

THE LEGENDARY ETHAN ALLEN

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Probably no other Vermonter is as **legendary** as Ethan Allen. Stories tell how he was strong enough to strangle a bear with his big hands and knock out an ox with one blow of his fist, fast enough to outrun a deer, and so tough that he could bite the heads off iron nails.

It seems unlikely that accounts like these are anything more than tall tales. And even though Ethan Allen played a major role in events that led to Vermont becoming the fourteenth state in 1791, he still remains a mystery today.

Since photography was not yet invented in the 1700s



Illustration by Lynd Ward for *America's Ethan Allen* by Stewart Holbrook

when Allen lived, and descriptions and drawings of him vary greatly, we don't really know what he looked like. No one can even say for sure where his grave is. We do, however, know something about him from his letters and writings as well as the writings of his **contemporaries**. With the histories that others have written about him, we can piece together a picture of eighteenth-century Vermont.

In 1770, Ethan Allen came to Vermont from his home in Salisbury, Connecticut, to defend the rights of the New Hampshire grants' settlers. He was then thirty-two years old. At that time the land we now call Vermont was claimed by people who received land grants from New Hampshire's Governor Benning Wentworth. Vermont's neighbors to the west, the citizens of New York, also felt they had a right to the land.



Allen organized a group of men unhappy with the practices of the **Yorkers** and the courts that supported them. This group called itself the Green Mountain Boys. It is fair to say that without Allen's spirited leadership Vermont might today be a county in either New York or New Hampshire instead of a state.

In 1773, Ethan Allen, along with several brothers and a cousin, formed the Onion River Land Company. Now a landowner himself under the New Hampshire Grants, Ethan Allen had even greater **incentive** to fight the Yorkers who threatened in word and deed to take land away from the grants' settlers.

Perhaps the most famous of Allen's **endeavors** was his capture of Fort Ticonderoga on May 10, 1775. At dawn, Allen and his Green Mountain Boys took the British completely by surprise, forcing them to surrender without even firing a shot.



Allen was not so lucky when he tried to capture Montreal. His September 1775 attack on the city failed, in part because promised **reinforcements** did not arrive. Allen was captured and, **shackled** in irons, taken to England in a British ship. He remained a prisoner there for over two years. In October of 1778, Allen was returned to America.

In the years that followed, Allen voiced his strong opinions about the defense of the grants' lands in his speeches and writing in both Vermont and in the Continental Congress. Popular and feared, Ethan Allen carved a name for himself in Vermont's history.

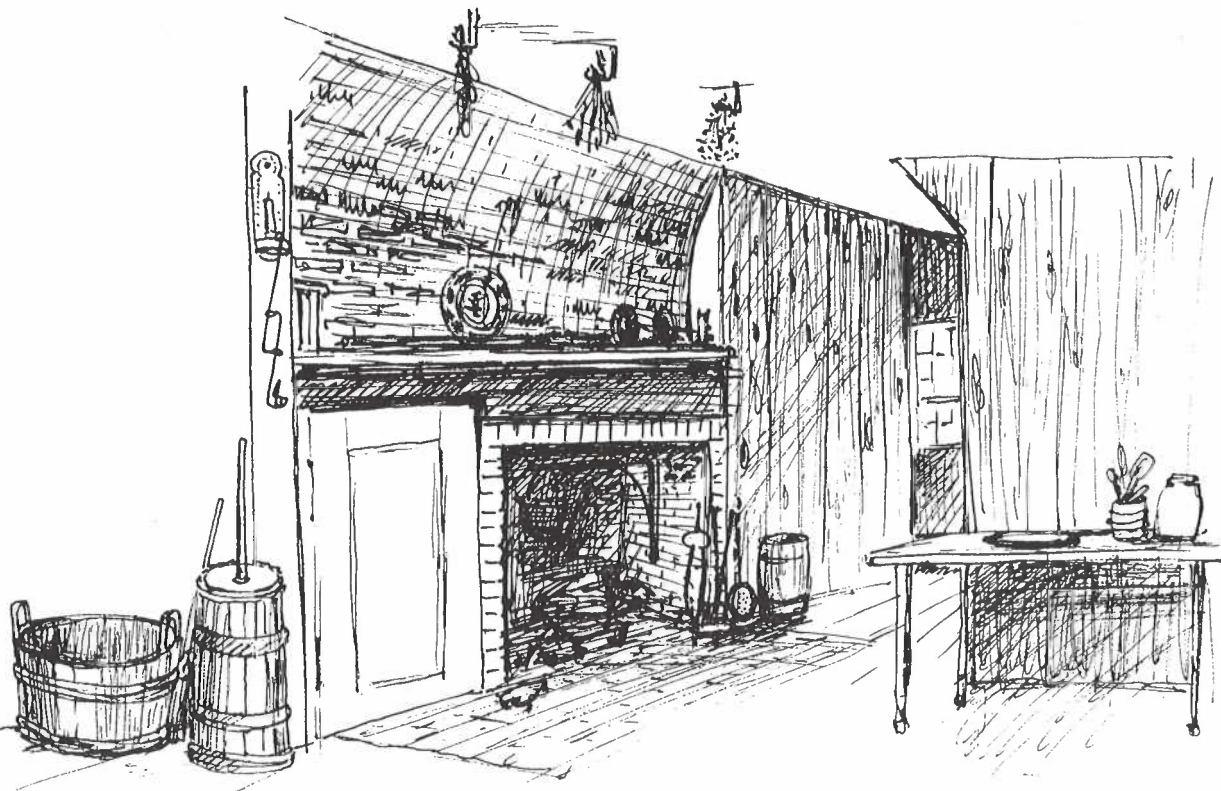
The rediscovery of Ethan Allen's home on the Winooski **intervale** in Burlington has focused attention on a lesser known period in Allen's life. Not quite as exciting as his days as a **rabble-rouser** and Green Mountain Boy, Allen's later years on his 1400-acre Burlington farm with his wife Fanny and their six children reveal another side of Allen and give clues to life in Vermont in the late 1700s.

Despite his fame and high standing in the community, Ethan Allen lived in much the same way as other Vermonters of the time. They depended on the weather for good crops and on neighbors for help. People had to be tough and independent to manage a new life in the grants. At the same time they were dependent upon the cooperation of friends and family in times of need or hardship.

Burlington was a wilderness in 1787 when Ethan

Allen and his family moved into their new home on the Winooski River. About two hundred persons lived there then compared to forty thousand persons today. Homes were far apart and connected, when possible, by primitive paths through the forest.

The Allen farm was **strategically** located on the floodplain created by the Winooski River. Land there was desirable because it was naturally clear of big timber and the soil rich. Since roads in early Vermont were few, waterways served as main transportation routes, both for the settlers and Indians. Getting local goods like **potash** to market was a concern to settlers, and the river and Lake Champlain provided the necessary waterway for trade. From his land Ethan Allen could travel downriver to Lake Champlain or upriver towards the Winooski falls where his brother Ira operated the area's first sawmill.



Keeping Room at the Ethan Allen Homestead. Drawing by Linda Seifert-Reynolds

Ethan Allen

Allen's last years were spent writing and farming. He wrote a **controversial** book, *Reason: The Only Oracle of Man*, which questioned the religious thinking of the time. The book won him few friends and gained him many enemies. Then Allen's writing and farming careers were cut short by his death at age fifty-two. He and his hired man, Newport, made a trip across the river and lake ice to South Hero on February 11, 1789, to get hay from a cousin, Ebenezer Allen. On his return trip Allen was seized by a fit. Newport brought Ethan Allen back to his home where he died the following morning.

VOCABULARY

legendary — famous; described in legend

contemporaries — people of the same age and time

Yorkers — Vermont's neighbors to the west, residents of New York

incentive — the reason for doing a thing

endeavors — efforts, actions

reinforcements — more troops and equipment

shackled — confined at the ankles or wrists

intervale — low-lying land, often beside a riverbed

rabble-rouser — a leader who excites with angry speeches

strategically — fortunately

potash — pearl ash or lye obtained from wood ashes, then used in making soap, glass, pottery, and paints

controversial — the subject of many arguments

