

The Fourteenth State

Benjamin Hall's history of eastern Vermont

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Benjamin H. Hall's "History of Eastern Vermont" is an odd book to find on the history shelves. It is heavy and extremely long (799 pages), very readable, and includes biographies, sketches, and early documents. But it does make you wonder: why would anyone write a history of only *eastern* Vermont?

Besides its geographic tilt and its heft, the book has a thesis to present. It strongly reflects the pro-New York attitude that was prevalent in eighteenth-century Windsor and Windham counties (then known as Cumberland County). What also struck me after some research was the extreme youth of the author. He began the book when he was 22, in 1852, the year after he graduated from Harvard. It was published in 1858 by Appleton & Co. in New York.

Benjamin Homer Hall was born in Troy, N.Y., in 1830, and was prepared for college in private schools and Phillips Andover Academy before entering Harvard. His intense interest in early eastern Vermont might be traced to the fact of his father's birth in 1787 in Westminster, which boasts that it was the first town chartered in Vermont, in 1735 (by Massachusetts, when it was joined with New Hampshire). Hall's father, Daniel, graduated from Middlebury. Both Halls were lawyers in Troy where their practice was carried out in an ornate downtown edifice built in 1871 called the Hall Building (now known as the Rice Building).

For those fascinated by what happened within each town during the most intense time of controversy between New Hampshire and New York, Hall offers extensive and delicious local detail town by town – Windham and Windsor (Cumberland) towns only – with personal data on many early settlers.

In keeping with his thesis, Hall is amusingly scornful of Ethan Allen and Governor Benning Wentworth. Of Wentworth, he writes, “. . . at the end of the year 1763 he had, with but little show of discretion, divided almost the whole of the New Hampshire Grants, into townships and distributed them among flatters, followers, and adventurers.”

Of Ethan Allen he gushes, “Flushed with success, Ethan Allen was unable to retrain his blatant boasting and vulgar oaths. Against [NY

governor] Clinton, in particular, did his wordy rage vent itself in torrents of abuse.”

The amount of rich detail Hall has amassed is impressive. Subjects covered in depth include relationships with the Congress; a time when Massachusetts sought to claim Vermont; the achievement of statehood in 1791; and the \$30,000 Vermont paid New York to settle all land claims. Much of his readable text seems to derive from his own knowledge but he has used several solid sources such as the voluminous “Documentary History of New York” by E. B. O’Callaghan, published in Albany in 1851, and Thompson’s “Vermont Gazetteer,” 1824 edition, plus Governor Clinton’s papers.

Hall includes a section of about 35 biographies of prominent early eastern Vermonters such as Royall Tyler, Luke Knowlton, Stephen Rowe Bradley, and William Williams; plus useful appendix entries.

Benjamin Hall’s 1858 publication was rebutted in 1868 by Hiland Hall’s “History of Early Vermont.” Hiland endorsed Benning Wentworth’s dubious actions in chartering towns west of the Connecticut River. These two lawyers named Hall were not related, but their nineteenth-century analyses of the creation of Vermont have become useful counterpoints to each other and together a major contribution to history.