

The Fourteenth State

Updating Ethan Allen's boldest move

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Everyone knows the story of Ethan Allen's capture of Fort Ticonderoga from the British. It was his boldest move, and it gave a huge boost to the morale of the American Patriots because it happened in May 1775, only a month after the American Revolution was sparked at Lexington and Concord.

The story is especially amazing because of the strategic and geographical importance of Fort Ticonderoga, high on a bluff that commands control of traffic on Lake Champlain.

Though it's an old story, there is a relatively new book on the subject that uncovers fresh information, "Ethan Allen and the Capture of Fort Ticonderoga: America's First Victory" published in 2010 by History Press. The author, Manchester historian Richard D. Smith, lists the names of the 82 men Allen personally recruited on his travel from northwestern Connecticut, through Berkshire County, and into Vermont from Pownal to Shoreham. The subtitle tells it all: America's first victory.

The "capture," without a fatality, or even a shot being fired, was executed by speed, stealth, intelligence, and surprise, which were the trademarks of the Green Mountain Boys, as Smith relates the tale. The adventurers took the enormous chance that failure could result in the loss of their property if not their lives in case they were caught and branded as traitors to the English crown.

Fort Ti's loss to the British had great impact on the course of the coming war and demonstrated the mettle and determination of the American patriots.

Smith writes in an informal and almost gossipy style (with many parenthetical asides) as he focuses on specific participants in this exciting venture that includes bits of genealogy, such as who was married to who's sister and who had suspected Tory relatives. These men are analyzed in terms of their demographics, occupations, and towns of residence. There were in fact two doctors, three lawyers, several college graduates (both Harvard and Yale were represented), a future congressman (the estimable Matthew Lyon), and a total of 170 Green Mountain Boys, who tended to be a little older, 30-ish, than one might think.

Smith has included many interesting charts, tables, illustrations, notes, and other addenda. There are five appendices, one of which offers five pages of GPS coordinates of relevant historic sites, another a list of sites or museums or inns open to the public, including a Lake Champlain cruise.

“The Green Mountain Boys were not a ‘mob,’” as New York authorities had charged, Smith writes. “Mobs can’t start with one person and grow to more than two hundred people after moving two hundred miles in secret. There was an elected leader, Ethan Allen, who had the respect of all present. They were on a single mission. All were fighting tyranny of some sort – some religious tyranny, some tyranny over the use of their land and of life, and his diverse group had a love of freedom.”

The author also uncovered a memorable ironic fact: Four days before Lexington and Concord, Lord Dartmouth wrote to Thomas Gage, the British commanding officer, to order reinforcement of all forts in North America. The letter arrived on May 25, after Fort Ti was captured.