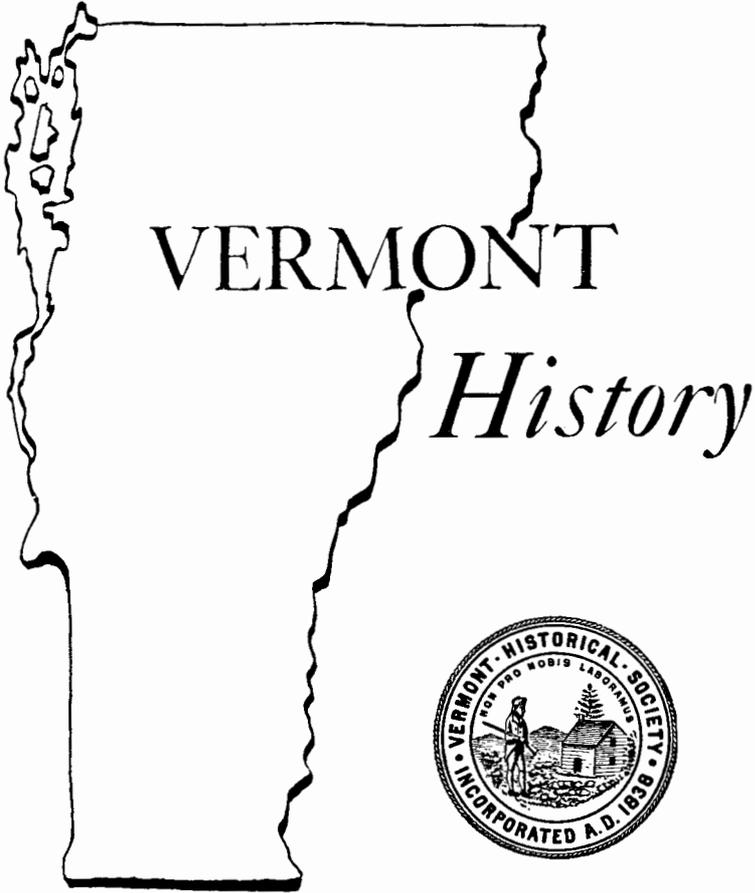
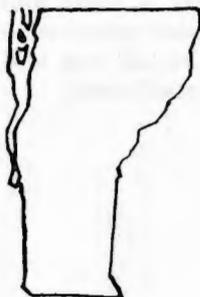


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A Ballad of Rogers' Retreat, 1759

Edited by T.D. SEYMOUR BASSETT

Major Robert Rogers' daring raid and destruction of St. François, an Indian village far inside French lines, ranks among the most dramatic and bloody operations of the Colonial Wars. Rogers followed General Jeffrey Amherst's instructions to "take your revenge" for the terrifying border raids the Indians from St. François had perpetrated on the New England frontier since the seventeenth century, but he ignored the orders to spare women and children. The raid provided one of the great stories of the French and Indian War, told in taverns by survivors. Rogers wrote a pungent but brief description of the massacre in his 1765 *Journal*.¹ Years later Kenneth Roberts, after retracing Rogers' route to St. François with William Ross of St. Albans, fleshed out the story in *Northwest Passage* (1936). The popular novel climbs a series of climaxes, with hairbreadth escapes, for the Rangers were always just inches ahead of capture as they retreated from St. François.

The ballad concentrates on the last, dull plateau of starvation in the wilderness of what became northeastern Vermont, where Eben Wheeler,² eighteen, was so weak from hunger and cold he could walk no more, and "upon the mountains large and high/he all alone is left to dy." The song, by an anonymous churchgoer, strangely parallels a dying Indian's death chant. It contains little "history," but allowing for a bit of poetic (doggerel) license, it rings true.

The selections come from thirty-four quotations devoted to God's judgments on saints and sinners transcribed by Warder H. Cadbury, John R. Cuneo and T.D. Seymour Bassett. Manuscript copies, if not printed broadsides, of the ballad must have circulated in the nineteenth century, for both Abner Morse's *Descendants of Puritans* (1859), and F.D. Pierce's *History of Grafton* seem aware of it.³ The late

Ben Tight of Athol, Massachusetts, discovered a torn and waterstained copy, which Warder H. Cadbury of Albany presented to Wilbur Collection of the University of Vermont. A full text will appear in a forthcoming history of Southbury, Massachusetts.

The thirteenth of Septembr last⁴
which is but newly gon & past
Brave rogers with his men set out
in hopes to range the woods about

To Cannada his cours did steer
in hops to meet the indians their
& when unto St. francois came
the town they soon set all on flame

The indians he both cut & tore
who soon began to howl and roar
fort willian Henry they did cry
To think upon their cruelty

When at Lake George the English their
they did in piecies cut and tare
and now for their own cruelty
in they same manner they must dy

He was but just two Hours space
in takeing of this fatal place
& then in hast he did return
His men with hunger they did mourn

& when ten days were spent in vain
the indians ovre took them again
Near thirty men as som do cry
Now by the indians their did dy

The rest there fled into the wood
where they did dy for want of food
these men did grieve and mourn and cry
wee in these howling woods must dy

few of these men rogers there fore
conducted safe to numbr four⁵
the rest behind did their remain
wher they with Hunger firce were slain

poor Eben Wheler as they cry
in this sad wilderness did dy
upon a mountain high and strange
he their suffer deaths cruell pains

Levtennant Brigham⁶ he doth say
was the last man that came away
he was so spent with cold & week
he scarcely could Either stand or speak

Nathan brigham is his name
to southborough he does belong
in hopp he will at last obtain
a crown above an Earthly king

NOTES

¹Robert Rogers, *Journals* . . . (London: 1765), pp. 145-159, in T.D. Seymour Bassett, ed. *Outsiders inside Vermont*, 2nd ed., (Canaan, N.H.: Phoenix Publishing, 1976), pp. 13-19.

²Ebenezer Wheeler, Jr., born in Grafton, Mass., in April 1741, served in Capt. James Whipple's company at 16, and enlisted April 2, 1759, with Rogers. "While traveling through the woods they were compelled to eat ground nuts and lily roots; and, at last, roasted their shoes and powder horns and used them as food . . . Wheeler . . . was left by his companions and died upon a lonely mountain in Vermont, Oct. 24, 1759." F.C. Pierce, *History of Grafton, Mass., 1647-1879* . . . Worcester, 1879), p. 102.

³*Ibid*; and Abner Morse, *A genealogical register of the descendants of several ancient Puritans* . . . (Boston, 1859).

⁴This line indicates that the ballad was begun at least by August 1760.

⁵Charlestown, N.H. Rogers had sent a scout from Mississquoi Bay to tell Amherst that the enemy had discovered his cache, that the Rangers would return from St. François down the Connecticut River, and to send supplies to the Coos intervalles (Wells River — Woodsville). But Lieut. Stephens, after waiting a while, took Rogers for the enemy and retreated with the supplies he had brought to Wells River.

⁶Nathan Brigham, "a Lt. in the first French war . . . to avenge the massacre at Fort Wm. Henry, he . . . volunteered . . . under . . . Capt. Rogers to . . . attack St. Francis . . . they were pursued and overtaken by the Indians, who killed and scalped 30 of their number. The remainder fled into the wilderness and for the most part perished. Of the few who lived to return was Lieut. Brigham, whose deeds of valor were eulogized in ballads. He settled in Southboro . . ." Abner Morse, *Descendants of Puritans*, p. 18.