1. Woodstock and the First Watershed

We have a tradition in our family that sometime in the past century, one of our ancestors crept out of the ground in Lebanon, Connecticut, and as soon as he got money enough together to run away with, came up to Queechy Vermont, where we have remained ever since.

Marsh, speech at Forefathers’ Day, Middlebury, Vt., 1859

GEORGE PERKINS MARSH WAS BORN IN WOODSTOCK, Vermont, “the true date of my happy nativity being the Ides of March 1801.” So he told a friend who had wrongly antiquated him back into the eighteenth century. It was a bitter winter, this first of the new century. Typhus raged in Woodstock village along the terraced flats of the Ottauquechee River, usually known as the Quechee. Across the river, the family of Charles Marsh, Esquire, Woodstock’s leading lawyer and U.S. District Attorney for Vermont, escaped the lice-born malady. Six years later the family left their riverside cottage for a brick mansion a hundred yards north at the foot of Mount Tom.

Here, overlooking the village opposite, Charles Marsh brought up a large family, entertained visiting dignitaries, and managed his farm,
GEORGE PERKINS MARSH

the choicest in the township. He owned much of Mount Tom, and his well-tilled fields and meadows covered the whole of the rich intervale in the great bend of the Quechee north of Woodstock. The new road from Royalton, a turnpike in which Marsh held a half interest, skirted his house and entered Woodstock on the Quechee bridge Marsh had built in 1797. Across this bridge to Elm Street, which he had likewise laid out, Charles Marsh would walk to his law office.

From the summit of Mount Tom, treeless since a devastating October fire in George’s very early childhood, the boy could survey his entire cosmos. The windswept summit afforded an unobstructed view of the village five hundred feet below. To the west, the main range of the Green Mountains was dark with spruce, hemlock, and white pine. Seven miles to the east lay Hartford, the home of George’s grandfather, Colonel Joseph Marsh. A few miles farther downstream, the Quechee entered the broad Connecticut River, spanned seven miles upstream by a bridge linking Norwich, Vermont, where young Marsh would briefly teach school, and Hanover, New Hampshire, the site of his alma mater, Dartmouth College.

This was no static panorama but one in ceaseless flux, rapidly being transformed by the forces George Marsh would so memorably limn in *Man and Nature*. Thirty years of clearing and planting had converted the wooded lower hills surrounding Woodstock into field and pasture. On higher, steeper slopes the forest was also receding, as demands for fuel and the effects of pioneer profligacy took their toll. The runoff of rain and snow on denuded hillsides sped erosion and depleted once abundant supplies of fish and game. Frequent floods washed out bridges and mill sites.

From his first years, Marsh was acutely aware of such metamorphoses. “Too sterile ungrateful and cold to furnish food and shelter even to the frugal and hardy Indian,” the Green Mountains had remained for the most part “an untenanted and untenantable wilderness,” he wrote half a century later. “Born on the edge of an interminable forest,” as he termed it, he himself saw much of it cut down for timber, fuel, and the making of fuller’s soap from potash, then in huge demand for manufacturing woolen cloth, especially in England. In Woodstock “every family made its own soap, preparing also its own lye,” Marsh
recalled, from "the numerous potash factories supplied with material from the 'clearings' then going on."4

Such clearings had an impact on the fish in local streams. Sent to school in 1811 at Royalton, fifteen miles north, the ten-year-old fisherman found the White River “a very different ichthyological province from that of Woodstock.” Lower-lying than the Quechee, the White River valley had been earlier and more thoroughly deforested. There Marsh caught eels and gathered freshwater clams “never found in forest streams but only [in] those cleared and cultivated.”5

Birds were also affected. Commenting on their nocturnal migrations along natural channels now become thickly settled, Marsh in Man and Nature recalled a boyhood village

at the junction of two valleys, each drained by a mill stream, where the flocks of wild geese which formerly passed, every spring and autumn, were very frequently lost, as it was popularly phrased, and I have often heard their screams in the night as they flew wildly about in perplexity as to the proper course. Perhaps the village lights embarrassed them, or perhaps the constant changes in the face of the country, from the clearings then going on, introduced into the landscape features not according with the ideal map handed down in the anserine family, and thus deranged its traditional geography.6

Many such changes, Marsh later stressed, were at least for some time irreversible. The fierce fire that had denuded Mount Tom in his childhood consumed humus as well as trees: “the rains of the following autumn carried off much of the remaining soil, and the mountain-side was nearly bare of wood for two or three years afterward.” Although Mount Tom was soon again thickly wooded, “the depth of mould and earth is too small to allow the trees to reach maturity.” No trees over six inches in diameter survived, and seedlings would go on dying “until the decay of leaves and wood on the surface, and the decomposition” of rock beneath, had “formed, perhaps hundreds of years hence, a stratum of soil thick enough to support a full-grown forest.”7

In fact, Mount Tom was replanted by Frederick Billings in the 1880s with exotics—Norwegian spruce, European larch, and white ash; thus only fifty years after Marsh’s somber augury in Man and Nature, it was well clad in mature growth.8 Yet Marsh’s insight that the intensity
Map 1. Vermont, 1800–1860
of human-induced damage might long delay natural recuperation remains valid. And in this instance, as Marsh often came to stress, it was not nature alone but nature aided by human artifice that had restored Mount Tom.

Revolutionary Vermont usually calls to mind Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys, brash, unschooled, ultrademocratic, but the Marshes were emphatically not Vermonters of this type. Indeed, for years they strove not to be Vermonters at all. They sought instead to set up their own Puritan commonwealth between the Green Mountains and the White Mountains, a pious, orderly, Dartmouth-focused New Connecticut. Their political arcadia unrealized, the gentry of eastern Vermont contented themselves with inculcating genteel virtues in their offspring. In frontier Vermont, George Marsh was brought up a sober Calvinist patrician.

For a long time the Green Mountains separated two hostile worlds. To the west, from Bennington and Rutland north through the Champlain Valley, came western Connecticut backwoodsmen. Dissenters from Congregational conformity, some were revivalists, others free-thinkers. In orthodox eyes, western Vermont was notorious as the abode of atheists who “chuse to have no Sabbath—no ministers—no religion—no heaven—no hell—no morality.”

East of the mountains, settlers came from conservative central and coastal Connecticut. Orthodox in religion and Federalist in politics, many were educated and prosperous. The likes of the Marshes along the upper Connecticut and its tributaries were noted for “puritanical gravity, that shrewdness and Connecticut peddler’s air, which enables them to drive a lucrative business in the humblest and most unpromising pursuits.” But an 1840s visitor also found them honest and “punctual to a fault.” In eastern Vermont roads were better than those to the west, fences in good repair, houses neat and weatherproof. Yale’s president Timothy Dwight smugly judged, in 1803, that “steadiness of character, softness of manners, a disposition to read, respect for the laws and magistrates, are all extensively predominant in this region.”

Joseph Marsh, George’s grandfather, exemplified such traits. With his mother, wife, nine children, and several brothers’ and cousins’ fami-
lies, Marsh had moved north from Lebanon, Connecticut, in 1772. Hartford, their Vermont destination, was one of the Connecticut valley townships chartered by New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth at the close of the French and Indian Wars a decade before. In those wars Joseph Marsh had ably served. A man of substance, he was already a town proprietor before he came to Hartford, which thrived on timber, potash, and wheat.

He rapidly gained further influence. Colonel of militia, convention delegate, Connecticut Valley spokesman, he was chosen lieutenant governor of the newly independent republic of Vermont in 1778. But misgivings about the radical Green Mountain Boys led his "Dartmouth College party," headed by Dartmouth president Eleazar Wheelock, to seek separate autonomy, or at least Vermont hegemony, for the upper Connecticut Valley. They failed. In 1784 the towns east of the river rejoined coastal New Hampshire, and the Marsh-Wheelock party capitulated to the Allens. Though they saw the Allens and their ilk as "friends of Hell," they were "prepared to make a pact with the devil himself" to protect their properties against New Hampshire and New York. The pact reflected little faith on either side, Ethan Allen terming the Marsh faction "a Petulent, Petefoging, Scribling sort of Gentry, that will keep any Government in hot water till they are Thoroughly brought under by the Exertions of authority."\(^{11}\)

Joseph Marsh again became Vermont's lieutenant governor in 1787–89. Although radical Jeffersonians for the most part controlled the state (admitted to the Union in 1791), conservative Federalists long dominated its eastern counties. As chief justice of the Windsor County Court until 1795, Joseph Marsh was legendary for his capacious memory, logical acuity, and equable temper. Meticulous in dress and manner, he remained until his death in 1811 "a perfect Federalist gentleman . . . of the pure Washingtonian school," recalled a grandson, "and trained his children in it."\(^{12}\) And trained his grandchildren in it too, recalled George Perkins Marsh near the end of his own life.\(^{13}\)

Charles, eighth of Joseph Marsh’s twelve children, and a graduate of Dartmouth and of Judge Tapping Reeve’s famed law school in Litchfield, Connecticut, opened his Woodstock law practice in 1789—the
first lawyer there, the third in Windsor County. Charles Marsh is said to have arrived in Woodstock without a shilling in his pocket beyond the price of his first fifty acres; but with his undoubted talents and an influential father heading the county court, success and prestige came quickly.

In 1790, Marsh and his wife, Nancy Collins, moved from the Eagle Hotel into the frame cottage at the foot of Mount Tom, known for the next half century as "Mr. Marsh's hill." Here Charles, Jr., was born in 1790, and Nancy Marsh died after giving birth to Ann Collins in 1793. Five years later Charles married Susan Perkins Arnold, also recently widowed, who brought with her a two-year-old daughter, also named Susan. Charles and Susan had five more children: Lyndon Arnold, 1799; George Perkins, 1801; Joseph, 1807; Sarah Burrill, 1809; and—the eldest son having died—another Charles, in 1821.

As a lettered man and trained advocate, Charles Marsh was at first an anomaly. Newly arrived from Connecticut, Charles's cousin Jeremiah Mason found Vermont's courts "badly organized and usually filled with incompetent men. Most of the members of the bar were poorly educated, and some of vulgar manners and indifferent morals." In Windham County's Newfane, just south of Woodstock, legal credentials scarcely mattered. "I certainly knew very little law," Mason recalled, "but that was the less necessary as my opponents knew not much more, and the judges I addressed none at all." Worse yet, "a large portion of the inhabitants were new settlers and poor, and of course not desirable clients." Mason departed to hang out his shingle in New Hampshire, where he hoped to find lawyers who were gentlemen, judges scholars, and clients well-heeled.

Charles Marsh was made of sterner stuff—or perhaps he concurred with state supreme court judge Royall Tyler, who termed Vermont "a good place for lawyers" because "all the rogues and runaways congregated" there. Woodstock became the county seat in 1790, Marsh planning the new courthouse. For a decade he monopolized Woodstock's legal business, and for many years led the Windsor County bar. Severity and hot temper made him widely feared; for punching a legal opponent in court, Marsh was scathingly rebuked by his father, sitting as judge. He thereafter behaved with icy restraint, excoriating his foes in a low-pitched voice that compelled close attention. He browbeat ju-
ries, too. In one defense Marsh agreed with the prosecutor that his clients were "poor and mean, wicked and criminal," they ought to be hanged. But, he warned, the jury must heed nothing but the evidence; were they swayed in the slightest by his clients' reputation, "you will as richly deserve the state prison as they deserve the gallows." Marsh won the case.17

During the War of 1812, when antiwar Federalists briefly controlled Vermont, Charles Marsh was twice elected to public office. Each time he courted public odium. In the Vermont Council of Censors, which met every seven years to revise the state constitution, Marsh urged a Senate elected by men of property to offset the "hasty, inconsiderate, violent rabble" in the Assembly. In the U.S. Congress, Marsh took a grim pride in unpopular stances. Backing a bill to raise congressional pay from six dollars a day—a bill disastrous to several politicians—he had the temerity to demand ten dollars! Like his son George a generation later, Charles Marsh was pilloried for legislative arrogance. Yet he remained staunchly republican; "how indignant my old Federal father was," George Marsh later recalled, when England at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 "abandoned the peoples of Europe to the tyranny of priests & princes."18

Charles Marsh gained no public renown. Better schooled and more brilliant than his popular father, he did not make the most of his talents. Echoing Joseph's political and social views, Charles lacked the tact, even the will, to make them palatable to others. He was never eager for office; hauteur ensured he never long retained it.19 Despite habitual self-deprecation—inherted by and intensified in his son George—Charles Marsh saw himself inferior only to God. To most mortals he was clearly superior. Confident of never lying or acting unjustly, he pitilessly pilloried anyone he thought did so. His portrait shows a man one would not care to gainsay: a spare six-footer with a narrow, deeply lined face and thin-lipped, derisive smile.

Reared in a stern religion, Charles Marsh remained a strict Calvinist. He helped found Woodstock's Congregational Society and gave the land for its meeting house. A stalwart of the American Bible, Education, and Colonization societies, Board of Foreign Missions, and Society for the Promotion of Temperance, Marsh never deviated from their aims.
Yet he was besieged by doubt as to their efficacy and his own moral worth. It was like him to argue for banning liquor traffic by blaming himself for having “sold spirits to a person who under its influence had abused his family, and consequently been imprisoned.” In grieving the untimely death of his eldest son, Marsh found himself “dumb before my Judge. . . . ‘How shall I answer Him for one of ten thousand of my transgressions?’” Rectitude was the mainstay of Marsh’s piety; he taught his children to fear God not as a loving Father but as a righteous Judge.

Charles Marsh was gentler at home than in the courtroom, but a tyrant nonetheless. George’s father was as quick to condemn stupidity as to denounce a lapse from probity; a young Marsh ought to know as much as possible about everything. Thoroughness was a lesson George learned early. Watching his father inspect the building of their new house, he “never forgot the stern rebukes administered to the laborers when their work was found to be ignorantly or carelessly done.” Slow and negligent learners took a back place in the family circle; George was impelled by more than mere curiosity to absorb the encyclopedia from the age of five. His family viewed him as a paragon because he yearned to know everything from mechanics to needlework, precocity aroused admiration, exemplary conduct exempted him from criticism. At an age when most children are learning the alphabet, George Marsh was well on the way to becoming a pedant.

His rigorous childhood training left lasting traces. Marsh ever reveled in encyclopedic knowledge; versatility was a passion for this polymath in myriad diverse realms. He hungered for data of all sorts. And he forever interjected recondite lore into letters and essays, sometimes to illustrate a point, often simply as self-indulgent fun. Marsh never ceased finding virtue in facts, or delighting in knowing so many of them. In the home of Charles Marsh this had paid well.

George’s mother, unlike his father, was brought up in an ambience of quixotic fervor. Susan Perkins was born in Plainfield, Connecticut, in 1776, one of the nine children of Dr. Elisha (“Terrible Tractor”) Perkins, an innovative and enterprising physician. To make ends meet for his large family, Dr. Perkins boarded local academy students and ran
a lucrative business in breeding and trading mules. But his main hopes lay in improving on Franz Mesmer's by then discredited "animal magnetism" and on the "electrical" effects of metals that Luigi Galvani applied to nerves and muscles. In the early 1790s Perkins found rheumatic and other pains relieved and cures effected by stroking his patients with a polished knife blade or keeping a lacquered metal comb in their hair, "the most valuable discovery ever made," he assured his daughter and her first husband, for which an exclusive monopoly "would make me & mine as rich as we ought to wish to be." Since knives and combs yielded small profit, Perkins peddled pairs of three-inch gold- and silver-painted curative magnetic rods, pointed at one end and rounded at the other. In 1796 he secured a patent for his "tractors" from Congress in Philadelphia, George Washington among other leaders acquired a set. While Mesmer's method was said to succeed only with the "lower classes," Perkins's tractors were especially popular among "men of science and respectability."

Dr. Perkins was a entrepreneurial healer. A million and a half sets of his tractors, whose materials cost one shilling, were sold for five guineas a pair. Connecticut's Medical Society denounced Perkins's "bare-faced impositions" and expelled him as a user of nostrums; Perkins and his son Benjamin rebutted with testimonials from scores of statesmen and ministers and cited two thousand cures, notably of infants and horses. In London, Benjamin set up a Perkinistic Institute, satirized by Vermont poet Thomas Green Fessenden:

With powers of these Metallic Tractors,
He can raise dead malefactors;
And is reanimating daily,
Rogues that were hung once, at Old Bailey.

Dr. Perkins seems to have deceived himself along with others. Touting a magnetic cure for yellow fever, he went to New York in 1799 to test it and died there of the disease at age fifty-nine, two years before Marsh's birth. His grandson's name acknowledges Elisha Perkins's memory and a legacy to his daughter Susan March.

Four years before her father's medical martyrdom, black-haired, dark-eyed Susan Perkins had rejected haughty Charles Marsh in favor
of the romantic lyricist and lawyer Josias Lyndon Arnold, a Rhode Island emigré to St. Johnsbury, Vermont. Susan coped easily with frontier hardships in the northern wilderness, but within a year her husband fell ill and died. Likewise widowed, Charles Marsh renewed his suit, and this time she accepted him.

Of Susan Perkins Arnold Marsh’s long and useful life little is known; George himself rarely wrote of her. “Her beauty was of the queenly type,” a contemporary reminisced, “Juno and Venus in one.” Mental and moral training she left to Charles, but, unusually demonstrative for a New England mother of her day, she taught her children not to be chary of expressing affection. Sympathetic warmth, common sense, and good humor stand out in her dealings with her husband, her children, and—crucially for her son George, as will be seen—her grandchildren.

The good people of Woodstock have less incentive than others to yearn for heaven,” proclaimed Vermont Senator Jacob Collamer in the mid-1800s. The Woodstock of Marsh’s boyhood was already an uncommonly attractive village. In 1800 its forty-five frame houses held two hundred and fifty inhabitants, with two thousand more in the surrounding township, the fourth most populous in Vermont. Scores of small farms were scattered over the neighboring hillsides, for the migration that later emptied the hills to swell the villages and lowlands had hardly begun. “The first roads ran along the ridges,” where settlers also built, Marsh later wrote, “because there only was the earth dry enough to allow of their construction.” But low-lying land cleared by logging had since become drier, enabling highways and habitations to move “from the bleak hills to the sheltered valleys,” in Marsh’s eyes “one of the most agreeable among the many improvements” evident in Vermont.

Turn-of-the-century Woodstock epitomized Timothy Dwight’s paean praising the Connecticut Valley. Unlike Hudson Valley towns “where nothing but mercantile and mechanical business is done [and] beauty of situation disregarded,” Woodstock was “a place, not where trade compels, but where happiness invites to settle, [and] the beauty
of the scenery, scarcely found in the same degree elsewhere, becomes
a source of pride as well as of enjoyment.” Early on, Woodstock was
known as “an elegant little place.”

Crossing his father’s bridge to broad, tree-shaded Elm Street,
young George first passed the small schoolhouse, then his father’s law
office, Charles Dana’s dry goods store, John Carleton’s brick shop and
saddlery, and Amos Cutler’s cobbler’s shop. Past the rickety county jail
the road branched northeastward downstream along the Quechee, and
southward upriver along the Green. Around this open oval stood the
village’s chief buildings: the grand new courthouse overlooking the
river, Benjamin Swan’s pearlash factory at the upper end, and the prem-
ises of Isaiah Carpenter, bon vivant and bass violist, from whose print-
ing press emerged the Northern Memento, Woodstock’s weekly paper.

Opposite the courthouse was the two-story Eagle Hotel, ample
enough to lodge half the state legislature when it met in Woodstock in
1807. A rendezvous for farmers, merchants, and the courthouse crowd,
the Eagle dispensed salt cod and gingerbread with Woodstock’s famous
cider brandy, gin sling, maple rum, potato whisky, punch, toddy, and
eggnog. Distilling was a major industry in turn-of-the-century Ver-
mont; liquor flowed freely. Other types of license also throve; Wood-
stock was infamous as a place “where the greatest indecorum between
the sexes, is habitually practiced and countenanced.” But George’s mor-
als were not sullied by association with the young bloods at the Eagle
or the night owls at Samuel Chandler’s countinghouse. The Marshes
not only kept a strict Sabbath; they adhered to Sabbath sobriety all
week. The lawyers George met at his father’s house and office little
resembled the unlettered boors Jeremiah Mason had complained of:
many were college men versed in English letters, their courtroom prose
modeled on Addison, Swift, Steele, and Johnson.

George had no lack of companions. Young Danas, Swans, and
Churchills abounded, and a score of cousins lived nearby at Quechee
and Hartford. Elder brother Lyndon was an inseparable playmate. A
favorite and gifted storyteller was the future sculptor Hiram Powers,
grandson of Dr. Thomas Powers, Marsh and Powers remained lifelong
friends.

Often-visited friends were the Paines, forty miles north in Wil-
liamstown. Ex-senator and four decades a federal judge, Elijah Paine kept daily weather records for Zadock Thompson's pioneering Vermont almanacs, turnpiked a twenty-mile route to Montpelier, and made merino wool (from Portuguese sheep imported in 1810 by William Jarvis south of Woodstock) into Vermont's major industry, through Paine's broadcloth mill in Northfield. By the time George Marsh left Woodstock in 1825, still more forest had been cleared to pasture Vermont's half million sheep, denuding even heavily bouldered slopes. Overstocking quickly eroded the glacially swept thin soils, causing streams to silt up and floods to devastate their shores, in Marsh's own classic account in *Man and Nature*. The multifaceted Paine was one model for George Marsh's own career, unsavory as were Paine's addiction to snuff and his hypocritical temperance preaching. Paine's daughter Caroline would later travel with the Marshes in Turkey and Egypt. A son, future governor Charles Paine, would ruinously enmesh Marsh in railroad speculation.

The picture later drawn by Marsh's wife, Caroline, of George as a timid, gentle, solitary bookworm who preferred to be indoors with his sisters' friends, must be qualified by Marsh's own memories. A half century after their encounter as six-year-olds, Marsh wrote that a St. Johnsbury relative of his mother's "professed to have forgiven, though he had not forgotten, [my] getting mad at him, chasing him over the house, and kicking him when I caught him." A Woodstock companion recalled roaming far and wide with George and Lyndon, "stretching willows for whistles or elders for pop-guns, climbing high rocks, ascending Mt. Tom, losing ourselves in the woods," where moose, wolves, and catamounts were still to be seen. George reconnoitred the Quaking Pogue, a fear-inspiring bog of unknown depth on the far side of Mount Tom.

He learned marksmanship from Revolutionary War veterans, fished in the Quechee, watched wrestling matches, barn-raisings, sheep-shearings, and horse-racing along the river road below his home. Regimental musters after the harvest were festive events, and as the militia marched out from the Common, cider, gingerbread, cakes, and pies filled parade-ground booths in the meadow east of the Marsh place. During the War of 1812, zealots paraded with snare drum and
fife. The Marshes, Federalist peace-lovers, kept aloof from some of this frivolity, though Charles Marsh officiated at such state visits as President Monroe’s and the aging General Lafayette’s. And George recalled Isaac Hull’s “Old Ironsides” naval triumph of 1812 over the British as vividly as his mother had delighted, when a child, in feting General Rochambeau’s troops after the victory at Yorktown.33

The Quechee, “most rubato of Vermont rivers,”34 was the region’s chief focus. Like most tributaries to the Connecticut, it is nowhere navigable but was full and swift enough in Marsh’s boyhood to power a score of mills. The river was the font of farming as well as of factories. The light-brown, fine sandy loam of the fluvial terrace on which lay the Marsh farm was the most productive and easily tilled soil in eastern Vermont.

From its Green Mountains’ source the Quechee alternately dashed over rapids and meandered along fertile intervales, here roaring through a deeply incised gorge, there moving placidly past alder-covered banks. Icebound during winter, the river opened up in April, overflowing the meadows beyond its banks. In summer it shrank to a trickle, and the mills shut down until the fall rains came to turn their wheels again.

Turbulent before white settlers came to the valley, the Quechee’s flow was still more erratic by George Marsh’s youth. When farmers cleared fields and cut down trees for timber, fuel, and potash, and then for pasturage for sheep, the denuded hillsides could no longer absorb as much rain and snow. Instead of percolating into forest litter and soil, water rushed unchecked into the river; snow melted precipitately in spring thaws; floods were more frequent. And in summer the river might dry up entirely. Even as a youngster Marsh noted these extremes intensifying.

Destructive freshets were now common. Charles Marsh’s Quechee bridge had to be rebuilt three times in a decade, and the Royalton coach shook it so severely that passengers were relieved to reach the safety of the Eagle Hotel. In July 1811 a flood breached the bank, destroying Charles Marsh’s high stone wall and a sawmill upstream. Despite such losses, Woodstock boasted many flourishing mills. Besides Jabez Bennett’s village-center gristmill, there were a flaxseed oil mill, carding ma-
chines, a fulling mill, clothier’s works and dye house, and a gin distillery and malthouse; in West Woodstock, Moses Bradley manufactured pots, pitchers, and milk pans.

Woodstock’s agricultural and woodland produce were carted over the plank turnpike south to Windsor or on the common road east to White River Junction, thence across the Connecticut and south to Hartford, Connecticut, or east to Boston. After 1810, when canals were built around Quechee Falls at Hartland and Olcott’s Falls south of Hanover, the Connecticut River offered a cheaper shipping route. Log rafts and flatboats fitted with sails went all the way from Wells River, fifty miles north, down to Hartford. Tea, coffee, salt, spices, molasses, rum, and household furnishings reached rural Vermont and New Hampshire in exchange for farm produce, wool fleece and cloth, timber, potash and pearlash, maple sugar and syrup, and ginseng.35

As a farmer, Charles Marsh was closely involved in all of this. Although hired hands did most farm work and road and bridge building, farm matters absorbed him. So did cooking and eating. George’s account shows that home held more than the cold comforts of Calvinism and litigation:

That I am addicted to the pleasures of the table I utterly deny, but I confess I am a little critical in roast ham & pork & beans. This however is but a proof of my filial affection. I have to thank my parents both for my taste & my knowledge. . . . My mother . . . considered within herself the nature & capabilities of pork, & the exigencies of the human palate, and she created, evolved out of the depths of her own consciousness, the splendid result—roast ham. . . . Well, of course my father could not be otherwise than a lover of baked pork & beans. What good man is? Some there may be who never tasted them, having been cursed with a birth out of N[ew] E[n]g[land]. Others there can be none. . . . But as all wise men know, there are varieties of beans, some good, many indifferent, more bad. My father emigrated from Connecticut. His first crop (all the seed he carried from C) was cut off by a late frost. He tried the neighbours, sent hither & thither, bought Shaker seed beans, but all to no purpose. A baking bean he couldn’t get. . . . In this extremity what did he do? Did he turn Jew, or Mohammedan, & forswear pork? Did he profess himself a Pythagorean & renounce beans? Not a bit of it. He just sat down & invented a new bean for himself. . . . My father’s bean—it is a bush bean, of course; everybody knows that—is a small white bean, of regular shape & proportions, nearly cylindrical,
with hemispherical ends, skin as thin as Mrs. ——'s cuticle, & flesh when baked as soft as her hand. No damned crust, no globular segregation into indigestible pellets, but a carnation to the eye, homogeneous to the touch, ambrosial to the palate.  

Though never a devotee of fleshpots, George Marsh wore no hair shirt and did not abstain from creature comforts. "You used to think," recalled an elder brother, "that Father in his occasional remarks at family prayers, dwelt [too] largely upon the 'blessings of poverty', which you could not appreciate." Later travels among the poor of the Old World persuaded Marsh that such supposed 'blessings' were simply humbug.  

George was a habitually serious, precociously adult-looking child. At the age of five or six he began Latin and Greek, tutored by his eldest brother. He owed much to Charles Jr., "who excited my curiosity about books, when I was not much more than an infant, and who kindled my love of knowledge to a passion." The passion endured throughout life.  

His mother tried to pry him from his books, but the boy read everything he could get hold of. One favorite was Abraham Rees's *Cyclopaedia, or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*, whose huge volumes were almost too heavy to lift. George enjoyed astounding his father with the scope of material he absorbed. But poring over the encyclopedia's pages in poor light strained his sight so severely that when he was seven or eight he almost went blind. For many months any light caused intense pain, and for four years he could hardly read at all.  

But Marsh gained something from this ordeal. Having to be read to by others, he developed awesome powers of memory; and reading aloud became a lifelong habit. What he later termed "an excessive, almost preternatural, sensibility or sensitivity to sound" gave him an acute ear for foreign languages and a love of music; he could always identify by tone the type and number of instruments in a band, and when convalescing would compose music in his head.  

He also gained a love of nature that never ceased to sustain him. When he left his darkened room, his vision was at first so blurred that
he could scarcely make out familiar landmarks; but as his sight improved, the boy explored landscapes with the same zeal he had studied Rees's encyclopedia.

Marsh was fortunate to be thus driven at an age when his experience of nature was direct, intimate, naive, and vivid. He grew up a practical-minded Yankee who prided himself on devotion to utility, yet he was equally a romantic, attracted to Thoreau and to the Transcendentalist mystic poet Jones Very, whose lyrics accorded with Marsh’s “sense of the delight of life in close contact with nature.” Very’s sonnet “Nature”—“The bubbling brook doth leap when I come by / Because my feet find measure with its call”—echoed Marsh’s own Woodstock childhood. Marsh was “forest-born,” he reminisced; “the bubbling brook, the trees, the flowers, the wild animals were to me persons, not things.” As a lonely boy he had “sympathized with those beings, as I have never done since with the general society of men, too many of whom would find it hard to make out as good a claim to personality as a respectable oak.” Marsh took it amiss when friends failed to share his joy in nature; he felt Rufus Choate’s “want of sympathy with trees and shrubs and rivers and rocks and mountains and plains” a decided character defect. A similar “total want of sympathy with nature” Marsh felt disqualified John Ruskin as a “guide to any knowledge, physical or moral.”

Young Marsh would have been false to his father’s training had he neglected the science of nature. He recalled jolting along ridgetop roads in a two-wheeled chaise, sitting “on a little stool between my father’s knees,” when he was four or five. “To my mind the whole earth lay spread out before me. My father pointed out the most striking trees as we passed them, and told me how to distinguish their varieties. I do not think I ever afterward failed to know one forest-tree from another.” His schooling in geography began when his father “called my attention to the general configuration of the surface; pointed out the direction of the different ranges of hills; told me how the water gathered on them and ran down their sides. . . . He stopped his horse on the top of a steep hill, bade me notice how the water there flowed in different directions, and told me that such a point was called a water-shed.” Marsh never forgot the form of the land or the forces that shaped it. But the awareness of watersheds so crucial to his Man and Nature has more to do with a
George's formal schooling was sporadic and negligible. Latin and Greek with his brother, geography and morality with his father, and his own encyclopedic reading taught far more than intermittent attendance at the common school on Elm Street. Even after he regained his sight, his eyes remained weak and his hearing impaired, and he was often too ill to go to school. At other times, sickness shut down the school altogether. An 1811 Woodstock epidemic of "spotted fever" (cerebrospinal meningitis) led Charles Marsh to send George away to school in Royalton, fifteen miles north. At Woodstock in 1814, interim teacher John Powers Richardson (Hiram Powers's cousin) recalled Marsh among other boys on the left, on the right were "the red-cheeked Marsh girls, the round-faced Warrens, the pale-visaged Holtons."  

Religious instruction was stern but sporadic. Woodstock's Congregational meeting house was, like many, little more than a temporary base for itinerant preachers. In 1810 Charles Marsh persuaded Walter Chapin, a young Middlebury College graduate, to fill the Woodstock pastorate. But Chapin's missions to convert the heathen required frequent jaunts all over New England. When in Woodstock, the amiable minister dwelt more on the forms than the spirit of religion. Adherence to doctrine was primary; without rigid principle, Chapin was fond of saying, "morality was but the 'ghost of departed virtue.'"  

Such sermons inoculated Marsh against later proselyte fervor in revivals where many classmates succumbed to piety. But Chapin cannot be blamed for the doubts that precluded Marsh from becoming a full Congregational communicant. Facile faith in the triumph of truth, "magna est veritas et praevalabit," always struck Marsh as dubious. "Even when a boy," he later recalled, "I used to say 'Satan is mighty and will prevail.'"  

At twelve George was set to go to North Yarmouth, Maine, as a pupil of the Reverend Francis Brown, later president of Dartmouth. "Master George is very impatient for the time I shall send him to your care," wrote Charles Marsh. He added that "the poor boy . . . reads more
hours every day, besides going to a common school, than anyone in the family.” But George’s health precluded his going.

Bent on his son getting a dose of conservative orthodoxy, Charles Marsh in 1816 sent him to Phillips Academy at Andover, Massachusetts. George boarded in town with three future ministers and two others who did not survive their schooling. Some ninety students suffered prison life at the country’s first prep school. The curriculum was mainly Latin and Greek, which George already knew, and religion and morals, in which he was not remiss. Besides daily prayers, the boys recited on Saturday a ten-page lesson from John Mason’s *Self-Knowledge . . . and the Way to Attain It* (1745), spent all of Sunday at church and Bible classes in the unheated Meeting House, and on Monday abstracted Sunday’s sermons.

The headmaster was John Adams, a noted disciplinarian. “He was very religious,” summed up the cultivated Josiah Quincy, who had endured Adams’s rule a few years earlier, “but had no literary tastes.” Adams aimed to secure faith, not to instill zeal for learning. Frequent revivals converted scores of youths. “There will be a prayer-meeting,” Adams would thunder as the regular service ended, “those who wish to lie down in everlasting burning may go, the rest may stay.” George stayed only a few months at Andover, but Adams immunized him for life against religious authority. “The sons of schismatics,” Marsh later exhorted, “let us not dishonor our parentage by anathematizing schism among ourselves.” Blind obedience begot only abject conformity.

That George Marsh should go to Dartmouth was foreordained. Brother Charles had graduated; brother Lyndon and cousin James Marsh were there. For a Marsh to desert Dartmouth in its hour of peril was unthinkable. A year before George came, the trustees had deposed John Wheelock, son of the founder, and offered Francis Brown the presidency. “Should you disappoint us,” Charles Marsh wrote to Brown in the name of the Board, “we shall be thrown into a state of absolute despair, and the College must sink . . . into a seminary of Socinianism.” Terming Marsh and his fellow “aristocratic” trustees bigots and persecutors, Wheelock persuaded New Hampshire’s ruling Democrats to
amend Dartmouth’s charter, disempowering the existing Board. Charles Marsh’s men held fast against the “mob tyranny [of] agrarians, infidels, Jacobins, sans-culottes.” George Marsh reached Hanover in the fall of 1816 to find his college battling for its very buildings against a rival state university.49

Before Marsh graduated, the U.S. Supreme Court—moved by Daniel Webster’s legendary plea that though Dartmouth was “a small college, . . . yet there are those that love it”—famously vindicated the trustees. But the students derived small advantage from the decision; the curriculum remained as narrow and humdrum as before. Dartmouth studies were largely a continuation of those at Andover, and George Marsh got little pleasure or profit from them. What he learned of value he picked up independently. He spoke of his college days later in life only to chide himself for having wasted time.

At fifteen, Marsh was three to five years younger than most of his thirty-three classmates. Diffident, shy, studious to excess, Marsh had no close companions in his class; he was intimate only with his cousin James, a senior, and the future lawyer and statesman Rufus Choate, a sophomore, his intellectual equals. Caring neither for sports nor social affairs, Marsh had little in common with the rest. They in turn found him aloof. They admired his learning and his dry, quiet wit but did not warm to this solemn, bespectacled young man who “was indifferent to all external objects, save some book,” a classmate recalled, “and then he placed the book very near his eyes.”50

Few students shared Daniel Webster’s love of Dartmouth. Undergraduates complained then, as ever since, of Hanover’s paucity of attractions. It was a small town; some sixty white houses stood around the Green, with three-storied Dartmouth Hall on one side. Marsh lodged in the village his first three years, in Dartmouth Hall as a senior. Tuition was $21 a year, plus incidental expenses: a $2 library fee, 25 cents for a copy of the rules, fines for their infraction—amounting to 60 cents for Marsh’s entire four years. Such sums his father could easily spare, with pocket money besides; Marsh was one of the “richer” students.51

For most classmates, college was more formidable in both cost and effort. Although frugality and plain dress were customary, many had to eke out expenses by teaching school. The trustees may have been "aris-
tocrats”; the students were not. Some came via preparatory schools, but most had passed formative years on New Hampshire and Vermont farms. In contrast to men from Harvard and Yale, Dartmouth graduates were said to be rough-and-ready fellows of little learning or culture. This reputation was on the whole merited; discipline was strict, but scholastic demands were low. However lazy or incompetent, a student who paid his bills and kept out of trouble usually got his degree. But poverty and illness took heavy tolls—one in three of Marsh’s class failed to graduate.

Students assembled in the chapel daily at five in the morning, or “as early as the President could see to read the Bible”; neither light nor heat was provided. The chill may have sped President Brown’s premature demise. After chapel, they dispersed to recitations, each year’s students in one room. Breakfast followed, then a period of study—or slumber—then a second recitation; after midday dinner, study again, and an afternoon class at three or four. Evening prayers were at six, “or as late as the President was able to see.” Sunday was a day of enforced rest; students went to morning and evening chapel, but save for meals were otherwise confined to their rooms.52

In the few hours of recreation, students played football on the Green and swam in the Connecticut River, in the winter there was ice skating. Gambling was forbidden, but even Marsh sometimes took a hand at whist. Like Yale president Timothy Dwight, he learned a lesson from this frivolous indulgence. Asked fifty years later to join a game, Marsh said: “No, I believe not. I did too much of that in my college days, and I have never taken a card in my hand since.” Dwight bewailed his card playing as a moral lapse; Marsh merely regretted the waste of time.53

There were few pleasant ways to spend time at Dartmouth. Two literary societies, the United Fraternity and the Social Friends, engaged in debates; membership in one or the other was mandatory (Marsh was assigned to the Social Friends). Phi Beta Kappa, to which Marsh belonged, a theological group, to which he did not, and a sporadic Handel and Haydn Society were the only other organizations.

The college year began in September and ended the next August, with a seven-week midwinter vacation. Commencement Day was a grand occasion; parades, fireworks, refreshment booths, and sideshows...
around the Green gave it the aspect of a county fair. The trustees met, some celebrity gave an address, and all endured hours of student oratory.

The narrow, rigid curriculum was entirely compulsory. Classics and mathematics dominated the first three years; seniors got doses of metaphysics, theology, and political law out of Jonathan Edwards’s *Freedom of the Will* (1754), John Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding* (1690), Dugald Stewart’s *Elements of Philosophy* (1792), and William Paley’s *Evidences of Christianity* (1794). Of natural science there was virtually none; like other colleges of the day, Dartmouth held most science subversive of religion and government. Not until 1836 did chemistry, mineralogy, and geology enter the curriculum. The little astronomy that Dartmouth thought safe to impart in Marsh’s time was taught by Ebenezer Adams, a lusty-voiced ignoramus who relied mainly on what Marsh told him; indeed, Marsh was “not corrected,” recalled a classmate, “for any mistake or fault” in his college years.54

Bishop Paley’s *Natural Theology* (1802), which Marsh read in his junior year, was a canonical American college text, much admired for buttressing religious faith with purportedly scientific evidence.55 One Paley doctrine was geological catastrophism, the view that the earth had actually undergone all the violent upheavals delineated in the Bible. Another Paley premise was that only a purposeful Creator could have made the wonderful forms of nature; a third was that God made everything in nature for man’s use. Marsh found Paley intellectually vacuous and spiritually abhorrent.

Schooling in languages was little better than in science. Marsh’s Greek and Latin far surpassed the curriculum, “when he left college,” remembered a classmate, “he read the Greek poets and historians with as much ease as an ordinary man would read a newspaper.” But not all classical teaching at Dartmouth was second-rate. “President Brown hears us in Horace,” wrote Choate, “and it is our own fault if we do not make progress.” No modern languages were taught, but Marsh mastered the Romance tongues—Spanish and Portuguese as well as French and Italian—by himself. With Choate and James Marsh, in what Choate recalled nostalgically as a “magic circle,” George Marsh met regularly to explore classical and contemporary European literature.
They followed the lead of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, who ascribed to each nation and epoch a unique soul and mind to be gleaned from specific native texts. Pedagogy like subject matter at Dartmouth left much to be desired. Actual instruction was minimal. Recitations tested what students, called on in alphabetical order, had memorized. But if classwork was perfunctory, the three-man faculty—Brown, Adams, and Roswell Shurtleff, who taught theology, moral philosophy, political economy, and mathematics—were not wholly to blame, they were during Marsh's first two years shut out of the college library and their own classrooms by the state of New Hampshire. Never well paid, they were now not paid at all, and if the trustees lost their case they would have no jobs.

The condition of the college was, as Choate said, “critical in the extreme.” During midwinter in Marsh’s first year the state university preempted all the college buildings. Undaunted, President Brown held classes in the Rowley Assembly Rooms over Stewart’s hat shop. “It was a pleasing tho solemn sight,” reported the *Dartmouth Gazette*, “to see the students, who before had been accustomed . . . to flock to the chapel at the welcome sound of the bell, now punctually flocking to this retreat of persecuted innocence.”

Meanwhile faculty and trustees suffered wretched months. New Hampshire’s Supreme Court ruled against the trustees in November 1817, and Charles Marsh made plans to transfer George and other students to Middlebury if the federal appeal failed. But in February 1819, Chief Justice John Marshall read his historic decision, disallowing New Hampshire’s interference: “The college is a private . . . institution, unconnected with the government [and] the charter of such an institution is plainly a contract”; contracts were inviolable. The rival state university disbanded, and Hanoverians celebrated with cannonades.

George Marsh, himself so intimately involved, later termed the Dartmouth College decision “vitally important to the cause of education.” The controversy had “excited a sympathy between two vocations before thought antagonistic—the academic and the forensic,— . . . with favorable results to both of them.” But later still, when corporations cited Marshall’s ruling to claim immunity from legislative control, Marsh assailed this reading of the sanctity of contracts as “an old legal
superstition." He now lauded efforts to curb corporate power spearheaded by his nephew, Senator George F. Edmunds, that culminated in the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890.\(^59\)

Marsh’s senior year was uneventful. As excitement over the case ebbed, morale declined, discipline deteriorated. Students were repeatedly fined for absence and "inattention"; Rufus Choate, now faculty secretary, had to warn that any senior who "habitually neglect[s] any of the exercises [shall] be refused examination with his class."\(^60\) But most squeaked through to Commencement on August 20, 1820.

As the band played, students paraded to the meeting house under Colonel Amos Brewster, Grafton County high sheriff, whose stentorian voice, pompous swagger, cocked hat, sword, gold lace, and sash were indispensable accoutrements. The audience settled to an orgy of speeches: "The Decline of Eloquence," "The Moral and Religious Character of the First Settlers of New England," "The Expulsion of the Moors from Granada" (poem), "Piety Essential to the Highest Enjoyments of Taste." Hours later came Marsh’s Herder-based valedictory: "The Characteristic Traits of Modern Genius, as Exemplified in the Literature of the North and of the South of Europe." Compared with others, Marsh was termed plain, direct, unornamented.\(^61\)

\textit{I hate boys, hate tuition, hate forms.}

Marsh to Spencer Baird, April 25, 1859

Just two weeks after graduation, Marsh returned to Norwich, Vermont, across the Connecticut River from Hanover, to begin teaching. The salary was small, but the title grand for a youth of nineteen: George Perkins Marsh, A.B., Professor of the Greek and Latin Languages at the American Literary, Scientific and Military Academy.

Norwich Academy was emphatically experimental. Its eccentric and ebullient founder, Captain Alden Partridge, had been dismissed as superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1817 and cashiered for insubordination (noting the captain’s “zeal and perseverance,” President Monroe commuted the sentence). Partridge advocated military education for all. “A systematic knowledge of fortifications and tactics” would equip young men to understand history, “a large portion
of which is made up of descriptions of battles and sieges," and thus to
defend their country. He also promised to keep young men from evil
habits by eliminating their leisure time; at Norwich, drill and exercise
occupied "those hours . . . generally passed by students in idleness, or
devoted to useless amusements."\textsuperscript{62}

For otherwise misspent vacation times, Partridge mounted "excursions;"
marching his hundred cadets all over northern New England. The
 captain was an experienced surveyor, and on these trips took alti-
tudes of many peaks. Marsh went along in the summer of 1821, learned
to use the Englefield barometer in the Green Mountains and on Mount
Washington, and gained familiarity with local land forms.\textsuperscript{63}

But if the summer jaunt appealed to Marsh, nothing at the Acad-
emy did. The four-story brick barracks, surrounded by a high fence
and guardhouses, were depressingly gloomy, the blue-coated, high-
collared cadets depressingly stupid; Marsh lacked the patience and skill
needed to pound the classics into their heads. Unwilling to suffer fools
gladly, Marsh preferred self-education to teaching others. Less misan-
thetic later in life, he generously aided bright young protégés, but a
teaching career never attracted him. Bored by his classes and by the
self-important Partridge, he spent what time he could in the Dart-
mouth library, reading works in German and Scandinavian languages
until late at night. This regimen brought Marsh’s eyesight to an end
with the school year; he quit his job and sought an oculist.

His eye trouble, the same he had suffered as a child, proved ob-
durate; for several years he could read very little. During futile win-
ters in New York, Philadelphia, and Providence doctors blistered and
cupped him but failed to mend his vision. Marsh returned to Wood-
stock weak, thin, and discouraged. There he prepared for the law by
being read to at home and hearing cases in court.

Marsh’s horizon at this time was bounded by family. Often in pain
and scarcely able to see, cared for by his mother or a cousin, he coun-
tered misery with mordant repartee and multilingual puns. In better
hours he talked law with his father and brother Lyndon, now practic-
ing in Woodstock, played with the new baby, Charles; and joked with
a visiting Perkins cousin. She showed him a landscape she had just
painted. "How do you get off that bridge, cousin?" he asked her, smil-
ing. "Sure enough the bridge ended at one extremity square up against
the old castle. . . . After that ‘cousin Sarah’s bridge’ was not seldom re-
ferred to when some hideous mistake occurred."64

Unable to work at anything substantial, Marsh spent solitary days
roaming the countryside. After long abstinence from print, his eyes
gradually improved. Later Marsh looked back on this period, then
seemingly sad and barren, as one of growth and maturation, enhancing
his powers of memory and capacity for reflection.

Four years passed quietly in this way, enlivened for Marsh by
few contacts beyond Woodstock. He did take on one unusual task—a
state-mandated inquiry on deaf-mute education. Family links with Gov-
ernor Cornelius P. Van Ness prompted the legislature in 1823 to ask
Marsh what Vermont should do for these unfortunates. The issue was
then topical: Philadelphia educator Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, having
studied sign-language training under the pioneers Charles-Michel de
l’Épée and Roche-Ambroise Sicard in Paris, had returned to America
with their star deaf-mute pupil, Laurent Clerc. In six years Gallaudet
and Clerc had revolutionized deaf schooling through American Sign
Language, a variant of the French lexical system.65

Marsh visited Gallaudet and Clerc’s American School for the Deaf
at Hartford, Connecticut, inspected asylums in New York City and
Philadelphia, and corresponded with teachers at Danville, Kentucky,
and Canajoharie, New York. Rather than recommending a separate
asylum for Vermont’s few dozen deaf-mutes of educable age (then
tenagers), he advised that the state allocate $150 a year for each to go
to Connecticut. In 1826 nineteen Green Mountain deaf-mutes began
five years’ schooling in Hartford, a transfer scheme that lasted several
decades.66

Marsh’s detailed report far transcended the practical issue at hand:
it explored the mental world and future prospects of those who could
neither hear nor speak. Common stereotypes then ranked deaf-mutes
as cretins unable not only to communicate but to contemplate, remem-
ber, or envision; their perceptions were therefore thought to be limited
to isolated and momentary sensations. With language providing the
only means “of reflection and the comparison of ideas,” those without
it were indeed pitiable, wrote Marsh, elaborating on Abbé Sicard’s semi-
Cours d'instruction d'un sourd-muet de naissance: "The deaf and dumb, in a state of nature, possess no means of receiving ideas from others." Thus all their ideas "must be original, and derived only from personal observation." Their impressions were transient, their sensations fugitive. They could not "have the satisfaction of reflecting on the past" or anticipating future enjoyment. "Inferior to the savage, who possesses the means of communication with his fellows [and] enjoys the advantages of society," the deaf-mute was "but a moving machine, possessing little to elevate him above the brutes."

But this hapless view was quite false, insisted Marsh. Most deaf-mutes had language, as any observer could see. They conversed together in signs all the time. Formal sign-language training gave them ready communion with the hearing, manual alphabets, Marsh noted, conveyed words four times faster than they could be written. Indeed, sign language was more universal, more notably human, than were spoken tongues mutually unintelligible since the fall of Babel. "If you bring together two uneducated but intelligent deaf-mutes from different countries," Marsh later added, "they will at once comprehend most of each other's signs, and converse with freedom."67

Marsh felt sign language superior in other ways, too. "The deaf-mute learns nothing by rote, but every thing by analysis; [schooled deaf-mutes] not only acquire the precise meaning of words, but become good grammarians and logical reasoners." In sum, their minds were "precisely like" those of others. Hence "to educate a deaf mute is to render a new member to society, to give life to that which was before dead, and almost to convert matter into mind."68 Like most educators, until Horace Mann and S. F. B. Morse regressively enthroned oral training a half century later, Marsh thought teaching deaf-mutes to speak was a time-wasting detriment to their linguistic progress. Marsh's interest was life-long; in 1870 he supplied Gallaudet's son, Edward Miner Gallaudet, with data on deaf-mute education in Europe.69

This is not the place to argue the merits of sign language, which were as patent to Marsh as they are to modern educational reformers. What is extraordinary is that young Marsh, already a linguist to whom spoken and written words were meat and drink, esteemed signs not merely as a precondition of or adjunct to articulate speech, but often as preferable to it. In southern Europe, he later noted, "telegraphic com-
Communications by hands, face, feet, the whole person, in short, are everywhere kept up, as qualifications of animated oral discourse. Thus a foreigner, “who understands no language but that addressed to the ear, loses much of the point of the lively conversation around him.” And the language of gesture may be an advantage to a speaker who cannot be heard by a tumultuous crowd, or in “despotic countries [where] every man knows that he is constantly surrounded by spies, and it is therefore safer to express himself by gestures [which] cannot be so easily recorded or repeated, even when understood.” It was said that “the famous conspiracy of the Sicilian Vespers [1282] was organized wholly by facial signs, not even the hand being employed.”

Late in Marsh’s life, sign language led him to speculate on intrinsic forms of thought. Whether mental images were audible or visual seemed to depend, he surmised, on whether someone was at a given time more habitually exposed to spoken or to written words. But words, whether written or spoken, were intrinsically less veracious than involuntary facial gestures. “So much more truth-telling than words, in fact are these self-speaking muscles,” that Marsh commended the aphorism “that language was given us to enable us to conceal our thoughts.”

Happier in lofty erudition than in petty legal details, Marsh yet persevered in preparing for the bar. A committee of three, including future Vermont Senator Jacob Collamer, examined and admitted him as an attorney of the Windsor County Court in September 1825. Soon after, Marsh set out for Burlington, on the other side of Vermont, which became his home for most of the next thirty-five years.