By DON HARRELL

Travelers in search of autumn move north in late September, when the trees start to turn and farmers begin predicting the onset of winter by the color of the corn. The Middle Atlantic States and southern New England claim their share of visitors at this time of year, but the true foliage fan knows that nothing really important happens until you reach Vermont.

The gateway is the town of Bennington, a village just inside the border of the state and within easy reach of major cities in the Northeast. During the foliage season, which normally extends from the last week of September through mid-October, the town is crowded with tourists in cars and buses, and with bikers and hikers.

Even without the attractions of nature, there is plenty to see in this early American town, a large part of it directly out of Revolutionary War history books. Any appreciation of its heritage and tradition necessarily starts in Old Bennington, the original settlement at the crest of a hill on the western edge of town. This enclave of houses and maple trees is the best place to begin a tour of the area and to get a feel for its past.

The centerpiece of the village is the First Congregational Church, a white frame structure built in 1806. Box pews with footwarmers and pewter candleholders, as well as a separate gallery originally built for prisoners in a nearby jail, are still in place. A large Palladian window behind the pulpit gives a brilliant light to the sanctuary. The church is open on weekdays from 10 A.M. to noon and 1 to 4 P.M., and on Sundays from 1 to 4 P.M. There is no charge for admission but donations are accepted.

Robert Frost's grave, in the cemetery behind the church, is marked by a familiar line from one of his poems: "I had a lover's quarrel with the world." As an epitaph it is appropriate for the way it summarizes the tensions in Frost's poetry. His Yankee shrewdness, combined with a lyric affirmation of experience, defines the flavor associated with much of New England and particularly Vermont. The poems in "North of Boston," in fact, make a good introduction to the spirit of the region.

While Bennington may be known today for its peaceful and bucolic atmosphere, its military past is what first brought the town to national attention. The Battle of Bennington was fought in August 1777, when the Green Mountain Boys forced into retreat the redcoats of Gen. John Burgoyne. The monument commemorating the battle is half a mile north of the church. Along this short drive are the Fay-Brown stone (1781), the Richard Carpenter frame (1819), and the Samuel Raymond red brick (1821), all private dwellings that suggest a Vermont street 150 years ago. The monument, open 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. daily through the month of October, is a 300-foot monolith that commands a view of eastern New York State, Mount Greylock in Massachusetts, and the Green Mountains. The elevator ride costs 50 cents for adults, 25 cents for children 12 and up.

The steep hill behind the church and cemetery leads from Old Bennington down Main Street to the commercial section of town. Halfway down the hill is the Bennington Museum, one of those small regional galleries that has its customary share of local items but yields surprising corners of interest to anyone willing to spend time in all the rooms.

There is a collection of oils by Grandma Moses, and several of her early yarn pictures not shown elsewhere. Anyone accustomed to seeing her busy rural scenes reduced to greeting-card size should view the original canvases in order to grasp the simplicity of her work. Attached to the museum is the Grandma Moses schoolhouse, which was moved to its site from Eagle Bridge.

Continued on Page 21