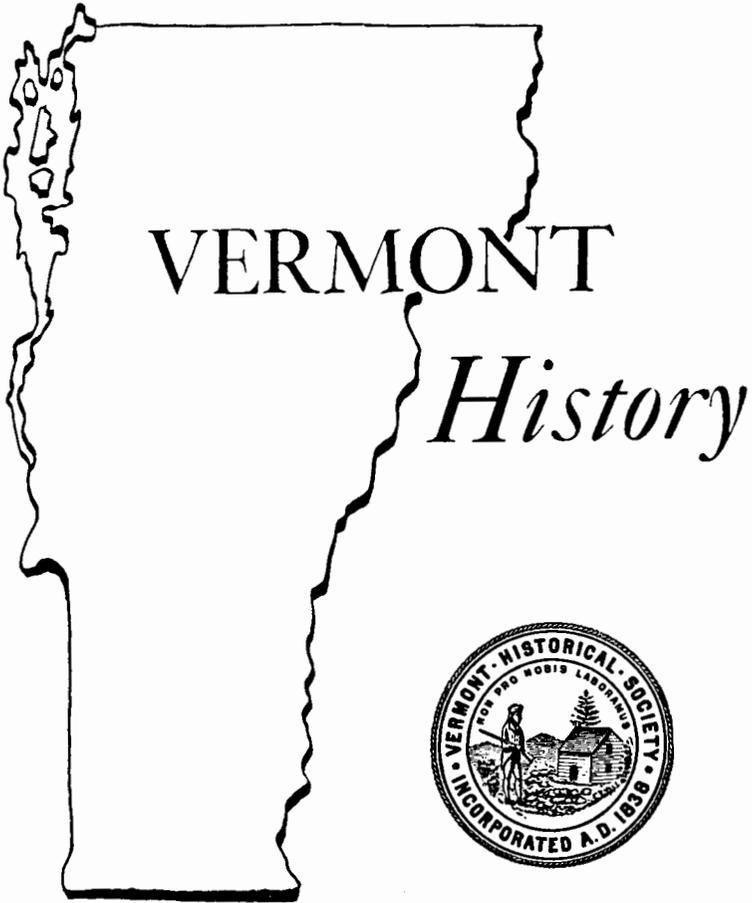
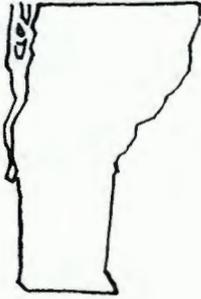


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Vermont shares the distinction of being one of four American states [with Hawaii, California, and Texas] that were at one time or other nominally independent nations.

Was Vermont Ever a Republic?

By DANIEL A. METRAUX

Vrest Orton, Vermont historian and entrepreneur, recounts how he once festooned his car with a flag that bore the logo "Republic of Vermont," while on a trip to New York City. "We drew up in front of the hotel, the REPUBLIC OF VERMONT flag whipping smartly in the wind. As we stopped the car, out rushed the doorman, arrayed in all the trappings of an admiral's rank. He opened the door and very politely said, "May I be of assistance, Mr. Ambassador?"¹

This amusing tale helps to raise an interesting question. Was there really a Republic of Vermont? In other words, did the leaders of Vermont during the fourteen years (1777-1791) that preceded statehood actually see their realm as an independent state, a true republic? When Vermont declared its independence in 1777, was it declaring its independence as a separate nation? Were there dreams of forging a country apart from the other states that were fighting for freedom from British rule? Did Ethan and Ira Allen really seek a separate identity for a homeland that would be permanently set apart from the United States?

Vermont shares the distinction of being one of four American states that were at one time or other nominally independent nations. Hawaii, a Polynesian kingdom until its annexation nearly a century ago by the United States, was the only genuinely independent state of the four. However, two others, Texas and California, as well as Vermont, were

settled by Americans who moved outside the recognized jurisdiction of any American state. Rather than live in a political vacuum, they declared their independence and formed their own governments. With the possible exception of Texas, none of these "republics" was formed with the idea that it would be a permanent independent entity. Rather, all were formed as states with the goal of incorporation into the American union.

There is, however, the popular notion in Vermont today that Vermont really was a republic, that the state functioned as an independent nation and that its leaders regarded it as such. Some twentieth century historians of Vermont history certainly feel that Vermont's founding fathers considered themselves the creators of a new nation. For example, Frederic Van de Water in his celebrated book, *The Reluctant Republic*, states that some of Vermont's early leaders such as Ira Allen and Thomas Chittenden had a special dream by 1776:

The hope they cherished, the high enterprise they determined to further was . . . simply, that the land which had waited a century and a half for settlement, the land that earnest farmer folk had come up to possess, the land that they had defended against the intrusion of New York, should be forever theirs—an independent nation.

It must not be an appendage of New York, or of New Hampshire, or Massachusetts. It must be, without qualification or higher loyalty, the property of the folk who now held it and their children and their children's children— a land of freemen, a republic.²

In his description of Ethan Allen, Van de Water wrote:

He was not an American; he was a Vermonter. No other colony, state, or nation ever obtained his full allegiance. He fought New York, New Hampshire as enthusiastically as he battled against the British. He and Ira, his brother, defied and thwarted the Union itself when it threatened Vermont. Ethan Allen lived and died a Vermonter.³

Vrest Orton's popular history book, *The Republic of Vermont*, is replete with statements about Vermont as an independent nation. He writes, for example, that the "roots of the Republic of Vermont go deep. Like the history of other nations in the long stretch of time . . ."⁴ Vermont historian Charles T. Morrissey writes that Vermonters were living in a "self-proclaimed republic"⁵ without defining his terms. Geographer Harold A. Meeks wrote in 1986 that "During the Revolutionary War, Vermont fought along with the American colonies, but as an independent country, a situation lasting fourteen years."⁶ Not surprisingly, Cora Cherey in her textbook for the elementary grades, *Vermont: The State with the Storybook Past*, calls the fourteen-year period between 1777-1791 the years of the "Republic of Vermont."⁷

Editors H. Nicholas Muller, III, and Samuel B. Hand in their *In a State of Nature: Readings in Vermont History* label one lengthy section "Forging the Republic,"⁸ again without defining their terms. They employ

such phrases as "Through a series of carefully orchestrated 'conventions' they declared independence and established the Republic of Vermont . . ." or "The convention which gathered at Windsor in July, 1777, to draft a constitution for the new republic . . ."⁹

Documents from the period including those issued at the conventions at Dorset, Westminster, and Windsor never make use of the term "republic."¹⁰ The writers of these documents declare Vermont (or the New Hampshire Grants) to be an independent state, but make it clear that they are declaring themselves independent of the authority of New York.¹¹

Walter Hill Crockett in his multi-volume *Vermont: The Green Mountain State* is the historian who most carefully defined his terms. He notes that:

During the period immediately following the declaration of peace with Great Britain, when there was no central government worthy of the name in the group of States calling itself the American nation, the little commonwealth of Vermont was gradually assuming most of the functions exercised by an independent republic. It coined money. It established post offices and post roads. It entered into negotiations with a foreign power concerning trade and commerce. It passed acts of naturalization. It granted public lands. It considered public acts relating to a policy of internal improvements. And long before it declared its independence, it had raised and supported armed forces for the defence of the homes of its people.¹²

A quick glance at Vermont's own Declaration of Independence of 1777 lends support to the idea that Vermonters were trying to form a republic:

That the district or territory comprehending and usually known by the name and description of the New Hampshire Grants of right ought to be and hereby is declared forever and hereafter to be considered a separate, free, and independent jurisdiction or state . . .¹³

Such a declaration has all of the connotations of creating an independent entity, but were the leaders of Vermont hoping to create an independent nation? What were they seeking independence from?

The technical definition that modern political scientists give to the term "republic" means a sovereign state ruled by representatives of a widely inclusive electorate in which the state's power is constitutionally limited. A jurisdiction is only independent if its own government does not answer to any higher authority. Just as important, however, are the feelings of the people in a nation. There must be a feeling of nationalism, the notion that they are in some sense unique or have some definable characteristics that make them unique.

Technically, the 1777-1791 "Republic of Vermont" meets these standards. Vermont had a democratic form of government and a constitution that carefully spelled out both the rights of the people and the

power of the government. Throughout this period, Vermont coined its own money, ran its own postal service, maintained a militia, and managed its affairs without direct outside interference. The inhabitants of Vermont also felt that they were Vermonters, not citizens of New York or elsewhere.

More important, however, is the question whether people like the Allen brothers and Thomas Chittenden really saw themselves as living in, helping to create, or actually leading an independent nation. The answer must be a cautious no. The settlers of the New Hampshire Grants saw themselves first as Americans, treated Vermont as a state or vital part of the United States, and gave no clear evidence of ever wanting to create a separate republic.

On the other hand, Vermonters did see themselves as distinct from Canadians, both French and English. Ethan Allen and another soldier active in Vermont during the American Revolution, Col. Moses Hazen,¹⁴ constantly refer to people living in Vermont as Americans and those north of Vermont as Canadians.

It is also clear that Vermonters saw themselves as belonging to a special community.¹⁵ There was a sense of separateness from New York or any other jurisdiction and of having common interests that differed from those of people elsewhere. What bound Vermonters together was both the fear that they would lose land that they had purchased and developed on their own and a certain degree of antipathy for New York whose government threatened their status as landholders. They formed a separate government to protect their land and themselves from New York. But a sense of community is much different from the notion of a republic to which one would attach his highest loyalty. They were Americans first and identified themselves with the evolving American nation.

Ethan Allen in his 1779 *Narrative*, which was written two years after the declaration of Vermont's independence, described himself as a patriotic American. When he starts his tract with the phrase, "Induced by a sense of duty to my country . . .", he is clearly referring to the United States.¹⁶ He adds:

The history of nations doomed to perpetual slavery, in consequence of yielding up to tyrants their natural born liberties, I read with a sort of philosophical horror; so that the first systematical and bloody attempt at Lexington, to enslave America, thoroughly electrified my mind, and fully determined me to take part with my country.¹⁷

Allen proclaims his duty to the United States throughout his book. There is no mention of any superior loyalty to any Republic of Vermont, although that entity was already in existence.

Ira Allen in his 1798 book, *The Natural and Political History of the State of Vermont*, gives a clear reason for Vermont's 1777 declaration of independence. He notes that four leading Vermonters including himself

met in 1776 to discuss the possibility of creating a civil government for Vermont. Vermonters had settled the New Hampshire Grants, issued in the 1750s and 1760s by Governor Benning Wentworth of New Hampshire, when Vermont was seen as a vacant no-man's-land between British America and French Canada. Both New Hampshire and New York had laid claim to the region, but Wentworth issued grants that led to the area's first substantial settlement. By 1764 King George III had ruled that the land was actually a part of the province of New York, but when New York tried to extend its authority over the New Hampshire Grants land, declaring the Wentworth grants to be invalid, Vermonters defied New York authority. Thus, by 1776 Vermont was confronted with the realities of the Revolution and its defiance of New York. According to Allen, it was necessary to create a government for the region to "carry on the war, raise men and money, and to secure the titles of the lands against the latent intentions of the Governor of New York."¹⁸ There were three options considered: connection with New Hampshire, establishment of a new government, or association with New York. There was some support for a new government, and, according to Ira, no one in favor of joining forces with New York.¹⁹

Allen wrote that despite some support for the New Hampshire option,

The arguments in favor of a new Government were, they did not like any connection with a colony, which by act of a Royal Governor, had too easily consented to part with territory, contrary to the interest and wishes of the people, and who might hereafter expose themselves to the evil intentions of the colony of New York. That by such a connection they should lose all the glory and credit they had gained in their exertions against the Governor and Council of New York. That a new Government would perpetuate the name of the Green Mountain Boys, and the honour of their leaders. That a new Government would infallibly establish the title of their lands under the New Hampshire Grants; and that the unappropriated lands might be disposed of to defray the expenses of Government and the war. That as a separate Government, in the course of events, they might find means to retaliate on the monopolists of New York, who had given them so much trouble in regranteeing and claiming the lands they held and occupied under the Grants of New Hampshire. That the active and offensive part taken at the early part of the war, in taking Ticonderoga, Crown Point, and St. John's, would make them consequential in the eyes of Congress, as friends of the American Revolution.²⁰

Ira Allen's statement is probably the clearest explanation of what was on the minds of Vermont's leaders when independence was declared. In a vacuum of power and organized civil government, it was in Vermont's interest to create its own government. The goal was recognition by the American Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, of Vermont as a separate

and equal entity on par with the other thirteen colonies/states. With its own government and recognition by Congress, Vermont could escape domination by New York and the New Hampshire Grants would be validated. In addition to their sincere support for the Revolution, Vermonters hoped that such actions as their seizure of Fort Ticonderoga in 1775 would influence Congress in their favor.

In neither book by the Allens quoted here is there mention of the "Republic of Vermont." Both Ethan and Ira Allen fervently declare their loyalty to the United States. Ira Allen describes the "State" of Vermont as an independent entity, but independent of New York and part of the American union.

The 1777 Constitution of Vermont calls the jurisdiction it governs the "commonwealth or state of Vermont" and calls for the creation of a form of government similar to that of Pennsylvania. The preamble to the Vermont document briefly denounces British tyranny and then at length condemns alleged injustices performed against Vermont by New York authorities.²¹ Vermont laws of 1785-91 refer to the region as a state or occasionally as a commonwealth, but there is never any reference to the Republic of Vermont per se. Indeed, one of the few places where the term "Republic of Vermont" appears (*Vermontis Res Publica*) is on coins minted in the 1780s.

Vermont's earliest settlers came from the colonies of New England (primarily Massachusetts and Connecticut) and maintained close ties with their former locations. Other settlers who entered Vermont before 1791 rarely, if ever, note that they are entering an independent nation or republic. In my own research in Greensboro and Craftsbury town history I have read many documents by early settlers in both towns, including numerous petitions written to the General Assembly of Vermont, without finding a reference to Vermont as a "republic." While evidence from two towns is not conclusive, clearly college-educated men like Ebenezer and Samuel Crafts from this area considered Vermont a future part of the American union.

Thus, to call Vermont a separate nation is at best a misnomer. In a technical sense Vermont was indeed a republic, but the creation of a lasting republic was neither the intention or desire of its founders, Americans who never really sought a separate destiny. It is time that historians examine the years of Vermont's independence and pay more careful, disciplined attention to what people of that era wrote about their thoughts and deeds.

NOTES

- ¹ Vrest Orton, *Personal Observations on the Republic of Vermont* (Rutland: Academy Books, 1981), p. 8.
- ² Frederic F. Van de Water, *The Reluctant Republic. Vermont: 1724-1791*. (New York: John Day Co., 1941), p. 166.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- ⁴ Orton, p. 11.
- ⁵ Charles T. Morrissey, *Vermont: A History* (New York: Norton, 1981), p. 905.
- ⁶ Harold A. Meeks, *Time and Change in Vermont: A Human Geography* (Chester, Conn.: Globe Pequot, 1986), p. 67.
- ⁷ Cora Cheney, *Vermont: The State with the Storybook Past* (Brattleboro, Vermont: Stephen Greene Press, 1976), pp. 74-94.
- ⁸ H. Nicholas Muller, III, and Samuel B. Hand, *In A State of Nature: Readings in Vermont History* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1982), pp. 37-88.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ¹⁰ A set of at least some of these documents is published in Fred. A. Howland, *Vermont Legislative Directory of 1898* (Montpelier: Vermont Watchman, 1898), pp. 85-112.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Walter Hill Crockett, *Vermont: The Green Mountain State* (New York: Century History Co., 1921), Vol. 2, p. 389.
- ¹³ Quoted in Howland, p. 107.
- ¹⁴ See Allen S. Everest, *Moses Hazen and the Canadian Refugees in the American Revolution* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1976).
- ¹⁵ Community defined as "a body of people organized into a political, municipal, or social unity." *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 352. In applied anthropology, community is defined as an "entity that responds to an effective changing environmental setting." Quoted from David Sills, Ed., *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 1 (New York: Free Press, 1968), p. 325.
- ¹⁶ Ethan Allen, *A Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Observations During his Captivity*. (New York: Corinth Books, 1961), p. 1.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ¹⁸ Ira Allen, *Natural and Political History of the State of Vermont* (Rutland, Vermont: C. E. Tuttle, 1969), p. 52. Reprint of 1798 edition.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.
- ²¹ John A. Williams, ed., *Laws of Vermont: 1785-1791* (Montpelier: State of Vermont, 1966), pp. 121-138.
- ²² Meeks, p. 67.