

A Young Republic Under Attack:  
Political and Social Reactions of Rutland County, Vermont

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1777 was a year of uncertainty, and one of the most pivotal years in the history of Rutland County. A convention of delegates from multiple towns across the New Hampshire Grants had met and declared independence from New York, who was—under the ruling of King George—the owner of the lands which was known as the grants. A couple of months later, Vermont would be caught up in the greater War for Independence being waged by the thirteen American colonies. With no constitution and a provincial government, the situation in Rutland County would be trying and incredibly crucial for the formation—and survival—of Vermont and Rutland County. Rutland County would see violence and militarization, and politically, Rutland County was a microcosm of the struggle for Vermont Independence from New York, as political groups sought to rid of enemies of the young republic and consolidate. The two front war that was waged in Rutland County would, ultimately, lead to the formation of Rutland County in 1781.

This history of Rutland County has been largely neglected in favor of the more climactic Battle of Hubbardton; even though a true historically accurate account of the events in

Hubbardton wasn't written until John Williams wrote *The Battle of Hubbardton: The American Rebels Stem the Tide* in 1988. The first historical pieces that were created and depicted the struggles and actions early Vermonters experienced were in the form of town histories. These town histories were written by members of the communities and relied on stories, first hand accounts, and any surviving documents or primary sources. One of the most comprehensive of the town histories is formed by Abby Maria Hemenway in 1877. As editor, Hemenway compiled all of these town histories which were based off of oral history, town government minutes, and other primary documents and made them available for others, even if they were not from that town. From 1877 onward, there have been many other Rutland County town histories published to include events that occurred years after Hemenway's death; however, much of the information provided for the eighteenth and nineteenth century (that was witnessed by Hemenway) can be found in the *Gazetteer*. This study also includes many other town histories, including ones from Castleton, Hubbardton, Clarendon, and Poultney, among others, which describe the events and reactions to British presence, as well as actions with New York officials and Yorkers.

One flaw of these town histories, one could argue, is that the histories come partially from eye witness testimonies and oral traditions, leaving room for erroneous statements. The defense of this argument is in two parts. The first defense to using these town histories is that the same incidents appear in multiple town histories, helping to solidify these statements until proven otherwise. The second defense is the unfortunate lack of other primary sources.

Vermonters of the late 1770s were mostly subsistence farmers, meaning that their days were filled with grueling work. These men and women had no time, therefore, to sit and reflect. For the few Vermonters who did write, however, their documents have not survived the centuries

since their creation or have not been found. Another issue is that many Vermonters fled back to their original colonies once the threat of the British Army came down Lake Champlain.

To understand the issues faced in 1777, it is important to realize that Vermont had been in conflict with New York for many years prior to 1777. Vermont was first settled by Europeans in Fort Dummer, which is in the far south of the state. The settlement, made by Massachusetts, would trigger New Hampshire to intervene, feeling that the land was theirs. Then, Governor Benning Wentworth began to issue grants of land to colonialists in the area, giving Vermont its first name, “the Grants.” New York would then take issue with these grants, claiming the land was *theirs*, not New Hampshire’s. The scuffling for the Grants territory would go all the way of the British judiciary system to the King and his Council, which ruled that the land was New York’s. To the dismay of many settlers—who had already paid for their lands and had moved their families to their new homes—New York then ruled that it would not recognize New Hampshire grants as legal documents. This alienated many settlers, who felt that they should not have to buy their land twice. Unfortunately, New York continued to anger the Grants, as they issued new grants and towns, which conflicted with the already-established communities. As a direct effect, Ethan Allen formed the Green Mountain Boys and began to push back against New York officials who would enter the Grants to bully settlers into buying new grants or survey land. This toxic relationship would, for New York, be not a priority in 1777, when General John Burgoyne recaptured Fort Ticonderoga and made camp in Skenesborough (Whitehall); for Vermont, it would be taken with as much importance as the British threat.

Rutland County saw its people becoming more militarized during this time period. Many forts were erected, most noticeably Fort Warren in Castleton, Fort Mott in Pittsford, and Fort

Ranger in Rutland (which would be the military headquarter in Vermont for the rest of the war).<sup>1</sup> These forts were built to protect the settlers from British soldiers as well as raiding parties of Loyalists, New York officials, and Native Americans. A group of Rangers, for example, would be formed in Pawlet, and that group would lead a secret raid on Fort Ticonderoga to reclaim it as American property.<sup>2</sup> Another group of militarized settlers from Rutland County came to the aid of a man in Shelburne, a frontier settlement far north of Rutland County; there, the men from Rutland fought against Tories and Native Americans, forcing the latter group to escape across the frozen Lake Champlain to New York.<sup>3</sup> The rise in military presence would be beneficial for the assertion of sovereignty by the Vermont government, as well. After the threat of British invasion had passed, Rutland County would have a very developed military complex in which to protect itself from another British invasion, as well as assert their sovereignty against any New York official who would try to enter the region.

The area also saw military action other than Hubbardton. The day before the infamous battle there was a skirmish in nearby Castleton, where the settlers fought against a group of Tories and Indians. The brief fight in Castleton would see two fatalities of the settlers who lived there; one settler was being tended to by his wife, who was trying to give him water, when it was reported that a Tory came up and kicked the water out of her hand.<sup>4</sup> Even after the rude conduct

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<sup>1</sup> See Sylvia Sullivan, *Castleton Looking Back: The First 100 Years*, Claire Burditt and Sylvia Sullivan, ed. (Rutland, VT: Sharp Offset Printing Inc., 1998), 9; "18th Century Rutland (1770-1800) Continued," *Rutland Historical Society*, [http://www.rutlandhistory.com/rutland\\_history/18th\\_cent\\_cont.htm](http://www.rutlandhistory.com/rutland_history/18th_cent_cont.htm); and A. M. Caverly, *Vermont Gazetteer*, Hemenway, ed., 943.

<sup>2</sup> Hiel Hollister, *The Vermont Historical Gazetteer: A Magazine Embracing a History of Each Town, Civil, Ecclesiastical, Biographical, and Military*, Abby Maria Hemenway, ed., 872. Hereafter referred to as *Vermont Gazetteer*.

<sup>3</sup> *Vermont Gazetteer*, Hemenway, ed., 1084-1085.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Steele, *Vermont Gazetteer*, J.C. Williams, ed., Abby Maria Hemenway, ed., Vol. 3 (Claremont, NH: The Claremont Manufacturing Company, 1877), 587.

which she was exposed to, the wife who was tending to her dying husband even tended to the wounded of the enemy. The region was in the midst of war and felt it just as any other region exposed to the war. Rutland County, due to the military actions it was exposed to, was able to come together and unite in protecting their towns and their property.

The reactions of the settlers of Vermont were mixed. Many fled to their former homes in neighboring colonies, or just searching for safety. An example of this is the story of the Valiant Thirteen, a group of thirteen women who traveled through the untamed forests of Vermont towards Bennington with their children and the British Army behind them the whole way.<sup>5</sup> Another example was the Churchill family, who lived in Hubbardton and were caught in the battle on July 7<sup>th</sup>. The men of the family entered the battle while the women and children fled to Massachusetts, their original home colony. The men were, unfortunately, captured, and when they returned to Hubbardton found no one there. Fearing the worst, they also made their journey to Massachusetts, where they—to their joyous surprises—met their family.<sup>6</sup> Some settlers even came back to help in the fight, as was the case for some settlers in the town of Pawlet, who came back because of the presence of Colonel Seth Warner.<sup>7</sup> The men of Poultney, upon hearing of the skirmish in Castleton on July 6<sup>th</sup>, marched towards Hubbardton to help in the battle. One man named Nathan Tuttle, being very drunk, started to pry and pick at one group of Tories in Rutland; this action would lead to Tuttle's death, as the one man in the group ran him through with his bayonet.<sup>8</sup> That death would be a mystery for years, as no one knew what had happened or

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<sup>5</sup> Elias Ashley, *Vermont Gazetteer*, Hemenway, ed., 965.

<sup>6</sup> Amos Churchill, *Vermont Gazetteer*, Hemenway, ed., 750-751.

<sup>7</sup> Hiel Hollister, *Vermont Gazetteer*, Hemenway, ed., 872.

<sup>8</sup> *Vermont Gazetteer*, Hemenway, ed., 1089.

witnessed the murder (besides the group who performed the action); the truth was revealed years later by a man in Rutland, who was informed of the events by the man who killed Tuttle.<sup>9</sup> Others would chose to take protection papers: a contract in which you would agree not to fight against the British Army and your property would not be harmed. To take protection papers, however, was quite dangerous, as it was seen by the provincial government and many patriotic settlers as a sign of loyalties. Those who did stay in Rutland County and were loyal to the independent Vermont cause would be crucial in the formation and consolidation of power in the region, using scare tactics and other methods to stifle opposition.

The acting government through this time was called the Council of Safety. Their goal was to protect the people of the region as well as fighting against those who were opposed to the free Vermont Republic. This led to one particular event where one settler, named John Irish, was killed due to the rumor that he was a Loyalist by a party sent out by the Council of Safety. The party's recollection of the events claim that Irish took one member of the party captive in his house. Then, as the party member tried to escape John Irish, Irish emerged from his house with a gun and powder horn. This led to the other members of the group—who were watching from the woods near the Irish homestead—shooting and killing John Irish. However, John Irish's wife testified that John was lured from his house and murdered by the group, claiming that the Quaker man had no intent on killing or even threatening the party. As her interview in the Rutland Herald claimed:

After dinner Clough called for a drink of water, which Mrs. Irish gave to him, fresh from the spring... all at once Clough started and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

ran out of the house—at the same time his wife [Rebecca] begged him not to leave the house—he advanced about three rods from the door, when Allen raised up from behind a maple log and shot Irish through the hand, severing his third and little finger from his hand, or nearly so. Clark then in a rough manner asked him if he wanted to take more prisoners. Irish answered that he should take or harm no man, and added, you have wounded me, upon which he held up his hand and Clark shot him through the heart.<sup>10</sup>

This unsolved case is an example of the political actions used in securing Vermont's sovereignty, possibly even in questionable manners. If the report of Rebecca Irish was true, and John Irish was lured from his house to be killed for reportedly being a Tory, the actions of the political group could be seen more as a threat to nearby Tories or even terrorism, routed in trying to secure Vermont borders and in silencing the opposition in the region.

Others who were seen as enemies of the region—and Vermont—were dealt with in many other ways. In Poultney, one man was nearly hanged due to his status as a Yorker, as well as eating the crops of his neighbor, who had fled the area due to the advancing British Army. He was spared, however, by the group's leader.<sup>11</sup> In Clarendon and Rutland, where Yorker presence was high, many groups including the Green Mountain Boys terrorized Yorkers. One example would be in Clarendon, where a high ranking New York official was tried by military court under

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<sup>10</sup> See John C. Williams, *The History and Map of Danby, Vermont* (Rutland: McLean & Robbins, 1869), 173. Original story first printed in *The Rutland Herald*, 1855; and O. Noble, *Vermont Gazetteer*, Hemenway, ed., 1146.

<sup>11</sup> Elias Ashley, *Vermont Gazetteer*, Hemenway, ed., 965-966.

Ethan Allen and Seth Warner: the original verdict was to burn his house down, which was then changed to replacing his roof and only returning it once he purchased a New Hampshire grant.<sup>12</sup> The people of Rutland were also reported as continually chasing land surveyors from New York away, threatening them if they were to return with lashings to their backs by the infamous beach seal; a bundle of twigs used to whip people on their bare backs.<sup>13</sup> This was crucial in getting rid of the New York and Loyalist support in the region, which would be crucial in cohesion of towns into a county, as well as the big picture, where the state would be formed.

Although New York's attention was absolutely focused on the British threat, the government and other political figures would fuel the fire of the question of Vermont independence. One instance is seen in a letter from Ira Allen, who was seeking help for the infant state. He implored that New Hampshire and New York give the state of Vermont provisions and military back-up. New Hampshire obliged and sent what they could. New York General Schuyler, however, responded as such: "As an officer of the Honorable the [*sic*] Congress, who represents the *thirteen* United States of America, I cannot with propriety take notice of a fourteenth state, unknown in their confederacy."<sup>14</sup> Although New York was very much preoccupied, they still made attempts to keep Vermont under their thumb and denying to recognize a sovereign entity separate from New York State.

The late-1770s were an important time for Vermont as well as the region that would become Rutland County in 1781. Due to the actions of the individuals of the area—as well as

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<sup>12</sup> H. B. Spofford, *Vermont Gazetteer*, Hemenway, ed., 555-556.

<sup>13</sup> Hiel Hollister, *Vermont Gazetteer*, Hemenway, ed., 872.

<sup>14</sup> *Records of the Governor and Council of the State of Vermont*, E.P. Walter, ed. (Montpelier, Vermont: J. & J. M. Poland, 1873), 131-132. Accessed through Archive.org.

circumstances and reactions to the war front—Rutland County was able to consolidate, to begin to form political entities to claim sovereignty, a heightened military presence to protect itself, and had rid of much of their opposition, either by scaring them out of the region, forcing them to conform, or violence (as was the case for John Irish). The two front warfare that Rutland County was exposed to would help in legitimizing their claim of sovereignty over New York, who had begun to shift their total focus to John Burgoyne’s army, as well as helping in the ultimate defeat of the British Army at Saratoga.

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