

“Ethan Allen Takes Fort Ticonderoga”

**A Reading and Writing Lesson. Social Studies and History. Download from jeanoconnor.com
Jean C. O’Connor**

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“Ethan Allen Takes Fort Ticonderoga”

By Jean C. O’Connor

In this reading, Ethan Allen describes to James Lovell and other inmates of the British prison in Halifax, Nova Scotia, how he and his Green Mountain Boys, along with Benedict Arnold, took Fort Ticonderoga from the British, in the first offensive move of the Revolutionary War.

August 5, 1776

Morning light shone through the boarded-up windows of the large jail room. The summer’s heat had been oppressive for weeks. Smells ripened in the close, stagnant air inside the jail room, causing the prisoners to long for fresh air or a change of scene. James stood to stretch. Some poor wretch had taken sick in the night, groaning and crying; of the thirty-four prisoners in close confinement in the Halifax prison, most had scurvy and many suffered violent stomach distress.

Shouts sounded outside, then thumps near the door, causing all to turn and wonder.

A rough voice outside bellowed, “Stand back all, while we open the door.”

James recognized the voice of the paunchy warden. The flabby bully took pleasure in kicking and abusing the weakest of the prisoners. “Out of my way,” he would bark, stomping through the crowded floor with buckets of water.

The heavy door swung open; there in the bright sunlight of the summer morning stood one of the tallest, sturdiest men James had ever seen. He was dressed in what had once been a fine suit of dark silk, cut in a military double-breasted style. Over it was a dirty jacket of deerskin, fringed and worn. His bearded face was haggard and unwashed, his hair gray and long.

The large man stepped into the jail, ducking his head. The warden held the door open, looking with some amazement at the new inmate. Behind him filed about a dozen other prisoners, all handcuffed, their dress filthy, unkempt, disheveled. They were followed by a group of guards carrying rifles.

“Stand at ease, ye devils, whilst I unlock your irons,” commanded the paunchy warden, recovering his voice. He unfastened the giant’s rusty handcuffs. The big prisoner rubbed his hands, then waved his arms in wide circles, looking about him with a pleasant expression.

Men sitting against the rough pine walls or lying on the stone floor gazed in curiosity at the new arrival. Even the guards stopped and stared in astonishment. He walked the line of excrement tubs in the middle of the sixty-foot structure, surveying the group in the thin light that shone through the cracks in the boarded-up windows. The warden unlocked the other prisoners, then turned with the guards and left.

The new prisoners each found a place, crowding in with others in the already-packed room. The big man walked over by James to a vacant space on the floor. He eyed James intently, seemed to approve, and then sat down, moving with ease for one so big, James thought.

“I am Ethan Allen of the Green Mountain boys, and a reviled prisoner of His Majesty’s troops these several months,” he introduced himself. “I’ve been to England and back, but they haven’t hung me yet.” Ethan Allen fixed bright brown eyes on James and held out his hand in greeting.

James met Ethan’s handshake, marveling at the size of the man’s hand. “I am James Lovell, of Boston. I am a teacher, or up to the time of the first shots between the British and the patriot cause I was one. I have been imprisoned now for over a year, here in Halifax going on six months. I wait every day for a return to my home through an exchange of prisoners. General Washington has written to me more than once and I hope soon the exchange will be effected.”

Ethan Allen motioned to the prisoners who had come into the jail with him. “This is Captain Francis Proctor of Philadelphia,” he said, introducing a pale seaman with a thin mustache who bore on his face the sores of scurvy. Francis Proctor acknowledged the introduction with a nod.

James nodded back in greeting, then looked about him at the fellow prisoners he knew. “I’ll introduce you to some who are here in this prison. This is Consider Howland,” he said, “and Jacob Taylor. Master Howland was commander of the privateer brig *Washington* and Jacob Taylor was his mate. They are waiting for an exchange to be freed, as am I.”

“I am pleased to meet you all. I am in good company,” asserted Ethan Allen. He nodded to each, and the prisoners smiled back.

James motioned to other men watching and listening from the sides of the room. “Here are some others you should meet. Richard Carpenter of Boston, Misters Bigelow, Kemp, Peak, and Sessions, all of whom fought at Bunker Hill.”

The men nodded. “Pleased to meet you,” said one.

“Here is Corporal Cruise and this is Cornelius Turner, both riflemen at Bunker Hill.” The two men both greeted Ethan Allen. “There’s Corporal Jeremiah Low, of Fredericksburg, John Gray of Arlington, Barnabas Castle of Saratoga, and Preston Denton, from Stillwater.” James

indicated several reclining forms in the back of the long room. "The sickness has them at present, but they'll be all right."

"I would like to share my story with you," Ethan Allen said. "It is a tale for strong constitutions, but I take it you have that!" He laughed heartily and the listeners smiled, nodding agreement.

"Not long after the militia at Lexington and Concord routed the British, my boys and I were at our favorite tavern, the Catamount, in the New Hampshire Grants, enjoying a drink or two of stone walls," Ethan Allen began. He evidently loved telling a story, for he warmed to his subject enthusiastically. "The Catamount is so named because outside the tall building is a pole bearing a mounted wildcat, warning anyone from New York or New Hampshire that we are independent and this is our country."

Ethan smiled and rubbed his hands together emphatically. James had heard about Ethan Allen, this bigger-than-life frontier woodsman and warrior. He and his Green Mountain Boys ranged the land west of New Hampshire, called the New Hampshire Grants, which were claimed by both New Hampshire and New York. The Green Mountain Boys wanted no part of either New Hampshire or New York. They wanted independence.

"We were talking at the Catamount about the war that was coming. I said, 'Boys, we should take Fort Ticonderoga.' This old fort was held by the British on the western shore of Lake Champlain. The ammunition, cannon, and guns left from the French and Indian War kept there would make a great addition to the Continental Army, I thought." He chuckled at the memory.

"Before I went to bed I told the men, by God, I'd like to take that fort. Next day, my brother Herman reported that the authorities in Connecticut had asked the Green Mountain Boys to attack Fort Ticonderoga. Which was exactly what I was thinking," Ethan added, winking and smiling.

"So we called up the Boys. Some came from Hartford, old soldiers from the French and Indian wars who knew the country well. Some settlers I called as we went. They grabbed their flintlocks and their bullets; I told them 'We're going on a big wolf hunt.'"

"On May 8 we had our council, just twenty miles from Fort Ticonderoga. I was elected head of the army. But we needed boats to get over to the west shore of the lake. That's when naturally we thought of the land and holdings of Colonel Philip Skene. He was a retired British officer who had rowboats, scows, and even a schooner. I sent some thirty men under a friend of mine, Sam Herrick, and told them to take the boats over to the eastern shore."

Colonel Skene, James thought. He sat up and listened with interest. What a coincidence. That was the retired British officer for whom General Howe had wanted him to be exchanged.

Men listened spellbound all around, caught up in Ethan Allen's tale. The August heat settled, bringing the stench in the dark room to rich fumes. Flies buzzed and bit continually, while fleas scampered about, causing one and then another of the men to jump or scratch.

“I sent a runner through the north,” Ethan Allen continued. “He ran over sixty miles in a day and a night, calling the Green Mountain Boys to come to the fight. I had sent Noah Phelps as a scout to Fort Ticonderoga; he had gained admittance by pretending to want a shave. You know military men—they always have a razor about. Noah found out easily that there were fewer than fifty soldiers at the Fort. It was not in the best shape, outer walls broken down, no protection at all.

“Hiding in the timber, we were watching closely for the boats that Sam Herrick was supposed to bring from Colonel Skene’s place, when here comes the gaudiest, most elegant officer you’ve ever seen, riding on a fine horse with plumed helmet and all, directly from Secretary of War Mott. His name is Colonel Benedict Arnold, and he tells us that he’d been put in charge of our expedition. That was a lie, as we found out later, but naturally we paid him no mind. I said I’d been elected leader, but if he wanted to march with me that would be fine. So we had two leaders for our group, but naturally, I was the real leader.” Ethan Allen laughed and the others nodded knowingly.

“We commandeered two boats and pushed off with eighty-three men in the early morning. I gave my boys a stout talk before they reached the fort. I told them they must move quickly for the attack to succeed. The men surely knew that attacking a British post could mean a hanging, yet none hesitated.

“We moved silently through the trees. When we reached the dark fort, I climbed first over the broken wall. A sentry fired at me and ran; I hit another redcoat advancing on me with my sword. He begged ‘Quarter, quarter!’ and I told him to take me to his commander.

“He led me up the steep wooden stairs; there at the top was Lieutenant Jocelyn Feltham, the second in command. Colonel Feltham had been surprised in his sleep and stood in his doorway embarrassed as could be without his breeches on.” The prisoners listening broke into shouts of laughter at this.

Ethan Allen continued. “Behind me were Colonel Benedict Arnold, who did look right fierce, even if I knew better, and a dozen of my men with their muskets, yelling for blood.

“We must have been a frightening sight. But the British second in command held his ground and showed his metal. ‘By what authority have you entered His Majesty’s fort?’ he demanded.

“I answered, ‘In the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress.’ I’ve been told these words were remembered, as I’ve heard them said back to me from soldiers who were there and even soldiers who weren’t there.”

James shook his head in amazement. No doubt this giant’s words would be remembered, as bold as brass, taking the British fort in the first offensive move of the war.

“When I got nowhere with Lieutenant Feltham, I began battering down the door behind him. Pretty quick here comes Captain Delaplace. And he is fully dressed.”

James and the others listening laughed again. Ethan Allen was certainly a diversion. James couldn't remember when he'd heard such a tale.

"Meanwhile, the rest of my boys down below had broken into the rooms, taken the arms, and rounded up the redcoats. We put under guard thirty-eight soldiers and twenty-four women and children. Not only that, but we found quite a bit of good strong liquor and rum. Not a bad day's work," Ethan added.

"I had some more complaints about my command from that Colonel Benedict Arnold with his fancy plumed hat, but Secretary of War Mott fixed that up for me and wrote out my commission. I was to keep command of the garrison of Ticonderoga until I had further orders from the colony of Connecticut or the Continental Congress." The men nodded approval. Some stared with open expressions of awe at Ethan Allen.

"My friend Sam Herrick, meanwhile, had taken control of Colonel Philip Skene's property down the lake, including the settlement of Skenesborough and a schooner. Then the following winter, Henry Knox, who had been sent by General Washington all the way from Boston, brave soul that he was, retrieved the cannon and armaments from Fort Ticonderoga and hauled them by oxen over the snowy Berkshire Mountains to the Americans. The Continentals used them to blast the British out of Boston and end the siege. Wasn't that a hell of a way to serve your country?" Ethan Allen laughed with delight at the courage of Henry Knox and his own part in getting cannon to the American militia.

James well remembered the rounds from cannon that shook the Boston Stone Jail night and day in the final days before the prisoners left with the fleet to sail to Halifax. He shivered as if the thunderous blasts were smashing buildings nearby again. Now he knew Ethan Allen of the Green Mountain Boys, and had heard his story of how he had freed the cannon used by the Americans and made it available to Henry Knox.

Ethan Allen continued, "Within a few days, I sent the officers from the fort as prisoners to Connecticut's governor. Major Philip Skene, meanwhile, had returned from London with a commission as governor of Ticonderoga and Montreal, intending to raise a regiment of Canadians against the Americans. He was captured by Connecticut patriot militia, escaped, and was recaptured. He is now in American hands in Connecticut."

James listened to this explanation with interest. "Is Philip Skene a colonel or a major?" he asked.

"I meant colonel, since he was generally called that, though I believe at one time he was a major. And sometimes he is known as governor, since he controlled quite a bit of land around Skenesborough," Ethan Allen said with a smile. "Why would you ask?"

"General Howe had suggested I be exchanged for Colonel Philip Skene," James said. "That exchange fell through, but I assume it was the same British officer."

"Undoubtedly one and the same," Ethan Allen agreed, "and with any luck it may still happen." He looked at James thoughtfully for a moment.

“To resume my tale,” Ethan Allen continued, “through one thing and another, sticking up for the rights of the Green Mountain Boys and fending off the claims of New Hampshire and New York to our lands, I ended up being captured by the British when I tried to take Montreal.”

“You tried to take Montreal?” James’s eyes grew big at the thought. Ethan Allen was either amazingly brave or a fool.

Ethan Allen laughed genially. Everything about him was big, James thought, even his laugh, which was so infectious Francis Proctor, John Howland, and others joined in despite their miserable surroundings. Some of the sicker men lying in the back of the room looked up in wonder.

“Yes, but I would have had help if those that promised to come hadn’t failed to show up. Then, I might have succeeded. Overall it was a scheme that had less than perfect merits, and it got me captured. I was taken to New York and then to England. Though they threatened to hang me, they didn’t, and I was given this fine suit of clothes and sent back here.”

Ethan Allen paused in his story to take a drink of water from the nearby bucket, using the dipper set in it. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and continued. “I must say, though, this Captain Montague who has the charge of the ship I’ve been on is the most cruel and uncivil person in all of the British navy. Me and several of the prisoners had the scurvy desperately; I wrote Captain Montague repeatedly, begging for a redress of our grievances, but got no answer. Finally he ordered the guards not to bring him any more letters.”

“I well know what it is like to be at a loss for help or decent treatment of any kind,” James said, nodding agreement. “I was put in prison in Boston back on June 29 of 1775, and all the time since then I’ve had no formal hearing or charge. That’s unfairness for you.”

He added, “I have written to General Washington more than once, to the Congress, to the Massachusetts Council, to the *London News*, to the diplomat Arthur Lee, to General Gage and General Howe—in short, to anyone with authority who might be able to help. I am still waiting for a solution.”

Francis Proctor, Howland, and Taylor all nodded. Their stories, though different, all told of mistreatment, neglect, and abuse since becoming prisoners of the British.

Francis Proctor said, “I once was with the English service. Since then I have changed my allegiance. For no good reason I was thrown into irons when first I came on board the *Mercury*, the vessel which bore us here until we were transferred to the foul prison sloop. There I was kept under close confinement for three months before we arrived.”

Ethan Allen nodded sympathetically. “Aye, they’re a sorry lot, and they treat prisoners as badly as ever could be,” he said.

Suddenly, the door opened and a gust of fresh, hot August air blew in to the crowded room, easing the stench of illness and waste.

Ethan Allen stood. More than a head higher than any there, he looked with curiosity towards the open door. James stood up near his new friend.

“Come, yard’s open,” shouted the paunchy guard. The prisoners filed out the door, down the steps to the narrow yard confined within stone walls. Under the hot summer sun, on a wooden bench, waited the pail of water, basin of bread, and cold potatoes that were both breakfast and lunch. “Have at it, and a pox on you all,” said the guard maliciously, slamming and locking the iron gate shut as he left.

Questions:

1. How would you describe Ethan Allen from this reading?
2. What were some results of Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys taking Fort Ticonderoga from the British?
3. In this British prison in Halifax, why were the prisoners glad to have Ethan Allen join them?

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ALTERNATIVE ESSAYS

Essays may be a paragraph in length or fully developed.

Narrative

Take the viewpoint of any of the characters introduced in this reading or in one of the primary sources, and write a journal entry, speech, or letter from that character’s point of view, explaining these events and giving your opinion about them.

Argumentative

Take a stand on this statement: “Ethan Allen is rightly known as a hero of the American revolution.” Cite details and facts from the primary sources and “Ethan Allen Takes Fort Ticonderoga” as support.

Explanatory

We know that Fort Ticonderoga was already ruined at the time of its capture, some of its walls having been broken down by the French when they abandoned it to the British after an attack in 1759. Explain why it was still a prize for the Americans, giving at least three reasons. You may engage in additional research for your response.