

## The Fourteenth State

### **‘Vermont in the Making 1750-1777’ clarifies history**

*Tyler Resch*

Most histories of early Vermont, even those written well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, follow a party line that was established by Ethan and Ira Allen. This viewpoint generally regards the first settlers and Green Mountain Boys as valiant, virtuous, and somewhat innocent folks who were constantly threatened by crafty and greedy New Yorkers who schemed to wrest away their lands in the New Hampshire Grants.

It was portrayed as a simple contest between good and evil. Too simple, really.

Even the earliest state history, written by Samuel Williams in 1794 when Vermont was but three years old, bears the strong influence of Ira Allen. (This is not to say that the Williams's history is not worth reading. It was a pioneering effort by the same author who founded the Rutland Herald also in 1794. It's heavy on natural history subjects like birds, beasts, climate, and topography. It also uses the English s, which looks like an f, so that the word assistance, for example, looks like affittance. This takes getting used to.)

Matt B. Jones's "Vermont in the Making" was published in 1939 by Harvard University Press as the first full-length objective examination of Vermont's quarter century that preceded its Declaration of Independence. Jones rejected the scenario of innocent settlers in the wilderness versus crafty Yorkers. Rather, he saw the dispute in mostly financial terms. It was a contest between two groups of entrepreneurs who wanted to protect their investments.

Jones was a native Vermonter, born in Waitsfield in 1871. He graduated from Dartmouth College in 1894, then from Harvard Law School. He practiced law in Boston and lived in Newton Center, but his interest in Vermont history was life-long. At about the age of 38 he published a thorough town history of Waitsfield that included detailed genealogies. For many years he continued to research, studying early documentary evidence. Finally at age 68 his "Vermont in the Making" was published.

Lawyer Jones also based his thesis largely on the U. S. Supreme Court decision of 1932, which confirmed that New York's eastern boundary was the west bank of the Connecticut River. The court also held that Benning Wentworth as New Hampshire governor had no right to create towns west of that river. Nonetheless, the high court recognized that Vermont had been created in the meantime through a state of revolution.

The court had been asked to settle a dispute about whether Vermont or New Hampshire could tax electric utilities, such as the Vernon dam, in the middle of the river: was the boundary in the center, as Vermont claimed, or at the west bank, as New Hampshire wished? New Hampshire won.

Jones's appendices in the back of the book are wisely selected. They include the journals of two prominent New Yorkers who in 1765 toured the short-lived town of

“Princetown.” This “phantom town” followed the Battenkill Valley and included portions of today’s Arlington, Sunderland, Manchester, and Dorset. The New York visitors were surprised at the number of settlers they encountered.

513

*This column is intended to revisit some of the books, past and present, that tell the history of Vermont. Tyler Resch is the research librarian of the Bennington Museum, reachable at [tresch@benningtonmuseum.org](mailto:tresch@benningtonmuseum.org).*