

# Family, Liberty, and Vermont: The Allegiance of Ethan Allen in the Revolutionary Era



Levi Allen was in London on a trade mission for the Republic of Vermont when he discovered his eldest brother, Ethan Allen, had died at the age of fifty-one. It was the smallest of notices in the *Connecticut Courant* that caught his eye, so small it could have been easily overlooked:

DIED, in Vermont, the 13<sup>th</sup>, very suddenly, ETHAN ALLEN Esq, Brigadier-General of the Militia of the State, and Author of the Oracle of Reason, &c.

The newspaper was dated February 23, 1789, but Levi did not see it until July or early August. Along with the newspaper, Ira Allen, his younger brother, told him their brother was dead in a matter-of-fact letter. Furious that it had taken so long for his family to inform of such a significant event, he wrote to Ira and his family, "I have Good reason to think You are all dead . . . It is impossible to form any conjecture about such unpardonable Omissions, not only ones feelings are Sensibly touched thro' Anxiety, but must appear redicalous to the discerning part here," who asked him if the stories about Ethan's death were true.



Figure 1: Monument on Ethan Allen's Grave in Green Mountain Cemetery, Burlington, Vermont. Mfwills, [CC BY 3.0](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Levi was shocked and wounded by Ethan's passing; it was just the final twist in their tumultuous relationship. After the British captured Ethan in 1775, Levi provided him with money and repeatedly petitioned George Washington for a

prisoner exchange. He “was not only a brother,” wrote Levi to Washington, “but a real friend.” When Ethan returned in 1778, however, he damned Levi as a “fallacious” Tory and demanded the Vermont authorities confiscate his property. Levi criticized Ethan in the *Connecticut Courant* over the years and eventually challenged him to a duel, which he rejected. Yet when the two met in person again in the early 1780s, they embraced each other as if nothing had ever happened. To the Allen clan, familial survival transcended everything else. This was particularly true of Ethan, whose experience in the Age of Revolution was shaped by the importance that he attached to his family’s self-preservation. He held multiple allegiances during the Revolution, all of which were connected or stemmed from the importance he placed on familial self-preservation.

Born in Litchfield, Connecticut, on January 21, 1737, to Joseph Allen and Mary Baker Allen, Ethan belonged to an extensive New England family that arrived aboard the *Mary and John* as part of the 1630 Puritan Great Migration. The earliest Allens were staunch Puritans who stressed the importance of family because it formed the core of Puritan society. Decades passed, however, and the New Englanders’ religious stress on family was increasingly replaced by a more secular one that revolved around economic and social ideas. Rather than maintaining mankind’s relationship with God, family was now about ensuring the next generation survived and carried on the family’s traditions and values.

Those early Allens discovered that successful land speculation was the key to their family’s self-preservation. They were a risk-taking, ambitious group that traversed the Connecticut frontier, taking part in the creation of new towns, such as Windsor, Litchfield, and Cornwall. While some were successful, others were not. The successful accumulated land in these new towns. They left it to their children when they died and ensured that the next generation not only had a home, but an opportunity to enhance the family’s social status. It was a lesson that Joseph passed down to his sons. Early on, he taught them that “next to religion landed Property was the most substantial,” recalled Levi. Further, he raised them on tales of their ancestors’ bravery that inspired them to become leading communal figures. As the leader of the new frontier town of Cornwall, Joseph was an example for Ethan to follow.



Figure 2: Possible likeness of Ethan Allen based on statue. *Appleton’s Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 1900, Jacques Reich, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Joseph and Ethan had a close relationship. He taught Ethan how to physically survive the frontier and instilled him with liberal and Enlightenment ideals. Ethan was devastated when his father died suddenly in 1755. He placed familial survival over his own ambitions to become a gentleman and cut his education short to return home and look after them and the farm. Nevertheless, he attempted to lead an adventurous life in the decade after Joseph’s death. Adventures, however, turned into misadventures. The one solace from this decade

was his discovery of Dr. Thomas Young, a New York and Yale physician and intellect, who continued Ethan's education on John Locke and other Enlightenment figures. The teachings from his father and Young would form the bedrock of the beliefs that he expressed during his self-proclaimed leadership of the New Hampshire Grants from the early 1770s onwards. In addition to the importance he attached to his family, Locke and liberty were closely intertwined with the nucleus of his allegiance during the Revolutionary War.

As revolutions swept across the British Atlantic world in the eighteenth century, New York found itself in a unique position for the thirteen colonies. After the colony had argued with New Hampshire for years, King George III decided in 1764 that the land twenty miles east of the Hudson River to the Connecticut River's western bank belonged to New York. This region, however, was filled with settlers who received land grants from Benning Wentworth, New Hampshire's Royal Governor, and they were not willing to accept New York's authority lying down because it demanded they pay exorbitant quit-rents, thus requiring them to pay for their land twice. Ethan, a man yearning to follow his father's example and lead a community, arrived in the Grants in the late 1760s and led the settlers in a revolution against New York in the 1770s that eventually culminated in the Republic of Vermont's creation in 1777.

It was during the Vermont Revolution that Ethan most demonstrated the close relationship between his belief in Locke and liberty and his inherent mission to protect his immediate family. In 1773 he created the Onion River Land Company with his brothers and cousin, while their wives and sisters remained at home to look after the families and oversee the farms with their children. By the start of the Revolutionary War in 1775, they had accumulated a land empire, namely in the west Grants, that amounted to some 70,000 acres worth more than \$100,000. Such figures would ensure Allen's immediate and wider family would be sustained for many generations to come. If New York, however, successfully brought the settlers to heel, then his empire, and, in turn, the future of the Allen family was in serious jeopardy.

As he led the Green Mountain Boys in a campaign of terrorizing the Yorker settlers and authorities on the ground, in the press and publications he expressed what J. Kevin Graffagnino calls a "backwoods reflection" of Lockeanism in property and liberty that was used to rally the settlers to protect his land empire. Self-preservation, he declared in his pamphlet *A Brief Narrative of the Proceedings of the Government of New-York* (1774), was "[t]he spring and moving Cause of [his] Opposition . . . to New York." Although New York could claim jurisdiction over the Grants, he argued, their attempts to take the settlers' land by "force without color or pretence of law," consequently declaring war on the "numerous families settled upon the land," meant that they forfeited their right to govern the settlers. Borrowing Locke's social contract theory, Allen highlighted the binding natural agreement between the governed and governors that stipulated the subject's right to rebel against the ruler if the latter clearly endangered the former's natural rights of liberty, life, and property. To preserve these rights, Allen insisted, the

settlers had to be attentive to New York's Machiavellian designs, for to allow tyranny to go unchallenged "would [leave one] by law . . . bound to be an accessory to his own Ruin and Destruction, which is inconsistent with the law of Self-Preservation." This stress upon self-preservation highlights the influence of the Allen psyche on his participation in the Vermont Revolution. He used it to portray himself as a populist leader, which would earn him support of the Grantees because he knew that he could not fight New York alone. The settlers' land and liberty, therefore, supplemented his mission to secure his immediate family's land and liberty. Nevertheless, in later years he evidently cared for the settlers and was sincere in his fight to defend them from New York, then Britain, and then the Continental Congress.

 Figure 3: B.H. Kinney, *Ethan Allen: To his grandson, Gen. Ethan Allen Hitchcock, U.S. Army.* (Massachusetts: s.n., 1858). *Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.*

Until the Revolutionary War, he hoped George III would intervene and validate his and the settlers' land. When the war commenced, he quickly joined the American cause because of his loyalty to liberty and his belief that it would best protect his and the settlers' land. He had "felt a sincere passion for liberty" and Britain's "first systematical and bloody attempts at Lexington [and Concord], to enslave America, thoroughly electrified [his] mind, and fully determined [him] to" fight with the Patriots.

Ethan's Revolutionary War experience was short but eventful. After seizing Fort Ticonderoga on May 10, 1775, he served as liaison for the Continental Army during the summer, but the British then captured him on September 25 after he brazenly attempted to seize Montreal. For three years he languished in prison. He returned to Vermont in 1778 and immediately set about persecuting New Yorkers and Loyalists alike through the Courts of Confiscation. To him, they were one and the same. Simultaneously, he pushed the Continental Congress to accept Vermont into the Union.

 Figure 4: Alonzo Chappel, *Ethan Allen and Captain de la Place. May 1775, The Capture of Fort Ticonderoga, New York.* National Archives at College Park, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Acceptance, however, was far from forthcoming. In 1779 and 1780, Congress appeared ready to decimate the region in the event of an American victory. It encouraged New Hampshire and Massachusetts, as well as New York, to submit their claims to the land. It also appeared willing to sacrifice the region to Britain by refusing Vermont access to the Continental Army's arsenal at a time when Vermonters were growing increasingly fearful of a British invasion from the north. Trapped between a potential British invasion in the north and Continental Congress in the south, "Vermont," Ira Allen remembered, "was in a

forlorn situation.”



Figure 5: Ira Allen, Unidentified Copy After William Wood Watercolor on Ivory, Smithsonian American Art Museum, pohick2, [CC BY-SA 2.0](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Determined to secure his family's land and liberties, as well as those of the Vermonters, Ethan, with the aid of Ira and Levi, undertook negotiations with Britain about returning to the British Empire. Allen survived by playing both sides of the conflict against one another. He gave both the U.S. and Britain the impression that Vermont wanted to be on their side, therefore sowing confusion and buying the state more time to figure out how it could survive. He sincerely hoped Vermont would enter the union, but he was willing to explore other avenues to secure those things he cherished most: family, liberty, and Vermont. Allegiance in the American Revolution was highly fluid, especially among those regular colonists who experienced multiple occupations by both sides. In recent decades, historians have demonstrated that self-interest trumped patriotism in many cases: survival, family, community, and profits all transcended patriotism, dictating what side a colonist took during the Revolutionary War. In this respect, Ethan Allen was not unlike many other regular colonists.

Ultimately, Ethan retired from public life after the Revolutionary War's conclusion and died in 1789. Imprisoned for high treason in Quebec in 1797, Levi Allen wrote a diary that contained many poems about his family and friendship, as well as an autobiography. In his diary, he insisted Ethan was "No Brother in the first place" and wrote a poem about his siblings that excluded Ethan. In Levi, there was an apparent firmness to stand by family through anything. Ethan, however, was not disinclined to sacrifice one member in the case of liberty, thus demonstrating his complex allegiance. Unfortunately for Levi, he was sacrificed on liberty's altar, and it was evident that this still rankled Levi after Ethan's death. Levi would die in a Burlington prison a financially-broken man in 1801.

## Further Reading

The history of Vermont and Ethan Allen are not well known outside of the state. I hope that my research project will bring greater attention to the fascinating and complex history of both.

For the two best general works on Vermont's early history, see: Chilton Williamson, *Vermont in Quandary, 1763-1825* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1949); Matt B. Jones, *Vermont in the Making: 1750-1777* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939).

The historiography of Ethan Allen can be split into two groups: the

traditionalists and revisionists. Whilst the traditionalists mythologize and canonize Allen's character, the revisionists demonstrate Allen was a much more complex figure. For traditionalist work see: Walter Henry De Puy, *Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Heroes of '76* (Buffalo: Phinney & Co. 1853); Willard Sterne Randall, *Ethan Allen: His Life and Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011); Jared Sparks, *The Life of Col. Ethan Allen* (Burlington: C. Goodrich & Co., 1834). For revisionist works see: Michael A. Bellesiles, *Revolutionary Outlaws: Ethan Allen and the Struggle for Independence on the Early American Frontier* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993); John J. Duffy and Nicholas H. Muller, *Inventing Ethan Allen* (Lebanon: University of New England Press, 2014); Charles Jellison, *Ethan Allen: Frontier Rebel* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1969).

For edited writings by Ethan, Ira, and Levi Allen see: Levi Allen, "The Autobiography of Levi Allen," ed. Michael A. Bellesiles, *Vermont History*, 60 (Spring 1992), 77-94; Kevin Graffagnino, ed., *Ethan and Ira Allen Collected Works*, 3 vols. (Benson: Chalidze Publications, 1992).

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