

Joseph Bowker

BY Henry Hall

If we consult our published histories for a knowledge of the leading actors in the drama of Vermont's colonial and revolutionary struggles, we shall find none whose appearance is so weird and spectre-like as that of the Honorable Joseph Bowker of Rutland... the John Hancock of Vermont.

(Bowker's name is at the head of the list of signers of the most important early Vermont documents, although not written in as large a hand as that of Hancock's.)

Bowker died July 11, 1784. His only surviving heirs were (his wife) and two married daughters whose descendants are said to be in the far west... Bowker was early left an orphan—brought up in the family of a Mr. Taintor, a prosperous farmer—privately betrothed to his daughter Sarah, drafted into the army during the French War, in the garrison at Ticonderoga one or two years—he returns with so good a reputation that he soon becomes the son-in-law of his quasi guardian.

In October 1773 we find Bowker in Rutland with the title of Captain... Moderator of Proprietor's meeting one of the committees to find the center of town; chairman of committee to inspect proprietors' titles, etc.

He soon appears a general officer holder for the town, county and state; one of the Committees of Safety; a magistrate very generally sought for the execution of conveyances, for the adjudication of legal rights, and for the trial of tories; town treasurer, selectman, town representative, member of the Governor's Council; member of the Board of War, Commissioner for Sequestration of tories' estates; judge of the Probate and County courts, and Chief Judge of a special court, appointed by the first legislature.

About 1780 Bowker, James Claghorn, Henry Strong and John Smith built a sawmill about 80 rods (quarter of a mile) from main street on

Handpole, Moon's or Tuttle's brook. A portion of his farm abounds in clay, and an inventory of his estate shows a note of \$13.00 against John Forbes for three thousand bricks..

Joseph Bowker (John, Edmond, John, John) was born 28 December 1725 at Hopkinton, Massachusetts, son of John and Sarah (Clapp) Bowker and died 11 July 1784 at Rutland.

He is buried in Center Rutland, Vermont in the small cemetery next to the Town of Rutland Municipal Building. The location was undisclosed until the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a government tombstone to his memory in the fall of 1956.

Joseph, who was orphaned at an early age, was brought up in the family of Simon Tainter and eventually married his daughter. During the French and Indian War he served in Capt. Pettibone's Company from 1755 to 1757.

Sometime before October 1773 he moved to Rutland where, because of his universal knowledge, he was honored with many positions. These included the presidency of the Vermont Conventions which proclaimed this state's independence and formed the constitution.

He also served as town treasurer and representative, member of the Governor's Council, judge of the county and probate court and chief of a special court appointed by the first Legislature.

As justice of the peace he performed many early Rutland marriages. In 1774 he bought one hundred acres of land on the west side of South Main Street, which was located south of Killington Avenue. He erected his plank house, which faced southward, on this property.

Several historians have tried to pinpoint the exact location of his dwelling. After mapping out the division of Bowker's estate, tracing the various deeds and measuring the boundaries, the editor came to the conclusion that the house once stood on the lot just north of 100 South Main Street.

Bowker is described as being five feet seven inches tall, of a stocky build, and of a religious nature. Historian James D. Butler stated that he “lived off the psalm”.

At the time of his death he owned one-quarter interest in a sawmill on Moon Brook. His personal inventory included the following wearing apparel: a pair of silver shoe buckles, pair of knee buckles, a stock buckle, a bosom broach, a pair of silver buttons, a new blue great coat, one old blue coat and vest, a pair of linen and cotton breeches, leather breeches, two woolen shirts and a cotton shirt.

During his funeral procession Rev. Jacob Wood, a revivalist, suddenly jumped upon a stump and cried “Hark! At the day of judgment it will be an honor to be a Christian.”

With that he rejoined the others and walked silently to the graveyard. By all accounts Bowker died a highly respected and universally well – regarded gentleman. His advice and counsel, which had helped to form the government of this state and town, were sorely missed after his death.

He married Sarah Tainter 21 November 1749 at Westborough, Massachusetts. She was baptized 1 August 1725 at Watertown, Massachusetts, daughter of Simon and Rebecca (Harrington) Tainter.