

The Fourteenth State

Vermont's first history was written in 1794

Tyler Resch

“The Natural and Civil History of Vermont” was the very first history of this state written, remarkably, in 1794 when the state was only three years old. The author, Rev. Samuel Williams (1743-1817), a former Harvard professor, is equally interesting as the contents of his book. There is much to say about both.

Rev. Williams, it seems, took a clue from Jeremy Belknap's early history of New Hampshire, also written in the 1790s. Williams produced his 1794 Vermont history in 416 pages, then in 1809 published an expanded edition of two volumes that totaled 1,000 pages. The first edition is tricky for today's reader because it uses the English letter s, which resembles an f, but the second edition dropped that style. The book is accessible on Internet Archive.

Rev. Williams was a busy fellow in 1794. In addition to producing a state history he also founded a weekly newspaper, the Rutland Herald, the direct ancestor of today's daily of the same name. Why he had left his position as Hollis Professor of Mathematics and Philosophy at Harvard is an unresolved question. There was a financial cloud that was probably caused by professional jealousy, but it prompted him in 1788 to remove to Vermont, then an independent republic where U.S. law could not touch him. He had a cousin in Rutland, a lawyer, also named Samuel Williams. To distinguish between them they were called Rev. Williams and Judge Williams. He first preached at the East Parish church and then went into partnership with his cousin.

The very first page of the Rutland Herald carried an announcement signed “S. Williams and S. Williams,” a partnership that lasted only a year and a half because Judge Williams went into politics. He ran unsuccessfully for Congress in 1796 and again in 1798, losing to Matthew Lyon (that's another fascinating story). He died in 1800 in a logging accident.

Rev. Williams was interested in everything. His book covers a huge amount of subject matter: climate and weather, vegetation, animals, original inhabitants, first settlers, French and Indian War, dispute with New York, American Revolution, civil policy, religion, courts, legislation, agriculture, manufacturing, hunting, proceedings of the Dorset conventions that led to Vermont independence, a speech by General Burgoyne to Indians camped at

Bouquet on June 21, 1777, population tables, shifts in the earth's magnetic field, weather around the world, a treatise on human skin color.

His table of contents in both editions summarizes each chapter. A verbatim example: "Native Animals . . . An account of the Quadrupeds; with observations on their Enumeration; Origin; Migration, Species, Magnitude, Disposition, and Multiplying Power. The Birds, Fishes, Reptiles, and Insects." His first book included a tipped-in map of Vermont in 1793 drawn by James Whitelaw, the second surveyor general, who succeeded Ira Allen.

Rev. Williams had a special interest in the concept of freedom in the new American nation. He concluded the first volume with these cautionary words:

In this state of society, every thing is adapted to promote the prosperity, the importance, and the improvement of the body of the people . . . If you should lose that spirit of industry, of economy, of knowledge, and of virtue, which led you to independence and to empire, then, but not until then, you will lose your freedom: Preserve your virtues, and your freedom will be perpetual.

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.

Ethan Allen & the Capture of Fort Ticonderoga: America's First
Victory, by Richard B. Smith

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Bennington and the Green Mountain Boys by Shalhope

The Revolutionary War in Bennington County by Richard D. Smith