

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Bookshelf

Founding Father (Of Vermont)

The Green Mountain Boys' leader was a rash commander and the author of a popular prisoner-of-war memoir. Robert Landers reviews "Ethan Allen."

By Robert K. Landers
August 22, 2011

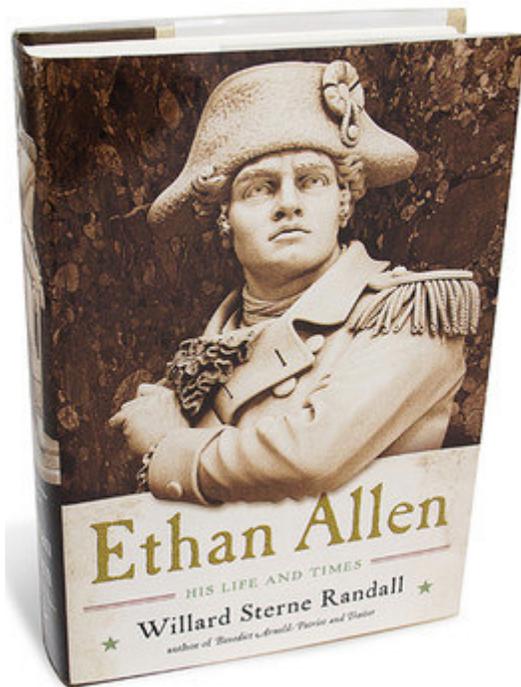
By 1771, a conflict over frontier settlements in what is today Vermont had begun to turn violent. Colonial officials in New York, eager to profit from making land grants in the territory between Lake Champlain and the Connecticut River, refused to recognize grants already made there by the New Hampshire colony. The Hampshire settlers themselves, meanwhile, were determined to hold on to their property and not pay twice for it. Ethan Allen, a major property owner in the region known as the New Hampshire Grants, emerged as the leader of the opposition to New York's efforts.

In June 1771, getting word that a New York surveyor was running lines in the woods 20 miles away, Allen and some of his followers went to the scene. Dressed as Indians, with soot-blackened faces, they threatened to kill the "Yorker"—who fled with his crew. Later that year, Allen formally organized the "Green Mountain Boys" to defend the Hampshire settlements and scotch any New York-backed settlements. He and his "boys" torched fences and haystacks as warnings to New York settlers reluctant to leave; in October, the Green Mountain Boys burned down the cabin of a Yorker who refused to depart.

In "Ethan Allen," historian Willard Sterne Randall cites the behavior by the nascent folk hero and his men—who in extreme cases flogged defiant Yorkers—and links it with "the tactics of intimidation used by ten thousand Sons of Liberty in the period before the Revolution" to raise "an unsettling question: was America founded, at least in part, on terrorism?" Mr. Randall does not attempt an answer, however.

The author and his publisher call Ethan Allen a "founding father," presumably to appeal to all those readers with a seemingly insatiable appetite for books about those so designated, but if Allen was a founding father, it was of Vermont, not of the United States. Still, by my reading of Mr. Randall's exhaustively researched and insightful (but overly long) biography,

Allen did make two significant contributions to the war for independence, each the result, directly or indirectly, of his recklessness.



Ethan Allen

By Willard Sterne Randall
(Norton, 617 pages, \$35)

The first was what many considered a premature attack on Britain's Fort Ticonderoga in May 1775. Even after the battles at Lexington and Concord the preceding month, most delegates to the Second Continental Congress were not ready to cut America loose from Britain, continuing to express hope for reconciliation with the mother country. But after years of armed struggle against New York's royal governors and sheriffs over the New Hampshire Grants, 37-year-old Ethan Allen—tall, muscular and "a commanding figure in his forest green greatcoat and sheared beaver tricorn hat"—and his Green Mountain Boys were ready to fight for independence.

Thinking that if Fort Ticonderoga at Lake Champlain were wrested from the British, it could serve as a base for a rapid invasion and capture of Quebec, Allen was glad to accept the request of "patriots" in the Connecticut and Massachusetts colonies that he (and Benedict Arnold) lead a surprise attack on the huge but lightly defended facility. With only 83 frontiersmen, Allen took the fort without a shot being fired. Ticonderoga's real value proved to be its cannon and mortars, which in the coming winter Gen. George Washington's artillery

commander, Henry Knox, would famously transport to Boston, overcoming the many formidable obstacles presented by terrain and weather.

Thanks to the bloodless fort seizure, Ethan Allen became the first American hero of the war, appearing in triumph before the Continental Congress in June 1775. Even the conservative delegates from New York, whose royal officials had branded him an outlaw and put a price on his head, joined the unanimous vote urging that the Green Mountain Boys be transformed into the Green Mountain Regiment, with Allen to be made a colonel in the Continental Army.

Allen's other important contribution to the Revolution was his best-selling wartime memoir of the harsh treatment he'd endured as a British prisoner for 32 months. In September 1775, while serving as a scout inside Canada, he joined in a rash plan to attack Montreal; counting on support that never materialized, Allen wound up a captive. If he expected to be treated as an officer and a gentleman, he was soon disappointed, for the British looked on him as a common criminal. "A Narrative of the Captivity of Colonel Ethan Allen," published in 1779, "riveted a populace still at war and instilled a patriotic feeling into a beleaguered people," Mr. Randall writes.

As a deist who had rejected Christianity, Allen felt no obligation to love his enemies. After his release in a prisoner exchange and return home to the new republic of Vermont in 1778, he led an official drive to ferret out loyalists (including his own brother Levi, even though Levi had tried to aid him when he was held captive), drive them away and confiscate their property. Allen went after Yorkers as well as loyalists. Mr. Randall notes: "To Allen, it was all the same."

A loose cannon if ever there was one, Allen during the war also engaged in secret talks with the British in Canada to obtain an agreement on prisoner exchanges with Vermont, arranging a ceasefire that averted British attacks on the shores of Lake Champlain. In those talks he explored the possibility of a separate peace for Vermont, using the threat of that to try to get Congress, despite New York's opposition, to admit Vermont into the Union. Allen strung the British along for nearly two years, and even after Yorktown, frustrated by Congress's latest refusal to admit Vermont to the Union, he wrote to British commander Frederick Haldimand: "I Shall do Every thing in my Power to render this State a British province." But by then, Mr. Randall relates, Haldimand had begun to grasp "that he had been duped." Vermont finally became a state in 1791, two years after Allen's death.

Mr. Landers, a former reporter at Congressional Quarterly's Editorial Research Reports, is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell."

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