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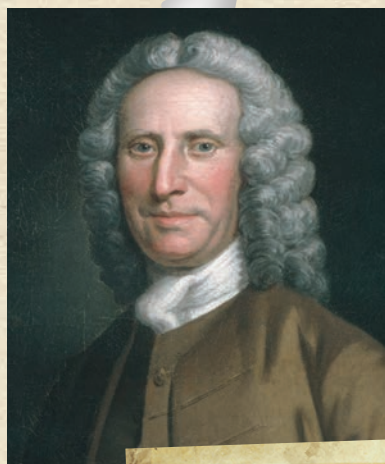
NEW YORK
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SECESSION

BY KEN GOTTRY

In 1781, a small upstate town voted to secede from New York and the Union.

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



Today, New York's Cambridge Valley, with a population of 7,000, encompasses the towns of Cambridge, White Creek, and Jackson at the southern end of Washington County. The area was formed by the Cambridge Patent granted by New York Governor Cadwallader Colden on July 23, 1761. Twenty years later, near the end of the Revolutionary War, the community became the headquarters of a regional

secession movement when it voted to secede from New York (and thus the United States) and join the republic of Vermont. The effort was short-lived; one year later, it voted to return to New York rule.

Disputes and Decrees

Colonial boundaries were poorly defined and often overlapped. When the Duke of York received his patent from the King of England in 1664, it described New York's eastern boundary as the Connecticut River. The Connecticut River likewise acted as a natural western boundary for the Province of New Hampshire. Farther south, however, using the river as the western boundary of Massachusetts or Connecticut made little sense because those colonies already extended well west of it.

Years of disputes followed until a 1741 royal decree established the western boundaries of Massachusetts and Connecticut about twenty miles east of the Hudson River, which kept most of the important Dutch patroonship of Rensselaerswyck (now

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Above: Cadwallader Colden, ca. 1750, by John Wollaston the Younger

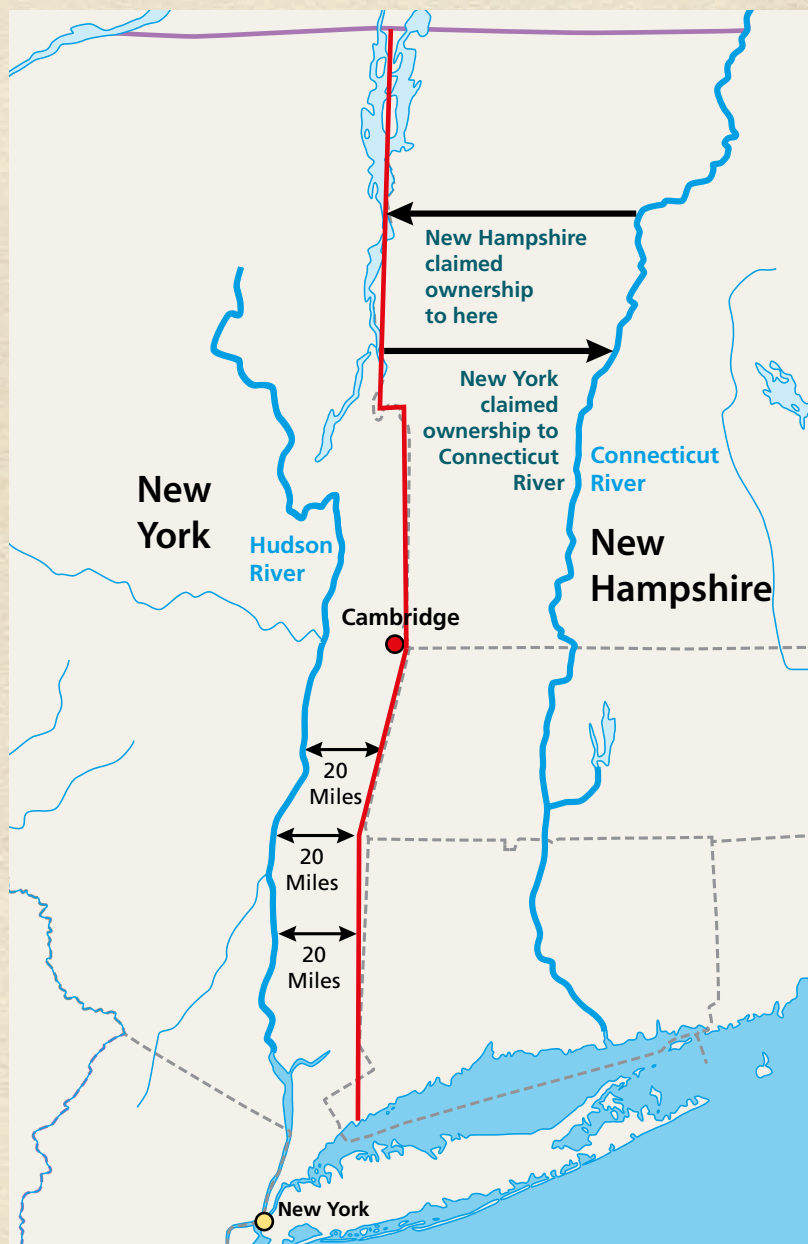
Below: The Duke of York's charter granting him the colony of New York, 1664

Right: Map of New York and New England, 1780. Vermont referred to itself at that time as a state, though it was not yet part of the United States.

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The border dispute centered on the territory between the Hudson and Connecticut Rivers.

Rensselaer County) within New York and settled the Massachusetts–New York and Connecticut–New York boundary disputes.

The decree did not, however, settle the New Hampshire–New York boundary. Because the Hudson River does not extend north to the Canadian border, it could not serve as New Hampshire's western boundary. As a result, the area north of Massachusetts and between the Connecticut and Hudson Rivers, present-day Vermont, remained in dispute, with both New Hampshire and New York claiming jurisdiction.



New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth, 1760

1664

King Charles II grants the Duke of York a patent in present-day New York.

1741

A royal decree establishes the western boundaries of Massachusetts and Connecticut about 20 miles east of the Hudson River.

January 3, 1749

New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth grants the first New Hampshire patent, in Bennington.

The governors of both provinces attempted to assert their authority over the disputed area. Governor Benning Wentworth of New Hampshire began issuing the Hampshire Grants, creating townships that were typically six miles square and selling them to groups of proprietors for modest fees. The first was Bennington, on January 3, 1749. Over the next fifteen years, Wentworth granted 108 townships covering nearly all of present-day Vermont.

At the same time, New York Governor Cadwallader Colden sought royal confirmation of New York's authority to grant land in the disputed region. Unlike New Hampshire's township system, which encouraged relatively small-scale settlement, New York's patent system often conveyed much larger tracts to wealthy landowners and politically connected speculators.

The 1764 Order in Council attempted to resolve the dispute by declaring the boundary to be the west bank of the Connecticut River, placing all the land created by the Hampshire Grants under New York's jurisdiction, effectively invalidating the grants that Wentworth had issued.

The settlers, however, neither left nor agreed to pay taxes to New York. New York moved the fight to the courts. Between 1773 and 1774, the Albany Ejectment Trials ruled, case by case, that New York's land patents were valid and the New Hampshire grants were not. Settlers who had



Left: *Ira Allen* | FLEMING MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT, JAMES WILBUR ESTATE



Right: *Ethan Allen* | LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

purchased land from New Hampshire now faced a choice: purchase the land again from New York, often at a much higher price, or be evicted.

One case resulted in a 1774 confrontation near Bennington. After repeatedly preventing New York officials from enforcing court orders, Ethan and Ira Allen were declared outlaws under New York law. When a sheriff's posse approached Bennington to enforce the court's judgments, armed resistance by the Allen-led Green Mountain Boys caused the New York authorities to retreat.

After repeatedly preventing New York officials from enforcing court orders, Ethan and Ira Allen were declared outlaws under New York law.

July 23, 1761

Cambridge patent granted by New York Governor Cadwallader Colden in reaction to the Hampshire Grants.

1764

Order in Council places all the land created by the New Hampshire Grants under New York's jurisdiction.

1773-74

Albany Ejectment Trials rule, case by case, that New York's land patents are valid.



On January 15, 1777, delegates representing the disputed territory declared it an independent state called New Connecticut, separate from both New York and New Hampshire.

On January 15, 1777, delegates representing the disputed territory declared it an independent state called New Connecticut, separate from both New York and New Hampshire. The new republic petitioned the Continental Congress for recognition as an equal member of the Union. New York, however, continued to claim the land. It successfully opposed the petitions by arguing that Congress could not recognize a state carved from New York without its consent.

In June 1777, New Connecticut changed its name to Vermont, and on July 8, 1777, the republic adopted the first written constitution to prohibit adult slavery, and one of the first to provide universal male suffrage without a property requirement. The constitution also included rights to freedom of religion, freedom of speech, trial by jury, right to bear arms, and guaranteed education. The Republic created its own legislature, its own taxes, and its own militia.

1774

Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys cause the New York authorities to retreat at Bennington.

January 15, 1777

New Connecticut is formed.

June 2, 1777

New Connecticut is renamed Vermont.

Cambridge's Location

Due to Cambridge's location east of the Hudson River, it was unclear whether it was part of New York, New Hampshire, or the new republic of Vermont. In April 1781, the Legislature of Vermont directed that a convention be held to let the communities east of the Hudson River decide their allegiance.

On May 9, 1781, the Union Convention was held in Cambridge, with the following districts represented: Hoosic, Little Hoosic (Petersburgh and Berlin), Schaghticoke, Cambridge, Saratoga (now Easton), Upper White Creek (Salem), Black Creek (Hebron), Granville, Skenesboro (Whitehall), Fort Edward, and Kingsbury.

John Rodgers served as chairman of the convention. Moses Robinson (chair) and Jonas Fay (clerk) of the Vermont Legislature were present to accept the propositions of the convention.

Six articles were presented and approved by the Convention attendees. Most notable was Article 1: "That the District or Tract of Land lying north of a line being extended from the North Line of the Massachusetts to Hudson's River, and south of Latitude 45, as comprehended in the late Jurisdictional Claim by the Legislature of the State of Vermont, be considered as part of the State, and the inhabitants as free Citizens."

Secession from New York was not readily accepted. First, the Convention was only attended by people who

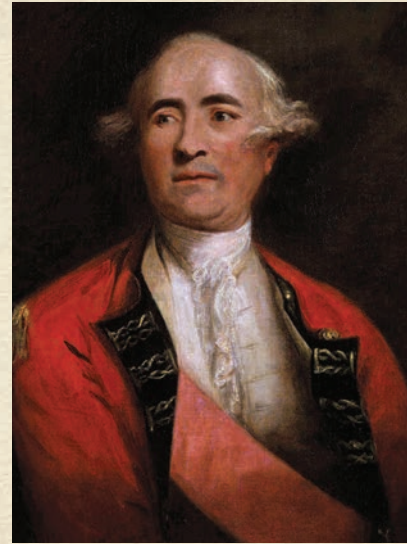
already favored secession. Second, many who lived in the area defined in Article 1 were opposed to the transfer to join the "outlaws of the Green Mountains." Third, all the other states were alarmed that their citizens could likewise choose to leave their state.

Why Secede?

Why Cambridge and other communities in the disputed territory may have supported efforts to secede from New York and the United States and align more closely with Vermont is not fully documented, but several plausible explanations have been suggested.

One possible concern was uncertainty over taxation and jurisdiction. Residents in the disputed territory were subject to competing taxation by both New York and Vermont. And, just as colonists were split between the United States and Great Britain, the sentiments of Cambridge residents were split between New York and Vermont. Both governments attempted to collect taxes from the same residents, and both appointed local officials. New York accounts have long maintained that Ethan Allen conducted raids in the Cambridge area based on what New York considered unlawful claims. On the other hand, Vermont accounts depict Allen as enforcing Vermont laws. The "facts" often depend upon which historical account you read.

The second possible reason is the prolonged economic and social strain of the Revolutionary War. By the early



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Sir Frederick Haldimand, ca. 1778, work by the studio of Sir Joshua Reynolds

1780s, the conflict had lasted 6 years, and wartime taxation and requisitions placed significant burdens on rural communities.

At the same time, Vermont leaders, especially Ethan Allen, Ira Allen, and Governor Thomas Chittenden, were secretly corresponding with Sir Frederick Haldimand, the Governor of the Province of Quebec, in what are now known as the Haldimand Negotiations. These discussions explored the possibility of Vermont becoming a British province, which meant the end of the war and its taxation. Haldimand also discussed granting Vermont protection against New York's land claims. How serious Vermont was about becoming a British province has been debated.

July 8, 1777

Vermont adopts its own progressive constitution.

May 9, 1781

Cambridge votes to secede from New York.

June 16, 1781

Cambridge District residents take seats in the Vermont Legislature.

Some see the negotiations as having been used mainly as leverage to protect Vermont from invasion, to encourage New York to dismiss claims on the disputed territory, and to pressure the Continental Congress to recognize Vermont as a state.

Whatever the reasons, on June 16, 1781, Cambridge District residents Phineas Whiteside and Joseph Caldwell took seats in the Vermont Legislature as Cambridge seceded from New York and the United States.

Later in 1781, two significant developments occurred. First, the American victory at the Siege of Yorktown effectively marked the end of major military operations in the Revolutionary War. Second, the Continental Congress reiterated its position that Vermont would need to resolve its territorial disputes before it could be considered for admission as a state.

In this broader context, a second convention was held in Cambridge on March 1, 1782, at which time a petition was sent to the government of New York requesting the restoration of the districts to their former status within the state. Around the same period, the Haldimand Negotiations gradually lost momentum. Although correspondence between Vermont leaders and British officials had continued intermittently, the prospects of any formal agreement diminished as the war drew to a close and diplomatic conditions shifted.

Congress of the United States:

AT THE THIRD SESSION,
Begun and held at the City of Philadelphia, on
Monday the sixth of December, one thousand seven hundred and ninety.

An ACT for the ADMISSION of the STATE of VERMONT into
this Union.

THE State of Vermont having petitioned the Congress to be admitted a member of the United States, Be it enacted by the SENATE and HOUSE of REPRESENTATIVES of the United States of America in Congress assembled, and it is hereby enacted and declared, That on the fourth day of March, one thousand seven hundred and ninety-one, the said State, by the name and file of "the State of Vermont," shall be received and admitted into this Union, as a new and entire member of the United States of America.

FREDERICK AUGUSTUS MUHLENBERG,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

JOHN ADAMS, *Vice-President of the United States,
and President of the Senate.*

APPROVED, February the eighteenth, 1791.

GEORGE WASHINGTON, *President of the United States.*

DEPOSITED among the ROLLS in the OFFICE of the SECRETARY
of STATE.

W. A. Muhlenberg Secretary of State.

The State of Vermont was admitted to the Union in 1791.

October 17, 1781

Americans emerge victorious at the Siege of Yorktown.

March 1, 1782

Cambridge leaves Vermont to return to New York.

September 3, 1783

Treaty of Paris is signed, ending the Revolutionary War.

On February 18, 1791,
Congress passed “An Act
for the admission of the
State of Vermont into
this Union,” specifying
admission effective
March 4, 1791.

On September 3, 1783, the Treaty of Paris marked the end of the Revolutionary War and recognized the independence of the United States. Vermont, however, was not specifically addressed. Thus, its political status remained unresolved; it was not recognized by the United States, and it continued to be claimed by New York.

New York and Vermont

History tells varied stories about the relations between New York and Vermont from 1783 to 1790. Some sources suggest that Congress approved an invasion of Vermont in 1783 to force it to submit to New York rule, though such claims appear to derive from interpretations of debates, correspondence, and newspaper accounts. At the same time, New York authorities periodically asserted their jurisdiction and, at

times, threatened to mobilize militia along the disputed border.

From 1781 to 1790, New York thwarted Vermont's attempts to become a state. Finally, on October 7, 1790, the Vermont Legislature voted to raise £9,000 (about \$2.4 million today) to compensate New York for the disputed land. The lump sum amount agreed upon was large enough for New York to save face yet small enough that Vermont could afford it. Each Vermont town was assigned a share roughly based on population and taxable property.

On February 18, 1791, Congress passed “An Act for the admission of the State of Vermont into this Union,” specifying admission effective March 4, 1791.

This outcome occurred roughly a decade after earlier local conventions such as the Cambridge meeting of 1781. While it is difficult to draw a direct causal line from any single local vote to eventual statehood, such conventions are often understood as part of the broader process by which Vermont's territorial claims and political identity coalesced into eventual recognition as a state. ■

Ken Gottry is a local historian in Cambridge, New York, though he would describe himself as more of a raconteur than a historian. He has published articles and given presentations on Cambridge's history since 2002.

The Cambridge Village Archives holds the town's Book of Records, minutes of events from 1773–1816. Books such as *Cambridge Centennial 1873* and *1916 Old Home Week* relate oral histories of the events surrounding the town's secession. *The Washington County Post* newspapers contain accounts relating to these events, as well.

The Lansingburgh Historical Society holds letters captured on a British mail boat bound to New York, including a letter from Lord George Germain to Sir Henry Clinton dated February 7, 1781, discussing British efforts to bring Vermont back under British allegiance. *The 1878 History of Washington County* by Crisfield Johnson also contains details pertinent to these events.



March 4, 1791

Vermont admitted to the Union
as a state.

For more about
Ethan Allen and the
Revolutionary War, see
“Forsaken Graves” by Thomas A.
Chambers, Winter 2014.