

The First Vermont “Republic”

What’s in a Name?

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Issue no. 9 • January 2006

Republic: A system of government in which the people hold sovereign power and elect representatives who exercise that power. It contrasts, on the one hand, with a pure democracy, in which the people or community as an organized whole wield the sovereign power of government, and on the other with the rule of one person (such as a king, emperor, czar, or sultan).

—*Black’s Law Dictionary*, abridged seventh edition.

During the fourteen years between Vermont’s Declaration of Independence (January 15, 1777) and its acceptance into the union (March 4, 1791), Vermont convened an elected assembly, adopted a constitution, coined its own money, operated a postal service, conducted military operations and diplomatic relations and trade, recruited and commanded its own militia, and wrote its own laws in a legislature elected at town meeting, where the people also elected the governor and his twelve member council. According to Ira Allen, Vermont from 1777 to 1791 proved a “free & Independent State Wholly unconnected with any Power whatever.” (Letter to Alexander Dundas and Justus Sherwood, May 8, 1781.) Ira’s brother Ethan called it a “neutral republic” in his letter to General Frederick Haldimand on June 16, 1782.

From the brothers Allen to the first historians such as Jared Sparks, then John Pell in 1929, through the romanticism of Frederick van de Water, to the recent scholarship of Michael Bellesiles, Vermont is referred to as an independent state and republic. Said Sparks of the Green Mountain Boys in his 1829 biography of Ethan: “Independence was their first and determined purpose; and, while they were neglected by Congress, and, like another Poland, threatened with a triple partition between the adjoining States, they felt at liberty to pursue any course, that would secure their safety.” Sparks further states that many in Congress refused to interfere in Vermont’s affairs, “affirming that Vermont was in fact independent, and had a right to set up such a scheme of government as she chose.” This argument comes straight from John Adams, whose recommendation, delivered to “the Inhabitants of Vermont” by Dr. Thomas Young, led Vermont to form its own government early in 1777.

On May 16 1776 Adams wrote “That it be recommended . . . where no government sufficient to the exigencies of their affairs hath been hitherto established, to adopt such government, as shall, in the opinion of the representatives of the people, best conduce to the happiness and safety of their constituents in particular, and America in general.” Adams’ argument goes back to principles established by the Magna Carta of 1215, described in Blackstone as “the safety of the whole,” and which Ethan called “the law of self-preservation,” or the right of a community to exist. This right is also stated most clearly, and carried further, in the Vermont Declaration of Independence. Van de Water states, in *The Reluctant Republic* (1941), paraphrasing the sentiments expressed by the Allens, Jonas Fay, Thomas Chittenden, and the Green Mountain Boys, that “the land they had defended against the intrusions of New York should be forever theirs—an independent nation. . . . It must be, without qualification or higher loyalty, the property of the folk who now held it and their children and their children’s children—a land of freemen, a republic.”

Bellesiles, in *Revolutionary Outlaws*, points out the shocking words heard round the world in Vermont's Constitution: "That all men are born equally free and independent. . . . Therefore, no male person, born in this country, or brought from oversea, ought to be holden by law, to serve any person, as a servant, slave or apprentice, after he arrives at the age of twenty-one, nor female, in like manner, after she arrives at the age of eighteen." The Vermont Constitution of 1777 shamed the U.S. Constitution of 1787, which would not bring itself to reach the same, logical conclusion on the subjects of involuntary servitude and slavery. Make no mistake: the Vermont Constitution was powerful, and far more revolutionary than any before it. It was based on the Constitution of Pennsylvania and radicalized (traced to its root) by the Allens, Chittenden, and the Green Mountain Boys; and it represented true republicanism and anathema not only to the South but also to New York.

Bellesiles tells us of an even greater slap in the face delivered by Vermont to the entire colonial structure. The French historian Achard de Bonvouloir in 1778 wrote that Vermonters, led by Ethan, held all colonial charters to be void, their powers superseded by the will of the people. This means that Vermonters did not rely upon legitimacy from a superior authority, past or present, but rather in their own authority, granted to them by nature and nature's God. In the story of Vermont's independence, there are some fascinating incidents. Ethan took Fort Ticonderoga with the Green Mountain Boys, refusing to serve under the duly-appointed, would-be commander, Benedict Arnold. General Starke and Colonels Warner and Herrick refused to obey the orders of General Schuyler regarding the deployments of their men in the retreat from Ticonderoga. (This refusal led to their defense of and victory at Bennington and foiled Burgoyne's advance.)

The young republic attracted the secession of sixteen towns from New Hampshire and several from New York. This could not have been a decision that the towns took lightly. Vermont eventually surrendered these towns in order to join the union. That Vermont had the sole authority to surrender them is recognition on the part of Congress, New York, and New Hampshire that Vermont was sovereign.

Ethan Allen wrote, "I am as Resolutely Determined to Defend the Independence of Vermont, as Congress are that of the United States, and, Rather than fail, will Retire with hardy Green Mountain Boys into the Desolate Caverns of the mountains and wage war with human Nature at large." He's back.