



Ethan Allen, the charismatic and controversial folk leader of Vermont, was born in 1738, in Litchfield, Conn., the first of Joseph and Mary Baker Allen's eight children. Despite the rural isolation, Joseph Allen could read and write and wanted to pass on those skills to young Ethan, in whom he found a willing pupil with a keen aptitude for learning. Joseph intended for his bright first son to go to Yale College, but when Joseph died unexpectedly in 1755, Ethan had to take on the role of leader of the household.

By Nancy Cooper

Ethan Allen: Outlaw Patriot Advocate

Then 17, Allen went to work immediately to provide for his mother, five brothers and two sisters. Though he felt a lifelong disappointment in not attending Yale, he went on to play an inspiring role in the emergence of Vermont, as well as a prominent part in the nation's early history.

There is no accurate portrait of Allen in any museum, but he was thought to be more than 6 feet tall. Despite a confrontational personality, he easily attracted and retained followers. He was known to be arrogant, belligerent and impulsive, but his flamboyance managed to spur his fellow rebels' enthusiasm and hunger for freedom.

The Birth of the Green Mountain Boys

Beginning in 1749, the first royal governor of New Hampshire, Benning Wentworth, made land grants to settlers, including Allen's father, who had acquired titles to land in what is now Vermont. King George III and the Colony of New York insisted they had jurisdiction over these same lands and wanted them back. In 1770, the New York Supreme Court said the grants were invalid. The British began confiscating these lands that were part of the New Hampshire Grants or, if settlers wanted to stay, imposing high taxes.

Allen and his brother Ira moved to western New Hampshire, now Vermont, in 1769. In 1770, Allen became the head of the local militia and quickly moved to defend the landholders' titles to the New Hampshire Grants, especially since the fees ordered by the court affected his properties. He started the movement for independence from the wealthy landowners of New York, called Yorkers, even before the Revolutionary War erupted. The militia he formed became

known as the Green Mountain Boys, whose first mission was to defend their property and take back the disputed lands from New York. From 1771 to 1775 his militia fought several skirmishes with the Yorkers, leading New York's Royal Governor William Tryon to declare Allen an outlaw and offer a cash reward for anyone who brought him into custody. Allen put the education his father had provided to good use, writing inflammatory pamphlets such as 1774's "A Brief Narrative of the Proceedings of the Government of New York," a 200-page treatise arguing against his oppressors.

Taking on Fort Ticonderoga

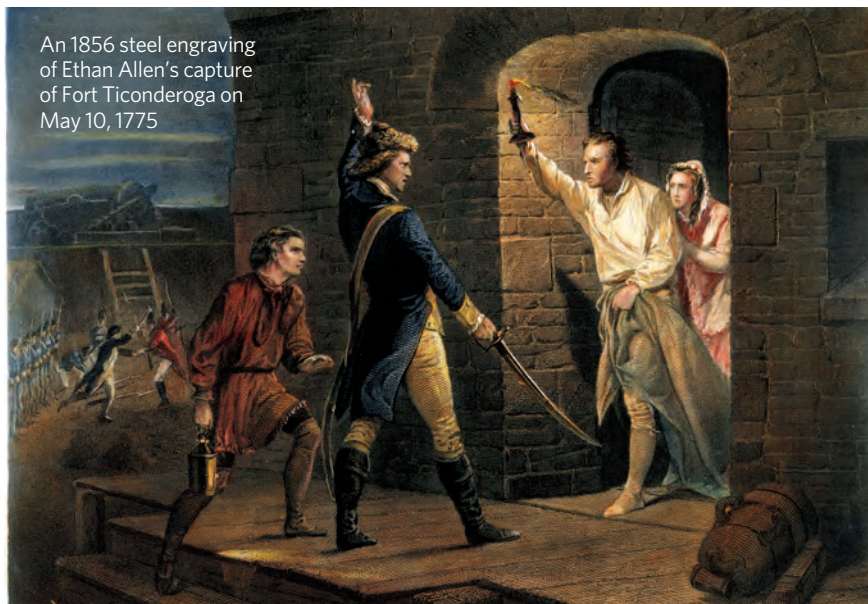
When the Revolution officially began in April 1775, Allen was ready to lead the Green Mountain Boys to help the colonists. He was one of the first to realize the significance of capturing Fort Ticonderoga, located in a strategic part of Lake Champlain's shipping route and under British rule since 1763. When the Continental Congress ordered Benedict Arnold to lead an attack against the fort, Allen stepped in as co-commander since the Green Mountain Boys wouldn't follow Arnold's orders. Some historians say that Allen sent Noah Phelps into the fort pretending to be a nearby farmer looking for a barber. While his hair was cut, Phelps learned much about the fort, such as what supplies were there, how many troops it held and the location of a gap in the wall.

Armed with such insider information, on May 10, Allen and his 85 men captured control of the fort without any loss of life—before the British troops at the fort even realized they were at war with their Colonies. The Patriots also took charge of a large store of war materials: 100 cannons, hundreds of rifles, 10 tons of musket and cannon balls, a warehouse of boat-building materials, and other supplies that were later used

by General George Washington in the battle for Boston. Legend tells us that when a British officer asked Allen under what authority he acted, Allen said, "In the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress!"

The Patriots' success in capturing Fort Ticonderoga, in addition to Crown Point, another British fort a few miles north, fueled the fires for independence. Though the victories owed more to the element of surprise than military skill, they gave the rebels confidence that they were a match for the British forces.

The next military venture for Allen did not end in victory, however. In autumn of 1775, he served under General Philip Schuyler's force in



An 1856 steel engraving of Ethan Allen's capture of Fort Ticonderoga on May 10, 1775



Don't miss these Ethan Allen-related sites in Burlington, Vt.: The Ethan Allen Homestead and (left) his grave and monument in Green Mount Cemetery.



frustrated at never receiving a formal commission—and characteristically impatient at the delays in action over the summer—led a risky foray to capture Montreal, which was well-prepared for the impending attack. When a backup force from the Continental Army failed to arrive and some of the Green Mountain Boys deserted him, Allen was easily captured by the British. He spent the next three years in jails as a prisoner of war in England, aboard British ships and in British-held New York City. He was freed in a 1778 prisoner swap, and later wrote about his harrowing experiences in the popular *Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity*.

Controversies

After his release, Allen returned to his land in the New Hampshire Grants, where residents had declared independence in July 1777 and abolished slavery. The Continental Congress didn't recognize the newly named Republic of Vermont, largely because it didn't want to anger the powerful state of New York, which objected to Vermonters' property claims. However, Allen, in addition to his farming and publishing careers, was actively involved in the republic's politics. Perhaps impatient for acknowledgement of Vermont's contribution to the American cause—or working to ensure Vermont's independence for his own ends—Allen and his brother Ira directly negotiated with the British for Vermont to become a British province. Those controversial talks, which took place from 1780 and 1783, were labeled by some as treasonous and weren't supported by the Vermont Assembly, which continued lobbying for statehood.

Allen also promoted the philosophy of deism, and in 1784, published *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*, which was influenced by his mentor Dr. Thomas Young, as well as the ideas of Thomas Paine. Though the volume and its controversial ideas were not well-received, the book reflected his free-thinking, independent spirit.

Allen had five children with his first wife Mary Brownson, whom he married in 1762. Their union was often strained—Mary was a very religious woman who could barely read and write, while Allen often attacked organized religion and maintained a lifelong love of learning. Mary died of consumption in 1783, and he married Frances “Fanny” Montresor Brush Buchanan, a well-educated widow, in 1784. Their marriage was a happier one, and they had three children together.

Allen died of an unknown cause in February 1789, two years before Vermont became the 14th state. Some believe he suffered a stroke after crossing a frozen lake to retrieve a load of hay for his animals. Another legend says he fell from a sleigh because he had had too much to drink.

Allen's home in Burlington is now a museum where visitors can trace his steps and see the land that inspired him. (Learn more at www.ethanallenhomestead.org.) The inscription on his granite column monument in Burlington's Green Mount Cemetery reads: “Wielding the pen as well as the sword, he was the sagacious and intrepid defender of the New Hampshire Grants, and Master Spirit of the arduous struggle which resulted in the sovereignty and independence of this state.” Another statue of him stands at the Vermont State Capitol in Burlington, his arm raised in defiance to anyone who would threaten Vermont and its people. 🍷

Nancy Cooper wrote about Patriot John Witherspoon for the November/December 2011 issue.