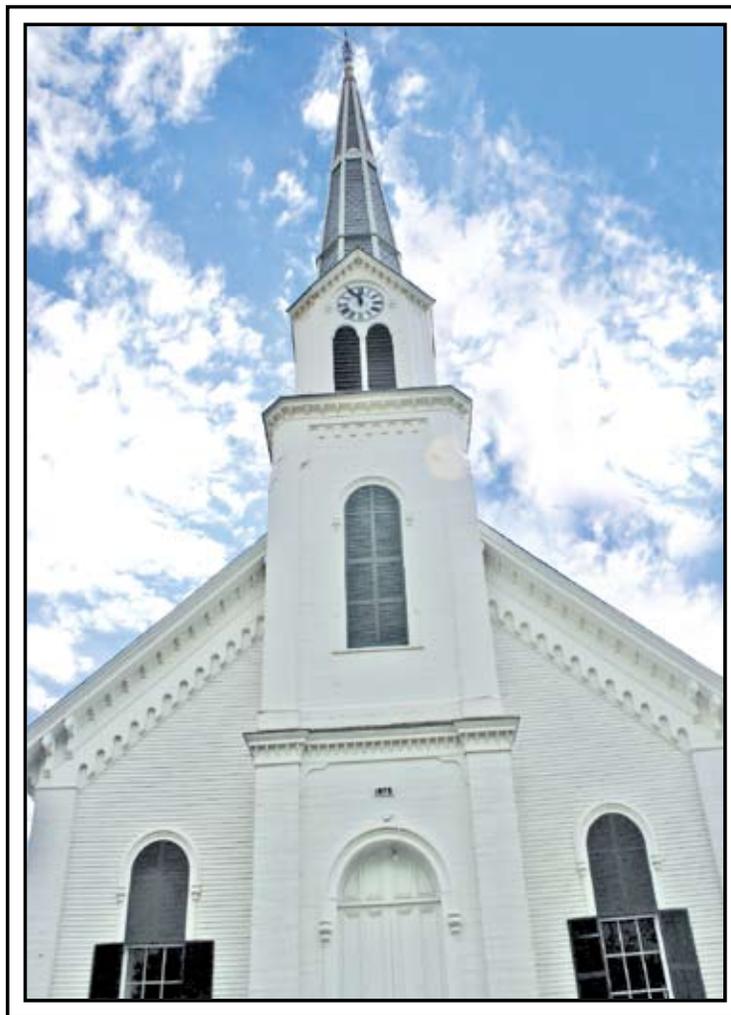
The frequent flooding of the Mad River may have kept the first settlers away from the floor of the val-



ley. Instead, many built their homes on the high plateau east of the river. The first real village center was established up on the 'Common' in the early 1800s. It remained as the Town's political and social center for forty years. In 1798, a donated piece of land on the Common was first 'chopped over' and the cemetery that is there today laid to its western side. A meeting house for the Town was built in 1807 in front of the cemetery. Roderick Richardson Sr. had a store on the Common by 1806. Potash works, tanneries and a blacksmith shop were there as well. Palmer Hill, a small knoll east of the Common at the foot of Old Scrag, was densely settled with the growing Bartlett, Quimby, Wheeler, Grandy and Palmer families.

To help build a successful community, the Proprietors of Waitsfield voted a tax of two pence an acre. One half of this money was to be used building roads and bridges. The rest was used to attract business and industry.

As the clearing of land is the most prevalent occupation of any woodland frontier, potash works were quickly established to wash the ash and char of the bonfires with lye. The residue used in the making of soap was then traded into southern New England for tools, clothes and seed. Lumber mills were also important to frontier communities. They not only gave land owners a commodity (logs) to barter for other goods, they also milled the board feet of lumber that became the comfortable frame homes, meetinghouses, churches and businesses: the infrastructure every new town needs to attract emigrants.



Six brook-sized streams fed the Mad River from the slopes of the surrounding mountains. Three fed from the west and three from the east, spaced at fairly equal margins from the southern Town line to the north. With flooding such trouble on the Mad River, these small streams became important sources of power for early millworks. General Wait may have had the first sawmill in Town just east of the present High Bridge on Clay Brook, a shallow stream which flows off Scrag Mountain, emptying into the Mad River just north of the village.

In 1793, as a result of the tax subsidy, John Heaton Jr. built the

first grist and saw mills on Mill Brook in Irasville. Until then, grains were milled in an old hollowed out birch stump near the covered bridge, or taken many miles south through the Kingston Mountains, (Granville Woods), where the nearest grist mill was found in Hancock. Turned over to successive owners, Heaton's Mills became known as Green's Mills, then Richardson's. They occupied a site just upstream from the present location of the Baird lumber mill today.

Helped by the presence of these mills, the hamlet of Irasville grew into some prominence. Named for Ira Richardson, who had a 'commodious' homestead along the flats, Irasville became the center for the Methodist Church when in 1835, First Elder Rufus Barrett donated land for a Methodist cemetery and oversaw the construction of a barn which became the Methodist meetinghouse. In 1870, the Methodists built the large white church in Waitsfield Village. Their old barn still stands in Irasville. It is occupied today by The Store.



Early roads were surveyed and built through taxation. By 1796, a bridge had been built over the Great Eddy of the Mad River carrying a road through what is now the village center. But perhaps from fear of flooding, the village did not become established until the 1820s and 30s. By 1797, the earliest road in Town ran south from the Barnard place near the Moretown line up along the west bank of the river, bending westward onto the terrace to pass General Wait's house, from which it proceeded south, curling past his son's place which would have been near the present village parsonage. From here a fork of the road turned south over a small knoll and out onto the Irasville flats, then pitched down the 'Dugway' and crossed Mill Brook on a bridge built near Green's Mills. It then climbed the steep hill towards the Francis Dana place.

As noted, there was a bridge over the Mad River at this time. Another fork of the old county road crossed the river and continued up over Mill Hill southeast, following the general direction of the present East Warren Road until it curved up onto Roxbury Mountain passing what is now the present Folsom/Great Lake Carbon Farm. This road over to Roxbury was the first highway that

ran into or out of the Mad River Valley.

The old bridge at the Great Eddy was destroyed several times by fire and flood. A covered bridge, which remains today, was built on the site and is the second oldest covered bridge in the state of Vermont. The bridge was restored in the early 1970s.

A north road was quickly laid out from the Roxbury/Kingston highway, across the eastern plateau to the Common, branching up Palmer Hill along the way. Another headed southerly from the Common, back down into the valley towards the Great Eddy bridge. In 1803 a road was extended northeast from the Common, entering Moretown high on the slopes under the knob of Bald Mountain. What are now the main routes through the village were not established until 1837.

Throughout the 1800s there was frequent talk of rail lines into the Mad River Valley, but finances were never found for the various schemes. Granville Gulf effectively sealed off any major southern exit for the valley. Eventually a good highway was established north along the Mad River through Moretown, and goods and supplies soon found transport to the railhead in Middlesex.

During the first three decades of the 19th century, more and more farms were established among the hills, and the demand for services grew. The village of Waitsfield slowly took form. Roderick Richardson



had a house there by 1817. In 1831 he built a store next door. The building was damaged by fire in 1845 and the present two story brick structure was built. It is now the Masonic Hall. In 1851 Richardson also moved a building from Irasville to the corner diagonally across from the Masonic Hall. This large building became a hotel. Its ground floor was used for fifty years as a hall for town meetings.

A few hundred yards north of the Richardson buildings, a Union Meeting Hall was built in 1836. At the turn of the century, this red brick building was purchased by the Odd Fellows Association and a second story was added. Dan Richardson built a brick house next door in the 1840s.

There was a blacksmith's shop across the river by 1838; a Congregational parsonage by 1840. George Kidder lived in a house next door to the parsonage. Today it is a half-brick, half wooden building. The wooden part is the oldest, having been used by Kidder as a store and a post office as he was made Postmaster in 1822. Across the road from Kidder's, at the foot of Mill Hill, Roderick Richardson built a large complex of grist and lumber mills in 1829–30. In order to supply his mills with power, he and his two partners hand dug a canal to the river, passing behind the post office. The slough is visible today.

By 1850, Waitsfield Village would have been the commercial and social center of the township.

The history of agriculture and industry in Waitsfield closely follows the patterns for Vermont as a whole. Initially, the pioneer settlers were engaged with the clearing of lands for subsistence farming. Virgin forests were chopped over and burned, their ash sent to the potash works, becoming the first marketable product of the farmers. The clearings were then planted with a variety of grains: wheats, barley, hay, rye and oats as well as corn and potatoes. Maple sugar was made in the spring. (Maple syrup was too perishable, so the sap was boiled longer to the sugar stage). These products were often used as currency to



pay taxes or bills, and directly bartered for other goods.

Sheep raising was the first dominant agricultural activity. To attract farmers, the town fathers again turned to tax incentives, allowing in 1804 a deduction of one dollar per sheared sheep off any taxpayer's property assessment. The Merino sheep did well with the Vermont climate and stony soil. Sheep were necessary for their wool to make clothes as cotton goods were only available far away in the bigger Towns of southern New England. In lieu of money, wool was of-

ten bartered locally for supplies.

The sheep industry remained strong throughout Vermont until the middle of the 19th Century when rangelands in Texas began to dominate the supply of wool. During this period, farmers often drove their excess range stock to market in southern New England some two hundred miles away!

The population of Waitsfield peaked during this period. In 1840 there were 1048 people in Town, a number that's been surpassed only in recent times. Of course many citizens left Waitsfield for more promising lands out in the Midwest, attracted by the Erie Canal and the reports of fertile lands in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Minnesota. Two of Benjamin Wait's sons left, while a third, Ezra fathered the first child in Town, Catherine Cutler Wait, born Oct. 21, 1790.

With the loss of the sheep industry, farmers in Vermont and the valley turned to dairying. As there was no refrigeration at the time, milk products were quickly turned into less perishable butter and cheese. For the next thirty years Vermonters produced the majority of dairy products for New England. Local farmers increased their dairy herds. To meet container demands, many mills in Waitsfield turned to the manufacture of butter and cheese tubs.

Farms increased in numbers from 95 in 1850 to 135 in 1880. Agricultural societies were chartered and exposition fairs were held throughout Town to display

products and animals. By 1870, it is estimated that Vermont was 70 percent cleared land and only 30 percent forest. That ratio is the reverse today.

In 1889, Child's Washington County Gazetteer and Directory showed M.L. Richardson's mills on Mill Brook to be producing 400,000 board feet of lumber. Fred Parker's shingle mill in Irasville produced 1,200,000 shingles annually. The Palmer Bros. grist and saw mills in Waitsfield Village were cutting 200,000 feet of clapboards and 250,000 feet of lumber a year. In the northern part of Town, Elmer Trask's mill turned out 600–800,000 feet of lumber, 350,000 feet of clapboards and 100,000 shingles. George Olmstead butter tub factory in the village made about 400 tubs a year. In 1880, all these wood products came from land farmers were clearing for new pasture and meadow. There were 1,161 milk cows in Town in 1880.

Irasville had a population of 125. Waitsfield Village about 250, including a dozen merchants, three doctors, one lawyer, a photographer, three churches, (Congregational, Methodist, and Universalist), a hotel and a school. Schools were important to the community. All Town charters granted by the State of Vermont held a reserve of land to be used for schools. College lands were set aside as well, though as major colleges became established in the state, the lands were often sold off. As early as 1797, Francis Dana, General Wait and three others formed a committee to divide the Town into school districts.

Each district was responsible for building its own school and attracting a teacher. Initially schools

were held in private residences. For instance, a "winter school" was held in Deacon Moses Fisk's spare bedroom until funds for the session were expended. Sometimes teachers received salary, other times they were paid in bushels of wheat or other bartered goods. "Summer schools" were frequently held. Often taught by women, they were attended by only girls and small boys, as all the older boys were busy in the mills and fields and woodlots of the family farms.

One room schoolhouses were built close to the geographical center of each district. Over time, chimneys and stoves were added, allowing winter sessions in the buildings. Teachers were boarded within the districts, a service which was auctioned to the lowest bidder. In the summer of 1848, sixteen weeks of teacher's board was paid off at 66 and one half cents a week. Winter board for the male teacher was 73 cents. Costs for Waitsfield District One School in 1838 showed expenditures of \$80.95. Eliza Jones received \$15 for teaching summer school; Mr. Taylor \$57 for winter school. J.S. Wilder was paid \$1.34 for building fires and 50 cents for banking the schoolhouse.

In 1802, there were 201 pupils in four districts. In 1812, there were 269 in five. Today the school has an enrollment of 160 students. Another 112 are sent to Harwood Union High in Duxbury. The Town's total school budget for the 2002–2003 fiscal year was estimated at over \$2.3 million.

In 1847 the Village District voted to build a new two story school. Complete with belfry, this building was



PHOTO: SKINNER BARN

built next to the village cemetery north of Town. Each floor was one room. The upper floor was often used for advanced classes in the 1850s and 60s. These classes eventually disappeared and the building was used exclusively for grammar grades until a two year high school program was created in 1906. The Old High School still stands today, converted into condominiums.

Military service has long been important to Waitsfield citizens. In fact many of the original settlers had served under General Wait, or taken part in the Revolutionary War. For many of the early decades in Town history, local militia were organized and drilled on 'June training day'. Though the War of 1812 was somewhat unpopular, a part of Waitsfield's "Floodwoods" militia was sent to support Plattsburg, New York, in battle with the British. They arrived too late to join in the fighting. Ten percent of Waitsfield's men served during the Civil War. Ten sons died in fighting, while ten more died of disease. In the World Wars of the twentieth century, 130 men served and eight died in combat. Twenty-eight served in Korea. Fifty-three served during the Vietnam War, and two Waitsfield men died in Southeast Asia.

In the twenty years before the turn of the century, agriculture changed again. Refrigeration meant milk could be stored in the fluid stage. The new DeLaval cream separators allowed raw milk to be skimmed of cream in large quantities. Until then, most butter and cream were produced on the farm. These new machines allowed for centrally located creameries which could process the product of many farms at one time. Cream skimming stations were built throughout Waitsfield. By 1893, a creamery was operating in the village. In 1897, several Waitsfield farmers founded a Cooperative and built a creamery in the northern part of Town, near the present Hartshorn farm.

Throughout the 20th—and into the 21st century—farming has been on decline in Waitsfield. Empty cellar holes, crumbling barns and neglected stone walls and fences can be found among the thick brush and woods which is now growing up in the old pastures and meadows. Of the 135 farms of Waitsfield in 1880, only about a dozen remain active today. Farms are larger in acreage, and may produce as much as the many smaller farms once did a hundred years ago.



A new industry has become the focal point of Waitsfield's economy. In 1948, the Mad River Glen Ski Area was opened on the slopes of Lincoln Mountain southwest of Town. Thus began an era of recreational, tourist oriented development that continues today. Two more ski areas (Sugarbush and Glen Ellen) were added southward along Lincoln Mountain and their webs of white ski trails economically bind Waitsfield and the other Mad River towns to their success.

Waitsfield is now the commercial center of the Mad River Valley. The old mills, meetinghouses and homes of the village are shops and restaurants. In the late sixties and early seventies, the Post Office, grocery and hardware store all moved out of the village into new shopping centers upon the Irasville flats. Thousands of tourists come to Town on weekends now to ski at the Mad River and Sugarbush Ski Areas, dine in restaurants and sleep in old farmhouses renovated into country inns. Summer tourism is important as well with vacationers coming to hike the Green Mountains, fish the valley's streams, canoe the Mad River, play golf, attend an annual arts festival or simply relax in the country air.

Vermont aesthetics and the expanding demographics of Waitsfield have attracted a population estimated at 1,659 in 2000, according to the U.S. Census. A wide variety of businesses and activities are located here. Waitsfield is now home to high tech computer and energy companies, specialty food stores and bakeries, garden centers, construction companies, craft shops, real estate and financial services, a movie theater and play house and award winning maple syrup manufacturers.

The old gravel roads of Town are no longer snow rolled by draft teams of horses. Some have been widened and paved and are plowed and sanded regularly in winter and often graded during the summer. New houses have been built among the old pasture and woodlots. A volunteer ambulance service and a medical center have been



organized to serve the public's health. Waitsfield also has one of the most modernized, independent phone companies in the nation—phone service was established locally by 1900. Zoning ordinances have been drafted and district planning coordinated to help assure and control growth.

Physiographic, economic, and cultural change has prevailed throughout the history of Waitsfield. Great floods of the Mad River have washed out many of the bridges and roads and buildings of the community, striking violently in 1850 as well as in the notorious flood of 1927 which devastated the whole of Vermont.

In August 1989, the Town of Waitsfield celebrated its bicentennial. Two hundred years from the date of Benjamin Wait's entry into Waitsfield, a small parade saw descendants of five original town settlers recognized. Families of Jonathan Palmer, Benjamin Wait, Samuel Barnard and others still live within the

Town. Guest speakers from our government saluted the Town's perseverance and established its importance for the future of Vermont. A historical exhibit of Town memorabilia attracted over 600 visitors.

With the 1990s Waitsfield began its third century as an organized community. That decade also brought a period of



continued change, as the population of the Town and surrounding Valley communities continued to grow.

The Mad River (formerly Fly In) Industrial Park finally began to reach its potential as several small manufacturing and wholesale businesses flourished, bringing the number of jobs in the park to well over 100. Irasville–Waitsfield’s commercial center since the 1970s—also experienced the first significant development in nearly 20 years, including the conversion of the former Valley Inn to senior housing, the establishment of the area’s third bank and a variety of other retail, office, manufacturing and residential development.

Land conservation became a household term when the Town allocated \$20,000 in 1991 to acquire development rights from a local dairy farm, thereby keeping the former Ed Eurich Farm in agriculture. The conservation of the Eurich Farm was part of the Maple Avenue conservation project which saw the protection of nearly 1,000 acres in the vicinity of the Common Road. Other notable properties protected were the Donald Joslyn Farm and the newly created Scrag Town Forest which was the result of a gift of approximately 360 acres to the Town.

Additional conservation efforts helped to secure public access to the Mad River (including the Lareau Swimhole, which was developed as a public park in 2002) and to support local farmers. Unlike the 1980s, few farm operations went out of business in the 1990s and as the decade came to a close several new commercial vegetable farms and organic beef operations had been established. Horses have also become an increasingly common sight throughout the Valley—one Vermont Department of Agriculture estimate found that the Valley now has the highest density of horses in the state.

Finally, in 1998, the Mad River reminded Town residents that despite our modern technologies and declining reliance on the land for our livelihood, the forces of nature still have a profound impact on our lives. Early on the morning of June 25th, a torrential rain fell on the Mad River Valley. The resulting 500 year flood covered portions of Route 100 and inundated Waitsfield Village. Despite widespread property damage, no lives were lost. And, in case Waitsfield residents had forgotten, we were again reminded of the Mad River’s central role in our community.

*(Contributed by Rick Thompson, 1993;
updated in 2003 by Brian Shupe)*

