



His Excellency, Governor Benning Wentworth
1696-1770

Royal Governor of the Province of New Hampshire from 1741-1766 - a Tenure in Office longer than that of any other colonial Governor in any of the thirteen colonies.

Governor Wentworth issued Town Charters for 129 Towns included in the present State of Vermont.

PROBLEMS OF THE NEW HAMPSHIRE "GRANTS"

If you will refer to any Red Book, more technically known as the New Hampshire Manual of the General Court, you will find that New Hampshire had seventeen governors under the British Crown before the American Revolution. This covered a period of 95 years.

New Hampshire had time to grow and develop a great deal in these 95 years. Each one of these governors made his own contribution to the colony's development, some more than others.

In my opinion, Governor Benning Wentworth, the next to the last of the Royal Governors (1741-1766) was the most ambitious and made the greatest progress toward developing New Hampshire and Vermont.

Just to set the picture in focus, Governor Benning Wentworth retired in 1766 and was succeeded by his nephew, Governor John Wentworth, who, with his family, made a hurried departure by sea in 1775.

Back now to Benning Wentworth. Here we have a man who was very ambitious, both for himself and for the colony. He was most anxious to see the colony grow, not only from an agricultural point of view, but manufacturing, lumbering, and all activities which would make for prosperity and increase the value of the land, much of which Governor Benning Wentworth held out for himself.

Governor Wentworth's best tool for expansion, of course, was his power to make large grants, usually granting whole towns to several proprietors, and receiving a consideration for affixing the Royal Seal--always reserving 360 acres for the school, 360 acres for the church, 360 acres for the clergyman, 360 acres for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, and, of course, 360 acres for Benning Wentworth.

These figures varied a little. Governor Wentworth was a good churchman and he expected these religious grants to boost The Church of England; however, the Congregationalists seemed to beat the others in most every time.

I would like to talk a little about the confusion caused by all these grants. I try to think how it would feel to be walking around on some of this uncertain footing. I once had a property line dispute and I can assure you it isn't fun.

It is difficult for us here today to imagine the heartache and frustration 200 years ago of our ancestors, who, after paying some money for from 100 acres to 500 acres, after developing a portion of it, and after building a set of buildings on it, to have their title to the whole property questioned. I am sure none of us here would like to have a sheriff knock on our respective doors tonight and advise us that we have no title to our homes.

More specifically, what was going on here a little over 200 years ago was this:

First, Benning Wentworth decided to take over and re-grant many old grants in New Hampshire that had not been developed. There was some legal precedent for this if a grant went over five years without being worked. However, in 1746, just as he was about to do this, a bombshell exploded, to wit, the Mason Grants were sold. The Mason Grants dated back over 100 years. They were, at best, quite vague, and much of this land was what Benning Wentworth intended to take over and re-grant.

Now, if Robert Tufton Mason had wanted to completely upset Benning Wentworth's wagon, he couldn't have planned it better. He sold his old claim to twelve men for 1,500 pounds, thereby giving Benning Wentworth twelve men to fight, half of them Wentworth's own relatives.

Next, the new proprietors announced that they were not going to disturb any of the people already settled on their lands. This gave these proprietors a great lift public relations-wise. Governor Wentworth couldn't hope to fight that combination here in New Hampshire. He sounded out his chances with the Crown and wasn't given any encouragement there.

However, this gentleman, Benning Wentworth, was not to be stopped altogether. He decided to make numerous grants in what is now Vermont. He had a commission from King George II dated the 3rd of July, 1741, which described New Hampshire as extending due west from the Merrimack River until it meets with other governments. This would seem to carry the New Hampshire west boundary over to the New York line. The only trouble was the New York eastern boundary had never been clearly defined--a real collision course for both governments.

You know, I always picture Governor Benning Wentworth as a man running about this state with a pad of blank grants in one hand and a quill pen in the other. Actually, there must have been a great deal of work involved in making a grant. First, the location had to be selected, then scouted out, then Carefully surveyed. Much planning went into these towns; good surveyors were in short supply.

Anyway, figuratively speaking at least, Governor Benning Wentworth crossed not the Rubicon, but the Connecticut. He notified Governor Clinton in Albany of his intention, and asked for his comments. He did not wait for a reply. His first grant in what is now Vermont was Bennington, well over to the West, in fact only 24 miles from Albany. He even had the courage to name it after himself.

Governor Clinton objected to this, citing lines from his own Charter to prove that his eastern boundary was the Connecticut River.

The fight was on. They went to the Crown for arbitration. However, these things take time, especially when there was an ocean to cross by sail. In the meantime, Governor Wentworth considered himself in possession and wasted no time in making use of that quill pen. He was slowed up because of a war; however, 1700, he made up for his lost time by issuing 60 town charters west of the Connecticut, and in the next four years the number grew to 113. Added to the 16 granted before the war, they totaled 129 towns, nearly the whole area of Vermont as we know it. Then, on June 20, 1764, the Royal Decree came down stating, in essence, that the west bank of the Connecticut River is to be the boundary line between New York and New Hampshire. Take note "is to be." Question: Is this retroactive? Of Course Clinton said "Yes" and Wentworth said "No." New York declared all of Benning Wentworths' grants west of the Connecticut null and void and began re-granting to new owners.

I leave it to you to decide how the settlers reacted to this. As we say today, "The fat was in the fire." Law or no law, you don't easily push hard-working settlers off their land. The settlers banded together and sent Samuel Robinson to England. He had one cute tool in his kit: He looked up "The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts" and pointed out that Governor Clinton did not include them in his grants. This powerful group got to the King with the result that the King ordered the governor of New York to stop making any grants in the disputed area. This helped some, but the battle went on and on.

In 1770, a New York Supreme Court upheld an ejectment action against a farmer on one of these grants. The news of this started up the fire. The Grant people organized and rioted against courts and sheriffs. The Green Mountain Boys organized under Ethan Allen as early as 1770, received early practice fighting

New York and they were more than ready to fight the British in the Revolution. Others employed more peaceful means; many petitions were drawn up, signed, and directed to the King. The New Hampshire Legislature took a hand in it, seeking aid from the British. However, a bigger problem was arising.

The Revolution was upon us. The "Grants" would have to wait, that is, as far as the British Government was concerned. How was the problem of the "Grants" solved? Of course, there was no "one fell swoop" settling the whole matter once and for all. The "Grant Controversy" went right on, up to and during the Revolution. The New York authorities insisted upon voiding all of the Wentworth Grants west of the Connecticut (about all of what we know as Vermont) and re-granting them to new proprietors.

The Green Mountain Boys, under the able leadership of the famous Allen brothers (Ira and Ethan) were not about to take this ejection treatment. They had had all they could take from the west, and from the east, for that matter. On January 15, 1777, the Vermont towns west of the Connecticut announced that New York no longer had legal control over them. They took the name of "New Connecticut." By June, the name was changed to Vermont.

Simultaneously another controversy on the east side of the Connecticut was going on which eventually dovetailed nicely with the "Grants" problem. This second controversy is known as the "Secession Movement."

The Secessionist Movement in New Hampshire certainly is a chapter by itself and there isn't time to give that story its full due. However, it must be mentioned here because of its direct bearing on the final establishment of Vermont as a state, and its direct bearing on the "Grants."

The New Hampshire towns along the Connecticut, usually under the leadership of Hanover, were sadly overlooked in the matter of representation at Exeter. These included 16 towns from Canaan to Apthorp (Littleton). Later, it grew to include 20 Cheshire County towns.

These towns at first threatened to set up a state of their own, but finally decided to join Vermont, Vermont accepted them by legislative vote at Windsor. However, Ethan Allen needed some support at the Continental Congress to get Vermont recognized as a state. Ethan Allen won Dr. Bartlett of New Hampshire over to his statehood cause by agreeing to retrocede the wayward towns to New Hampshire. Dr. Bartlett appears to have been worth the price, and Ethan went home and persuaded the Vermont House to rescind their vote and return the towns to New Hampshire, where the winters are not quite so severe.

Like any other epoch in history, the Secessionist problem did not end abruptly with this action. However, Vermont did become a state and was able to deal with their own "Grants." The Connecticut Valley Towns? Well, like Bo Peep's sheep--there's always home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Compatriot Noyes had been a member and officer of the New Hampshire S.A.R. for many years. A former President of our State Society, he also served several terms as our National Trustee and as a member of the Board of Managers.

A resident of Bethlehem, New Hampshire, he had been active in the business and professional life of his community and of the State. He represented Bethlehem in the General Court of New Hampshire from 1943-1945, and was elected to the Governor's Council for the term 1951-1953. He has long been involved with the work of the New Hampshire Division of the American Automobile Association. Some years ago the Town of Bethlehem, in appreciation for his services, dedicated its Annual Report to him.

[Return to Index of Essays](#)