

Ethan Allen (For Children)

Ethan was born in Litchfield, Connecticut on January 21 1738, the first child of Joseph and Mary Baker Allen. A few months later, Joseph removed his family to the brand-new town of Cornwall, Connecticut, where they lived a truly pioneer life among the steep and rocky hills through which the Housatonic River threaded its way toward Long Island Sound and the Atlantic Ocean. It was here that the young Ethan learned to cut trees, create fields, build stone walls and become a good hunter. In other words, all the skills that were required of pioneer children.

When he was quite young, his parents realized that he was a very intelligent boy; he learned fast, and he asked untold questions. Schooling was never easily found in pioneer settlements; books were scarce, with usually only the Bible available in most homes. Fortunately for Ethan, his father was an intelligent man, and was able to give him what today would be called a “home education”. Joseph Allen hoped that Ethan would be able to attend Yale College in New Haven. At that time, Yale offered the best opportunity for a higher education in Connecticut. To prepare him for Yale, Ethan was sent to study with the Reverend Jonathan Lee in Salisbury, Connecticut. In a way, there is a Colebrook connection here: The Reverend Jonathan Lee had a son, named Chauncey, who became a minister in the Congregational Church, and eventually became Colebrook’s second minister in September, 1799. Reverend Lee remained in Colebrook more than 28 years. He lived in the house at the top of the hill north of Colebrook Center across from the cemetery.

But to get back to Ethan Allen: Shortly after beginning his studies with Reverend Lee, Joseph Allen suddenly died, and this left young Ethan, as the eldest son, the head of the Allen family, charged with the care of his mother and younger brothers and sisters. An education at Yale became an impossibility.

He farmed for a while, and then in the summer of 1757, when he was 19 years old, he enlisted with other men from Cornwall in a company that marched north to Lake George, intending to help defend Fort William Henry, at the head of the Hudson Valley, from the French and their Indian allies; but the fort had already been captured before they arrived, so the men turned around and returned home.

During the next four years, Ethan was able to save enough money to buy a farm and also invest in an iron ore operation near Salisbury and in a blast furnace for making iron from the local ores. He remained with the iron business for about four years, when he finally sold his interest.

The date is now in the mid 1760s; the French and Indian War ended in 1763, but peace did not come to stay in New England and New York State. A major problem had developed in the territory north of Massachusetts, east of New York and west of New Hampshire. Today this is the State of Vermont, but then it was wild land claimed by both New York and New Hampshire. It was a terrible situation, one that could not last for very long. A settler would go to New York and purchase a piece of property located, lets say, where Bennington, Vermont is today. On his new land he would build a house and barn, and begin a new life for himself and his family. One day a stranger would walk down the dusty road in front of the little farm, and knock on the door. The conversation might have sounded like this: “I recently purchased the property on which your farm is located. I hate to tell you this, but you will have to move.” “There is no way I will

move, I have a deed to this land, and neither you nor anyone else is going to make me move!” Another thing that would happen was for the tax man from New York to show up one day with the tax bill for the past year. That would be all right, the owner would expect that he would show up one day. The problem came a short time later when another tax man, this time from New Hampshire, would knock on the door and demand the tax payment. When it was explained that the taxes had already been paid, the owner would be threatened with eviction unless they were paid. And he meant it, if the taxes weren't paid, the sheriff, with some men, would come and physically force the occupants off the land and put them in jail if they refused to comply. You can see that this situation could not last very long, and tempers were beginning to heat up between the two states of New Hampshire and New York, and now another element was added to the problem; the people who already lived in the disputed territory decided that they didn't want to be part of either state, they wanted to be their own state, and wanted both New Hampshire and New York to go away and leave them alone.

Many people from Connecticut, especially Litchfield County, were interested in this territory. Many, if not most, had seen it while serving in the Colonial militia during the French and Indian War. They obviously liked what they saw, and some had moved into the territory (mostly with New Hampshire permits), while others, like Ethan Allen, were very interested in the outcome of the dispute about ownership, especially the fate of Connecticut men who had New Hampshire land titles and who were being harassed by the New York authorities.

In the early 1770s Ethan, with three of his brothers, formed a company that purchased 77,000 acres of land along the eastern shore of Lake Champlain. (This is about the area of Colebrook, Norfolk and Barkhamsted.) Ethan, along with other duties, was the chief law enforcement officer, and as such persuaded the settlers already on the land with New York titles to purchase New Hampshire ones instead.

History was about to alter everyone's plans however. On May 2, 1775 word arrived that there had been a confrontation between the American Colonists and the British army at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts; it looked as though there was going to be war between the English colonies and the mother country, and everyone had to choose which side they were on. There was no hesitation on Ethan's part, however, he was solidly on the side of the Patriots.

Back in Hartford, Connecticut there was a group of patriots known as the Revolutionary Committee of Correspondence, whose purpose was to keep the various Patriot communities informed about what was happening. Ethan asked them what he could do for the Patriot's cause. Their reply was that Fort Ticonderoga, on the southwest end of Lake Champlain, must be taken away from the British forces immediately, and sent a group of Connecticut and Massachusetts volunteers northward to Bennington, where they met with Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys, as they were called. The importance of Fort Ticonderoga was that it commanded all movement north and south between Canada and the Hudson River valley. There were no roads on either the New York or the Vermont side; all traffic used the lake and its rivers as transportation routes. Lake Champlain is quite narrow at its southern end, and the cannon at the fort could reach clear across to the eastern shore, effectively controlling all military and civilian traffic.

As the forces that Allen needed to make an assault on the fort were arriving from all over, a Connecticut man named Noah Phelps went as a spy into the fort claiming to be a local farmer who was looking for a barber. There was one in the fort, and Noah had his hair cut, all the while observing everything he thought would help the Green Mountain Boys in capturing the fort. He did very well; reporting that there were only 50 troops at the fort, that they were entirely without suspicion of any impending attack, and that there was a gap in the fort's southern wall through which the attackers could easily gain access to the interior of Fort Ticonderoga.

On May 10, just 8 days after hearing the news of Lexington and Concord, Ethan Allen, leading 85 Green Mountain Boys, was able to conquer the great fortress without the loss of life on either side. When the commander of the fort answered the pounding on his door, he found himself facing the giant figure of a wild-looking man who demanded the immediate surrender of the fort "in the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress".

The fort yielded a tremendous amount of war material for the army that George Washington was assembling; over 100 cannon and other heavy weapons, hundreds of rifles, ten tons of musket and cannon balls, three cartloads of flints, a warehouse full of boat-building materials, 30 new carriages, and other supplies.

The following winter, in one of the greatest logistical triumphs of the entire war, General Henry Knox, on orders from Gen. Washington, transported much of the Ticonderoga material by sled across the snow to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ticonderoga cannon almost certainly, decided the outcome of the battle for Boston in favor of Washington and the Patriot cause.

Of at least equal and more immediate importance was the effect of Allen's feat on American moral, proving that plain Americans were more than a match for the British army.

The next military effort on the part of Ethan Allen did not go as well as the Ticonderoga campaign. In the autumn of 1775, he attempted to capture Montreal with only a handful of men, which ended with his capture by the British. He spent the next two and a half years as a prisoner of war – a year in England, the rest aboard ships at sea and in British-held New York City.

Upon his release in an exchange of other prisoners in May 1778, he visited Gen. Washington at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Washington had great praise for Ethan, who continued his fight for independence, but to the surprise of many, it was not freedom of the colonies from Great Britain, which he felt was well on the way to accomplishment, but to the independence of his beloved Grants, the land we now call Vermont. While Ethan was being held captive, the men of the disputed grants met and declared themselves a free and independent state, and even proposed the name of "New Connecticut", but it was eventually decided to call it Vermont – French for Green Mountain.

The newly proclaimed state established a constitution (the first one in America specifically to prohibit slavery) and had elected a governor, a legislature, and other officers, Vermont considered itself to be, and Ethan certainly considered it to be, an independent republic. Ethan now devoted all of his energy to advance his beloved Vermont, and as in the old days, he was the leading man.

During this time period when Vermont thought of herself as an independent state, Ethan approached the Canadians with the proposal that perhaps Vermont might become a Canadian province, while at the same time making overtures to the newly-independent United States, to see which would make the best offer. There was no doubt that he really believed that Vermont's future lay with joining the United States, and this is what did happen. On March 4, 1791 the Republic of Vermont was admitted to the Union as the fourteenth state – an event for which Ethan Allen was more responsible than any other man.

But by the time it occurred he had been dead more than two years.

Ethan's wife died in 1783. The next year he met a young widow named Fanny Montresor Buchanan, whom he married after a short courtship. The chief justice of the Republic of Vermont married them. A daughter and a son were born to them, the son in 1787, shortly after Ethan had retired to his farm near Burlington.

It was on this farm, two years later, during one of the hardest winters in all Vermont history, that he died. He had taken a team of horses and a sled across the ice to the Island of South Hero (named in honor of his brother, Ira; the island of North Hero honors Ethan himself) to borrow a load of hay from his cousin Ebenezer. On the return trip, while sitting atop the load of hay, Ethan suffered what most likely was a stroke, and a few hours later, on February 12, 1789, he was dead.

Ethan had been known all of his adult life as a man who loved to tell stories. He was fond of telling about a dream he had had in which he was among several men standing in line at the Pearly Gates. One by one the men were questioned by Saint Peter; then each of those admitted was asked to sit in a specially designated seat inside, there to await further instructions. Not so Ethan Allen. The gatekeeper looked at him sharply when he gave his name. "You're the man who took Ticonderoga?" Saint Peter asked. "The very same." The gatekeeper's stern expression broke into a warm smile. "Come in," said he. "Come in, Ethan! Sit down wherever you please!"