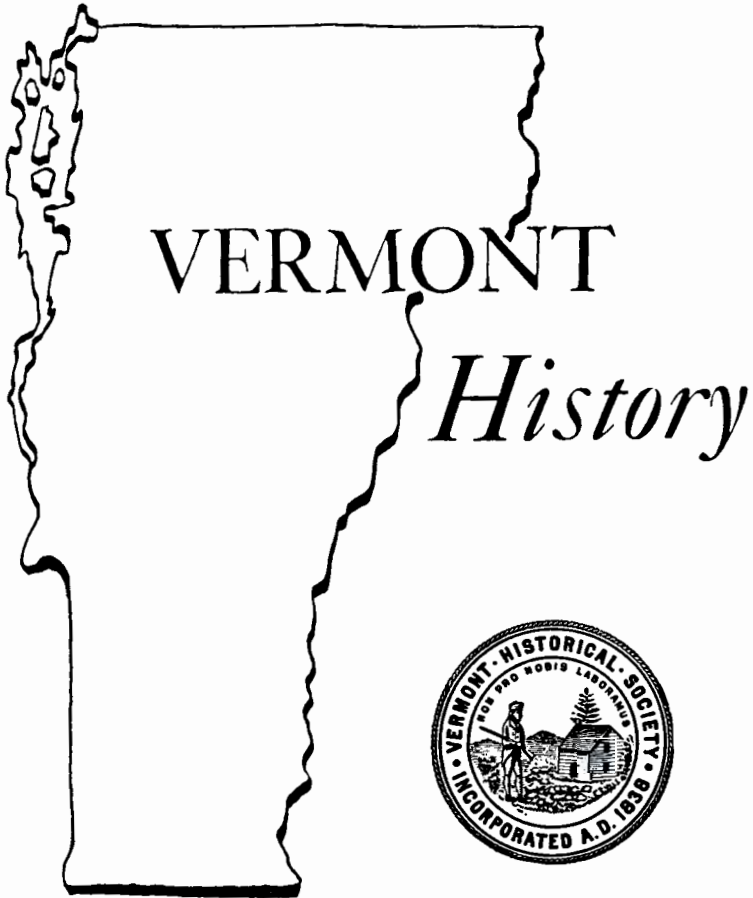


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## Reflections on Jacksonian Democracy and Militia Reform: The Waitsfield Militia Petition of 1836

By MARILYN S. BLACKWELL AND JAMES M. HOLWAY

A group of petitioners from Waitsfield and surrounding towns addressed the Vermont legislature during the 1836 session with concern for militia reform. Their grievances and the language of their petition reflected attitudes that emerged during the turbulent 1830s, a period characterized by interest in reform, reassertion of democratic rights and increased class consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Largely working men, these petitioners expressed their frustration with a militia system that required the common man to shoulder the full burden of service while allowing the community elite to avoid duty. The petition from Waitsfield added to the growing debate over militia reform and exemplified concerns symptomatic of the decade.

During the early nineteenth century Vermonters accepted the strong tradition of military service inherited from the frontier period. The belief that citizens must bear arms in defense of their homesteads became paramount during the New Hampshire Grants controversy of the 1770s.<sup>2</sup> The Vermont constitution formally established a trained militia force that initially served the vital needs of the fledgling republican government. Maintenance of a stable environment for settlement and hopes for admission to the Union were partially dependent upon a military force that could protect against external threats and insure "domestic tranquility."<sup>3</sup> Having established the right to self-defense, Vermont lawmakers insured universal conscription through the military law of 1779, requiring males from sixteen to fifty to bear arms.<sup>4</sup> This militia of citizens organized for drill and discipline provided temporary service in the public interest. Fear

of a standing army, such as the British model, helped prevent the establishment of a professional force.<sup>5</sup>

Support of the citizen-soldier concept reached a peak after the War of 1812, which had reinforced the value of the militia for Vermonters. The militia law of 1818 specified that men from eighteen to forty-five who appeared for drill properly equipped were exempt from prosecution for debt, and their polls were excluded from the state tax list.<sup>6</sup> Restating prior statutes, the act laid out an array of exemptions from service that included ministers, judges, public officials, physicians, teachers, ferrymen and millers, all those who served vital political and economic functions.<sup>7</sup> Two days a year were set aside for drill. June training gained its reputation for conviviality during this period and increasingly served a social as well as military function. Through its numerous exemptions, which included former officers, and fines imposed for absence from drill or inadequate equipment, the system insured that the wealthy and political elite could avoid service.

By 1830 attitudes toward the militia had shifted significantly as resentment increased toward this duty imposed upon workingmen. The legislature, sympathetic to new manufacturing interests, had excused men involved in iron production from training days.<sup>8</sup> In 1829 it had eliminated the exemption of polls from the tax list for local schools and highways and repealed September drill day.<sup>9</sup> Militiamen still had to supply their own equipment and, more importantly, contributed the time spent on training during one of the busiest farming seasons. The holiday atmosphere surrounding June training masked a mounting discontent on the part of those "equipped" toward those who managed to obtain exemption on the basis of political or social position. The officers' tradition of treating militiamen to rum on training day, a custom initiated to increase officers' popularity and insure their reelection as captains,<sup>10</sup> resulted in the association of militiamen with drunkenness. Those exempt from service might condescendingly remark that "militiamen knew only three commands: 'Mount! Drink! Fall Off!'"<sup>11</sup>

Changing attitudes toward the militia resulted in part from social movements in Vermont during the 1830s. The influence of social change was evident in Waitsfield as its residents responded, like those of many Vermont towns, to forces that swept the state and region. The temperance crusade, initially associated with a general reform movement organized by the evangelical churches, gained momentum and separate status in 1828 with the organization of the Vermont Temperance Society.<sup>12</sup> June training became an obvious target for temperance advocates, who, by focusing on the association between training and drinking, justified the abolition of militia training days as a means to further the temperance cause.<sup>13</sup>



*Criticism of the militia system was not confined to Vermont, as this 1829 print from the Library of Congress attests. Americans endorsed the ideal of the “citizen soldier,” but the reality of ineffectuality and indiscipline had led to a national demand for militia reform in the Age of Jackson. The Waitsfield petitioners, thus, were part of a larger movement.*

A Young Men’s Temperance Society, one of several in Waitsfield, was organized in 1835 with the pledge “to abstain altogether from the use of intoxicating liquors” and discourage use by others.<sup>14</sup> The constitution of another Waitsfield Temperance Society, whose membership was largely female, stressed discouraging liquor use “by all proper means and on all fit occasions.”<sup>15</sup> Temperance was clearly an active issue in Waitsfield that could dampen the traditional pleasures of June training and contribute to the denigration of militiamen by associating them with liquor abuse.

Waitsfield men evidenced renewed interest in religion during the 1830s as revivalism spread throughout the northeast. Congregationalism, dominant in the town during early settlement, lost its pervasive appeal with the organization of the Universalist Society in 1830 and the subsequent establishment of both Methodist and Baptist churches.<sup>16</sup> The appearance of new denominations in Waitsfield reflected the strong appeal of sects founded on a democratic philosophy. Universalism was particularly attractive because it guaranteed salvation to all. Unrest during the period

caused many residents to react against the orthodoxy of the Congregational Church and its practice of fundraising through an assessment based on the grand list.<sup>17</sup> Sixty-four Waitsfield men who signed the militia petition in 1836 also appeared on surviving church membership lists. Two-thirds of these men were Methodists or Universalists. Only one-third of the group held membership in the Congregational Church, which still received close to half the town's public money for support of the gospel.<sup>18</sup>

Residents questioned social as well as religious institutions. Organized in 1817, the King Hiram Masonic Lodge became inactive in 1832 and, as a result of antimasonic sentiment, members voted unanimously to dissolve in 1834.<sup>19</sup> Distrust of Masonry became another expression of the concern over equal rights and control by a privileged elite.

As Vermonters reassessed the legitimacy of their traditional institutions, the militia did not escape their scrutiny. Recognition of the need for militia reform had become widespread, but opinion was divided over outright repeal of the militia act or reform of the existing system by eliminating exemptions and providing compensation for service. Absence of a foreign threat and acceptance of the need for a professional force on the national level helped shape public attitudes that encouraged abolition of the local organization.<sup>20</sup> Many Vermont politicians, not willing to advocate elimination of exemptions, supported repeal.<sup>21</sup> In 1831 the legislature eliminated all tax exemptions for service, but promptly reinstated the exclusion of a militiaman's polls from his list for local taxes after attendance at drill dwindled.<sup>22</sup> Loyal militiamen continued to see merit in the organization while recognizing its inequities. The Waitsfield petitioners advocating reform in 1836 coupled a strong tradition of service with a compelling concern for their democratic rights. The following document [reprinted verbatim], which they submitted to Vermont lawmakers, was filed by the House of Representatives on November 4, 1836.

Petition of the Inhabitants of Waitsfield Praying for the Relief of  
the Militia

To the hon legislature of the state of Vermont now in session  
at Montpelier

We the undersigned inhabitants of the Town of Waitsfield and vicinity feeling ourselves aggrieved by the unjust and unequal proportion with which the Militia Law of this state bears upon the community then of and - upon the sacred right of petition pray that the Hon. Legislature will take the subject into consideration with that candour which it may merit - as a decent respect to others compels a community when complaining of a grievance to briefly state the cause of that grievance we shall therefore be permitted to state explicitly the features in the present code of militia laws of which we complain - first the ranks of the militia are filled with the - laborer and mechanick (to the almost utter exclusion of the wealthy) who

receive no adequate compensation for their services thus throwing the whole support of the militia upon those who are of *all* the least able to bear it as proof of this the grand list of this town is nine thous eleven Doll fifty nine cts - when as of that list only two thous. one hundred thirteen Doll and eight five cts belongs to those who serve in the militia in their own persons or by equipping minors secondly young men orphans without any natural protectors (their offspring of man deceased) are compelled while they are unable to procure a decent suit to their backs to serve in the ranks of the militia and contribute of their time and money to its support (when having no pole tax they receive not the least compensation) while their wealthy and opulent employers contribute in no way either directly or indirectly one cent - and while we recognize a well organized militia as the brightest feature of our government subserving the use of standing armies so dangerous to the liberties of a free state - while we look with admiration and exaltation upon that system which can concentrate a mill and a half of men upon any given point within the limits of this vast republic in the short space of two months and again dissolve that mass into the useful mecanick and industrious farmer. We cannot but consider it as the bulworks of our national freedom the paladium of our liberties the safeguard of all classes of community - a benefit to the publick the whole publick - not instead of a mere fraction of it - and so considering it your petitioners cannot but think that in justice that publick ought to support it - you take from us our time the source by which we gain a livelihood - and to us there is no difference between taking a dollar from our pockets - or depriving us of a source by which we receive that dollar - thus making a direct tax upon a part of community for that benefit and protection which is equally shared by the whole. - it is urged against the justice of our claims that it would impose a grievous tax upon community that our fathers suffered this evil and we their sons ought to do as much - but we ask can that system which is a grievous burthen to the whole wealth of the country with any consistency be supported by a third part of that wealth - or is it any place for an unjust and corrupt system that it is of long standing that it has come down to us with all the sin and injustice of fifty years accumulating fastened to its back - considering it this light your petitioners pray the evils which are complained of may be obviated by granting a just equivalent for those services which the state requires at our hands - appealing to the justice of the legislative authority of our own State our only resort we your petitioners abide the decision of that justice & wisdom

Waitsfield Oct 24 1836<sup>23</sup>

Names	Names
Sanford Clark	Jonathan Palmer
Rufus H Clapp	Nathaniel Wait
Luman Symonds	Lyman Mix
Levi Wait	Ira Grandy
John R Spaulding	Luther S. Burnham
Franklin Reed	James Deale

Geo D Rice  
David S. Steele  
Wm R Buzzell  
Danford F Cutler  
Edmund Rice  
Geo R Tewksbury  
James Rider  
J. S. Ware  
Roswell Morris  
Seth Chase  
Salmon Rice  
Bethuel Joslin  
Asahel Rider  
Abijah Whitcomb  
Moses Stenard  
Zadock Smith  
T. C. Kelton  
Giles L. Talcutt  
Obed Thayer  
Milo M. Goodwin  
John W. Richardson  
Daniel Moors  
James Selleck Jun.  
Daniel Taylor  
James Sumervill  
David Selleck  
Richard Strong  
Daniel Thomas  
Ebenezer Johnson  
Benjamin Corliss  
Nathaniel Thayer  
Winslow Richardson  
Zacius Drew  
Russell Drew  
Timothy E Corliss  
John Eagan  
Charles W. Nelson  
Aaron Nelson  
Edward Rodgers  
Asa Lyon  
Paul Boyce  
Silas Boyce  
Lewis Burnham  
Amasa Russ  
Orin Wheeler  
Elliot Porter  
Willard B Porter  
Francis Wilder  
Langdon Sherman  
Oliver Field  
Oliver F. Field

Anson Fisk  
Lyman Fisk  
Alonso Hitchcock  
Luther Dumas  
Lynus Norman  
Jared S. Wilder  
Rufus Barnard  
Elias Barnard  
Timothy Joslin  
Ezra Jones  
Nathan Stowell Jr  
Thomas Tinkham  
Julien Dumas  
Charles Newcomb  
Horace Phelps  
Joseph Hamilton  
John Stowell  
Stephen P. Joslin  
Hooker Joslin  
Hubbard Joslin  
Horace S. Jones  
Charles Jones  
T.G.W. Farr  
Moses J. Boyce  
Ziba W. Boyce  
Wright Haskins  
Benjamin Marble  
Jacob Marble  
William T. Stoddard  
Peter Norse  
Joseph M Stearns  
Hiram Jones  
Henry Dewey  
Joseph Wells  
Thomas Benton  
Jenison Jones  
Harry Jones  
Aaron Goss  
Timothy Reed  
George Dean  
Benjamin Reed Jr.  
Ezra Reed  
Christopher Ormsbee  
W. H. Chaffee  
Leonard W. Freeman  
Elisha P Webstr  
Alexander S Phelps  
Luke Joslin  
Pardon Bushnell  
Paschal Stowell  
Hiram Stowell

Andrew H Mills  
Silas Jones  
Daniel Brown  
Nathaniel Joslin  
Jonathan H Brown  
John Walton  
Joel Foster Jr  
Joel Foster  
Lucius Ware  
Amos Hadley  
Theophilus Bixby  
Gilman Wheeler  
Benjamin Gibson  
Edwin G Gibson  
Calvin Fullerton  
John C. Griggs  
David Randall  
Philo Ranslow  
Eligh Randall  
John S. Campbell  
Wells Hitchcock  
Frederick Richardson  
Asaph Silsby  
A Robinson

Eli Richardson  
Jonathan Lamson  
George Hadley  
Ebenezer Cutler jr  
Daniel Kimball jr  
Job House  
David Wheeler  
Nathan D House  
Alexander Mcallister  
Romeo Green  
James Burnham  
Edwin P. Burnham  
Jesse Mix  
Rufus B. Barrett  
Hosea Newcomb  
Lucius Griggs  
Luther Bixby  
John Bixby  
William Bixby  
Elisha Brigham  
Henry L Thayer  
Andrew Johnson  
Henry Hitchcock  
Roderick Richardson Jr.

A total of 162 men signed the militia petition. Eighty-three, just over half, were residents of Waitsfield. Other signers lived in Fayston, Moretown, Warren, and Northfield.<sup>24</sup> In an effort to ascertain the position of these petitioners within their community, we examined the Waitsfield group as a representative sample. Sixty-two signers were freemen in Waitsfield in 1836, representing forty-two percent of the voters in town.<sup>25</sup> Only twenty-four of the eighty-three signers from Waitsfield were militiamen in 1836. This group plus five signers who equipped minors that year comprised forty-seven percent of the militia roster for 1836.<sup>26</sup> Waitsfield signers were normally distributed by age around a mean of thirty-five.<sup>27</sup> The petition, therefore, had significant support outside the ranks of the militia and represented a public concern for close to half the town's eligible voters.

The majority of signers were farmers, like most residents of rural Waitsfield in the 1830s, and a few were craftsmen: carpenters, tanners, blacksmiths, and coopers. Merchants and professionals had only minor representation, typical for a Vermont farming town.<sup>28</sup> Waitsfield's tax list for 1834 included forty-nine petition signers whose taxable property represented twenty-four percent of the town's grand list that year. The average grand list for signers, however, approximated the average for the total list. Seventy-three percent of these petitioners had valuations under fifty dollars, only five percentage points higher than that for the



To the Honor Clerk of Waitfield

The following are the names of the Officers  
 non Commissioned Officers Musicians, and Privates belong-  
 ing to the Company of Volunteers under my command  
 that were Equip'd according to Law, and their that were not Equip'd  
 as required on the 1<sup>st</sup> Tuesday of June 1836.

✓ Henry Jones & Captain	Equip'd	1
✓ Warden Bushnell & Lieut		1
✓ Joseph H. Houghton & Lieut		1
✓ Paschal Howell		1
✓ Elisha P. Webster		1
✓ George Carpenter		1
✓ Wm. Moore		1
✓ Wm. S. Barnard & Corporal	Equip'd by Charles Swain	1
✓ Daniel B. Sherman		1
✓ Russell Lockwood		1
✓ Wm. Howell		1
✓ Wm. Green		1
✓ Lewis (Burrham)		1
✓ Luther Burrham		1
✓ David H. Rice		1
✓ Wm. Rice		1
✓ J. T. Rice		1
✓ Wm. Rice		1
✓ Wm. Rice		1

Musicians

Reproduced here is the first page of the "Return of the Infantry Company in Waitfield as inspected on June 7, 1836," which is part of the Vermont Historical Society collection. These extant, local records, as well as the petition published here, (the original is located in the Office of State Papers) represent valuable and little used sources for nineteenth century economic and social history.

entire list.<sup>29</sup> Fifty-six residents serving in the militia or equipping minors in 1834 owned twenty-nine percent of taxable property.<sup>30</sup> By 1836 that ratio had been reduced to twenty-three percent while the grand list had risen ten percent.<sup>31</sup> Militiamen did carry a disproportionate burden of service, yet the support for reform was broad based.

*Official iconography reflected American (and Vermont) ideals of the militia and its importance. This printed engraving taken from an officer's commission signed by Governor Skinner in the 1820s is a good example. Nevertheless, by the late 1830s complaints like those from Waitsfield made militia reform a central issue on the state's political agenda.*



Although the Waitsfield petitioners maintained slightly less than average economic status, a number of signers held positions of respect within the Waitsfield community. Signer Lyman Fisk was a selectman in 1836. Roderick Richardson, Jr., son of a selectman, became the town's representative to the legislature in 1837. Other prominent petitioners included: Jen-

nison Jones, a former representative, town clerk, treasurer, selectman, and successful farmer; his son Harry Jones, captain of the Waitsfield militia company in 1836; Ezra Jones, a former town clerk and selectman; and Hiram Jones, son of the prominent town official Matthias Stone Jones. Signer John C. Campbell, former militia captain and innkeeper, operated mills in Waitsfield Village.<sup>32</sup> All of these petitioners were exempt from militia duty except Harry Jones. Recognizing the inequities of a system that burdened fellow residents, they reacted in the spirit of the decade by championing militia reform.

The Waitsfield petitioners were not alone in their attempt to seek relief from the legislature, which debated militia reform throughout the decade. At its October Session, 1836, the Vermont House of Representatives referred the petition to a joint military affairs committee in conjunction with a petition requesting partial repeal of the militia law, a resolution from the House calling for reasonable compensation for military duty, and recommendations from Governor Silas Jenison for reform.<sup>33</sup> Legislators took no action that session but passed a reform bill the following year. The new law exempted those over forty from duty in peacetime, provided compensation of one dollar per day for officers and musicians on duty, and closed an exemption loophole for officers who, under the new law, had to serve for five years before being exempt.<sup>34</sup> The status of militiamen remained relatively unchanged, and militia debate continued until 1844 when the legislature repealed the militia laws.<sup>35</sup>

The campaign for militia reform during the 1830s and 1840s represented only one of the issues that emerged during the period as Vermonters scrutinized their political and social institutions. Waitsfield's militia petition delineated specific grievances perceived by men who had grown accustomed to questioning the validity of inequitable social organizations, a practice that historians closely identify with Jacksonian America. These petitioners, despite their belief in the merits of a local militia, emphasized the injustice of a system that treated men unequally. Broad support for the cause from men of average economic standing in Waitsfield and from those who appeared to have no self interest in reform was symptomatic of the spirit permeating the era. The grievance, surpassing town boundaries, gained significance with the number of signatures from nearby towns. Couched in language reminiscent of the Revolutionary period, the petition paralleled attitudes expressed by Vermont's Working Men's societies of 1830 and 1831.<sup>36</sup> As champions of the rights of the common man, these groups contributed to a period of reform dominated by interest in temperance, antimasonry, and antislavery. In this context, advocacy of militia reform became another expression of the general reassertion of equal rights.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For discussion of social movements of the 1830s see: David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment In Vermont 1791-1850*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939).

<sup>2</sup> Burton Rubenstein, "To Support the Civil With The Military Arm," in Peter H. Haraty, ed., *Put the Vermonters Ahead: A History of the Vermont National Guard 1764-1978*, (Burlington, Vt., 1979), p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>4</sup> Burton Rubenstein, "The Laws," in Haraty, *Put Vermonters Ahead*, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Vermont, *Laws of 1818*, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Terrill G. Bourcius, "The Militia After The War of 1812," in Haraty, *Put Vermonters Ahead*, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Vermont, *Laws of 1829*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>10</sup> Bourcius, "The Militia After 1812," p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> As quoted in Ludlum, *Social Ferment*, p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> Ludlum, *Social Ferment*, p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> Bourcius, "The Militia After 1812," p. 71.

<sup>14</sup> Matt B. Jones, *History of the Town of Waitsfield, Vermont 1782-1908 With Family Genealogies*, (Boston: George E. Littlefield, 1909), pp. 192-3.

<sup>15</sup> Constitution of the Waitsfield Temperance Society, MS 56, Vermont Historical Society Collections.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, *History of Waitsfield*, pp. 130-137.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129, 135, 137 and Congregational Society Membership List, 1841, Division of Gospel Fund, MS 56, VHS Collections.

<sup>19</sup> Jones, *History of Waitsfield*, p. 193.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Marro, "Vermont's Local Militia Units, 1815-1860," *Vermont History* 40 (Winter 1972): 35.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>22</sup> Vermont *Laws of 1831*, p. 28; *Laws of 1832*, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> MS Vermont State Papers, 65, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Schedules, Washington County, 1830, 1840; Manuscript Census of Vermont, Agricultural Productions by Counties, 1850.

<sup>25</sup> List of Freemen, Nov. 1836, MS 48, VHS Collections.

<sup>26</sup> Waitsfield Militia Returns, 1836, MS 48 and MS 56, VHS Collections. Captain Harry Jones submitted two militia returns to the Waitsfield town clerk in 1836. One, dated June 20, listed inspection as June 7 and was received at the clerk's office June 28; on the other, Jones specified, "as revised on the first tuesday of June 1836 and also as inspected on said day." The names were identical, but the revised list noted twenty-two men as absent, over a third of the roster. Ten of these men were also petition signers.

<sup>27</sup> Jones, *History of Waitsfield*, pp. 219-515. Ages of sixty-one signers were determined from Jones's genealogical data: under 20, 6; 20-30, 16; 30-40, 19; 40-50, 13; 50 and over, 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1840 Census of mines, agriculture, commerce and manufacturing; Manuscript Census of Vermont, 1850. Industry; Agricultural Productions.

<sup>29</sup> Waitsfield Tax List, 1834, Waitsfield Town Office. The grand list for 1834 was \$8,183.50. Signers owned \$1,947.03. The average list for signers was \$39.74; the average valuation for males on the total list was \$40.42. Sixty-eight percent of these valuations were under fifty dollars.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* Militiamen and guardians held \$2,392.84.

<sup>31</sup> As listed in the 1836 petition, the grand list was \$9,011.59 in 1836, and militiamen or guardians owned \$2,113.85.

<sup>32</sup> Jones, *History of Waitsfield*, pp. 219-515.

<sup>33</sup> Report of the Committee on Military Affairs, November 15, 1836, MS State Papers, 75, p. 83.

<sup>34</sup> Terrill G. Bourcius, "Reform Efforts and the Decline of the Militia," in Haraty, *Put Vermonters Ahead*, p. 72.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>36</sup> Ludlum discusses the Working Men's societies in *Social Ferment*, pp. 202-204.