

The Fourteenth State

Col. William Marsh: Patriot *and* Loyalist

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A biography of Col. William Marsh, published in 2010 by Tiger Rock Press of Denver, paints a fresh portrait of Vermont's perplexity before, during, and after the American Revolution.

What was this perplexity all about? Vermont had been disaffected and even fearful of New York, was twice disappointed at rejection by the Continental Congress, ambivalent toward England, briefly attracted to the notion of joining Quebec, and striving for its own stability, independence, and unity. Basically, Vermont was also uneasy about the very validity of its own land rights.

Col. William Marsh seems an unlikely figure to be plucked from history, but in the hands of authors Jennifer S. H. Brown and Wilson S. Brown his life offers a compelling story. The Browns are retired professors from the University of Winnipeg, and Jennifer Brown was partly motivated to research this book because Marsh was her ancestor.

Marsh worked on both sides of the Patriot-Loyalist fence and also on both sides of the Vermont-Canada border. The sensitive subject of divided loyalties is explored during the time when the Hampshire Grants were being transformed first into an independent state and then the fourteenth state of the new United States.

The authors provide a series of explanations for why Marsh switched sides from Vermonter to Loyalist. His decision took place in July of 1777 after the battle of Hubbardton in June and before the Battle of Bennington in August. Among the reasons: Marsh's concern for the political and economic stability of the new Vermont government; uncertainty of the Burgoyne campaign; the harsh tactics of the Green Mountain Boys against suspected Tories (in the absence of Ethan Allen, who was in captivity); the feeling that New York and not Britain was the principal adversary; a perception that the American nation was going to be unworkable; and the refusal of the Continental Congress to grant Vermont statehood and confirm its land titles.

In addition, Marsh's wife, Sarah French of Dorset, had many Loyalist kin including her parents. It was remarkable that Marsh was able later to return to his home in East Dorset, where much of his Tory-tainted property had been seized. At his death in 1818 he had outlived most of the principal characters with whom he had dealt: Ethan, Heman, and Ira Allen, Remember

Baker, Seth Warner, and Thomas Chittenden. His gravestone is in the East Dorset Cemetery.

There was much interaction between Marsh and another character who switched sides, Justus Sherwood, who had been a Green Mountain Boy and was among those who rescued Remember Baker from the Yorkers in 1772. Marsh and Sherwood were involved with intelligence work during the episode in which Ethan and Ira Allen flirted with the idea of having Vermont join Quebec as a member of the British Commonwealth – at the same time the United States were fighting the Brits for their own independence!

Strong attributes of this book are the abundant use of sources and the newly indexed papers of Sir Frederick Haldimand, the governor of Quebec. The story of William Marsh opens the reader's eyes to the political and economic hardships of Vermont settlers during the American Revolution, when many were justifiably troubled about where their loyalties should reside.