

# INTRODUCTION

Diversity defines Colchester. From its sandy soils in Malletts Bay to its fine clays found in the Clay Point area to its wetlands and rocky hills, Colchester holds as much contrast in its topography and geology as it does in its assortment of waterways. The Winooski and Lamoille Rivers border the town on the north and south, and also to the north lies the breathtaking Colchester Pond. To the southwest lies Colchester's jewel, Malletts Bay, the state's largest bay and part of Lake Champlain, the state's largest lake. With 30 miles of lakeshore, it is Lake Champlain that is the town's mainstay.

Colchester is one of the oldest communities in the state, having been chartered on June 7, 1763. In the rush of issuing charters—nine on that day alone—the name of Burling, for 10 of the grantees, was inadvertently assigned to the area south of the mouth of the Winooski River or Burlington. The *Vermont Historical Quarterly* of 1953 conjectures that the town was named for William de Nassau Zulestein, who was secretary of state during the reign of King George III and lived in Colchester, England. What luck not to have the town's name be Zulestein! All 66 proprietors on the charter were not interested in settling in this area, but instead bought the tract of land on speculation.

Another speculator was Ira Allen, who after purchasing land in the Rutland area with his inheritance, came north as a surveyor and arrived in Colchester in 1772. Allen became Colchester's first town clerk and treasurer, as well as its most important landowner, buying 15,000 of the town's 23,000 acres. The first family to live in Colchester was the Remember Bakers, with whom Allen lived. Years later, Allen became the founder of the University of Vermont and a founding father of the state of Vermont. To finance his plan to build a canal from Vermont to Canada, Allen went to Europe, leaving behind his mortgaged land. Returning several years later, he found his land sold as a result of defaulted tax sales. This allowed settlers to move into the wilderness areas of Colchester. The lives of Ira Allen, his brother Ethan, the Baker family, and Mallet—the independent, rogue sea captain—could easily fill a movie screen with drama, excitement, and adventure that were a fitting start for Colchester, now Vermont's second largest single community.

William Munson was in Colchester for the first town meeting of record on March 18, 1793. The last Munson, Walter, passed away in 2000, thus ending the longest family name legacy in town, but the family home remains. In 1797, Ebenezer Wolcott built a brick house (made from the soft rose-colored clay found along the town's brooks) at the intersection of East Road and Depot Road and raised 12 children. The house and his descendants remain in Colchester. And so it began.

The rural part of town (called Colchester Center) was made up of farmers, millers, and tradesmen who lived north and away from the hustle bustle of the Winooski Falls area. A post office began in Colchester Center in 1813. Up to 14 school districts sprang up with the largest in the Winooski village area. Lake Champlain allowed sailing ships to transport white sand from Thayer Beach through the Champlain canal; lumber was shipped by schooner to Hudson River markets; mined bog iron was carried across the lake. Friction between the residents of the rural areas and the factory and mill workers of the Winooski Falls area (woolen mills came later) was inevitable, and in 1922, Winooski split away from Colchester to become a city.

A phenomenon somewhat unique to Colchester is its lack of a downtown area. This may have resulted from the industrial, commercial nature of Winooski Falls drawing rural residents to its downtown to do their shopping and conduct business. With 37 square miles, the size of Colchester also may have prohibited such development in any one place. Colchester Center at one time did have the town's municipal office, post office, and public library, along with two prominent churches. The churches have since united under one roof; the town clerk's office moved to Blakely Road; and a new post office was built on Malletts Bay Avenue in 1978.