



# BILLINGS FARM & MUSEUM

## SHEEP AND WOOL WEEK: VERMONT'S SHEEP BOOM

Before Vermont became a dairy state, it was a sheep state. In the early 1800s, Merino sheep were imported to Vermont from Spain for their wool. This sparked the woolen mill industry to prosper and began the sheep boom.



Woolen Mill in Bridgewater, VT

Farmers who moved to Vermont bought land to raise their flocks on Vermont's hilly, forested terrain made it slightly more difficult for those looking to raise animals. Sheep need pasture land to graze on so new land owners clear-cut their land and sold the lumber for profit. Once cleared, native grasses grew providing sheep with the food they needed. By 1870, there were more than 500,000 sheep in the state of Vermont.

Less than 100 years after it began, the sheep industry left Vermont. As the railroads became more accessible to the Midwest, farmers would sell their flocks or move west with them. The Midwest was already open pasture land with no need to log which made raising sheep much easier and cheaper.



An ad for the sale of Merino sheep in Vermont.

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Once the sheep left Vermont, the land began returning to its natural forested state. However, the damage done by sheep was vast. Sheep are hard on the land and rip plants out by the roots. This leaves areas of barren ground which are susceptible to wind and water erosion. Today Vermont is 80% forested compared to the sheep boom when it was less than 20% forested.

Vermont left the door wide open for the dairy industry after the sheep left, and the number of cows in the state began to rise. The sheep boom was over and the dairy boom was just beginning.

Around the time the sheep boom was declining, Frederick Billings began purchasing Southdown sheep from Britain to bring to Billings Farm. Billings chose Southdown sheep because they are a dual purpose breed, used for wool and meat. Today at the farm, we have a small flock of Southdown sheep acquired from a few farms in the US.



**Billings Farm's Flock of Southdown Sheep**