



Crean Brush vs. Ethan Allen: A Winner's Tale

*A victor's version of the past reaffirmed
the Revolution for an anxious present and
an ambiguous future.*

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Crean Brush, an Irish soldier and lawyer, came to colonial New York about 1762 and settled in Westminster, in the region east of the Green Mountains that New York organized as Cumberland County in the same year. A Crown official, land speculator, and member of the New York Assembly for Cumberland County in the early 1770s, Crean Brush comes down to us as one of the villains in the New Hampshire Grants controversy and the early years of the Revolution in New York and Boston, who properly died a degraded suicide in 1778. Vermont's historians have represented him as a rootless, vaguely Irish figure whose major sin was to chair the New York Assembly's committee that wrote the bill outlawing Ethan Allen and other leaders of the Green Mountain Boys in 1774. Ethan Allen and Crean Brush have served a common purpose in the story of Vermont. In their afterlives as, respectively, villain and hero, Brush and Allen have contributed to the historical narrative by which Americans require their past to justify and give certainty to their present and future.¹

Crean Brush was the son of a family staunchly loyal to the British Crown since at least the late seventeenth century, when his great-grandfather, John Brush (1662–1741), served as a Williamite officer in a Dutch regiment against the Jacobites in the major Irish battles of the 1680s and 1690s, including at Derry, Aughrim, and the Boyne. He was rewarded with a treasury warrant in 1696 for his military service, with which he bought a small number of forfeited Abercorn properties near Omagh in County Tyrone. He later purchased property in Meath at Kilrush and in Dublin city from the Williamite Commissioners sale in

1703. After John's death his son, Crane I (1680–1758), mortgaged with three of his own sons (James, Crane II, and Roland) the properties acquired by patriarch John for his service to William II. Crane I thus assured his own maintenance in old age and the family's continuance in the confiscated properties, one of which was Darkmany, a 100-acre farm and stone house in Omagh where he lived with his son Crane II (1703–1767) and his family. Crane I's youngest son, Roland Ash-Brush (d. 1775), resided on the family's property in Kilrush, County Meath. The middle son, the Reverend James Brush (1704–1777), B.A. and M.A. from the University of Glasgow, was comfortably settled with his large family as vicar of Garvagh and bishop-elect of Dromore, County Down. He also administered the Church of Ireland estate in Dromore and held the family's interest in several Dublin city properties. By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, the progeny of John Brush were solidly based in the middle class as minor landed gentry.²

Among the descendants of John Brush, his great-grandson, Crean Brush III (1727–1778) of Darkmany in Omagh, carried on the family tradition of loyalty to the Crown. Between 1757 and 1760 he married and became a father in Ireland. After his wife died in childbirth he placed his daughter Elizabeth Martha with his brother-in-law John Cushing in Dublin. Brush emigrated to New York, where he adopted Crean as the variant spelling of his name, and quickly obtained employment as assistant to Goldsbroow Banyar, deputy secretary to the provincial assembly. In 1764 he was licensed as an attorney and formed a partnership with another Irish lawyer, John Kelly, who also speculated in wild lands, despite banishments and condemnation for his loyalist sympathies by the revolutionary governments of New York and Vermont. Brush rose in colonial society with help from Banyar and Kelly and a beautiful new wife, Margaret Schoolcraft, daughter of a well-known family in New York's Schoharie Valley. She brought to the marriage her late sister Anna's talented, illegitimate, six-year-old daughter, Frances Montresor. Brush continued in New York City until 1770, when he took his new family two hundred miles north to settle in recently established and sparsely populated Cumberland County on the Connecticut River, where he remained a government supporter.³

From 1763 to 1771 three governors of colonial New York had asserted a legally dubious authority to grant unsettled lands, an arrogation of executive power easily corrupted by granting townships in the vastness north of Albany to family members and political favorites. Brush's loyal partisanship was well rewarded. In 1772 he was appointed Cumberland County clerk, surrogate judge, and administrator of all civil and military oaths. In April of the same year, New York

Governor William Tryon granted 32,000 acres in Albany County to thirty-two associates, including his son-in-law Edmund Fanning, Golds-brow Banyar, John Kelly, and Crean Brush. Two days later Brush and several others conveyed their shares to Tryon, completing the circle of appointments and payoffs. By early 1775 Brush had acquired over 20,000 acres in the provinces of New York and New Hampshire, all of those in New York coming to him as Crown grants, including those in the New York counties later separated and reorganized as the state of Vermont.⁴

The common political corruptions of eighteenth-century British government marked Crean Brush as a loyal Crown officeholder, the very model of a colonial placeman. Representing Cumberland County when the New York Assembly sat in 1773, Brush was comfortably established as a land speculator with extensive holdings, a lawyer, and a prominent political figure at home and in the provincial capital. His very comfortable and improving circumstances promised a prosperous future. But the revolutionary turmoil of colonial America during the mid-1770s completely reversed his fortunes. The American dispute with the Crown turned to violent resistance in 1775 as colonial militia roughly handled British regulars in Massachusetts during April. After a force of Green Mountain Boys and Connecticut militia led by Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold seized the crumbling fortresses at Ticonderoga and Crown Point on Lake Champlain in early May, Crean Brush exerted his loyalist energies in the New York Assembly to help lead Tory opposition to the revolutionary Continental Congress. Only the year before he had also been a central figure in preparing legislation—the Bloody Acts of 1774—that designated Ethan Allen and other leaders of the Green Mountain Boys as outlaws with rewards on their heads for violently resisting New York’s enforcement of land grant titles that overlapped grants first issued by Governor Benning Wentworth of New Hampshire in a region west of the Green Mountains that New York had subsequently organized as Albany and Charlotte counties. Brush also held substantial acreage in Albany County around Lake George. But soon after the New York Assembly adjourned in late spring of 1775, the revolutionary New York Congress formed and quickly took its seat in the Assembly’s chamber. The four northeastern counties claimed by New York, a region of heated land claim disputes, were in a war zone, and Crean Brush faced arrest or worse both in New York City and back home in Westminster.⁵

The remaining three years of Crean Brush’s life took him first in mid-1775 to British-held Boston, where he was commissioned by General Gage to evacuate the stocks of mercantile warehouses in order to

house troops in them during the coming winter. While in Boston, Brush twice sought authority to enlist a regiment of loyalists that would suppress Ethan Allen and his “banditti” and take back Cumberland County and the rest of the region west of the Connecticut River, including the disputed New Hampshire Grants that settlers were even then organizing into an independent state they would name Vermont in mid-1777. Brush sketched offensive and defensive strategies to restore the Crown’s authority and crush the revolutionaries, especially Allen, and urged the British commanders Gage and Howe to approve his plans. But nothing came of these schemes. In April 1776, commanding a ship loaded with confiscated property, Brush left Boston in the British retreat to Halifax, but was captured by an American privateer and brought back to Boston. A Patriot court failed to convict him of any anti-revolutionary crimes, but kept him in jail. In November 1777 Brush disguised himself in his wife’s clothes and escaped to New York City, where he was restored to the military rolls. His wife joined him, but Crean Brush died in the spring of 1778, within days of the exchange of Ethan Allen for British Colonel Alexander Campbell in New York. Allen had been taken prisoner after a failed attempt to seize Montreal in September 1775, was sent to Pendennis Castle in Cornwall, England, then for a month was held at Cobh, Ireland, and finally was held in New York on parole for over a year before the exchange.⁶

The new state of Vermont confiscated and sold Brush’s house, barn, and law library in Westminster. His lands were also taken by Vermont’s confiscation commissioners and leased for fees that helped support the new state’s government. A year after Brush’s death, the Vermont legislature listed him with his old law partner John Kelly among 126 loyalists who were banished from Vermont and threatened with forty lashes if they returned. Curiously, none of Kelly’s land was confiscated, and soon after the war ended the Vermont legislature granted him at least one township and a portion of another. Margaret Brush and Frances Montresor returned to Westminster in 1783 after the cessation of hostilities to recover their inheritance of one-third shares of Crean Brush’s landed estate. But the legislature had granted most of Brush’s 20,000 acres to settlers and speculators, and other settlers who had leased the land after it was first confiscated now claimed outright ownership. His estate was irretrievable.⁷

In 1784, Ethan Allen, whose leadership against both the colonial government of New York and the British Crown had haunted Brush during his months in Boston, formed an unforeseeable alliance with Crean Brush’s heirs by marrying the young widow Frances Montresor in Westminster at the home of his friend and attorney Stephen R. Brad-

ley. Until his death in 1789 Allen, with Bradley's assistance, led his wife and her aunt's unsuccessful legal efforts to acquire Brush's land in Westminster and New York. After Allen's death, Margaret Brush and Frances Montresor Allen sold their interests in Brush's estate to his daughter Elizabeth Martha in Ireland, by then married to Thomas Norman of Drogheda. She came to America in 1795 seeking to recover her inheritance, only to be advised by John Kelly that Brush's Vermont lands were "irrecoverably lost" through a land claims settlement negotiated by New York and Vermont in 1791. Thomas Norman later joined his wife to settle at Lake George in Caldwell, New York, on land originally granted to her father by New York's Governor Tryon.⁸

The vanquished loyalist Crean Brush acquired an afterlife in the standard nineteenth-century accounts of the origins of the state of Vermont. He appeared in regional histories and historical fiction as an Irish macaroni whose city manners and fancy dress offended the simple and honest rural folk of Westminster. As the Tory New York legislator who drafted the infamous Bloody Acts of 1774 outlawing Ethan Allen and others who forcefully resisted efforts to enforce New York land titles that overlapped New Hampshire land grants, he was a useful foil in the story of the heroic founding fathers. A Boston newspaper claimed Brush killed himself, though the manner of his death was not reported in New York. Even Brush's death was exploited as an example of loyalism's moral degradation. Traditional accounts of his death—suicide either by cutting his own throat or by a gunshot—"his brains besmearing the walls of his apartment"—featured a British payroll officer in New York rejecting his appeals and shaming him into suicide for his conduct in Boston. His career exhibits the mixed motives and a range of both material success and degradation that could result from loyalism in violent revolutionary times. As reported by nineteenth-century American regional historians, the standard account of Crean Brush's loyalist and antirevolutionary activities during his sixteen years in America came to a properly bathetic and dishonorable conclusion with his death.⁹

The received account of Brush's American years comes to us, then, as a moral fable told by the victorious Revolution's heirs, in a regional chapter of the Whig version of the Revolution's history. So understood, the moral tale of Crean Brush the corrupt loser shows how eighteenth-century loyalism could serve American, especially Vermont history's purpose to enforce a victor's version of the past that reaffirmed the Revolution for an anxious present and an ambiguous future. By the 1830s, when postrevolutionary America's second generation began to gather the documents of the Revolution and the early Republic, the political and moral order apparently confirmed by that successful struggle

seemed to lack the certitude that victory had ascribed to it. The anxieties induced by the social ferment of the 1830s and 1840s contributed to the popular appeal of historical novels with clearly defined Patriot heroes and counter-revolutionary villains. In New England, Daniel Pierce Thompson's frequently reprinted novels, *The Green Mountain Boys* (1839) and *Locke Amsden* (1847), gave to Ethan Allen a glorious afterlife in the popular imagination that eventually led to enshrining him in the Statuary Hall at the United States Capitol. Defender of poor settlers on the New Hampshire grants against New York land jobbers, hero of Ticonderoga, hanging prosecutor of loyalists, rescuer of babes lost in the woods, and diplomatic saviour of the young State of Vermont from a threatening British army in Quebec, Thompson's Allen was noble, tall, blond, and buckskin-clad. In one of the most frequently reprinted novels of the nineteenth century and later in Benjamin Hall's *History of Eastern Vermont*, Allen's loyalist antagonists, such as Justus Sherwood, the former-Green Mountain Boy turned loyalist leader, and Crean Brush, the foppish placeman and self-aggrandizing Crown officer, could represent much that the Revolution had defeated and expelled from American life.¹⁰

The stark black and white shades of Crean Brush's afterlife and the concurrent mythic construction of Ethan Allen suggest, however, that obviously no single narrative of the past tells the full story and that the victor's version deserves scrutiny. In violent struggles for political power contestants may raise their personal stakes in the outcome, and their own economic interests might even merge with community or civil life. Ethan Allen, for example, the demon of Crean Brush's dreams of recovering his power and land in Cumberland County, has come down to us as the altruistic defender of liberty and the young state of Vermont. Yet the Allen family's titles to over 200,000 acres of New Hampshire Grants could have been rendered worthless and their land business would have collapsed had New York's claim to jurisdiction over the lands it had granted west of the Connecticut been enforced by a British victory over the American revolutionaries. As the story of the loyalist Crean Brush and his antagonist Ethan Allen reminds us, winners seldom examine their own complex motives, and history from their point of view usually avoids such analysis.

NOTES

¹ Benjamin Hall's *History of Early Vermont* (New York: Appleton, 1857) is the earliest account of Crean Brush's American career. Though Hall used important New York and Vermont documents

from the colonial and revolutionary years, his version of Brush came in good part from oral traditions communicated to him distant in time from that era.

² Brush Family Tree, *Blackwood Pedigree for County Families*, Blackwood Mss., Linenhall Library, Belfast; Burke's *Irish Family Records* (London: Burke's Peerage, Ltd., 1876), 178–79. Dean H. B. Swazy, *The Biographical Succession Lists for Dromore Diocese* (Dundalk: privately printed, 1925); J. G. Simms, *Williamite Conquest in Ireland 1690–1703* (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), 89. Of the 9,681 acres confiscated from Claude Abercorn, Earl of Tyrone, his Protestant brother James purchased 8,982 from the Confiscation Commissioners and the remainder was awarded to Williamite soldiers. *Calendar of Home Office Papers*, 1696, 100.

³ Goldsbroow Banyar (1724–1815) came to America in 1734 and eight years later was appointed deputy secretary of the province of New York, deputy clerk of the Council and deputy clerk of the Supreme Court. At the outbreak of the Revolution he retired to Rhinebeck and refused to cooperate with the British army in the Hudson River valley. John Kelly speculated profitably in New York, New Hampshire, and Vermont grants before and after the Revolution. Kelly and Crean Brush's daughter, Elizabeth Norman, were among those paid by Vermont in 1791 to quiet land claims based on New York grants dating from the 1760s, which was a negotiated condition for New York withdrawing its objections to Vermont joining the Union, and he advised the Vermont General Assembly to grant a township to John Jay for his role in settling the long-standing dispute. Frances Montresor (1760–1830) was the child of a liaison between Anna Schoolcraft and John Montresor, a major in the engineers corps during the Seven Years War. The affair became the subject of Susannah Rowson's much-reprinted sentimental romance novel, *Charlotte Temple* (Boston, 1790). When Brush arrived in Westminster in 1770 as the county's third lawyer, Cumberland County held fewer than 5,000 inhabitants.

⁴ John Murray, Earl of Dunmore, granted 450,000 acres while governor of New York for eight months in 1770–1771, over 10 percent of which was deeded back to him. In July 1771 he granted 32,000 acres to 32 prominent New Yorkers supportive of Crown policies in a region where the province of New Hampshire had already granted five townships. William Tryon resumed the New York governorship in 1772 and continued the corruption with another 32,000-acre grant in April. New York State Library, *Albany Land Papers*, Patents Volume 16, Deed 9, 97; see E. B. O'Callaghan, ed., *Documentary History of the State of New York* (Albany: Weed, Parson & Co., 1849–51), 8: 213.

⁵ For Ethan Allen's response to Brush's role in composing and passing the Bloody Acts, see John J. Duffy, et al., eds., *Ethan Allen and His Kin: Correspondence 1772–1816* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1998), 1: 16–17. On the dissolution of the New York Provincial Assembly, see "Proceedings of the New York Provincial Assembly, Winter 1775," Peter Force, ed., *The American Archives: consisting of a collection of authentick records*, 9 volumes (Washington, D.C.: prepared and published by the authority of an act of Congress, 1837–1853), 1: 1281 ff. By late April armed mobs roamed New York's streets looking for prominent Tories, but many of them had left town, like Brush, or escaped to safety on HMS *Kingfisher* in New York harbor. In May a meeting of town delegates in Cumberland County elected representatives to the newly formed New York Congress. New York State Library, Colonial Historical Mss., 1: 97, and *The American Archives*, 2: 918–934.

⁶ Hall mentions Brush's military experience in Ireland as the basis for his rank of colonel in New York. Dublin city electoral polls list a Major Crane Brush for 1760. His plans for a loyalist regiment and a strategy to regain Cumberland County and the New Hampshire Grants from Allen and the Green Mountain Boys appeared in the *Boston Gazette*, 15 April 1776, a few days after he was captured. Office of the Massachusetts Secretary of State, *Revolution Messages 1775–1783*, 297–319. Eugene A. Coyle and John J. Duffy, "Ethan Allen's Irish Friends," *Vermont History*, 63 (1995), 69–80.

⁷ Brush's death was reported without details in the *Boston Gazette*, a Patriot newspaper that regularly published Samuel Adams's revolutionary pronouncements. In New York, neither James Rivington's *Loyal Gazette* nor Hugh Gaines's *New York Mercury* mentioned Brush's death. Preparing a suit by Elizabeth and Thomas Norman to recover a debt of the Burt family of Walpole, New Hampshire, owed to Crean Brush's estate, attorney Stephen R. Bradley secured a deposition in New York City in 1800 from the former Loyalist Timothy Lovell who testified to selling a load of firewood to Crean Brush in 1778 about an hour before his death, an unlikely transaction before suicide. Cf. Norman file, Stephen R. Bradley Papers, Special Collections, Bailey Howe Library, University of Vermont. The only surviving contemporary record of the event is a petition for support by Margaret Brush to Roger Morris, Commissioner of Refugee Claims for New York, January 20, 1779, *Royal Institution Transcription*, 4: 17–18, in which she tells Morris that nothing remains from Brush's military pay.

⁸ Frances Montresor's first husband, a young New York merchant named John Buchanan, died in service as a King's Loyal Ranger. See also the Ethan Allen–Stephen R. Bradley correspondence on Allen's efforts to secure and liquidate the Brush estate in Duffy, *Ethan Allen and His Kin*, 1: 217–218, 248–250. John Kelly to Elizabeth Norman, *Documentary History of the State of New York*,

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4: 1024–1025. Benjamin Hall interviewed Elizabeth Brush Norman's son, Henry, in Lake George for information on her immigration and settlement on her father's land in New York.

⁹ The *Boston Evening Post*, 11 July 1774, spelled out the revolution's dress code, true Patriot homespun. On Brush's death as a suicide, Hall cites the Patriot *Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, 21 May 1778.

¹⁰ For a complete summary of the nineteenth-century view of Crean Brush, including most of Hall's many factual errors, see the text of an internet web site by Rachel V. Duffalo, www.usgennet.org/usa/vt/town/westminster/brush.html.