

The Fourteenth State

Hiland Hall's Early History of Vermont

By Tyler Resch

Hiland Hall (1795-1885) of North Bennington was an especially prominent Vermont political figure, locally and statewide, throughout most of the nineteenth century. He was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives throughout the decade 1832-42, then sat as a Supreme Court justice, held two federal positions in Washington, and was President Fillmore's appointee in 1851 as federal land commissioner in California right after that state joined the union. He was elected Vermont governor for two one-year terms, in 1859 and 1860, and both his inaugural addresses railed against the immorality of slavery in America. Perhaps his most durable contribution was as father of the 306-foot Bennington Battle Monument which, 125 years later, is the most-visited state historic site.

Hall "read the law" to become a lawyer but he was also a diligent historian. In 1868 he published his 500-page "Early History of Vermont." I contend that if one is familiar with the essential facts of Hall's long life and has read his dense book of history, one could do very well on a college-level test on Vermont history.

While Hall's book is generally well regarded by historians, I would not rush to recommend reading it other than to sample it here and there to get a flavor of the times and of his style. His multiple-phrased sentences are lengthy, indeed turgid on occasion, and punctuated by too many commas.

The book is history but it's also a lawyer's brief as it offers enthusiastic endorsement of the actions taken by Governor Benning Wentworth of New Hampshire in chartering more than half of Vermont's townships. Hall is highly critical of New York for its attempt to claim jurisdiction of the territory that became Vermont, and for New York's adamant opposition to Vermont statehood.

Hall wrote his history, I have reason to believe, partly to counteract the opposing thesis of another book written a decade earlier, "The History of Eastern Vermont" by Benjamin H. Hall, no relation. Compare the two books in terms of size, typography, format, and subject matter, and they could almost be two of a series. B.H. Hall represented a strong regional point of view in pre-statehood Vermont – that is, predominantly today's Windham and Windsor counties – where opinion largely favored remaining under New

York's control and opposed the manipulations of Wentworth. I expect to focus on the B.H. Hall book in a future column.

Nonetheless, Hiland Hall's history is also valuable for its appendices, which include thumbnail sketches of the cast of characters on both sides of the disputed border. Included are a map and texts of several documents, some dating to 1741, that gave New Hampshire jurisdiction over Fort Dummer, and others supporting Hall's thesis. The final document analyzes the \$30,000 that Vermont paid New York to settle all land claims, and it lists dollars and cents awarded to each claimant. The largest amount, \$7,218.94 for 144,600 acres, went to Goldsbrow Banyar, clerk of the New York council, a major land speculator, and "a man of much shrewdness," according to Hall.

Hiland would be pleased to know that his "Early History of Vermont" is now available on googlebooks.