Ethan Allen Speech

Given to the Withlacoochee Chapter

Of the SAR on 15 April 2023

Good morning, Members of the Withlacoochee chapter of the SAR. I was going to do a speech on American captives by the British during the revolutionary war and of course in my research up popped Ethan Allen’s book “A Narrative of Ethan Allen’s Captivity, Containing his Voyages and Travels”. This is considered to be the bible of being in British captivity. Ethan Allen was captured during an abortive attack on Montreal on September 25, 1775, and finally released from captivity on or about May 6 1778 or around 2 years and 7 months of captivity by the British.

Ethan Allen was one of the more interesting Revolutionary war characters. He was born in 1738 to Joseph and Mary Allen of Litchfield Ct, the first of 8 children. His parents were devoutly religious people that had come to this country as Puritan Settlers. Interestingly my family who were also Puritans came over in 1637 and ended up in Woodstock Ct in the late 1600s. When his father died in 1755, he left a profitable business to support his widow. Ethan was able to get a good education by studying with a local minister and was scheduled to enter Yale University but as he was the oldest had to help support his family with many young children and went to work on the farm. He was a restless young man and when the French and Indian War reached CT in 1757, he joined the militia and went off to relieve British Troops trapped in the Siege of Fort William Henry. The fort fell before he got there so back to farming, he went. After five years of farming, he bought partial ownership in an iron furnace in Salisbury and married a woman five years his senior which was very unusual for the time. Typical of the time would be that men married women that could be 3 to ten years younger as they had to establish themselves before, they married.

His wife Mary Brownson was a deeply religious woman who signed her name with a cross. The couple went on to have five children but were not apparently well suited for each other. She was devout while he liked to question faith. He was well read, and she was barely literate. He got into trouble with local authorities occasionally and over an escaped pig episode where he and his brothers confined the pigs in a neighbor pigpen he was accused by the owner of the pigs for not confining the pigs in a legally defined town pound. When he got to court, and the owner stated he had not properly confined the pigs he said, and this is a direct quote **“One pigpen is as good as another**”. The magistrate was not amused and fined him 15 shillings.

Ethan was good friends with a local Dr Thomas Young who convinced him to get the smallpox vaccination. Smallpox vaccinations at that time were dangerous but much less dangerous than getting the disease itself. You were injected with a small amount of pus taken directly from a person with smallpox. You would have a mild case of smallpox and then be immune, but a small percentage of folks would die from the vaccination. The local church leaders were against vaccinations and threatened Allen with prosecution. He and his doctor friend survived this threat and became good friends.

The doctor then converted Allen to a religion called Deism. Allen eventually published a book later in life called Reason: The Only Oracle of Man about Deism. Deism was a form of rational theology that emerged among free thinking Europeans in the 17th and 18th centuries. Deists insisted that religious truth should be subject to the authority of human reason rather than divine revelation and denied that the bible was the revealed word of God. Miracles, prophecies and divine portents were all prescribed as residues of superstition.

In 1766 he moved his family to Northampton Mass. Where he invested in a lead mining operation. He was strongly encouraged to leave because of his religious views and moved to Sheffield Mass. There he was approached by two distant relatives, Remember Baker and Seth Warner, with a problem. They had purchased land grants in N. Hampshire colony only to have British officials determine that the land belonged to New York. New York then demanded another payment for the land and by 1769 violence broke out against those trying to enforce New York’s claim. They hired an attorney and took it to court in New York but lost. The next day the Attorney General of New York and another lawyer offered him a good hunk of land if Allen would put in with New York. Allen immediately turned down the proposal. He was threatened by the N. Y. Attorney General “***That the people settled on the Grants will do well to make the best terms possible with the rightful New York* *landlords. We have might on our side, and you know that might often prevails against right” Allen responded that “The gods of* *the hills are not the gods of the valleys*”** He made his response clear when he suggested that those two men accompany him to Bennington VT which was the unofficial capital of the No Mans land of the Grants. The two men got the message.

He then organized a militia of men who felt they had been swindled into two companies – one led by Baker and one by Warner. He named himself as their Colonel Commandant and named the group the Green Mountain Boys. Their job was to protect those whose land was threatened and to resist encroachments. Realizing that this was also a good time to speculate in buying and selling parcels of land, he did so and became wealthy in the process. His Green Mountain Boys then attacked the home of Charles Hutchinson in October of 1771 and burned it and told him to complain to his governor and “**God damn your governor, your laws, your king, council and** **assembly.**”

New York Governor William Tryon responded to this threat with a reward of 150 pounds for Allen and 50 pounds each for Warner and five others. Allen responded with his own reward for several men in the Bennington area of 25 pounds. There were some written words exchanged between Tyron and Allen in the next several years with Tyron raising the bounty on Allen. Allen and his Green Mountain Boys continued to eject New York settlers and Gov. Tyron finally issued an edict which forbade three or more persons to gather when ordered to disperse by civil authorities and declared unlawful assumption of judicial power and malicious destruction of property felonies punishable by death. Allen, Warner, Baker and Cochran were named as the chief rioters. General Gage refused to send royal soldiers to enforce this act, so it ended up just a piece of worthless paper.

Violence finally broke out in a riot on March 13, 1775, in Westminster which ended up with two men dead and many injured. Allen led his men into town and convinced the town leaders to appeal directly to the King with Col. Allen and two others as a committee to work on the document. Around this time war broke out between the Colonists and the British empire and Benedict Arnold marched his newly formed company to the Boston’s siege lines in Cambridge Mass. and proposed to the Mass Comm of Safety a plan to capture Fort Ticonderoga in upstate New York and seize its artillery. On May 3, 1775, Col Arnold was authorized to raise a full complement of men. Meanwhile The loosely organized Conn. militia approached Allen and his men about leading an attack on Ft. Ticonderoga. By this time, he had received an officer’s commission which ordered him to take Ft. Ticonderoga.

When Arnold caught up with Allen there was some quiet dispute about who was in charge, and they finally decided that they would each lead their own soldiers into battle. On May 10, 1775, Allen and Arnold decided on a dawn raid although they did not have enough boats to transport all the men. He ended up with 83 men near the garrison and gave them a stirring speech in part “You have … been a scourge and terror to arbitrary power. Your valor has been famed abroad and our orders are to surprise and take the garrison now before us. I now propose to advance before you and in person conduct you through the **wicket gate** and then asked them “**if you are to** **undertake this voluntarily to** “**Poise your Firelocks**” There are 14 commands in His majesty’s 1764 Manual of Arms. **Stop and** **demo Poise your Firelock with Bob Thompson.**

He ordered them to advance in center file with himself at the head of the file and marched them to the wicket gate where he found a sentry posted who instantly snapped his fusee at me. The sentry ran through the wicket gate and then into a bomb proof while giving an alarm. Allen then formed his men as on parade to face the two barracks. The garrison being asleep we gave three **huzzas** which greatly surprised them. A sentry made a pass at one of my officers with a charged bayonet and slightly wounded him. My first thought was to kill him with my sword but in an instant altered the design and fury of the blow to a slight cut on the side of the head upon which he then dropped his gun and asked for quarter which I readily granted and demanded of him to show me the place where the commanding officer kept. Allen repaired to a stairwell and ordered the commander to come forth instantly or I would sacrifice the whole garrison. The commander came with breeches in hand and asked by what authority. Allen answered, “**In the name of the great Jehovah and the Continental Congress”**.

Allen again demanded the immediate surrender with his sword over his head to which he complied and ordered his men to be paraded without arms. There is some historical dispute on Allen’s story as the first man to come to the door was an adjutant to the commander and when the commander appeared he was fully dressed. Allen captured 100 pieces of cannon, one 13 inch mortar and a number of swivels. This capture of cannons was extremely important to the new Continental Army who had very few cannons. Interestingly Allen fails to mention that his undisciplined militia began to plunder the fort, getting drunk and looting anything of value. When Arnold demanded that Allen restore order, Allen refused to control his men drew his pistol and stripped Arnold of joint command at gunpoint. Arnold complained of this in a letter to headquarters.

He then sent his men to take another fort called Crown Point and captured an additional 13 prisoners. Arnold and Allen then took several boats to capture a Sloop of War and small outpost in south bay of Lake Champlain, but Arnold beat Allen there to capture the sloop and outpost as his boat was faster than Allen’s and captured another 12 men. After these military actions Allen’s men returned to Fort Ticonderoga and **“drank the place dry**”. While Allen’s men were drinking Fort Ticonderoga dry Benedict Arnold took his captured schooner and his men and captured another important British outpost and the northern tip of the lake on May 19th. He personally led the charge, and the British abandoned their weapons and surrendered. He also captured another schooner at that outpost.

After the drama played out at Ticonderoga many of Allen’s men deserted him as they had to return home for spring planting and Allen began to lobby for a colonial force to invade Canada. He claimed that with 1500 men and proper artillery he would take Montreal and then it would be no insuperable difficulty to take Quebec. His lobbying failed and he then lobbied congress to make his Green Mountain Boys part of the continental army. Congress agreed but when it became time to name the leaders of the Green Mountain Boys his name was not even mentioned. His reputation as a troublemaker had preceded him. He was forced to accompany his regiment as a civilian scout.

General Montgomery asked Allen to put together some Canadians as a fighting force and met up with a Major Brown and now had 110 soldiers. Allen himself concluded that he had a motley party of soldiers. He persuaded Brown to go ahead and attack Montreal instead of waiting for Benedict Arnold who was leading additional American Forces to attack Montreal. Allen was a man that did not want to share any glory with Arnold especially. In September 1775 Allen and his men about 75 of whom decided that it was a foolhardy attack and deserted was soundly defeated by about 40 British regulars and another 400 mixed irregulars and Indians. Allen ended up with about 45 men in his own words.

Allen gives an interesting account of his capture. He knew he was surrounded and related that a British officer and himself exchanged shots both of which missed. He then advised the British Officer that he would surrender if his men and himself would be well treated. Another British officer then showed up and Allen surrendered himself and his men. he then relates after his surrender an Indian ran up to him presented his firelock at around 12 feet. Allen twitched the British Officer between the two of them and as the Indian tried to get a shot at Allen, he kept the officer between the two of them. He was then attacked by another **“Imp of Hell”** and kept interposing this officer between him and the Indians. Finally, several irregulars for the British intervened and the situation was saved for Allen.

He was then taken to the barrack yard in Montreal and met Gen. Prescott who worked himself into a rage. The General was then restrained by a British major. According to Allen the General then ordered that 13 Canadians were to be executed. Allen opened his shirt and told the General to “thrust the bayonets into his breast for I was the sole cause of the Canadians taking up arms” After thinking for a minute or two the General belayed his order and stated, “**I will not execute you** **now, but you shall grace a halter at Tyburn God damn ye**” Trivia question: **What is a halter?** Allen admits he had anxiety about after he landed in England as a prisoner. After a few days in Montreal under close guard he and his soldiers were taken by ship to England. All 34 of them were put into a 20 x 22 area on the ship and handcuffed. Not one of them died during the passage to Falmouth a rarity in the 1700s. They were then taken to Pendennis Castle which still exists today. Allen was still concerned about “gracing a halter” especially when he was told by a friendly man that bets were being laid in London that I would be executed.

Early in this war the American colonists were considered to be rebels and traitors to the Crown and thereby subject to execution.

He wrote a letter to Congress asking them not to retaliate against any British prisoners until his fate was decided expecting it to be read and discussed in London. His letter must have brought fruit as he and his men and many other prisoners were shipped back to American on 12 February 1776. Much credit must also be given to George Washington’s note to King George III saying in late 1775 **“Whatever happens to Allen such exactly shall be the treatment and fate of British Brigadier Prescott**” whom Washington had captured in November 1775 By this time many British prisoners had been taken and King George III did not want his own soldiers mistreated so shipped American prisoners back to the shores of American where they spend the next two years on British Prison Hulks. **– Trivia question. What are prison hulks**? Huge Monument Brooklyn NY. Trivia - **How many American prisoners died in? these Hulks?** He was finally paroled in May of 1778 in exchanged for a British colonel.

As soon as he was freed Allen rendezvoused with Washington’s camp at Valley Forge where he was raised to the rank of Colonel on May 14, 1778, with the approval of Congress. He fought no more in the war and returned home when he learned that two of his four brothers had died. He learned that in his absence that Vermont had been granted permission by New Hampshire and New York to form their own independent government and essentially became their own independent republic for the next 14 years. He became a judge for the Vermont Republic and dealt with Cases which authorized authorities to confiscate Tory owned houses. He was soon relieved of his duties as he had a knack for making enemies and not friends.

He then started to hunt down known Tory sympathizers and turn them in, including his own brother Levi Allen. He wrote a lengthy complaint on his brother that he was counterfeiting Continental money and supplying the enemy on Long Island. He did this despite Levi spending a great deal of time and money supporting Ethan during his imprisonment. Levi did cross over the lines into the British camp after many heated and public exchanges. They did reconcile after the war ended. He wrote his memoirs in 1779 and they were a best seller. During this time he and several others including the Governor of Vermont Thomas Chittenden lobbied the Governor of Quebec about Vermont joining Great Britain as a loyal province. He also lobbied for a military commission for himself within the British Army but never received one. These negotiations were lengthy and could have been considered treasonous. In the end since he was a war hero and author of a best seller everything was ignored. Congress got a hold of one of his missives to Quebec and read it aloud in Congress which stirred up sentiment against him.

In his final years his wife died, and he remarried a widow and had three more children. His final book in 1785 was **Reason:** **The Only Oracle of Man.** He printed 1500 copies and only sold 200. He attacked everything from the Bible to priests to organized religion. He stated in his book that **“I am no Christian except mere infant baptism makes me one” He** stated that he did not know if he was a Deist or not. This was the first publication in the U. S. openly directed against the Christian religion and a review by the President of Yale called his book “crude and vulgar, the arguments were flimsy and unmeaning, and sentiments were coarser than the style.”

He died on February 12, 1789, and the Vermont Gazette published a glowing obituary. Ethan Allen was many things, war hero, a Vermont pioneer and partial founder of that state, a man without a religion in a highly religious era, outspoken, a patriot and potential traitor who negotiated with the British government to attach Vermont to Canada and receive a British Army commission and a published author of a book that is still in print today. He was a very complicated man and a direct forefather of our President Hitchcock. Thank you for your time and attention. Any questions.