

# Moses Robinson—Town Clerk

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WE like to think of the end of the eighteenth century as a period when men were gifted with versatility, were capable of turning their hands to many things. In that era Moses Robinson was no exception. One biographer lists him as a "soldier, jurist, statesman" but notes that Moses Robinson was not a lawyer even though he served as Vermont's first chief justice.<sup>1</sup> This accomplished man was born in the Massachusetts town of Hardwick in 1742; and later he and his father founded the new settlement at Bennington in southwest Vermont. Bennington, in the "New Hampshire Grants," had been chartered by Governor Benning Wentworth of New Hampshire before the French and Indian War, but that conflict had delayed settlement until 1761. Robinson was soon a member of the vigorous group that defended the rights of the Vermonters, first against the "Yorkers" and then against the Crown. A friend of the Allens and by marriage one of the Fay family, he served with Thomas Chittenden, the first Vermont Governor, and was in on the secret of the negotiations with Haldimand, commander in chief in Canada. During the campaign of 1777 he was a colonel of militia and was stationed at Mount Independence at the time of St. Clair's retreat from Ticonderoga. He was a member of the Vermont Committee of Safety, he served on the Governor's Council (1777–85), and he was an agent of Vermont to the Continental Congress (1782).<sup>2</sup>

When citizens of Windham County embraced the cause of New York in 1779, several were brought to trial in Robinson's court. As presiding justice he duly sentenced these rebels but at the same time rebuked the redoubtable Ethan Allen for his harangue before the court.<sup>3</sup> In 1789 Chittenden's long term of service as Governor was broken by the election of Moses Robinson. This came about

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund C. Mowrer, in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 16: 49.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob B. Ullery, *Men of Vermont*, p. 55–57 (Brattleboro, Transcript Publishing Co., 1894).

<sup>3</sup> Chilton Williamson, *Vermont in Quandary, 1763–1825*, p. 84 (Montpelier, Vermont Historical Society, 1949).

as the result of a land scandal. Just as the assembly was about to grant title of the town of Highgate to a Mr. Hunt, Ira Allen interposed and claimed that title had already been vested in him. Chittenden's popularity was so weakened by this incident that he did not win a clear majority. The election was thus thrown into the assembly, and Moses Robinson won. But the change of pace was just enough to allow those wishing to come to terms with New York to make a payment of \$30,000 to that State. This, in turn, strengthened the party working for admission to the Union.<sup>4</sup>

Moses Robinson next appeared as one of Vermont's first two U. S. Senators. In the Senate he opposed the Jay Treaty of 1795. If not technically a Democratic-Republican, he was at least an Anti-Federalist. Although he was backed by a majority in his own county, he began to feel that he did not have the confidence of the State as a whole, and he resigned before his Senatorial term expired.<sup>5</sup> He died in Vermont in 1813.

Moses Robinson represented a combination of democracy and piety. He believed in the French Revolution because it furthered the rights of man, but he supported the orthodox Congregational Church in Bennington when many of his friends were Deists. The legend runs that when Jefferson and Madison went up the Hudson on a "botanizing" expedition, they dropped in on Robinson at Bennington. Proud of his church and its choir, he invited the visiting statesmen to attend. Upon the conclusion of the service, when he asked them what they thought of the singing, they were obliged to confess that they were not good judges—they had not been to church for some time. Another story has it that during his land sales to prospective settlers he quizzed the applicants about their religious views. If they met the test, he sold them land in Bennington; if not, he steered them to nearby Pownal or Shaftsbury.<sup>6</sup>

Among the offices Robinson held was that of town clerk, a position he filled for almost 20 years. Before the town of Bennington had been organized he served as a member of the proprietors' highway committee. At the first town meeting, in March 1762, when it was "Voted that Every Freeholder Shold have Free Liberty to vote in Said Town Meeting," Moses Robinson was elected town clerk. At the same time a long list of town offices was filled, some of them long since obsolete—tithingmen, hay

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178-179.

<sup>5</sup> Ullery, *Men of Vermont*, p. 55-57. His letter of resignation is in the collections of the Vermont Historical Society.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

wards, fence viewers, and "dearifts" (deer reeves). And so it went with much the same business as the years rolled by. The clerk rarely used more than one page in the record book for the minutes of a meeting. In a pioneer town it is not surprising to find much time devoted to laying out the roads. In 1775 the town voted that it was satisfied with the committee of safety that had been appointed. While war raged around the town in 1777, no town meeting was recorded, and Robinson's minutes do not mention the Battle of Bennington. In 1778 the list of freemen was set down. By 1780 Robinson had become moderator of the town meeting. In 1781 he recorded that one Ebenezer Lyman, a transient, must be returned to Sharon in Connecticut. In that year also he ceased to be town clerk for Bennington.<sup>7</sup>

Attention is thus drawn to Moses Robinson not because of his later State and Federal services, but because at the town level he was typical of the smalltown archivist who kept his sparse records of an early town when Vermont was an independent republic rather than a State in the Union.

<sup>7</sup> Bennington Proprietors' and Town Records, Mormon Microfilm F-2127, in the Vermont Public Records Division.

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### ***Holmes' Papers—Watson's Crux***

Our chambers were always full of chemicals and of criminal relics which had a way of wandering into unlikely positions, and of turning up in the butter-dish or in even less desirable places. But his papers were my great crux. He had a horror of destroying documents, especially those which were connected with his past cases, and yet it was only once in every year or two that he would muster energy to docket and arrange them; for, as I have mentioned somewhere in these incoherent memoirs, the outbursts of passionate energy when he performed the remarkable feats with which his name is associated were followed by reactions of lethargy during which he would lie about with his violin and his books, hardly moving save from the sofa to the table. Thus month after month his papers accumulated until every corner of the room was stacked with bundles of manuscript which were on no account to be burned, and which could not be put away save by their owner.

—SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, "The Musgrave Ritual," in *Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*.