

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Ethan Allen (1738-1789)

From *The Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity*

The Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity was published first in 1779, in a Philadelphia newspaper, and it made such good anti-British propaganda that George Washington gave orders to his officers to read it to their troops. By 1780, it had gone through seven more printings and reprinting's, all "in the shabby dress of a large and ragged pamphlet," as an 1807 editor described them. The Narrative remained popular until outdated by Civil War prison stories of the 1860s.

On first reading it may seem like the most egotistical autobiography ever written, and some people are put off by Allan's swaggering. He also seems inconsistent, at one moment acting rough and egalitarian and at another insisting upon his status as a gentleman—even serving as a British officer's "faithful second" in a duel. But there was strategy to Allen's boasting. As he notes, many of the British treated the Americans with contempt, especially early in the war, and many Americans were in awe of British power. By not showing fear, Allen attempted to "set an example of virtue and fortitude to our little commonwealth." Likewise, taking pride in being an officer and gentleman was a way of irritating the enemy and inspiring his countrymen. So he demanded all the rights of an officer as dictated by eighteenth-century military customs (which, however, were not based on wars of revolution or ideological conflict). Demanding his rights might not only bring better treatment; it might also bring greater respect for him and the American cause.

The selections below all come from the beginning of his Narrative, when he showed himself as generally at his boldest. Later, following the imprisonment in Falmouth, England, he was sent back to America and spent over a year and a half in New York, part of the time on parole and part in jail. Conditions there, especially among the enlisted men starving and dying of disease in abandoned churches, were too severe and pathetic for Allen to change by any tough-talk. But he did cry out against such atrocities, while continuing to show himself as unsubdued by them. He was released in an exchange of prisoners in May, 1778.

The standard biographies of Ethan Allen are John Pell, *Ethan Allen* (Boston; Houghton Mifflin, 1929) and Charles A. Jellison, *Ethan Allen: Frontier Rebel* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1969). A balanced, critical assessment of Allen is John McWilliams, "The Faces of Ethan Allen" (*New England Quarterly* 49 (1976): 257-82).

### Reading

A Narrative of Col Ethan Allen's Captivity: 1775 – 1778  
[http://archive.org/stream/cihm\\_22019#page/n5/mode/2up](http://archive.org/stream/cihm_22019#page/n5/mode/2up)