

# FIRST BLOW FOR FREEDOM

What happened in Westminster, Vermont, on the 13th of March, 1775? Only a plaque and the two tombstones of the men who were killed mark the spot where the event took place. The courthouse has long been gone. No one who was there is still alive to tell the story. We only know what happened from what has been written down.

The events of that famous evening were the result of **tensions** between the settlers in what would soon be called Vermont and the “Yorkers,” their neighbors across the border in New York State. To understand what happened that night and why, we have to look back to a time almost 25 years earlier.

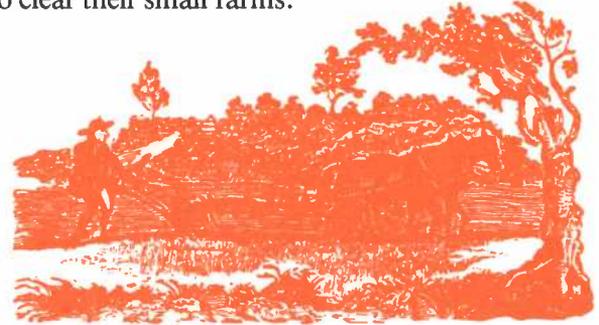
In 1749 New Hampshire’s Governor, Benning Wentworth, began selling land west of the Connecticut River. Families from Massachusetts and Connecticut began settling these “New Hampshire Grants” lands. After a great many persons had moved to what would later become Vermont, Governor Colden of New York became angry. He felt that the land the New Hampshire Governor was selling actually belonged to New York.

It was decided by the New York officials that the Grants settlers should pay New York for the land that they had already purchased or leave it. This did not go over well with the settlers. Just as you would be unhappy and mad if you had to pay a second time for something you had already purchased, so were the settlers. Some did grudgingly pay New York, but most of them refused. They asked King George III of England to stand behind their right to own the land they had bought and spent years clearing.

The King supported the settlers and told the New York government not to bother them anymore. Easier said than done. Governor Colden ignored the King’s orders and issued New York land patents in the same territory as the New Hampshire Grants. He sent out men to survey the already settled land and run the old settlers out.

Now this is where the famous character Ethan Allen comes in. Men living in the Grants knew that to win the fight with New York they had to be organized. They selected their friend, Ethan Allen, from Salisbury, Connecticut, to be their leader. In the spring of 1770, he came north to help the Grants owners.

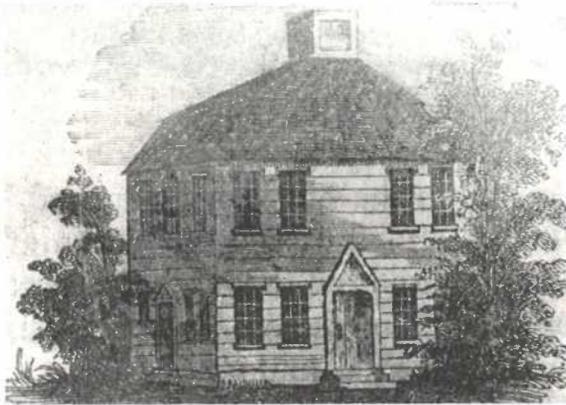
His first attempt was to fight their battle in court. In preparation he went to the Governor of New Hampshire to get the deeds for the land sold to the Grants settlers. After accomplishing this he hired a fine Connecticut lawyer to defend the settlers in court. The trial was in Albany, New York. The court was **prejudiced** in favor of the New York position. They did not consider the settlers’ land deeds as evidence in the case. The judge himself was a Yorker who had bought several New York patents in Vermont. There is little doubt that he benefited from the decision to ignore the rights of those men, women, and children who had worked long and hard to clear their small farms.



After losing their court battle, Ethan Allen and his supporters organized to fight for their rights. They formed the Green Mountain Boys, a group of some 100 volunteers. Again and again they **thwarted** the Yorkers’ attempts to take their land, but were proud of the fact that they never killed anyone. These **confrontations** continued and the settlers’ hate for the Yorkers grew.

As you know, communication was not as easy then as it is today. There were no telephones for settlers of one part of the Grants to use to talk with settlers in another. And with no automobiles, sending messages took a long time too. As a result, Vermonters living on the eastern border of the state had little contact with those on the western side and could not understand the disagreements that the westerners were having with the Yorkers. But in time, news of the western farmers' hardships reached those on the east side.

New York had set up a court in Chester, Vermont, an eastern town. A disagreement broke out in the courthouse one day because an angry citizen felt that a court **biased** in favor of New York land claims should not be allowed to meet there. The worried New York officials moved their court to what they thought was safer territory - southeast to Westminster. But the settlers in and around the town of Westminster liked the Yorker court no more than the fellow in Chester.



The Westminster Courthouse

The Court was scheduled to **convene** on the 14th of March, 1775. A month earlier a group of men warned the judge, a liked man, that there would be trouble on the 14th. The judge felt that he could not cancel the trial because of a possible fight. Instead he said he would arrive a day early to make sure that there would be no trouble.

Even though communication from one side of the Green Mountains to the other took a long time, it didn't take long for rumors of a possible confrontation to **circulate** around Westminster. It was said that the Yorkers or "Court Party" were planning to take over the courthouse. However, about 100 unarmed "anti-Yorkers" got there first on the afternoon of March 13, 1775. Soon after the Court Party, led by the sheriff, arrived. The two groups shouted at each other. The sheriff threatened to shoot a lane through the crowd in the courthouse if they did not leave. When the judge arrived, the two groups were still yelling back and forth. He asked the Court Party to leave, which they did, and **assured** the others that no weapons would be allowed in the court. But all did not end there.



Most of the "anti-Yorkers" were asleep when, near midnight, the Court Party returned with blazing torches in their hands. The sheriff ordered his band to fire into the courthouse before charging into the building with swords drawn. Two of the startled settlers were killed in the fight that followed. One died immediately from a gunshot and the other died within a week from wounds. Many others were wounded as well. Those who did not escape were locked in the courthouse jail.

Those who got away spread the news of what had happened to farmers in outlying areas. Soon, settlers from all over headed for town, numbering 400 by noon. After they released the prisoners, they threw the sheriff and his gang into the jail in their place.

The New York court did not convene again in the Grants. The "Westminster Massacre," as it was called, unified the east and west in their fight to gain freedom from New York.

## VOCABULARY

**tension** - stress

**prejudice** - unfair judgement

**thwart** - stop

**confrontation** - hostile meeting

**bias** - prejudice

**convene** - to bring together

**circulate** - to move around

**assure** - to make certain



Photograph Courtesy of Westminster Central School