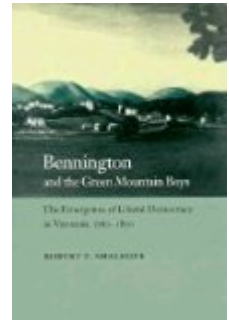


Robert E. Shalhope. *Bennington and the Green Mountain Boys: The Emergence of Liberal Democracy in Vermont, 1760-1850.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. xiii + 412 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-5335-7.



Reviewed by Susan Ouellette

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In the tradition of historians such as Kenneth A. Lockridge, Paul Johnson, and Richard L. Bushman, Robert E. Shalhope's book is a richly detailed community study. However, it is a community study that also draws on more recent trends synthesizing social, economic and political history into one cohesive narrative.

As a social history, *Bennington and the Green Mountain Boys* is essentially a people's tale. Introduced in a series of short biographies, Bennington's widely diverse group of early proprietors emerge as individuals with specific reasons for leaving the settled parts of New York, Massachusetts and Connecticut. Whether escaping the quirements of the "patricians of the Hudson River Valley" or separating from a less-than-satisfying religious community, Bennington's prospective settlers all envisioned a new beginning in the frontier community of the New Hampshire land grants. On the grants, farm lots were much less dear than in the older, more thickly settled parts of New England. Thus, the opportunity for land ownership and independent status was much greater.

Another opportunity associated with the New Hampshire frontier had a spiritual dimension. Bennington was a place where New Light separatists leaving Massachusetts and Connecticut could establish an independent church. Founded on their desire for a harmonious, mutually supportive community, Bennington's New Lights established a church covenant and chose ministers reflective of their independent spirit. Though often a source of conflict in Bennington, other times the separatists' philosophy contributed positively as when the town enacted "just price" guidelines for their sawmill.

In his political analysis, Shalhope argues that the first settlers/proprietors arrived with more than a desire for land, an independent church and the opportunity of the frontier. In his view, they were also "committed to an open, egalitarian society" that made Bennington a "liberal democracy" in its earliest stages of development. To be sure, the radical resistance of some of Bennington's proprietors to New York and British authorities during the land grant controversy highlighted the aggressive individualism rampant in Benning-

ton. In this instance, Shalhope's contention that Bennington was a unique social and political development in New England is persuasive. Yet, not entirely so. In many other ways the settlement of Bennington had much in common with other New England settlements of its time. The intention of Bennington's first generation was to establish an egalitarian community and, when not engaged in the legal and physical wrangling over their land titles, settlement proceeded in a well-established pattern begun well before the middle of the eighteenth century.

Despite the independence movement of the Green Mountain Boys, Shalhope's Bennington became a fairly typical community over the period. Once land grant issues were resolved, proprietors and those who followed them to the grants experienced the same socio-economic trends of other New England communities: rapid population growth, industrialization and immigration. The earliest and best positioned settlers took up the most desirable land and quickly "concentrated on growing staple crops for distant markets" (p. 225). As their focus moved away from subsistence farming and they became tied to the regional and national economic forces, Bennington's yeomanry embraced ideals of Jeffersonian democracy that emphasized an equality of opportunity.

In the period after the American Revolution, the physical growth of Bennington as well as the development of other economic opportunities in professional occupations led Bennington to develop two distinctly different communities. The newer merchant-dominated downhill section challenged the economic and political dominance of the older uphill farming community. Not surprisingly, conflict developed between the uphill Jeffersonian Democrats and the new professionals, who embraced Federalist and, later, Whig sensibilities. Such deep divisions underlay the spectacle of the Post Office building being physically drawn back and forth between the two districts on skids. Yet, in the end, that conflict resolved itself on the side

of the newly emergent merchant leaders. The shifting economic and social climate in the Jacksonian era made the downhill economic interests ascendant and possession of the Post Office passed to them along with the political power.

Though perhaps beyond the intended scope of Shalhope's book, several areas went unaddressed in his work. First, though there must surely have been native people still living in the area of Bennington at the time of its first settlement, Shalhope never mentions them. Ethan and Ira Allen certainly concerned themselves with extinguishing Indian land titles; were they the only ones? Was there no other discussion? In that same category, were all Yorker titles extinguished and Yorker tenants or grant holders banished? Were some of the poor farmers and landless poor who worked on the farms and in the mills of Bennington have been descendants of these less fortunate early settlers? Finally, by the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the religious and secular reform movements of the period were active centers of political and economic debate. Were Bennington's own reform societies not offering any challenge to the uphill and downhill elites? These are areas that still have important implications for Bennington's larger socio-political story.

Despite these last omissions, those wishing to learn more about the political and economic dimensions of Vermont's earlier settlement and the emergence of the Ethan Allen "ethos" in the nineteenth century will find this a valuable work.

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>.

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