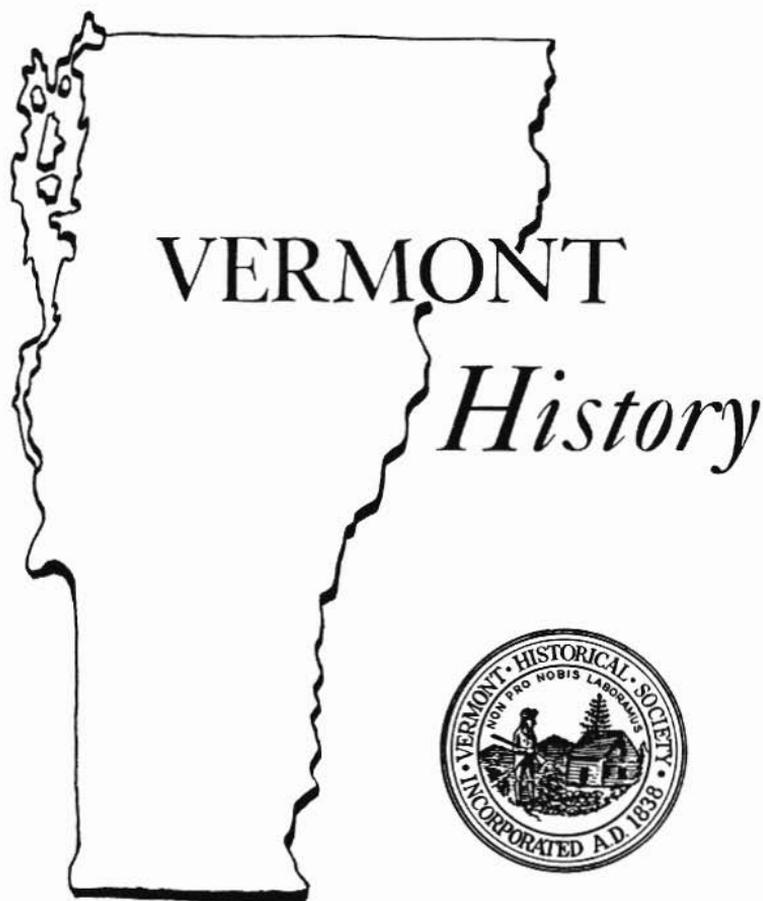


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## Excerpts from John Howe's "Smuggler's Journal"

Introduction by NEIL R. STOUT

**J**OHAN HOWE was an extraordinarily resourceful smuggler, considering that he did not take it up until he was sixty; but then, resourcefulness had always been his outstanding characteristic. Before he took up smuggling, he had been a spy and a soldier in two different wars, and an Indian trader in between.

Howe was born in 1752 or 1753, possibly in England. In 1775 he was an enlisted man in the British Army stationed in Boston. By Howe's own account, which shows signs of improving with age, in April, 1775, General Thomas Gage sent him on a spying mission to Worcester. (Gage may well have felt the need to get an opinion other than that of the two British officers, De Birniere and Browne, whose bumbling mission to Worcester I have recounted in "The Spies Who Went Out in the Cold," *American Heritage*, February, 1972.) Howe's instinct for survival and imaginative lying got him safely through the mission, and he claimed that he convinced Gage that his troops could not survive an expedition to Worcester. April 19, 1775, found him at Concord, where Major John Pitcairn sent him back to British headquarters with a plea for reinforcements. Typically, Howe got past the Americans by galloping along the road to Charlestown shouting for the locals to get their guns and ambush the retreating Redcoats.

Howe's experiences as a British spy convinced him that the Americans were going to win, so he decided to switch sides. Joel Pratt, an Albany teamster who held a commission in the New York militia, helped him get away from the British lines in Boston. In September, 1775, they both joined the Second New York Regiment of the newly-formed Continental Army, Howe as a private, Pratt as a captain. Both served throughout the Revolutionary War. Afterwards Howe went to the Ohio country and became a successful Indian trader.

At the beginning of the War of 1812, Howe was in the Michigan Territory. The territorial governor was William Hull, a Revolutionary War veteran the same age as Howe, who had just been made a brigadier general and commander of the North Western Army. Hull recruited Howe into his army, and also sent him on a spying mission to the British Army in Canada. Thus Howe was in a particularly dangerous situation when Hull surrendered his whole army to General Sir Isaac Brock at Detroit on August 16, 1812. Fortunately for Howe, he

was unrecognized by any of Brock's officers, and he, along with the rest of the enlisted men, was quickly released on parole.

Hull's men were convinced that he had sold them out to the British. (History has since absolved Hull of the charge. His court martial dodged the question of treason, but found him guilty of cowardice, neglect of duty, and unofficer-like conduct. He was sentenced to be shot, but President Madison pardoned him.) Howe, as certain as anyone of Hull's duplicity, decided to get a measure of revenge by becoming a smuggler. He sought out Captain Joel Pratt, whom he had not seen since the end of the Revolution, and told him he would "put no more confidence in the Americans. . . . I had rather trust the western Indians, for they would not sell one another for money . . . for by nature they were more likely than such men as Hull." Pratt thought smuggling "no worse than to sell a whole army for British gold," so, although he refused a share in the profits, he gave his old comrade-in-arms a horse and wagon to get him started in the business.

In 1812 smuggling was almost an honorable profession in New England (at least among Federalists; Republicans thought it thoroughly reprehensible). Vermont, where Howe based his operations, had a particularly colorful history of smuggling. Smuggler's Notch gained its name and fame during the embargo of 1807-1809; so did Jeffersonville, at its northern end, named as a Yankee joke on the man whose embargo made its existence possible. The War of 1812, and the attendant blockade by the Royal Navy, brought a resurgence of smuggling, carried out by both profiteers and anti-war protesters. Authorities on the Canadian side were happy to see it go on, for it provided Canada with food and markets, while sowing dissension in America.

The following journal, printed here with only minor alterations in punctuation and identification of places, was probably written down by Howe while he was at Captain Pratt's in the spring of 1813. Soon after, Howe started off for Mexico, where his stepson had gone about 1806, and efforts to trace his further career have been unsuccessful. Howe's journals of his experiences as a spy in 1775 and a smuggler in 1812-13 were found in Captain Pratt's papers when he died. They were printed by Luther Roby of Concord, New Hampshire, in 1827. Although they were reprinted by William Abbatt of Tarrytown, New York, in 1927, only a few writers of local histories seem ever to have heard of them. Judgment of Howe's veracity is left to the reader, although the smuggling journal printed here contains none of the obvious embellishments of his earlier spying journal. At any rate, Howe's talents as a story teller ought to win him an honored place along side Marco Polo and Captain John Smith.

## JOHN HOWE'S JOURNAL

November, 1812 - April, 1813

In the month of November, 1812, I set out for Canada. I went into Montreal, where I purchased five hundred dollars' worth of dry goods. I crossed out of [Canada] into Irasburgh, Vermont. Here I bribed the custom house officer, traveled on to Manchester [Vt.], from there to Cambridge, state of N. York, to the Chequered tavern, a noted place for smugglers to stop. Here I had my goods secreted, and here I discovered, in the evening, one of the same officers I had bribed. I continued in this place three days; in the evening I set out for Troy [N.Y.] —got almost to Lansingburgh, when my horse was seized by the bit. I asked who was there; the answer was "a Government officer." I told him to show his authority. He told me he would, when we got to the tavern. He told me I was loaded with contraband goods; but if I would give them up peaceably, he would give me up my horse and wagon, which were forfeited. I went to the tavern, where he showed me his commission. I found he was sent by one of the officers I had bribed, and I could do no other way than to surrender my load.

I went to my old friend Capt. Pratt [in Albany] and informed him that they had played another Yankee trick upon me. Here I continued a few days, and was determined to make another trial. I returned near to the line between Canada and Vermont. Here I left my horse and wagon and went into Canada, and purchased a quantity of brass wire and buttons and the most valuable hardware goods I could find, which I fetched on my back over the line and secreted in the woods at ten times.

Now I was determined to make no friends, nor let any body know my business; but I found it impossible to put my plans into execution without assistance. So I went to a man that followed the carpenter's trade, and informed him of my plan, and told him if he would assist me, I would help him to a considerable sum of money. I found him to be such a man as I wanted, an Irishman, very quick and cunning. I informed him how I had been treated by the Americans, and that I did not mean to trust them again. This pleased him so well, that I believe he would have given up his life for me.

I told him I wanted him to make me a coffin as large as he ever made, that would be in good shape, colored black. We went to work and carved out of a block the shape of a man's head, and made a skull-cap which we put on which looked like natural hair. Then we took a white linen cloth, dipped it in a composition paste, made of milk,

blood and flour, spread this on the face, to make it look as if it was in a state of putrefaction. Now we took our coffin, and started for the woods where our goods were concealed. Here we went to work and filled up the coffin, leaving room for the artificial head. After that the lid which had a pane of glass in it for any person to view the corpse which wished to. Then my Irishman went to work to fit a box in my wagon, to set the coffin on, which he said I could fill with broadcloths. Accordingly I set out for Canada after a back load of broadcloths. On my return I carried my cloth to the place where the coffin was covered up, and concealed it. The next night we took the wagon with the box in it, painted black, near to the place where our goods were concealed. Then we went and conveyed the coffin on our shoulders to the hearse, and placed it on the box, which was filled with cloth. In this solemn manner I set off. When I parted with my friend I gave him one hundred and fifty dollars, and told him to take his pay out of it, buy goods with the remainder, and conceal them where we concealed the others.

I traveled on. When daylight appeared, windows and doors were crowded as I passed the houses. I passed on until twelve o'clock, without any questions being asked, where I stopped to refresh myself and horse. I was enquired of what corpse I had. I informed them that it was a gentleman who died in the army, who some days before his death requested that his remains should be carried to Newport and interred among his relatives. I removed the pall from off the coffin, which was made of good black broadcloth, and told them they could view the corpse if they wished. Two or three men stepped up, and seeing the ghastly look, started back and said, "drive on, we don't wish you to stop here, perhaps the man died of the small pox." I started on, and the greatest difficulty I experienced was finding stopping places to refresh; no one was willing to have me stop. I continued on through Brattleboro in Vermont, from thence to Northampton, Massachusetts, driving night and day, through Northbridge and Uxbridge. I arrived in the state of Rhode Island about ten o'clock. I drove until about two o'clock in the morning, when I saw a light at a cooper's shop, and there I found two men making lime casks. As I understood they were manufacturing lime near this place, I informed them of my business, and wished to buy two lime casks, and if they would help me shift my goods, I would pay them to their satisfaction, telling them I owed money and was afraid my goods would be attached for debt. In one hour my goods were shifted into two casks and headed up, and put in my wagon, and my coffin was burnt. I paid them ten dollars, extorting a solemn promise from them that they would keep it a secret. By sun-

rise my goods were safe on board a team prepared for that purpose, to go to Boston. I put my horse up in Pawtucket, a small village in Rhode Island. Here I took the stage and went on to Boston. Here I found the gentleman I had engaged the goods to in Canada, provided I could get them here. This proved to be a very profitable trip. I got the cash for my goods, and returned to Pawtucket.

I now took my horse and wagon and returned to my friend on the Canada line. I found he had purchased and brought over the line a considerable quantity of wire. I told him I should not make another trip until sleighing. I told him he must go to work and make a large, bungling, two-horse sleigh. From here I went to my old friend, Capt. Pratt, in the State of N. York. I informed him I had found a friend, an European, who was yet faithful. Capt. Pratt made this remark, "don't let him Hull you at last."

Now I returned to the Canada line. By this time it had got to be about the middle of December. Here I found my old friend had got the sleigh done, and an ingenious piece of work it was; it was plank sides, each side consisted of two planks hollowed out, then put together water tight. He informed me that the sides were filled with cards of treble gilt buttons; the braces of the sleigh were steel, covered with wood; the tongue of the sleigh was a bar of steel covered with wood.

I informed my friend that I wanted his wife and two small children to go with me to Boston, for which I would pay him a handsome sum (he had two boys, one about nine, the other eleven years old). Pat started a little at this, and said, "we will go and see Peggy." I related to her the whole affair, promising her that she should be well used, and I would leave five hundred dollars with her husband, which they should be at liberty to take out their pay when we returned, as they see proper. They both agreed to my proposal. I told them we should not get ready before the first of February. I told them they must clothe themselves warm, and put old clothes outside, which would denote poverty, and carry each a suit of good clothes. I told the man that I wanted an old-fashioned chest, the lid hanging by one hinge, also a box fixed forward for the woman to ride on, made comfortable and easy, one similar behind for the boys. After giving these directions, I set off for the purpose of buying and packing goods, which I concealed in a hay stack. When I concluded that I had collected as many goods as I could carry with safety, we began to fill our chest and boxes. These goods consisted chiefly of silks and cambricks. The box on which the boys sat was filled with silk gloves, leaving room for them to sit. On the top of the chest and on each box were old bedclothes, partly burnt; two old-fashioned

chairs, bottoms nearly out, were fastened on the top of the chest; some poor bedding was also fastened on; two large stone jugs were filled with ribbons, the noses broken off, and stuffed with rags. These with one female spaniel comprised my load, with a family who were not afraid of cold weather.

Now I purchased another horse, and on the 25th of Jan. 1813, I set out for Boston and travelled all day, and at night we stopped. I and my Irish family understood our business and all told one story; we were asked where we were from and where we were going; I answered that I was moving a poor family that was burnt out by the British and Indians, to try to find employment in some cotton factory in Massachusetts or Rhode Island. We continued here until the next day; after breakfast we set out. Here they charged us nothing for entertainment, and gave us something to eat on the way. The snow was deep and the roads poor. The first day of February I arrived at Windsor [Vt.], on Connecticut river. Here we tarried all night at a private house. In the morning we crossed the river into Cornish, New Hampshire. Nothing in particular had happened until now, when two men stepped up to my sleigh and said they should search for contraband goods. By this time the two boys began to cry. The old lady gave them a few Irish shots, and raising herself on end, she threw them a bunch of squares and small clothes [underwear] prepared for the purpose. The men then stepped back, and I picked up the bundle, and we went on about three miles, where we stopped and refreshed ourselves and horses. Here we related what had taken place back; they told us that one of them was a customhouse officer, who searched every team that came along. Here they charged us nothing, and gave the children some clothing. Now we set off; nothing extraordinary happened that day.

We arrived at Washington, New Hampshire. Here we staid at one Dea. Farnsworth's; they told us they were afraid we should meet with trouble at Hillsborough, for the custom house officers searched everything that came along. I asked what sort of a man he was. They answered that he was a large, fleshy man, and had lost a thumb off one of his hands. A by-stander remarked that he had taken a great many goods that the government would be none the better for. The landlady said he was tenderhearted to his own family, and perhaps would favor them under their present circumstances. They told me he was a man that feared nothing except sickness, but was very much terrified with any contagious disorder. The spotted fever prevailed in that part of the country, and he was very much terrified. In the morning we set out. They charged us nothing for our entertainment.

We had about six miles to go before we come to the dangerous place. We got within two miles of there, and stopped in the woods out of sight, where we refreshed with some brandy, and gave the two boys very large portions. About the time we arrived at the village, it began to operate, which terminated in their puking. Here was a large collection of people. This officer, who had terrified so many, stepped up and says, "what have you got aboard, man?" The woman rose so as to show herself to good advantage, presented him with the bundle of small clothes, and told him to examine them. This caused a great laughter. He walked round to the opposite side of the sleigh, and put his hand on the old bed. The spaniel set her hair erect, and growled; he snatched his hand quick from the sleigh, exclaiming, "what in h--l have you got here?" He walked round to the hind end, where the two boys were sitting with their heads on one shoulder, discharging a load from their stomachs; when I stepped up to him, and asked him where I could obtain a doctor. He asked what ailed my boys; I told him I was afraid they had got the spotted fever, they were taken about two miles back. Then he began to call by name half a dozen boys to come away from the sleigh, and run himself into the store, halooing to "drive on, and get out of that neighborhood." Some ran with biscuit and threw into the sleigh, and one threw in some salted salmon. Now we started off. There was a toll-gate within a few rods, and this great officer came out of the store and said, "drive on, we will pay your toll."

We drove on to Francestown, [N.H.], without any difficulty. Here I met a man from Boston, whom I had written to since I started from Canada. Here the whole business was understood by the landlord, and this gentleman. Here was a fresh span of horses immediately put on to my sleigh, and off I set with a fresh team. I went thro' Mount Vernon and Amherst, [N.H.] to Dunstable, [Mass.]. Here we lay by all day, doctoring our sick boys, as we pretended. We were now at a tavern where the landlord himself was a smuggler, and understood the business I was upon. At night we set off again and travelled on to a town called Woburn, ten miles out of Boston, where we left the Boston road and steered a westerly course into a remote place, to a private house. Here we put up, and my cargo was unloaded at this house, my sleigh taken to pieces, and found everything safe. Here the goods were all carried down cellar and here my family dressed up in their best clothes. Here I cut up my old sleigh, under pretence that I would not draw it any further. Here I took one of my horses, borrowed a saddle, and set off to buy a second-hand lumber sleigh, which by noon I accomplished, and returned. I took my little family in my sleigh and carried them to

the stage tavern, where I paid their passage to Burlington, Vermont, and furnished them with money to defray their expenses.

Now I set out for Boston with my sleigh. At night my goods came safe to Boston in the middle of a load of hay. My old furniture I left behind for the good it had done. This load of hay was unloaded in the evening, and the goods conveyed to the store. Here we overhauled the goods, and they were divided between three men, who paid me the cash price agreed on before. Now I took my cash, bought me a load of fresh fish, and set off for Francestown. I would just remark that I had my spaniel with me. I arrived at Francestown, where I shifted horses. Here a man wished to employ me to fetch him some goods. He said he was deeply concerned in this business, but on a larger scale, and further told me he expected to have part of the goods I had carried to Boston. Now I set off for Burlington. I stopped for a few minutes at Hillsborough, at the store kept by the custom house officer whom I had out-generaled. Here I saw a man that I mentioned in my former journal, who conveyed me to Marlborough when I was a spy [for General Thomas Gage in 1775], but I did not make myself known to him; it was by some person calling him by name that I knew him. Here the custom-house officer asked me how my sick children were, and where I left them. I told him I left them ten miles from Boston with some friends, and that the children were better. Now I started on my journey. Nothing particular took place until I arrived at Burlington. Here I sold my fish to good advantage, and found my little family at one of her brothers'. We stayed here a day or two, and set off. When we arrived at home we found Pat busily employed in his domestic affairs. Never did I see greater rejoicing than at this meeting, it being four weeks and two days since we parted. Now I settled my bill with my old friend, and all I could make him take for his trouble, and family, was two hundred dollars. I left my sleigh here, with one horse and wagon and then set off for my old friend Capt. Pratt. I arrived at Capt. Pratt's the latter part of February. Here I reckoned up my money, and found I had cleared 3250 dollars.

Here I continued until April, when I set off for my old Irish friend. . . . we concluded to make one trip to Boston on foot, in the garb of a female dress. Accordingly, we went into Canada and purchased a large quantity of silks, principally gloves. Then we drest ourselves in home-spun frocks, check'd aprons, Quaker bonnets, put our goods into petticoats, sewed them up tight, slung them to our backs, and off we set, with our razors and apparatus to keep our beards shaved close, for this was the greatest difficulty we had to surmount in our disguise. In this

manner we travelled, well entertained for our money. When enquired of what our business was, we told them that we were after employment in some cotton factory. We travelled on the same road through Washington, Hillsborough, and Francestown, to Dunstable. Here I wrote on to Boston to have them meet me at the old place where I cut up the old sleigh, and to fetch me two suits of second-hand clothes. We went on to this house, and the same night were met there by a gentleman from Boston. Here we shifted clothes and immediately set off for Boston. Next day our goods were fetched to Boston in a load of charcol. Here we sold our goods, took our cash, took the stage and set off for Burlington, where we made a short tarry. From here we set off for home. . . . I made a present of one horse and sleigh to my old friend, took my other horse and wagon, and set off for New York for my old friend Capt. Pratt. . . . I stayed three months, then set off for Mexico, in the Spanish Dominions, in search of William Frye, my wife's son.