

The Fourteenth State

Ira Allen's life: purpose and passion

Tyler Resch

Ira Allen, (1751-1814) one of the major founders of Vermont, was an intelligent and complex character who led a vigorous and purposeful life, though it did not end well. He is also remembered as a founder of the University of Vermont, where a life-sized statue of him graces its green.

Ira left to posterity a substantial book, “History of the State of Vermont” – his own version of it. Youngest of six brothers from Salisbury, Conn., he had migrated into the Hampshire Grants in 1771 following his eldest brother, Ethan. He served as a Green Mountain Boy and became closely involved with the entire series of events that evolved into the independent republic of Vermont.

Near the end of the American Revolution Ira and Ethan initiated the controversial negotiations with Frederick Haldimand, governor of Quebec, the purpose of which has always been subject to interpretation. Did they really threaten to have Vermont join the British Empire? Or was the goal to stave off a British invasion, or to prod the Continental Congress into admitting Vermont as a separate state? Ira refers to himself in his book as “principal negotiator of the truce with Canada . . . which prevented the invasion of the state from that province.”

During most of the fourteen years of the Vermont independent republic he served in a conflict of interest as both treasurer and surveyor general while keeping an eye on the Allen brothers’ real-estate interests in the Onion River Valley of Chittenden County.

After statehood was achieved in 1791 Ira became perhaps too ambitious. In 1795, in his role as major general of the Vermont militia, he purchased from the French government “20,000 muskets with bayonets, 24 brass four-pound field pieces, six gun carriages and six cannon-waggons.” These arms were to be delivered in New York on board an American ship, the *Olive Branch*. But because France and England were at war it was

captured by a British ship of war and taken to Portsmouth, England. Ira was charged with attempting to foment insurrection, possibly against Ireland, against the interests of Britain.

Lengthy litigation and appeals basically devoured the rest of Ira's life. But he made the best of it, first by writing a 400-page defense of his actions titled "The Olive Branch." Then in an amazing feat of memory he wrote his massive "History of Vermont." It also reflected well on himself and it became a template for future state histories. Both books were published in London in 1798.

During his absence from Vermont his large land holdings were lost and he became seriously in debt. To escape imprisonment he moved to Philadelphia, where he died in poverty.

Because of the scarcity of copies of Ira Allen's History, the former Tuttle Company in Rutland produced a reprint in 1969 and printed it in Japan, where Tuttle had major publishing interests. It contains an explanatory note by an anonymous author plus Allen's own preface and an appendix that contains answers to questions he had been asked about the Vermontese, as he called them. Copies are readily available.

The anonymous author of the book's introduction summed up Ira Allen's life by saying that he "united great energy of purpose with a passion for speculation and adventure."