

HISTORIC ROOTS

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ETHAN ALLEN: VERMONT HERO

Ethan Allen is without doubt the most famous Vermonter. Because he and his Green Mountain Boys captured Fort Ticonderoga in the early days of the Revolution, his fame has gone far beyond Vermont. But we really don't know that much about the man himself. There are no known pictures of him that were drawn from life. We have books he wrote on religion and government, but few letters. What we know is mostly what others wrote and told about him.

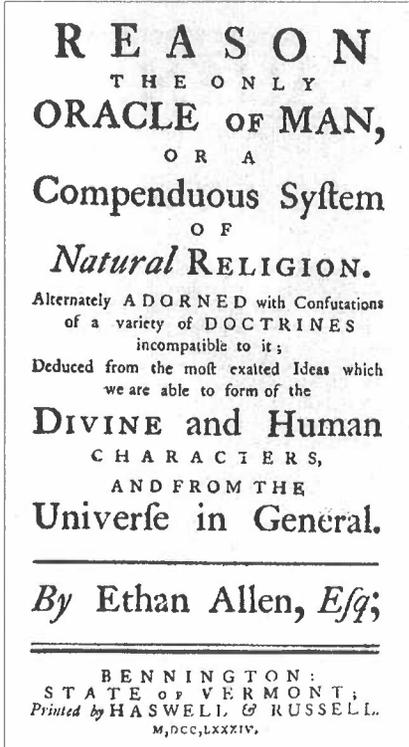
We do know that Ethan Allen was very tall, had a fierce temper and a loud voice. He drank a lot. He loved a good fight. Whatever he did or said pleased some people, but made many others angry. But one thing is true, whatever he wrote or did, people noticed.

He was often in trouble. He was kicked out of Northampton, Massachusetts for his rowdy behavior. He left his home town of Salisbury, Connecticut in debt, having angered many of the religious and civic leaders of the town. The wild, frontier lands of Vermont were where he made his home.



Ethan Allen Homestead Trust

The artist used descriptions of Ethan Allen to make this portrait.



Ethan Allen Homestead Trust

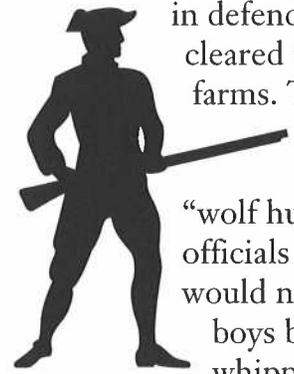
The title page of Ethan Allen's book on religion. The book outraged many religious people.

The stories about Ethan Allen make him seem larger than life. In many ways he was. One night, one story goes, on his first trip to look at land in Vermont, he got lost in the woods. It rained and then it snowed. He knew that if he stopped moving he would freeze to death. So he made himself walk around in a circle all night long and lived

to tell the tale. Ethan Allen and his brothers Ira, Heber, Heman, and Levi came to Vermont to buy land. They settled in and around Bennington. There was lots of empty land in Vermont, but claiming it was not simple. The governors of New York and New Hampshire each felt he owned the land and had the right to sell it.

Sometimes they gave away or sold the same piece of land, to different people.

Ethan Allen, his brothers, and many of the families around Bennington had bought their land from New Hampshire. They settled down and began to farm. The governor of New York sent men to try to force them out. The Green Mountain Boys were farmers who organized to protect their land against the "Yorkers." They chose Ethan Allen as their leader.



The Green Mountain Boys were not gentle in defending their property. They had cleared the land and built homes and farms. They were not going to let outsiders take it all away from them. Ethan Allen organized "wolf hunts" to chase out settlers and officials from New York. If the Yorkers would not leave, the Green Mountain boys burned their houses. They whipped some who would not go.

Others they coated with tar and feathers and rode out of town on a rail.

There was a doctor in Bennington who agreed with New York's claim to the land. Ethan Allen had him tied up in a chair that was hung in the air outside a tavern. After such treatment, the doctor said nothing more about the grants, at least not in public.

Ethan Allen became famous in the North Country. New Yorkers saw him as a criminal

and offered a reward for his capture. Vermont settlers saw him as a defender of their rights and their land. Early in the American Revolution, his daring made him famous in the rest of the colonies and in England.

The British controlled Fort Ticonderoga, at the narrow southern end of Lake Champlain. (See map on page 21.) In May 1775, Ethan Allen and a small group of Green Mountain Boys captured the fort. War against England was on the horizon and Allen understood how important Fort Ticonderoga might be in such a war. There were no roads along Lake Champlain. Whoever controlled the lake controlled the traffic north and south. If the colonists held it, the British would not be able to send men or supplies south from Canada to join in the war.

The capture of Fort Ti was a bold stroke. No one was killed, but it proved the British could be beaten. Many guns and some supplies were taken and put to good use in the war. Ethan Allen became an American hero.

He was not so lucky after that. In September 1775, on a raid to capture Montreal, he himself was taken. He was sent to England to be hanged. On the way, he and his men were treated very badly. In the end, he was not hanged, but he was a prisoner for most of the Revolution.

Ethan Allen became a popular figure in



Ethan Allen Homestead Trust

How one artist imagined Ethan Allen in prison during the Revolutionary War.

England. People came to visit him in prison and brought him food and gifts. He arrived back in America in the fall of 1776 and was released in the spring of 1778. After going to visit George Washington at Valley Forge, he arrived back in Vermont. News of his coming reached Vermont before he did.

Even while the Revolution was going on, New York kept insisting on its right to land in



Fort Ticonderoga Museum

Fanny Montessor Allen came from a rich family, as you can see from this portrait of her as a girl.

Vermont. It prevented Vermont from becoming a state during the war and for years after. So Vermont became a republic, its own country. Its constitution was the first in America to forbid slavery and to give the vote to every man over 21 years old.

For a while after he got home, Ethan Allen kept up the fight against New York. He was named a general in the militia. But after a few years he retired from public life. He married a new wife, Fanny, and moved to land he owned near Burlington.

Ethan lived a quiet life in Burlington. He farmed his land. He entertained visitors with stories about his adventures. One day in Febru-

ary 1789, he went across the frozen lake to South Hero to get a load of hay. On the way home, he lost consciousness. We don't know why. The next day, he died. He was 51 years old. Vermont did not become a state until 1791, two years after he died.

Ethan Allen never became governor or senator. After Fort Ti, he played no great role in the war against England. But he remained a hero. Without him, the war might have gone differently. And without him, Vermont might still be part of New York or New Hampshire.

Ethan Allen received a hero's burial. But, as with so much else about Ethan Allen, we don't know exactly where his grave is. There is a grave monument to him on Colchester Avenue in Burlington.

Interestingly, there are no towns in Vermont named after Ethan Allen, only a mountain in Duxbury. North Hero and South Hero were named for the Green Mountain Boys. Many people say, though, that they were named for Ethan. Some people at the time called him simply "Hero." And that is how he is always remembered: as a hero of early Vermont and the American Revolution.

ANN E. COOPER, *Editor*

Rooting Around

What makes a person a hero? Do heroes (and heroines) have to be all good? Who are your heroes?

Does everyone agree on who is a hero? How did New Yorkers feel about Ethan Allen? How did the English feel about George Washington?

Michael T. Hahn has written a very good short book about Ethan Allen. It is called *Ethan Allen, A Life of Adventure*. You probably can find it in your local bookstore or library.