



Bennington Historical Society News

Birthplace of Vermont: The 1771 Breakenridge Standoff

Sunday, March 21 at 2:00 pm
Live Zoom Presentation: bit.ly/BHSbirthplace

A story of the New Hampshire Grants and New York's claims to the land that became Vermont.

Bob Hoar will discuss the early conflicts with New York over ownership of land in what is now Vermont. The turning of the tide was the standoff between the Yorkers and the Green Mountain Boys at the Breakenridge farm near the Henry Bridge in Bennington. This is sometimes described as the birth of Vermont.

Bob started studying the Battle of Bennington at the Bennington Museum Research Library in 2005, with Joe Parks and Tyler Resch. There being no book on the subject, Bob put together the story from available sources and began inspiring others with his enthusiasm. He has been involved with the Friends of the Bennington Battlefield and has served as tour guide at the Battlefield. He has also produced a study of the Continental Storehouse in Bennington, the object of the British attack at the battle. He has been involved in the planning of the 250th

anniversary committee to commemorate the state's founding, constitution, and especially the 1777 battles at Hubbardton and Bennington. Bob currently lives in Bennington and offers history tours under the name of The Iron Cannon Club. ♦



"The Breakenridge Standoff" with
Bob Hoar

In This Issue

Remembering Lion G. Miles	2 - 3
Then Again: A Journey Among "Deists and Proper Heathen"	4 - 7
Next BHS Program	7
Bennington Museum Re-opening Plans	8

Remembering Lion G. Miles, 1934-2020

by Phil Holland

I believe that Lion Miles's first public appearance in Bennington came in June 1981 when he delivered a talk on the Battle of Bennington to the Rotary Club. He had already become friends and amateur-historian colleagues with Joe Parks, and he had already conducted original research on the Battle. On a research trip to Germany, he had discovered the names of the Brunswickers whose remains are buried at the "common grave" in the Bennington Centre Cemetery, while Parks researched the names of the American dead buried there. The Rotary had the names incised on the monument placed in 1896 by the Bennington Historical Society. Miles gave what was billed as "the annual Battle Day address" at the Old First Church preceding the dedication ceremony in 1981.

He spoke on the Battle at the Bennington Museum in 1993 and about the Loyalists who fought in it at the Louis Miller Museum in Hoosick Falls in 2001 (available at <https://hoosickfallshistory.wordpress.com/events/2/#symposium>). He joined me for a talk about Sipp Ives and other black soldiers at the Battle at the Bennington Museum in 2018, and some of you had lunch with him then. I got to know him in the last years of his life by looking him up in Stockbridge, Mass., where he had lived for many years. It was his 1981 address (a copy of which Ty Resch directed me to in the Museum Library), with its combination of meticulous research and historical empathy, that put me on his trail.

His 1987 UMASS graduate seminar paper

Lion G. Miles 1934-2020



'Men work together,' I told him from the heart,
'Whether they work together or apart.'

— Robert Frost, "The Tuft of Flowers"

on the Battle, also on file at the Library, was aptly characterized by Richard Ketchum (1997) as "one of two outstanding modern studies" of the Battle (the other being Phil Lord's). Miles's paper "contains much new material," Ketchum said. Lion and his grad school adviser Frank Wickwire were collaborating on a book about the Battle when the latter became ill and died. Lion took a hiatus from Battle research and applied himself to the study of the Stockbridge Indians. He produced property maps of Stockbridge based on his study of 18th century deeds. He published an excellent account of the tribe's displacement by white settlers in the *New England Quarterly* (1996) and issued a small book on John Konkapot, the Stockbridge chief. He compiled a Mohican-English dictionary. He also published (with James L. Kochan) a *Guide to Hessian Documents of the American Revolution*,

Continued on p. 3

1776-1783 – transcripts and translations from the Lidgerwood collection at Morristown National Historical Park, Morristown, New Jersey (1989). He also published a booklet on “The Hessians of Lewis Miller.” I should add that Lion was also known for his letters to the Berkshire Eagle decrying this or that exaggerated historical claim that had made its way into the paper’s pages. He was born to a Navy family in Pensacola, Florida in 1934 (one grandfather wrote the words to “Anchors Aweigh”). His boyhood was overshadowed by his father’s death at sea at the hands of Japanese destroyers in the South Pacific in 1942. He spent summers with an aunt in Williamstown, which began a lifelong association with this area. He became a Navy pilot, then a pilot for American Airlines. He had majored in History at William and Mary and had an MA in History (and a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship) from Columbia, and he got his start as an amateur historian by tracing a German ancestor who had been among the Convention Army prisoners who had deserted to live in the fledgling United States. He taught himself 18th century German and made his own translation of Wasmus’s journal several years before Helga Döblin published hers. In the course of his work as a pilot, he requested routes that enabled him to visit major research collections on his layovers. He believed in consulting original sources. In his last year he was preparing a talk on Charles Lee for his fellow residents at his assisted living facility in Lee, Mass. (named for the general, as you may know).

Indefatigable and scrupulous researcher though he was (and copying the names from muster rolls and prisoner lists is

dry work), he had an emotional side that came out in his love of opera and in aspects of his writings about the Battle. He ended his 1981 talk by quoting (in his own translation) from a letter from the wife of a slain Brunswick officer found on the latter’s body after the Battle of Bennington in which she expresses hopes and fears for his safety. He had found the letter in the Massachusetts Historical Society archives in Boston. It wasn’t a desire to be academically fashionable that led him to investigate the Loyalists, the German prisoners, the Stockbridge Indians, and Blacks who fought in the Revolution—it was imagination and sympathy for the other actors in 18th century America, not just the winners, though he had plenty of admiration for figures such as George Washington and Benjamin Lincoln. He was proud to march in his Navy jacket in the parade that was part of the annual Stockbridge-Munsee Band of the Mohicans powwow in Wisconsin (he was made an honorable member and often hosted them on their visits to Stockbridge), and he was present with representatives of the tribe at the opening of the Smithsonian’s Museum of the American Indian in 2004.

He was generous with his knowledge. He fielded genealogical inquiries from Hessian descendants as well as inquiries from scholars like Gary Nash, Phil Lord, Michael Gabriel -- and me. He passed his research papers on to me, and I intend to put them into order so that they may be shared. The level of detail in his research is extraordinary. I think it is safe to say that Bennington will not see his like again. ❖

Then Again: A Journey Among 'Deists & Proper Heathen'

by Mark Bushnell

Originally published on Facebook and VT Digger, Nov. 19, 2017.

Editor's note: For those of you who don't use Facebook or read VT Digger, you may not have had a chance to read pieces by Mark Bushnell. On Nov. 19, 2017, he wrote about the Rev. Nathan Perkins, a missionary preacher from West Hartford, Connecticut, who described his travel through Vermont in very unflattering ways.

... On April 27, 1789, Perkins bid a tearful goodbye to his wife and children and rode off on his horse, not sure when or whether he would see them again.

We know of Perkins' mission, and his feelings about it, thanks to the unusually frank journal he left behind. As a wealthy and well-regarded conservative Congregationalist minister, Perkins was used to the comforts of the civilized world of Hartford, Connecticut. He was hardly prepared for the deprivations he would meet along the road.

Perkins ... didn't mince words; he unleashed them in torrents, expressing his shock and dismay over what he regarded as the crude and godless conditions he encountered during his travels. "The evening passed in dulness & insipidity," he wrote after his first night on the road, clearly confident his hosts would never read his journal. "Poor Supper—wretched breakfast—tea paler than water—Sugar heavier than lead."

And to think he was only in southern Massachusetts when he wrote that. How he must have dreaded what lay ahead for him once he reached the wilds of Vermont. That first night, he later realized, was when he "began to experience that hard & coarse fare which, wasted away my flesh & made me often, often regret my tour."

His tour would take him along the approximate path of present-day Route 7. He would enter Vermont at Pownal and visit Bennington and Manchester before reaching the Burlington area, where he lodged at the home of Gov. Thomas Chittenden in Williston. The state was still nominally independent, having declared itself free of Britain 12 years earlier. It would be another two years before it officially joined the United States.

Perkins describes the region as a wasteland. The desolation Perkins saw wasn't for lack of people — Vermont's population stood at about 85,000 — but rather for lack of proper religion and refinement. "I have rode more than 100 miles and seen no meeting house!" he wrote in despair at one point. It's hard to misconstrue entries

Continued on p. 5

like this one from May 1: “Friday entered ye State of Vermont—a bad appearance at ye entrance, Pawnal ye first town, poor land—very unpleasant—very uneven—miserable set of inhabitants—no religion, Rhode Island haters of religion—baptists, quakers, & and some Presbyterians—no meeting house.” (The Rhode Island comment apparently refers to that colony’s founding by opponents of the strict religious doctrines of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.)

At a particularly low point during this time in Vermont, Perkins wrote: “Words cannot describe ye hardships I undergo, or ye strength of my desire to see my family. ... How affectionately do I remember them, hundreds of times every day, & shed a tear, in ye woods—got lost twice in ye woods already—heard ye horrible howling of ye wolves. Far absent—in ye wilderness—among all strangers—all alone—among log-huts—people nasty—poor—low-lived—indelicate—and miserable cooks.”

If the food in Vermont disappointed Perkins, so did the drink.

“I suffer as much for ye want of drink as any thing,” he wrote. “Brook-water is my chief drink. The maple cyder is horrible stuff—no malt in ye Country.—Their beer poor bran beer.”

The few Vermonters whom Perkins considered cultured were apparently the exception to the rule. He judged Moses Robinson, chief justice of the state Supreme Court, “a man of sense & religion.” He stayed with the family of Timothy Brownson, one of the first settlers of Sunderland, and found them “kind.” But they were also “destitute of all taste & polish.”

Despite the hardships faced by these rough frontier sorts, Perkins credited the women with being happier than the refined ladies of Connecticut:

“When I go from hut to hut, from town to town, in ye Wilderness, ye people nothing to eat,–to drink,–or wear,– all work, & yet ye women quiet,–serene,–peaceable,–contented, loving their husbands,–their home,–wanting never to return,–nor any dressy clothes; I think how strange!—I ask myself are these women of ye same species with our fine Ladies? tough are they, brawny their limbs,–their young girls unpolished – & will bear work as well as mules.”

Connecticut women, Perkins complained, have nice clothes, good roads and carriages to transport them, yet still they are unsatisfied. They are “vile,” “guilty” and “ungrateful to providence,” he wrote. Much like Perkins himself, it is tempting to think.

If you are starting to wonder whether Perkins had issues with his wife, you might be right. “Could my Lady so agreeable & pleasant to me, only see & endure what I have, how contented – how easy – how thankful would she be!” he wrote. (For her part, Katherine Perkins’ life was hardly free of worries: she bore him nine children.)

For all his talk of backwoods coarseness, Nathan Perkins suggested that the hardships of living in a wilderness had burnished Vermonters’ characters. “Woods make people love one another & kind & obliging and good natured,” he wrote. “They set much more by one another than in ye old settlements. Leave their doors unbarred.”

If he found some virtue among Vermonters, he saw a greater reason for concern. To him, many Vermonters were irreligious — that is, not Congregationalists. They numbered among them Quakers, Anabaptists, Episcopalians and Universalists. Worse, “almost all ye men of learning” were deists, whose belief in God was based on reason and personal experience, rather than on revelations to prophets, holy texts or religious authority.

For an evangelist, Vermont would be a tough nut to crack.

“Colchester & Burlington all deists & proper heathen,” he wrote. “... People pay little regard to ye Sabbath, hunt & fish on that day frequently. Not more than 1/6 part of ye families attend family prayer in ye whole State.”

(Perkins would no doubt be disappointed that today Vermont ranks last in the nation in terms of how important religion is in people’s lives, according to a study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.)

While in Sunderland, he had seen the onetime home of his nemesis, the state’s most famous heathen. “Here lived formerly ye awful Deist Ethan Allyn . . . who delighted in calling himself ye old philospher.”

But Perkins was confident his mission was having success. He preached about six days a week, in large barns and tiny backwoods cabins. Preaching in Williston, he found the “(a)udience peculiarly attentive.” He helped a group in Essex write a covenant and form a church. “The people deeply affected,” he observed. “Tears flowed plentifully.”

Perkins wrote that his audiences “were charmed with my sermons & my delivery” and that he received compliments that “would be vain in me to repeat.” Then he repeated them: “Such as ye very first-rate – philosophical – Deep – penetrating – a great Scholar – angelic – The angel Gabriel could not go before him . . .”

But Perkins said he was above such praise. He had “a higher end,” and that was “to alarm ye Conscience ... to give ye nature of true Religion.”

Riding near Essex, he wrote, “my horse got away & steered for Hartford. He had undergone hardships enough he thought.”

Perkins had had enough too. He had been braving Vermont for a little over a month. Soon he would start his journey south and reach home two weeks later. But before he left the Burlington area, he had one more visit to pay.

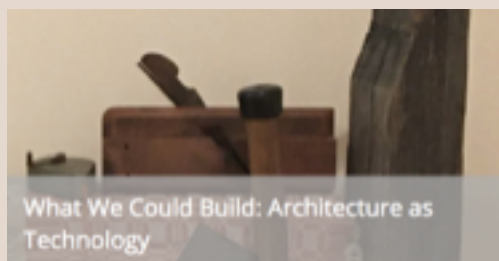
“Arrived at Onion-river falls & passed by Ethan Allyn’s grave,” he wrote. Allen had died in February of that year. “An awful Infidel,” Perkins continued, “one of ye wickedest men yet ever walked this guilty globe. I stopped & looked at his grave with a pious horror.” ✦

Mark Bushnell is the author of *Hidden History of Vermont* and *It Happened in Vermont*. His work appears on the VTDigger.com website.

Next BHS Program: What We Could Build: Architecture as Technology

April 18, 2021 2:00 pm to 3:00 pm

Using Bennington’s architecture as examples, Jane Radocchia will explore what was built between the 1760’s and the 1920’s, looking at how new technology offered new choices which allowed us to build in new styles.



A Virtual Interactive Presentation on Zoom

<http://bit.ly/BHSarchitecture>

Jane Radocchia is an architect specializing in old houses, and an architectural historian.

Bennington Museum Reopening Plans

The Museum will be reopening on Friday, April 2 after a period of offering online programs and social media activity. The basic schedule follows; please check the Museum website for Holiday hours. The Museum will be open on Easter, April 4, 10 AM - 4 PM.

April 2 - May 31

Friday - Monday, 10 AM - 4 PM

June 4 - September 6

Friday, 10 AM - 8 PM; Sat.-Monday, 10 AM - 4 PM

September 10 - December 27

Friday - Monday, 10 AM - 4 PM

At a **Library Committee** meeting on February 26, discussion began about Library hours. With the assistance of volunteers from the Bennington Historical Society, we plan for the Library to be open for at least two hours a day on two of the days that the Museum is open. We will continue to discuss hours and staffing and post information on the Museum and BHS areas of the website prior to April 2. Please let Bennington Historical Society President-Elect, Robert Tegart (rttegs@gmail.com), know if you are interested in volunteering to help staff the Library.

Bennington Historical Society

A volunteer-operated program of Bennington Museum

Officers: Don Miller, President; Bob Tegart, President-Elect; Bill Morgan, Immediate Past President; Charles Dewey, Secretary

Committee Members: Anne Bugnee, Beverley Petrelis, Joe Hall, Ted Bird, Jackie Marro, Scott Maguire, Ray Rodrigues

Newsletter Editor: Ray Rodrigues

Thank you for your donation to Bennington Museum in support of Historical Society programs.