

The Fourteenth State

Who was Moses Robinson?

By Tyler Resch

This column is intended to explore, revisit, and celebrate some of the books, past and present, that tell the history of Vermont, the fourteenth state. We will start with one of the newest.

The best recent book of this state's history is "Moses Robinson and the Founding of Vermont" by Robert A. Mello. After nearly a decade of research by the author, who was appointed a Superior Court judge by Gov. Jim Douglas, the book was published in 2014 by the Vermont Historical Society.

Moses Robinson (1740-1813) is described on the back cover as "the most important founder of Vermont you never heard of." But by the time you've read the book Moses Robinson will almost come alive.

In the spring of 1761 Moses Robinson was one of the very first arrivals in the town of Bennington. He was only 20 years old, one of several sons of Captain Samuel Robinson and his wife Marcy Leonard. The Robinson family was joined by a few others from near the central Massachusetts town of Hardwick who migrated to newly opened wilderness to create a Congregationalist Separatist community. They chose to settle on a stretch of uninhabited upland not far from the intersection of the Massachusetts and New York colonies that looked down on the Walloomsac River valley. Looming in the distance to the east was a solid ridge of Green Mountains.

Moses was named almost immediately as the first town clerk of Bennington, a post he would hold for twenty years. Armed with a talent for leadership but without formal legal training he would go on to become the first chief justice of the new Vermont republic and lay the foundations of the its judiciary. He would be elected the second governor and – once statehood was finally achieved in 1791 – the first United States senator. Along the way he served in other public offices such as member of the Council of Safety and the Governor's Council.

As Vermont's U.S. senator, Robinson dealt directly and amicably with President George Washington, Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and other Founding Fathers, even though he was not a member of their Federalist party. Moses Robinson and his senate colleague, Stephen Rowe Bradley of Westminster, were Anti-Federalists, followers of

Thomas Jefferson, and called themselves Republicans. That political party became known as Democratic Republicans and eventually as Democrats by the time Moses's grandson, John Staniford Robinson, became Vermont governor in 1853.

At the start of each chapter author Mello uses an interesting technique. He summarizes the chapter using the present tense, then he proceeds with the details in the past tense, as a reader might expect. In reading this fine biography, I accumulated a few clusters of facts or circumstances about early Vermont that either I had not known or found greatly clarified.

Moses Robinson's most important and lasting role was as chief negotiator for Vermont statehood during its relations with a dubious Congress (both during the Articles of Confederation and after 1789 the Congress of the new United States) and a New York legislature that was hostile, even belligerent. A strong takeaway from this book is the dramatic story of how Vermont emerged from a time when it appeared to be an island surrounded by adversaries.