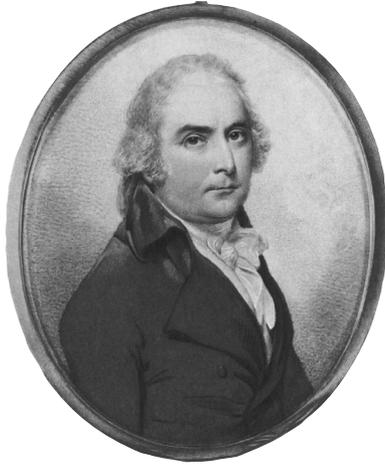


How Ethan Allen and his brothers chased success in the real estate business

John J. Duffy



Ira Allen 1751-1814
Bennington Museum collection

In memorials produced long after his death in 1789, Ethan Allen has been remembered in statues in Vermont and in the Congressional Hall of Statuary in Washington, DC; in military posts named for him in Virginia during the Civil War and in Colchester, Vermont, an 1890s post, its original structures now residential and commercial sites. Though Allen sailed the seas only as a British prisoner in 1776, two Union coastal defense boats displayed his name in the 1860s. A century later, the nuclear submarine *Ethan Allen* fired the first nuclear-tipped missile from below the ocean's surface in the early 1960s.

Ethan is probably best remembered from mostly fictional tales and stories about his heroic and other deeds, especially the pre-dawn capture of the British forts at Ticonderoga and Crown Point in May 1775 during the earliest months of the American War for Independence from Great Britain. Some say he was the most important founder of Vermont.

On that latter point, however, remembrances of Ethan Allen seem to forget that he was far from Vermont when the state's independence was de-

clared in 1777. He had been a prisoner of the British since September 1775 when he was captured after foolishly attacking Montreal with only one-hundred poorly armed Americans and Canadians against a force of five-hundred defenders – British regulars, Loyalist militia, and Mohawk warriors. After nearly three years as a prisoner, he was exchanged for a British officer in May 1778 and returned to Vermont. As compensation for his imprisonment, Congress commissioned him brevet (temporary) lieutenant colonel in 1778 and paid him \$75 a month for thirty-one months, the length of his imprisonment.

Ethan did not seek nor was he called to active duty with the Continental Army. Instead, he served on Vermont's Court of Confiscation that seized Loyalist property for sale or lease by the state. In that capacity he acquired confiscated land from the Court, including the site of today's Ethan Allen Homestead in the Burlington Intervale. He also unsuccessfully petitioned the Court to seize Vermont land owned by his younger brother Levi, at the time a resident of New York. Ethan served as an unelected advisor to the Governor's Council (predecessor of the Senate) and the General Assembly, which sent him on several diplomatic missions to New Hampshire and to lobby Congress for Vermont's admission to the United States. The Assembly commissioned him a general to command the Vermont Militia in 1779, but in 1783 he resigned in anger after his wife's cousin and others publicly accused him of treason for negotiating with the British for a separate peace.

Ethan Allen and at least six other prominent political leaders of Vermont, including Governor Thomas Chittenden and Ethan's youngest brother Ira, who was Vermont state treasurer, surveyor general, and colonel of militia, did indeed negotiate with the British. Beginning in 1780, British officials in New York and General Frederick Haldimand, the military governor general of Quebec, initiated and conducted the negotiations with the Vermonters under direct orders from the Crown's ministers in London. When it appeared that Congress was unwilling to accept Vermont into the confederated United States, the Vermonters sought to ally Vermont as a republic within the governance of the British Empire.

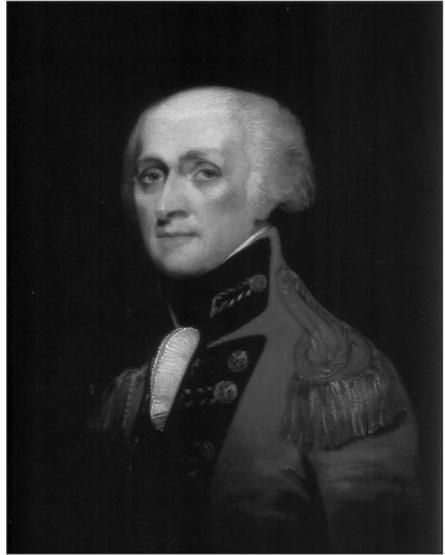
The extensive surviving American and British documentary records of the so-called Haldimand Affair became fully accessible to the public when the British Museum sent copies of the British records to Ottawa's National Archives of Canada in the late nineteenth century. A large collection of American, mostly Vermont, documents, together with the Haldimand Papers, have provided the information about those negotiations showing how close Vermont came to an imperial alliance between 1781 and 1783 under the leadership of a small group of powerful political figures, including Ethan and Ira Allen and the so-called Arlington mob, sometimes called the Junto.

Ethan Allen in his private correspondence during the so-called Haldimand Affair referred to this group as “the private cabinet of Vt.”

In Vermont from 1780 to 1782, correspondence and negotiations between Frederic Haldimand and Ethan and Ira Allen, Governor Thomas Chittenden, and other prominent political figures continued to the point that Haldimand, with advice from the Allens and approval from London, produced a “Proclamation to Vermont”: offering the Crown’s protection against Congress if it sent a military force to suppress Vermont’s alliance with Britain. For the “private cabinet” and other Vermonters with similar personal interests, Haldimand promised free trade of Vermont’s produce – mostly timber and livestock – in Quebec and overseas in England.

The arrival of the French navy and army on the east coast of the United States in early 1781 produced an allied force of 17,000 French and American troops that defeated 6,000 British led by Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia, in October 1781. News of the Franco-American victory in Virginia, however, led Haldimand to stop distribution of his proclamation and suspend negotiations with the Vermonters. The Allens kept up correspondence with the British after Yorktown and continued to seek their own commercial alliance with Britain. Ethan wrote a long letter to General Haldimand in June 1782 discussing both the national and Vermont political situations, concluding with the pledge, “I shall do Every thing in my Power to render this State a British province.”

The Yorktown victory forced the Crown to confirm American independence and to accept initial plans for the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Nonetheless, Ethan Allen continued to correspond with the Crown’s agents in Quebec. Writing in April to the Loyalist and former Green Mountain Boy Justus Sherwood at the British blockhouse on North Hero Island in northern Lake Champlain, Allen asserted that Britain’s “friends [in Vermont] will not Confederate with Congress come on what will but will be independent of Independency.” He also sent a verbal message to Sherwood by James



*General Frederick Haldimand,
a portrait circa 1778 by Sir Joshua Reynolds
National Portrait Gallery, London*

Savage of Albany County that Sherwood passed up the chain of command to Haldimand's assistant, Major Robert Mathews, in Quebec nine days later: As Sherwood reported the verbal message, Ethan Allen, James Savage, and either Daniel or Alexander Campbell, Loyalists from Schenectady, were involved in a plan to speedily settle "the northern parts of Vermont and the Grand Isle with the distressed loyal subjects now in the colonies."

The Allens knew those negotiations with the British were a risky and dangerous business. As state's attorney pro tem when he first returned to Bennington from the British prison in New York City, Ethan Allen himself had won the conviction and hanging of the Loyalist David Redding for treason and knew the fatal consequences if plotting with Haldimand failed and his treason proven. Yet Allen had trusted Savage with a potentially explosive message – if its contents ever saw light of day in Vermont. Savage reported to Sherwood, "It is determined in the private cabinet of Vt. to give every possibel [sic] encouragement to loyal subjects in the Colonies to remove into the northern parts of Vt. and on this Island [North Hero], by this policy (A)[llen] thinks there may soon be a party found in opposition to Congress, sufficient to bring about revolution in favor of Vt's uniting with Canada and becoming a British Gov't."

The Allen brothers and several friends, including Joseph Fay of Bennington, author of the Vermont Declaration of Independence (1777) and an intermediary and messenger in the Haldimand Affair, spent most of the summer of 1783 promoting the sale of lands they owned in northwestern Vermont to Loyalists and a free-trade relationship between Vermont and Quebec. Seeking an official free-trade compact, they petitioned Frederick Haldimand and lower level officials for permission to send livestock to the Montreal and Quebec markets, initially asking for a contract to supply beef to the army. Quebec had a surplus of beef at the time, the Allens were told, but other products, except peltry [wild animal pelts, chiefly beaver], would be considered for an exemption from import tariffs. In the meantime, British customs officers at Fort St John on the Richelieu River, twenty miles above the border, reported growing exports of Quebec and English products to the Champlain valley. The Allens undoubtedly felt pressure from the competitive Quebec market to sell land and bring settlers to the Champlain islands and other real estate they owned in northwestern Vermont. Loyalists from the Hudson River Valley and western Connecticut had good reasons to head north. The Allens had land to sell them on long terms with little or no cash down for settlement in a state where land taxes were small or nil due to revenue reaped through the Courts of Confiscation.

In Vermont, the topic of selling northwestern Vermont's land to former Loyalists became a debatable matter. The Vermont Gazette published an

article in which the author recommended welcoming Loyalists to settle in northwestern Vermont, but a rebuttal article three weeks later disapproved of bringing Loyalists into Vermont as a betrayal of Vermont's revolutionary past.

For Ethan and Ira Allen, ideological debates on the Loyalist settlement issue had no bearing. They needed cash. Despite a pent-up demand for land, the postwar recession of the 1780s was slow to recover. The Allens had legal titles to nearly 200,000 acres of unimproved land in the northern Champlain Valley from Ferrisburg and Charlotte north to the border, the rough equivalent of five townships. Though New York titles still encumbered some of their holdings, nearly all of their land inventory had been granted originally by New Hampshire and later warranted by the Vermont General Assembly.

To turn land into cash, they placed "Land for Sale" advertisements in Connecticut's *Hartford Courant*. And they wrote to prominent former Loyalists who had returned to America after the war, offering land at very distressed prices, which even then would turn a profit for the Allens. A substantial portion of their holdings had been acquired between 1771 and 1775, the most active years of their Onion River Land Company during the price-depressing Green Mountain Boys' insurgency against New York over legality of New Hampshire land titles. They also acquired extensive acreage during the war by grants from the legislature for their services. On Ethan's return from prison to command the Vermont militia, he was paid for his services in that office in late 1779 with a grant of the two largest Champlain islands, the Two Heroes. He enlisted thirty associates to pledge fee payment with him. Brother Ira was paid for his services to the state in 1780-81 with a grant of the town of Alburgh. They also acquired the town of Swanton, originally granted by New York to Simon Metcalfe, who spent most of the war years under arrest by the Americans for suspicion of spying. When Metcalfe and original Abenaki residents returned to Swanton after the war, the Allens denied their claims and drove them off.

The long-running dispute between New York and Vermont over conflicting claims to jurisdictional authority to grant title to lands west of the Connecticut River – the so-called New Hampshire Grants dispute – lay dormant during the war, but came out of limbo after the peace. The sooner Ethan Allen could turn his land holdings into cash, the closer he would come to fulfilling his long-held aspirations to the life of a gentleman farmer and rustic philosopher. So in 1784 he announced that he and his family would remove from Sunderland to a new home and farm of 1,400 acres in Burlington. From that location he could manage his land business in the northwest sector of Vermont.

Leaving his new home in Burlington in the summer of 1788, Ethan Allen went to Canada with his brother Levi to meet the new governor general, Guy Carleton, at his headquarters in Quebec. Levi successfully guided their lumber raft to Quebec for sale to English buyers. Upon arriving at the British stronghold, Ethan wrote a long letter to Carleton introducing himself and offering an analysis of the political situation of the United States in relation to Vermont and Great Britain. Focusing directly on Vermont, he told Carleton how he approved the goals of the earlier Haldimand negotiations and hoped Carleton would eventually adopt those policies and seek to ally the now-independent Vermont with the British Empire. His supporting arguments were all economic – Vermont’s proximity to the Canadian markets and access to overseas transportation, the quality of the exported products, mainly lumber and livestock, and the prosperity that fair trade would bring to Montreal and Quebec as well as Vermont. After a dinner meeting with Carleton and his staff the Allens headed home, where with Ira they developed a Grand Plan to send Levi directly to London to obtain a free-trade agreement for Vermont and to secure a license to build a canal from St. John on the Richelieu around impassable shoals and rapids to the St. Lawrence River.

Seven months later, on February 12, 1789, visiting his cousin Ebenezer Allen at the south end of South Hero, Ethan Allen had a stroke, lost consciousness on the ice off Allen’s Point and died on a hay sled a few miles from his home on the Winooski River in Burlington. Levi was on his way to England, where he finally learned of Ethan’s death in May. With a commission as envoy from the state of Vermont, he lobbied Whitehall and Parliament for two years, finally winning an exclusive free-trade agreement for Vermont to export its products, except peltry, to Quebec and England from Lake Champlain. The canal wouldn’t happen until the 1840s. Whitehall correctly doubted that the rough-edged Vermonters had sufficient capital for the project.

Ethan Allen had sold the family’s Connecticut farm in the late 1760s. He had tried hunting deer for their skins, a niche at the rock bottom of the colonial economy that he soon abandoned for the New Hampshire Grants, where money was to be made as a land speculator. By 1775 Ethan and his brothers knew that their personal economic interests and security were intimately connected to commerce between northwestern Vermont and the province of Quebec. Lake Champlain and the Richelieu River would eventually become the highway to carry the commerce of the newly settled territory. The expansion of their land holdings on the shores of Lake Champlain in northwestern Vermont in the years before the war and continuing after Ethan’s return from prison could only drive home to them

the real necessity of linking his service to Vermont to his personal interests. In the depths of the war between Britain and the United States he made a bold and very dangerous attempt to expand that linkage in a way that could have either stabilized and enriched his and his family's fortunes or cost him his life as a traitor.

Historians for more than 150 years have disputed his motives and role in the Haldimand negotiations. Some have said he simply lied to both Congress and Frederick Haldimand; others say it was the only tactic he could come up with to save Vermont from the British army and greedy Yorkers. Well, maybe, but I keep hearing another northern farmer's words of advice when I read those arguments.

He's the father advising his unmarried son Sam to prepare for marriage in Tennyson's *Northern Farmer*: "Dost thou 'ear my 'erse's legs, as they canters awaäy? / Proputty, proputty, proputty — that's what I 'ears 'em saäy. / Proputty, proputty, proputty."

According to both Levi and Ira Allen in their autobiographies, their father, Joseph Allen, advised his sons long and often to invest in land, "proputty, proputty, proputty." Good sons all, they followed their father's advice. Levi observed about the Allen brothers in a letter home from his mission in London: "Amasingly Ambitious."

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The Allens' ambitions didn't end with Ethan's death. Six years later, Ira secured a loan in Boston of \$30,000 with a mortgage on his extensive Burlington and Colchester properties, including profitable mills on the Winooski River. Ira went to England ostensibly to buy muskets and cannon to arm the Vermont militia. The British government denied him the right to purchase weapons, fearing they would be turned against Canada. So he went to France and bought with cash and extended credit, 20,000 muskets and cannon the French took from the British army they had defeated in 1796, the spoils of the defeat of "The noble Duke of York" and his 10,000 men. Ira's chartered freighter, however, was intercepted by the British navy and his war surplus weapons were taken from him, launching a legal battle over ownership that lasted for nearly ten years, during which the guns rusted to scrap in a New York warehouse where he had shipped them after the Admiralty judge granted bail for the ship's cargo. An impoverished Ira lost his land businesses in Vermont, avoided imprisonment for debt by fleeing to Kentucky, and finally settled in Philadelphia where he died a pauper in 1814. Levi had died in a debtor's room in Gideon King's Tavern on the Burlington waterfront in 1801.

Notes:

Microfilm copies of the Frederick Haldimand Papers provide the extensive correspondence between the British in Canada and Ethan, Ira, and other Vermont leaders from 1780 to 1784. They are accessible in the Special Collections of the Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont, the Vermont State Archives, and the National Library and Archives in Ottawa. Much of the correspondence from the Allens and their associates in the Haldimand negotiations and after 1784 with Quebec's Governor General Guy Carleton is also reproduced in *Ethan Allen and His Kin: Selected Correspondence*, 2 volumes, ed. by John J. Duffy et al. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).