Ethan's Brother

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ON OCTOBER 27th, 1795, the Hon. Thomas Chittenden, Governor of Vermont, issued a letter of credential which reads, in part, as follows:

> Know ye, that the bearer hereof, the Honourable Ira Allen, Esquire, of Colchester, in the State of Vermont, in North America, having a disposition to go to Europe, I can say he is esteemed a gentleman of honor, a man of business and distinction, and has, in this State, a large landed property; was late a member of the Council of State, and Treasurer, Trustee of Loans, Surveyor General, member, and Secretary of the Board of War, agent to the Congress, to the General Courts of New Hampshire, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland, and Missioner to the Commander in Chief of Lower Canada, to settle a cartel for the exchange of prisoners, to settle a truce, &c., and now First Major General of the Militia of this State, and one of the Corporation of the University of Vermont. . . . All of which offices and missions he has discharged with honor and fidelity, which has contributed much towards the establishment and interest of this government.

The subject of this remarkable commendation was descended from one Samuel Allen, who came over in 1630 with the Dorchester Company and died in Windsor, Connecticut, in 1648. Samuel begat seven children, among them Nehemiah, of Salisbury, Connecticut and Northampton, Massachusetts, who died in 1684. Nehemiah begat nine children, among them Samuel, of Northampton and Deerfield, Massachusetts and Coventry, Connecticut, who died in 1718. Samuel begat nine children, among them Joseph, of Deerfield, Massachusetts and Woodbury, Coventry, Litchfield, and Cornwall, Connecticut, who died in 1755. Joseph begat eight children, of whom the first-born was the famous Ethan Allen of the Green Mountain Boys, thirteen years older than the youngest, Ira, born in 1751, "a gentleman of honor."

Ira first comes into view at the age of eighteen, in a business venture with two of his brothers (Joseph—or his wife—had unusual ideas about names: besides Ethan and Ira, the brothers were Heber, Heman, Levi, and Zimri). They bought three hundred and fifty hogs and drove them north in the snow from Salisbury, Connecticut to fatten them on beech nuts. They sold half the animals that winter and the remainder the next summer, getting a good price for both lots, Ira "having attended to the business through the whole," as he writes in his autobiography.

The wilderness was their element. Ira's sister Lydia took sick this same year; Ira rode 120 miles round-trip to Albany to fetch medicines for her. At the age of twenty-one he was caught in the woods one night during a hurricane that was knocking trees down. He made camp under the stump of an overturned tree. During the night the storm toppled trees across the great log that sheltered him. In the morning he set forth again, none the worse for wear. He thought nothing, four years later, of setting out

for home, from Quebec, in the dead of winter, alone, through 300 miles of trackless forests infested with savages. The journey was uneventful.

He was a crack shot. Spying a deer partly hidden by a tree, he judged that his only hope was to sever the animal's spinal cord and then finish him off with a knife. He dropped the animal, at a distance of eighteen rods, with the first shot, right through the spinal column. With a pistol he could hit a Spanish piece of eight at fifty feet.

By the time Ira was twenty, he had followed his brother Ethan northward into the forests and mountains north of Massachusetts and west of the Connecticut River—that pristine wilderness then being parceled out in "grants" by Governor Benning Wentworth of New Hampshire. This was an area of almost six million acres, in which there was not a blade of grass—only the thousand-year-old trees and an occasional outcrop of granite. The first men to go there had to walk in, as Ethan had done on snow-shoes in the winter of 1766, for there was no pasturage for horses or oxen.

In the next five years Ira surveyed most of the area, bought hundreds of thousands of acres at a few pence per acre, and established himself as a young man of competence and reliability. He seems to have possessed a lively sense of natural beauty. At the age of twenty-three, taking steps to buy lands along Lake Champlain, where Burlington now stands, he explained that this "was the country my soul delighted in." Thirty years later we find him referring again to this region as "a place made beautiful in the formation of the Earth." Again, when he found the site where he would establish his permanent habitation, he planted it with fruit trees; and ten years later gave orders for the construction of the house. A man who plants ten years before he builds is a man to be counted upon.

But there was always the question whether the titles to these lands were clear and valid. New Hampshire's claims ran west, under a royal decree of 1737, to the York domains. But York, or New York, in turn, under Charles II's grant of 1664, ran east to "Connecticut," a geographical name that meant very little (or entirely too much) in 1664. Massachusetts, since its establishment of a fort north of the border in 1724, had been making claims in those regions. Disputed titles, greedy manipulators, and that perennial locust the self-serving politician, all led to a vast snarl. Legal actions, petitions to the King, injunctions, threats, and broadsides filled the air with uncertainty, which greatly impeded the effort to settle the land—and settle the dust, for that matter.

So Ethan Allen organized the Green Mountain Boys in 1770 in order to keep the "Yorkers" off balance. Ira Allen, a year after he went north, was elected by the Green Mountain Boys as their ambassador to go to Albany and press their claims. His qualities of diplomacy and leadership must have been evident already.

The Green Mountain Boys waged a war of nerves against the Yorkers, publishing violent threats (for braggadocio and vilification the language of Ethan Allen has seldom been equalled), heaping the functionaires with ridicule, assailing them with backwoods ribaldry and scorn, occasionally hauling them in chairs to the top of flagpoles and letting them consider their ways. In all the five years of the Green Mountain Boys' activity no one was killed or even seriously wounded on either side—although an ill-mannered Yorker did, in a pique, cut off Captain Remember Baker's thumb.

The farmers of Lexington, Massachusetts, "fired the shot heard 'round the world" in April, 1775. One month later Ethan Allen and his "boys" took Fort Ticonderoga "in the name of the great Jehovah and the Continental Congress." Ethan was captured in Montreal later that year and was held in chains for three years. Ira inherited much of the leadership of the Vermont movement.

The spirit of independence caught fire in July, 1776, and by the following January the work of Ira Allen came to maturity. He had quietly argued for months, behind the scenes, and in three conventions of township delegates that year, that the territory of the "New Hampshire grants" should become an independent country. He was one of the two delegates who attended all three conventions that year. He

wrote all, or almost all, of the Vermont Declaration of Independence, and it was he who named the new nation "New Connecticut" (later changed to Vermont). Ira took the new Declaration, rode to Hartford, Connecticut to have it printed, rode back to Vermont with the copies, and starting in November, 1776, spent sixty-three days in the saddle, often breaking new trails in the snow, circulating the Declaration and gathering signatures among the far-flung settlers, singlehandedly putting together the movement that resulted in the adoption of the Declaration by the convention that met in January, 1777. Ira then wrote the Preamble to the Constitution of Vermont; we can be certain that he contributed much to the substance of the Constitution itself; and he drew the design for the State Seal. He was twenty-six.

Vermont remained an independent Republic for fourteen years, with Ira Allen holding down the two most powerful offices: Treasurer and Surveyor General. Because the Surveyor General had to validate the land titles (and in 1778 Vermont began issuing her own land grants), that office controlled all transactions in the most important economic activity of the time. Ira Allen wielded this immense trust with irreproachable equity.

Ira's competence extended beyond woodsmanship, surveying (at twenty-three he had published a surveyor's manual), military operations, diplomacy, pamphleteering, draftsmanship, and politics. He was also a journeyman judge and lawyer who prepared thousands of legal documents with correctness and precision, and a treasurer-accountant whose work stands up under the most pitiless audit. During his years as Treasurer he rode about the Republic, paying and receiving in three different currencies—the Continentals, "lawful money" (Vermont coinage), and specie (gold and silver). Every transaction was noted in the traveling notebooks kept in his saddlebag. On returning home he transferred the notes to the official ledgers, working night after night in the little one-room "office," twelve feet by fourteen, that was in essence the capitol of Vermont. The funds that passed through his hands would amount to more than $100 million in today's dollars. The accounts are in order. No discrepancy has ever been noted, and there were political antagonists who sought with all their might to embarrass him. Indeed, on inspecting the accounts, they learned that Ira had advanced a large fortune in his own funds to the Republic. He received no salary as Treasurer and asked for none. In today's equivalent money he charged about $200 a day for the days actually spent at work in the "office."

By 1783, Ira was the greatest landowner in the State, and most of his holdings had been bought and paid for before the "shot heard "round the world." He founded the University of Vermont, at Burlington (which "delighted his soul"), with a pledge of $4,000—a sum that would amount to several million of today's dollars. The value of a formal education is often prized the most by those who have had to educate themselves.

But all was not secure. Ira was generous to a fault. If he was involved in a sale of land, and if the title was questionable (as they almost all were), then he would issue his personal bond in an amount several times as large as the sale price. He would often accept payment in cattle, which of course had to be fed, and hay wasn't cheap; such a "sale" might leave him with less cash than before, and would saddle him with additional carrying charges into the bargain. He assumed obligations incurred by other members of his family, he took in their widows and orphans, he made timely gifts to the distressed, he advanced princely sums to the Republic, and he scarcely charged for his services.

The Republic, most of its founders having died by 1791, ceased to stand independent, and joined the U.S. as a State in 1791. By now Ira's financial liabilities amounted to about $10 million in today's money. Against this huge debt he owned an even more huge asset—300,000 acres of Vermont, valued at perhaps $40 million in today's money, if it could all be sold at a fair price and at one time. But that was the rub: money was in short supply, and Ira's creditors were hounding him. He desperately needed a major venture to produce cash and put his finances on a more solid footing.

The Vermont militia needed about 20,000 muskets, which were attainable only overseas. With the blessing (as we have seen) of Governor Chittenden, Ira set sail for Europe in 1795, intending to purchase the muskets over there at the going price and transport them to Vermont and sell them to the State of Vermont at the going price in this country. This transaction was boldly conceived; if successful it would pay off all of his debts and leave some cash to spare. He also had in mind pursuing, in London, his old idea of developing a canal to link Lake Champlain to the St. Lawrence River, so that the resources of Vermont could be closely linked to the great channels of commerce. (He was 65 years ahead of his time on that one.)

Ira's powers of diplomacy now received their sternest test. In London, despite his reputation as a principal leader of the revolt of the colonies, and despite his brother's having run up a pile of debts, he succeeded in establishing a line of credit. He sailed for France, and, at the height of the Terror, with mobs churning and the guillotine busily at work, he successfully contracted for 20,000 muskets on extremely favorable terms—a small initial payment and seven years to repay the rest.

Then his luck ran out.

Unbeknownst to Ira, the ship he had ordered to transport the muskets to America had been used for a contraband shipment from England to France shortly before. Not long after Ira put to sea with his muskets, the ship was stopped by a British man-o'-war that came alongside, ordered his ship to strike sail, and sent over a boarding party. There followed an inspection of the ship's papers and Ira's letters of commission. Ira, despite his patient but firm explanations, was hauled back to England, and the muskets were impounded. He wound up in the English law courts, fighting his case with his customary skill and endurance. In debtor's prison he wrote his *History of Vermont*, from memory, producing a work that remains authoritative. He won the right to go to France to secure documentation of the legitimacy of his transactions. In France he was imprisoned as a British agent. Years passed. He wrote his charming *Autobiography* while suffering terrible deprivations and solitary confinement during the Terror. He learned French and studied Continental politics and continued his voluminous and even-tempered correspondence with British, French, and American authorities, arguing for his release.

He published two books in his own defense and was eventually exonerated by the British courts and released from French prisons and permitted, in 1800, to return home. By then the muskets had rusted away and were almost worthless. He started a suit against the British courts to recover damages. Early in 1801, home again, he paid a call on President Thomas Jefferson and gave him a briefing on European politics and a prophetic analysis of global political trends. It is amazing to consider the backwoods boy lecturing the great Jefferson on geopolitics; and the backwoods boy was right.

Returning to Vermont, Ira learned that his antagonists had slapped liens on his lands while he was in French prisons trying to arrange a transaction for the benefit of Vermont. He never lost his calmness of mind but continued to assemble documents, file briefs, make motions, and construct arguments in his defense. But the difficulties were beyond him. In his own beloved Burlington, site of the University he had founded, he was arrested and jailed on trumped-up charges. After some weeks he secured bail and in 1803 he stole away from the State he had founded, with $1,000 (today's equivalent) in his pocket, on a lame horse, at night, making for Kentucky, to avail himself of that State's bankruptcy laws. He never saw his family again, and there is no evidence that they missed him. He had given his bride a wedding gift of 23,000 acres of prime land—less than a tenth of his eventual holdings—and she hung on to that, keeping at least that part of the family comfortably wealthy for the next three generations.

Although Ira's claims against England were supported by President Monroe and Secretary of State Madison, nothing could be done. Hostility was rising. The War of 1812 would soon break out. Ira's case was airtight, legally perfect, morally commanding—and hopeless.

Ira went to Philadelphia and there he was taken in by a family he had aided in earlier

years; it is good to find at least some small evidence of gratitude towards this self-effacing man who had never said no to any honest supplicant. He pursued his claims and legal correspondence with his usual sagacity and power. But his daughter died in 1811 and the starch went out of him. In 1814 he died. No family member came to help settle his affairs. Eventually the gravesite was removed; and for the past century and a half no one has known where he lies finally at rest.

In London there was in those times a regular biennial publication devoted to sketches of contemporary worthies. One issue carried a biographical notice of "Major-General Ira Allen of Vermont," which includes this lustrous passage:

> This singular and extraordinary man, the particulars of whose life we are about to detail, is a native of the American woods, and his history is in some measure connected with the American revolution. . . . General Allen is not yet fifty years of age; he is a married man, and has several children. In point of stature he is below the middle size, and his person and address are both prepossessing. He has habitually acquired a command over his passions; is cheerful, good tempered and benevolent; but somewhat positive in his opinions, which has, however, given an air of firmness to all his public measures. During the course of the trial alluded to, General Allen printed the whole proceedings, as taken down by a short-hand writer; and he has also published the History of the State of Vermont, which according to his account, contained the progressive population, in fighting men, annexed to the respective periods, as follows, viz.
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> | In 1781 they were estimated at | | 7,000 |
> | 1792 | | 18,500 |
> | 1798 | near | 30,000 |
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> Yet it is but a few years back that the whole country was a wilderness, overgrown with wood, the receptacle of wild beasts, and unimpressed by the footsteps of man. Mr. Ira Allen, who had shared in all its infant struggles, has lived to see Vermont attain an unexampled degree of prosperity, and, after achieving its independence, has beheld it become an important state in the American Union; while he himself, by a cruel reverse of fortune, equally sudden and unexpected, after endowing an University, and acting as a legislator and a general, has been subjected in one foreign Country to all the rigours of imprisonment, and in another to all the miseries attendant on confiscation.

To this day the standard histories of the United States (see Bancroft, Woodrow Wilson, Samuel Eliot Morison, or any school or college text) make no mention of Ira Allen. After that tribute published in London a silence settled in for a century and a quarter. Then, in 1928, Houghton Mifflin published James Benjamin Wilbur's fine two-volume biography, *Ira Allen: Founder of Vermont, 1751-1814*, which must be classed among the truly rare books—as rare, worthy, and grievously unknown as the good Ira himself.