

# 66 St. Johnsbury Historic District

## Town of St. Johnsbury, Caledonia County, Vermont

---



Located at the union of the Passumpsic, Moose and Sleepers Rivers, St. Johnsbury, nicknamed “St. J,” is the largest town by population in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. St. Johnsbury was originally part of the New Hampshire land grants with the first charter granted by King George in 1770. While it was first known as Bessborough and then Dunmore, the town acquired its current name from Michel Guillaume St. Jean de Crevecoeur, who was later known as J. Hector St. John, the author of “Letters from an American Farmer.” St. Johnsbury is the shire town of Caledonia County.

During the Victorian era, St. Johnsbury village thrived as an industrial town, and its character and development patterns can be traced to that era. The main industries in St. Johnsbury at that time were platform scale manufacturing, a maple sugar candy company, and a livestock feed company, Ide Company (now the well-known Blue Seal Feeds). During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, commercial development was limited almost entirely to the high plateau along Main Street, referred to as “The Plain.”

Once the railroad was introduced along the Passumpsic River in 1850, a second commercial district began to emerge on Railroad Street. The development of the second commercial district throughout the second half of the 19th century created somewhat of a competitive relationship between the two districts. Each district was determined to be the preeminent business district at that time. Eventually, the powerful influence of the railroads proved to be too much to compete with, and Railroad Street became the business center of St. Johnsbury.

The St. Johnsbury Historic District is composed of two previously designated historic districts, the upper section of the village included within the St. Johnsbury Main Street Historic District, the lower section of the village which comprises part of the Railroad Street Historical District, and the street that links them together, Eastern Avenue. A number of architectural styles are represented throughout the St. Johnsbury Historic District including Greek Revival, Italianate Revival, French Second Empire, Neo-Classic Revival, Richardson Romanesque and others.

Main Street can be thought of as the acropolis of St. Johnsbury, where public buildings were built, including the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, the North Congregational Church, the Caledonia County Superior Court, and Fairbanks Museum. The high Main Street plateau, “The Plain,” is a steep ascent accessed by the east-west running Eastern Avenue and Maple Street.

Railroad Street lies immediately east of Main Street and is a long, narrow corridor that forms the eastern perimeter of the Village of St. Johnsbury, near the Passumpsic River. The main business section of Railroad Street has been densely developed, and stretches from the intersection of Portland Street to in the intersection of Eastern Avenue and Depot Park.

Interestingly and for reasons unknown, all the high style commercial buildings built in the mid-to late 19<sup>th</sup> century were built on the east side of the street—providing an interesting dynamic on Railroad Street. One of the main attractions of Railroad Street is the enormous Victorian-style St. Johnsbury Railroad Depot, built in 1883. During its prime, the Depot played host to the dozens of passenger trains passing through the station each day, destined for Montreal, Boston, and Maine. It currently houses the town’s Welcome Center and other businesses.

Eastern Street is narrow and steep as it was originally a path between Main Street and Railroad Street, and characterized by set-backs, open spacing, and trees and landscaping. Eastern Street is also dotted with residential properties. Its distinctive character provides a striking transition from Railroad or Main Street.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one particular family carried significant industrial and cultural influence in St. Johnsbury. Thaddeus and Erastus Fairbanks developed the first commercial platform scale, and founded their manufacturing company in St. Johnsbury, E. & T. Fairbanks and Company in 1834. Once the railroads arrived, the Fairbanks family also manufactured locomotives. These ventures made the Fairbanks family fabulously wealthy, and while the family was entrepreneurial, they were also very philanthropic.

The Fairbanks Museum, St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, the St. Johnsbury Academy were all donated to the residents of St. Johnsbury by various members of the Fairbanks family. These buildings, along with much of the village of St. Johnsbury, have stood the test of time and transport the visitor back to the thriving Victorian era and allow us to appreciate our past.

### **Sources:**

“A Few Characteristics”; “Civic Structure”; and “What’s In A Name?” St. Johnsbury History. The University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies. 23 April 1998. Web. Accessed 28 March 2013. <<http://www.uvm.edu/crs/resources/profiles/StJohnsbury/history.htm>>

“Businesses” St. Johnsbury Built Resources Capital. The University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies. 23 April 1998. Web. Accessed 29 March 2013. <<http://www.uvm.edu/crs/resources/profiles/StJohnsbury/built.htm>>

Colburn, Selene. “Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium.” *Historic Roots: A Magazine of Vermont History*. Vol. 5, No. 3. Dec. 2000. P. 24-29. Web. Accessed 18 March 2013. <<http://www.vermonthistory.org/explorer/images/stories/articles/historicroots/fairbanksmuseum.pdf>>

National Register of Historic Places. St. Johnsbury Historic District. Town of St. Johnsbury. Caledonia County. Vermont. National Register #80000424 <<http://accd.vermont.gov/sites/accd/files/Documents/strongcommunities/historic/StJohnsburyHD.pdf>>

“St. Johnsbury, Vermont.” *A Connecticut River Byway Waypoint Community*. The Connecticut River Byway Council. Web. Accessed March 28, 2013. <<http://www.ctrivertravel.net/st-johnsbury.htm>>