

The Place of Crossing: Prospectus of White River Junction, Vermont

Three critical intersections define White River Junction; the confluence of the Ottauquechee

River and the White River into the Connecticut River, the intersection between Interstate 89 and Interstate 91—the only major roadways in all of Vermont and Western New Hampshire—and the junction of several major freight and passenger train rails. This unincorporated downtown settlement has historic, economic, and cultural significance, and played a central role in the development of my human capital and my connection to place growing up. Founded in 1761, it is one of the five surviving settlements of Hartford, Vermont, along with Hartford Village, Wilder, Quechee, and West Hartford (“About Hartford”). Although it has a population just under 4,000 residents (ACS 2015 (5-year estimate), “Total Population”), the development and persistence of White River Junction exemplifies major phenomena seen in many American settlements, such as the rise and fall of an industrial economy, the criticality of geographic features to sustainability, and the use of art and culture to revitalize and reclaim neighborhood identity. [\[a very strong introduction\]](#)

I grew up in Sharon, Vermont, 25 minutes away from White River. Sharon’s amenities consist of two general stores with gas pumps, a seasonal ice cream shop, a small health center, the Seven Stars Center for the Arts, and a volunteer fire department. Due to the extreme rural conditions of Sharon, White River Junction provides my family critical access to a wider variety of resources, entertainment, exploring art, attending after-school programs, developing skills, and getting jobs. My connection to White River started because my father is a special educator at Hartford High School; our family’s primary source of income is based in the Hartford community. As a teenager, I began to dance seriously—establishing the foundation for my current passion and scholarly interest in dance as a discipline and field of study—at the White River Ballet Academy (WRBA), a small ballet school with high quality training using the

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American Ballet Theatre curriculum. The twenty hours a week I spent in White River at WRBA taking class were critical in developing my skills as a trained dancer, a form of capital I have used many times to access artistic opportunities and form connections outside of my small home community, especially at Bowdoin [\[interesting\]](#). WRBA, and its location in White River Junction, also became a center of my social experience, as my friends—most of whom attended the ballet school as well—and I spent time at the local café, shopped at the consignment shop, Revolution, and engaged with various community events like farmers markets, the Halloween art parade, and community theater at the local performing arts building. Although straining my family’s financial capital, the social and artistic capital I gained has allowed me to develop a connection to place that was not possible in Sharon, as well as skills I can utilize in new settings, outside of Vermont [\[very interesting; a wonderful testament of the sacrifices your parents made to ensure a better life for you\]](#).

My connection to White River Junction extends beyond the dance studio. My first legal job was in White River, where I was the assistant at the new art and wellness center, although my responsibilities were primarily to clean the building. My internship last summer at the local domestic and sexual violence crisis center was located primarily in the district court located downtown across the train tracks downtown [\[interesting; I wonder the connections this has to the kind of communities described by Sherman\]](#). White River contains my hair salon, with the only hairdresser trained to cut curly hair in the entire Upper Valley, our family’s grocery store, the Upper Valley food coop, and the only accessible train station, giving us access to the rest of the east coast. It is modest and sparse by the standards of most genuinely urban centers, but it has provided a wealth of resources to myself and my family, and many east central Vermonters would express similar sentiments.

White River Junction owes its existence to the railroads. Until the mid-19th century, it was sparsely populated, but the geographic significance of the three rivers—The White, the Ottauquechee, and the Connecticut Rivers—meant that the settlement was in a strategic industrial and commercial location (“Brief History”). In 1848, both VT Central Railway and the Connecticut River Railroad built the first tracks (“White River Junction Historic District...”). White River Junction quickly became the largest rail



center in both the state and New England north of Boston (“About Hartford”), instigating rapid growth of both the industrial economy, the train junction, and the downtown area, as the increased traffic encouraged the business district to develop thriving hospitality and commercial services (“White River Junction Historic District...”). White River Junction was “destined to develop into a thriving, nineteenth-century commercial center” (Fisher) due to its natural and industrial features, thus enabling a production of culture and community to supplement the industrial needs. For a century, White River was the entertainment center of the area, featuring traveling circus acts, prizefights, and the Vermont State Fair (“Brief History”). This growth and prosperity exemplifies the importance of geography and transportation infrastructure to the development of a community [\[great description of the area’s history in the 19th century\]](#).

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As the town’s commercial prosperity was dependent on the economic condition of the railway industry, instability left the town vulnerable to the consequences of industrial decline and economic depression (Fisher). After World War II, the railroad industry began a rapid pattern of decline, particularly due to economic expansion unsuitable to rail transportation, instead favoring specialized modes of transportation such as trucking (Meyers, Morton) [\[so was the town’s resources diverted toward building roads and highways?\]](#). In the postwar period, employment in the rail sector declined by two thirds, according to John Meyers and Alexander Morton of the National Bureau of Economic Research and Harvard University. This decline had severe economic repercussions for White River Junction, whose entire economy was centered around its train junction (“White River Junction (VT)”). The development of interstate highways I-89 and I-91 in 1969 furthered the commercial and industrial decline as highway traffic was diverted away from the central business district located across from the train station. The interstates were assets to the town in connecting Vermont to Southern New England through White River Junction and increasing the variety of transportation options available, but they did have an undeniably negative effect on the downtown area of White River (Fisher). In response to the decline in commercial activity in the postindustrial era, officials attempted to spark revitalization and community pride by emphasizing the history of the downtown and the heritage of the railroads [\[interesting\]](#). For many years

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during the post war period, the town celebrated their history in the Glory Days Festival, with live music, food, art, and train excursion (“White River Junction (VT)”). Although the festival and other attempts to stabilize and revitalize the community have kept the village alive, the lack of sustainability in the town’s main industries has had a lasting effect on the economic composition of the town [Again, I’m thinking about Sherman here and cannot help questioning the consequences on the shift of the town’s economy from industrial (railroads and perhaps even road-construction) to a more cultural/service based economy was understood as something different for the men who lost their jobs].

Today, White River Junction is home to 3,882 residents (ACS 2015 (5-year estimate), “Total Population”). The composition of White River Junction is extremely racially homogenous, as 97.5% of its population is white compared to .4% black, .8% multiracial, and 1.3% Asian (ACS 2015 (5-year estimate), “Race”). Socioeconomically, White River Junction can be classified as a working-class town. The median household income in 2015 was \$48,661—for whites, the median household income was slightly higher, at \$49,196, meaning that nonwhites experience more financial marginalization than their white counterparts (ACS 2015 (5-year estimate), “Median Household Income”). Areas surrounding White River Junction have median income rates of \$57,383, \$60,234, \$61,063, \$88,164, and \$128,276 (ibid)—this discrepancy is due in part to White River’s proximity to Quechee and Woodstock, major centers for wealthy out-of-state tourism, and Hanover, containing Dartmouth College. However, it would be interesting to investigate the connections between the decline of White River in the postindustrial era and its lower income status comparative to the surrounding locations [and even perhaps the ways that it shapes White River Junction’s growing economic fortune as an Art town].


White River Junction has a poverty rate of 7.1% (ACS 2015 (5-year estimate), “Poverty Status in 2015”), which is about half the national poverty rate of 13.5% (“What is the Current Poverty Rate...”). When broken down by gender, no single men live below the poverty line (0%) while 5.2% of single women do, all of whom were mothers with children under the age of 18 years old (ACS 2015 (5-year estimate), “Poverty Status in 2015”). This is interesting because many of the traditionally masculine jobs that sustained the town in the 19th and 20th centuries have declined, while traditionally feminine jobs in



service and retail have remained consistent, suggesting that other factors are contributing to the increased rate of poverty in single women compared to single men [interesting, indeed]. The poverty rate is also interesting when broken down by age; 10% of the population under 18, 9.8% of the population aged 18-64, and 17.7% of the population aged 65+ are determined to be living in poverty (ACS 2015 (5-year estimate), “Poverty Status in 2015”). The fact that the aging population experiences higher rates of poverty than the younger populations suggests that factors such as evolving or declining industries and cultural change may be effecting the economic stability of the older populations [good]. In terms of social services, 27.7% of households receive social security income (ACS 2015 (5-year estimate), “Households with Social Security Income”), 8.2% receive supplemental security income (Ssi) (ACS 2015 (5-year estimate), “Households with Supplemental Security Income”), and 7.5% receive public assistance (ACS 2015 (5-year estimate), “Households with Public Assistance Income”), meaning that about a third of the population relies on some form of government assistance.

While the town experiences lower rates of poverty than the nation on average, economic hardship still characterize much of the population, a condition paralleling that of many rural, Northern New England settlements in the postindustrial era. Despite the industrial stagnancy that challenges White River Junction’s economic stability and prosperity, the town still survives, and in many ways, is thriving. The train station is still fully functional, featuring the Amtrak route, *The Vermonter*, providing service from St. Albans, Vermont to Washington, D.C. The annual station ridership in 2016 was 13,988 passengers (“White River Junction (VT)”).

Independently of the rail infrastructure, the town has recently begun a process of revitalization, centered around an increase in the production and consumption of art and creative cultures. White River Junction is a modern hub of art and cultural phenomenon; in the past two decades, numerous businesses have sprung up or revitalized, including the Center for Cartoon Studies, the White River Ballet Academy, the Open Door Workshop, an art and wellness center, and a new and improved performing arts center sponsored by the theatre company Northern Stage. The Tip Top Building, formerly a baked goods factory, is now a studio complex for a variety of individual artists, and the Main Street Museum regularly



hosts art exhibits and events. On the evening of the first Friday of every month, artists and businesses across town host events and display work for community members (“White River Junction (VT)”). This trend has paralleled a new attitude towards the reclamation of the community and a renewed sense of pride in the town, exemplified in the popular shirt, “White River Junction; It’s Not So Bad” [very interesting; this could take on a few meaning].

For my final project, I will investigate the ways in which this rise of the creative class and influx of art-related businesses and organizations has produced a trend of growth and renovation, and generated tension between the new creative class and old working-class populations. I will analyze this urban issue through the medium of a feature story, in the hopes of creating a larger discussion about the consequences of the current changes on our community. I will examine the reasons behind the increase in artistic expression and production driving the town’s social and economic sectors to develop an understanding of how this trend fits into similar processes in larger urban centers. Although White River Junction is extremely rural compared to urban environments, the similarities between this trend in rural Vermont and major metropolitan areas provide insight into the force that art plays in contemporary society. Despite its small size, White River Junction is undergoing fascinating and rich change that is worth understanding, as it holds implications for urban areas across the country undergoing similar trends.

Additionally, I will look at how this process of improvement and artistic innovation inadvertently alienates long-time, working class residents still recovering from the loss of industrial jobs [great]. In contending with the need for new economic infrastructures in the wake of the economic depression following the end of the industrial era, I will investigate the ways in which the creative class and its connotations clash with the interests of working class and poor residents of White River. Is this trend towards revitalization exemplary of community-engaged self-improvement, or is it a product of gentrification? By doing this project, I hope to discuss the ways that art and community revitalization *can* include the interests of the working class residents, and challenge the town to protect the interests of the lower income populations to prevent their displacement in attempts to improve the town. Although it is happening in process, analysis of this trend and the conflicts that arise will provide insight into actions

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community members should take to preserve the identity of the town and leave space for all its residents to thrive, especially those who may be pushed out or left behind by ensuing changes.

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This is an excellent discussion of White River Junction (WRJ). From its historical evolution to your personal relationship to the area, you highlight quite well the role that Art and Culture has played in shaping the fortunes of WRJ. Your final project is well articulated (and admittedly, very close to my heart – my next book project actually looks at the very subject in some smaller towns along New England and the Mid-Atlantic). What I find most intriguing about your project is the role of population size in shaping these dynamics; Art as a strategy in cities in pretty well known and well researched, but the size of the city makes the impact different from what we might find in smaller towns, where attachments to place of oldtimers are more entrenched than what we find in urban contexts. There is something worth exploring here about the responses of oldtimer residents and the various forms of resistance mobilized against the outsiders who draw on art as a strategy of revitalization. I think you will find a wealth of material in the second half of the course to help ground your study, including the materials on the tourist town.

Great work! Depending on your interest and how the project turns out, perhaps there is a possibility to collaborate for my book project (at least publishing a few articles about the subject!)

Grade: 9.75/10 (A)

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