H. N. WILLIAMS STORE
OF DORSET, VERMONT

Serving a country community spanning three centuries

A brief history 1840-2007
&
The renovation & expansion of 2007-2008
(and preserving the exterior and interior from the 1800’s)
CHAPTER I ---“HISTORY OF THE STORE” 1840-2007

William Williams 1840-1872
Charles Williams 1865-1895
George Williams (CW vet) 1876-1915 (d)
Herbert Norton Williams 1893-1937 “Belle” until 1955 (d)
William Williams 1935-1947 (d)
Austin & Ada (Williams) Rumney 1947-1985
Dennis & Ruth Brownlee 1985-and still going strong
William & Blair Brownlee 2002-enlarging options & family

William Williams was the son of Oliver Williams, who had married Abigail Kent, a granddaughter of the famous Cephas Kent. Legend persists that William ran a tannery and harness making enterprise, just off the West Road, although documentation does not come to hand. He supposedly operated this business from 1825 until after 1835. This location seems possible because of the proximity to the Kent family holdings and there was access to water, which could be easily obtained from the brook tumbling off of Nichols Hill. This stream also may have, at times, provided water for a couple of other small businesses in that area.
It is an historic fact that William opened his tannery and harness shop in 1840 on the east side of the main road to Manchester about ½ mile south of Dorset Village. The main part of that building was obviously moved from another location, either as a unit or reconstructed. That building was soon added onto by 12’ addition toward the highway (today’s Route 30). The date of the addition is easy to establish, for during the 2008 renovation a wall in that part of the main building was opened and a lining of newspapers was found and saved. All of these issues were dated 1854. Possibly the first structure was moved from the West Road. It may have been the tannery and harness shop that William Williams supposedly ran at that location. At any rate the beams and underpinnings of both the shop and its narrow west addition are of the same era. They are of late 18th century or early 19th construction and consist of heavy hand-hewn timbers mortised to receive joists of logs with their bark still attached and are visible today from the lower level. The slate roof with its gable end toward the road was likely built at that time to cover the combined structures.

According to Mary Williams Rowland the ‘tannin’ or Chestnut, Oak and other barks used in making leather from the hides was ground up by a circular mill presumably powered by a horse or two. Because this process, along with its catalysts and ancillary operations, does not produce a pleasant odor, it must have been unwelcome, especially in a primarily residential area. Perforce of these offenses, the tanning works was gradually abandoned as the twentieth century dawned. The leather used in their products was obtained elsewhere and the boot and harness business continued to flourish.

Charles Williams takes over in 1865  George Williams joins his brother 1872
William’s two sons, Charles and George, renamed the enterprise William’s Sons and continued the business under their father’s guidance. George had enlisted during the Civil War. He was mustered on November 9, 1863 into Co. D of the 11th Vermont Regiment (*First Regiment of Heavy Artillery*). During his two years of duty nearly 1/3 of his regiment was lost in actions at Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, Cedar Creek, Fisher’s Hill, and three battles at Petersburg, Virginia. In an army that was not rank-happy he was promoted twice and on August 25, 1865 Sergeant George H. Williams was discharged. For a short while he went to work in Lowell, Massachusetts, very likely in the production of leather goods, but subsequently he returned to Dorset and spent the rest of his working life with his brother in the family business. Charles Williams, who had lost a leg in some forgotten accident, was supported on his limbless side by a wooden leg. Of course his prosthesis was hidden by his bib-overalls and as he sat by the old woodstove in the store, he delighted in the consternation he caused among uninformed visitors by cracking walnuts with a hammer against his artificial leg. Thus we get the first glimpse of the dry family humor that was to follow through the succeeding generations.

George’s son, Herbert N. Williams, began his tenure in 1893 and started almost immediately to expand the store’s inventory and offerings to
the public. The south shed-roofed addition was added prior to 1899, as was the additional grain building to the rear, which replaced the former tannery. Photos detail the north (or white) stable that was purchased and moved, about 1905, from the Methodist Church lot on the north side of Church St. in Dorset where Mrs. Musser later built her home. That sizeable building was probably moved on log rollers the ½ mile from the village. The relocation likely consumed several days, as the logs were no doubt moved from the rear when the stable, pulled by teams of horses, had passed over them and then were carried to the front to repeat their task. At that time the present Route 30 was dirt and the large structure resting in the right of way overnight was not a hazard to the traveling public in those slow moving horse & buggy days. Of course it is also a possibility that the moving was accomplished in the winter and the barn could easily been put on runners and hauled by teams of horses or even oxen, which were available at that time. Once on the Williams property the 30’x40’two-story building was set down on stones laid on the ground just north of the original store, but parallel with it. By 1914 photographs show that the two separate buildings

*Herbert Norton Williams Department Store 1893*

*George Williams and H.N. Williams are at work on the cobbler’s bench at the south wall of the store about 1900. The bench and the leather-working tools on the wall are still there today.*
were joined together and roofed over by an 8’ connector. It is not known structure, but it must have occurred either shortly before or just after the move. A few out-buildings have been added over the years and others

![This 1914 photo shows the two building joined by the connector](image)

removed. Herbert N. Williams is credited with creating the ‘Department Store’ to meet the demands of the new 20th century and the ever-changing economy. He stocked and sold wagons, sleighs and bicycles as well as ox-yokes and, made on the premises, harnesses, bridles, horse collars, and boots. A plethora of farm implements, machinery and tools were on hand in addition to flour, grain and seed. An advertisement in 1903 stated that he was also an agent for Oldsmobile automobiles, but there is no record that he ever actually sold one.

![H.N. Williams Store about 1930. Note the road has been raised significantly. The delivery truck was likely that of a wholesale supplier.](image)

H. N. Williams’s son, William, who everyone called “Bill”, worked in his father’s store from 1935 until he took the reins in 1937. Bill’s mother, Herbert’s widow, Isabelle (Belle), was a force to be reckoned with in the store until her demise in 1955. She is fondly remembered, certainly by this recorder, as the able lady to whose side was attached
a worn leather pouch that served as her cash register I have seen her stuff
bills into that pocket and grudgingly, it seemed, remove a little change from
it. It might be imagination, but I believe she felt that pocketbook was more
suited to receipt of money than the dispensing of it. Bill was a gregarious
citizen and a pillar of the Dorset Church, serving as deacon and trustee for
many years. At that time he was also treasurer of the Dorset Library and the
Fish & Game Club, member of the Dorset Players and he chaired every
‘War Bond Drive’ during World War II. The store rented bicycles, which
were in great demand during wartime shortages and my Mother and I often
rented Bill’s tandem bike to tour Dorset’s by-ways when gas rationing
precluded the use of cars and trucks

William (Bill) Williams II joins his mother, Isabelle in 1935

for such adventures. Sadly, Bill succumbed to a heart attack in 1947, way
before his time. Bill may be gone, but I can still see him wearing those black
rimmed glasses and slouch fedora hat sitting on the front porch of the store
in a straight back chair leaning back against the clapboards, just waiting to
visit with or accommodate the next neighbor or customer to enter his realm.
Bill’s sister Ada, and her husband Austin Rumney, jumped into the breech at
his passing and took over managing and staffing the ever-popular store with
Belle. As in the years past, most local citizens and a goodly number of
seasonal residents continued to patronize the H. N. Williams Department
Store. I am not quite sure when the watering trough just south of the store ceased to provide for the thirst of horses, but it must have been about the time that “Rufe” Lake, Monty & Stella Baker and Walt Nichols gave up their equine-powered transportation in the late 1950’s. Such accommodations are no longer needed, but the nostalgia lingers on. The marked prices on items in the store were reasonable, if not always current, so that bargains could often be found on the dusty shelves within this Dorset emporium. Today, in more modern retail establishments, when the cost of articles increase, label upon label are a testament to the price increases. During the ‘50’s and ‘60’s the Rumneys seemed content to leave those items from the previous years without updating the purchase prices. I recall buying the last box of .348 “Silver Tip” cartridges for my Winchester Model 71 deer rifle and paying only the marked $4.45. Austin said nothing at the time, but I got a phone call from him that evening asking if I would like to order more of them because he was restocking his ammunition prior to deer season. With malice aforethought, I asked if the price would be the same and the swift reply was: “No, by jingos, it won’t. Once burnt, twice cautious” and I swear I heard him chuckle. His humor was usually dry, although it could be frivolous. I was driving south on Route 30 one morning on my way
to work at J.K. Adam’s Co. The rain was, as they say, ‘torrential’ and Austin emerged from their home opposite the store and started to cross the road. He was cloaked head to foot in a black rubber rain suit with a ‘southwester’ wide-brimmed rubber hat. Just for fun, I leaned on the horn and he flapped his arms and grinned as I skirted his path and, though I couldn’t hear him, I’d bet the deed to the farm he was quacking like a duck. Ada was small lady and some more reserved than her husband, but she had a bit of fun herself on occasion. One Halloween when our kids were of trick-or-treat age we were visited by a bevy of costumed urchins and we were ‘bribing’ them all with bags of candy and treats. Somehow we missed one of the small fry and the slighted one reached out for the treats when I noticed that the hand protruding from the disguise was not of school age. You are way ahead of me—it was Ada Rumney. This pair was quietly given to helping folks get started. Several young married couples that I know were turned down when trying to borrow from the local banks to build or buy a house. It was a well-kept secret that Ada and Austin financed them at low interest. Austin kept a stable of ancient tractors and mowers including the first backhoe I had ever seen. This machine was trailed behind and was run by the tractor’s rear power take-off shaft. He also hired out for plowing, harrowing, seeding and hay field mowing. He dug the frost-wall foundation for our garage (30’ x 40’), went home for lunch, and returned to mow the hay in our four-acre apple orchard, cutting around about one hundred trees. All this was accomplished in one long day. The bill was almost laughable, but he would

This color photo of the old wood stove was probably taken in the 1960’s. It warmed the south end of the store for close to 80 years before the outdoor boiler was installed in 1992 to heat the entire store. The stove was made in E. Dorset.
property owner and later, when teased about it, he would laugh as loud as anyone. Is it any wonder that the William’s Store was often referred to as “Rumney’s”?

In 1985 Ada and Austin turned over the helm of the store to their daughter, Ruth, and her husband, Dennis Brownlee, who had been working at the store since their return to Dorset in 1977. Because of their good humor and willingness to stock the needs of their customers, together with the innate charm of the century-and-a-half old building, their business sailed merrily along. Occasionally the availability of some rare item would become the talk of the town. During the noon hour on a job that required a number of trades, the after-lunch conversation led to marveling at the ancient and outmoded contents of William’s store. One of the workers, I believe it was Ken Nichols, suggested that we get on the phone and test the store owners by seeking some forgotten device and, in the bargain, stump the proprietor. Fred Bovey ‘won the toss’ and suggested that we ask for an ox-yoke bolt. In the distant past the store had sold yokes for teams of oxen. After the laughter subsided, Fred was elected to make the request. As luck would have it Austin was minding the store during that noon hour and, hearing the query, he said he would look. After close to ten minutes, Fred thanked him and hung up. He turned to our curious gathering and exploded: “He said, “yup”. Then he asked, “Do you want the 7 inch or the 9 inch bolt?”
Dennis and Ruth raised a remarkable family of workers and students. That couple built their new home in the meadow behind the old family homestead and they hired local tradesmen to perform all the tasks required in its construction. The emphasis on “local” is intentional. This family has always been an integral part of the Dorset community and by their friendliness have encouraged a strong loyalty to their enterprise. The Brownlee’s second oldest son, Billy, had worked in the store since he was twelve years old. His grandmother, Ada, hovered over the youngster, teaching him how to make, and carefully count, change, figure sales tax, and then where to unearth the widely scattered items in the inventory. Billy continued as a temporary staff person, after school, during vacations and summers until he graduated from Burr & Burton Seminary in 1994.
That fall he entered the University of Vermont and graduated in 1999 holding a B.S. Business Degree with a concentration in Management and Information Systems. For a time he continued to work at the store and then in 2001 Billy took a 6-month job working for a special event marketing company. In December of that year he returned to H.N. Williams Store ‘full time’.

In Billy’s own words: “After taking many classes, I saw how these applications could have a positive impact on the store.” And he did just that. Also, this young man admitted: “I would be lying if I said I just came back for the store. I came back to eventually marry Blair and start a family.” Now things commenced to happen quickly. In 2002 he installed a point of sale computer system, but so as to not shock his old-time customers, the screens were hidden in old apple crates and only the most observant customers realized that the entries were made on a keyboard and not scribbled on cash or charge slips which used to disappear into the maw of that monstrous iron McCaskey. The inventory multiplied exponentially and clothing, boots, tools and hardware saved us all many a trip to Manchester or Granville, N.Y.. Then in 2007 began a mighty project of expansion to allow a larger and more comprehensive inventory and still retain the traditional aspects of the nearly 170 year-old business. Thus was permitted a gentle acknowledgement of twenty-first century marketing.