

TODAY

## Checking In | Voices from the New England Economy

*Yankee's* weekly roundup of personal stories about running a business in these uncertain times.

Ian Aldrich • June 13, 2020 • [Read Comments \(7\)](#)

As everyone in New England — and the world beyond — is being forced to rethink how they live and play and work and learn in the face of a pandemic, business owners are among those facing the most extreme challenges. They are tasked with keeping not only themselves and their families healthy, but also their employees, their customers, and the business itself.

We are here to share their stories. Each week, deputy editor Ian Aldrich checks in with some of the New England artisans and entrepreneurs that *Yankee* has introduced to its readers over the years, and learns how they are tackling the toughest job of all.

### Changes at the Farm

**David Simmons, executive director**

**Billings Farm & Museum | Woodstock, VT**

How does a museum stay connected to the public when it's forced to close? And what does it mean to reopen to a world where people may still feel nervous to visit public spaces?

These are the questions David Simmons and his staff at Billings Farm & Museum in Woodstock, Vermont, have been grappling with over the past few months.

"It's been incredibly challenging," he says. "We're still a farm, so we're still operating in that sense. But we've also had to think through a lot of the things we do and how we have to do some of them differently."

The property has deep roots as a public space. When Frederick Billings established a farm here in 1871, he did so with a mission to help other dairy operators learn more about best practices and sustainability.

Today, it's still a working farm, with a herd of award-winning Jersey cows, but it's also an outdoor history museum that's owned and operated by the Woodstock Foundation, a nonprofit educational institution begun by Laurance and Mary Rockefeller.



David Simmons, executive director of Billings Farm & Museum  
Courtesy of Billings Farm & Museum

But the Billings experience rests on the kinds of interactions and hands-on experiences that don't cater easily to a world that's practicing social distancing. A visit to the museum means a deep dive on the farm's fully operating dairy operation, as well as a primer on 19th-century Vermont life, from town meetings to one-room schoolhouses to general stores. There are animals to pet, farmers to meet, and if you're up for it, butter to churn.

As much as any institution could during this crisis, Billings got lucky when COVID-19 hit. Every year, the museum closes to the public for all of March, and so it was already not open to visitors when Vermont's shelter-in-place orders were put in place.

Still, Billings didn't wait long to pivot. In a typical year, the farm will welcome as many 60,000 guests. Many of them are school groups, and in the early days, the museum began working to make sure those connections were sustained.

On March 19, Billings rolled out a curbside activity pick-up with a variety of "Bag of Fun" kits for parents to take home. It launched with an all-things-cow theme featuring dairy trivia, butter-making instructions, and craft notes on how to make a brown-bag cow.

In the months since, Billings has leveraged its YouTube and Facebook channels to share sketching and art projects, offer book readings, lead farmhouse tours, and create virtual visits with the animals.



Billings Farm & Museum in Woodstock, Vermont  
Courtesy of Billings Farm & Museum

As it has developed these programs, Billings has also fleshed out how it will have to operate when it does open on June 27. The dairy barn, for example, will be closed — “We have to be sure our farmers don’t get sick,” says Simmons — but the new heifer barn, which is open and airy, will still be available to visitors. There will be limits on the number of people who can be on the grounds at any one time, staff will wear masks, and there will be temperature checks of all employees and visitors.

So in other words, Billings will look a little different, though in many ways it remains the same. And Simmons is hopeful that a destination built around beautiful gardens, cute animals, and a yesteryear appearance will help offer visitors the kind of respite they may be looking for.

“This is a special place,” says Simmons. “We’re looking forward to it coming to life again and reminding people what a special place it is.” —*June 12, 2020*

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