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# The Life of Benjamin Wait



**Taken from a 1939 Sesquicentennial celebration pin, this reproduction of a drawing is the only known portrait of Wait. The artist is unknown.**

*"Whereas it has been represented to us by our worthy friends the Honorable Roger Enos, Colonel Benjamin Wait and company to the number of seventy, that there is a tract of vacant land within this state, which has not been heretofore granted, which they pray may be granted to them."*

*-Waitsfield Charter, Feb. 25, 1782*

**Benjamin Wait** came to the Mad River Valley in the spring of 1789 for the purpose of setting up a homestead in a town that would bear his name.

With the help of his sons and a few close friends, he built a temporary cabin by the west bank of the river, and the arduous process of clearing the muddy, thawing ground began.

There were ancient trees to be chopped down and hand-sawed into timber for building. Stumps had to be rooted out, underbrush burned and the New England soil cleared of its endless wealth of stones in preparation for tilling and planting. Every town began in such humble fashion.

The settling of the northeastern territories of the New World was undertaken by a breed of young men and women whose character remains the backbone of New England mythology. A product of the most stringent ideals of Puritanism, New Englanders, perhaps above all other colonists, possessed the single-mindedness and spiritual determination to stand up to the howl-

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*Written by David W. Smith  
Photographs by Stefan Hard*

ing winds of winter, and farmland that revealed only small glimpses of its richness after incredible patience and backbreaking toil.

Waitsfield historian Matt Bushnell Jones, who along with his father, Dr. Walter A. Jones, compiled the bulk of information we have on Wait's life, quotes Lodge's "Life of Webster;"

"(They) were ruder than their more favored brethren to the South, but they were also more persistent, more tenacious, and more adventurous. They were a vigorous, bold, unforgiving, fighting race, hard and stern even beyond the ordinary standard of Puritanism."

Benjamin Wait was not one of these young men setting out to begin their adult life by conquering the wilderness when he reached the Valley. He was, in fact, a wealthy 53-year-old veteran of three wars, whose accomplishments as both a soldier and statesman were considerable. For more than 30 years, Wait had placed himself squarely at the center of every major conflict that shook the lands destined to become the state of Vermont, and emerged with his reputation and loyalties intact.

No one can say for sure what made Wait leave the comfortable position of gentleman farmer and leading citizen in the town of Windsor, Vermont for a hard life on the northern frontier. A man of his age and position might seem more at home behind a desk or in the state legislature, but Wait opted for the ax and the plow.

Biographers suggest he might have done it to accumulate land for his maturing family, or perhaps he longed for the chance to create a town of his own design.



Now used as a visitor's center and office space, the home Benjamin Wait built in 1793 was recently restored by the Burley Partnership of Waitsfield.

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His reasoning will remain a mystery, but an examination of the evidence we have of his life and accomplishments paints Wait as a true embodiment of the New England spirit. He was stubborn, hardworking and, above all, independent. He demonstrated both great loyalty, and a keen rebelliousness. He was, at times, self-sacrificing, yet paid close attention to his own interests. Wait was known to challenge authority, but could also be a stern and remorseless leader.

Something in this man's character simply would not allow him to lie still. The factors that motivated Wait to give up a comfortable life in favor of the uncertainty of the northern frontier are the factors that created New England.

Born too late to experience the first outreach of English settlers through western Massachusetts and New Hampshire, he was instead drawn as a young man from his boyhood home in Massachusetts to the unclaimed territories of the New Hampshire Grants. Periodically occupied by parties of fierce native tribes who resented the intrusion of white settlers on their hunting grounds, and battled over by the world's most powerful nations, and later by neighboring states, these wild lands that would become Vermont were dangerous, unstable and, most importantly, largely unsettled.

## Boyhood

Wait was born in Sudbury, Massachusetts on Feb. 13, 1736, the fourth child of John and Annah Wait, a family with roots in the earliest settlement of eastern Massachusetts.

Following the death of Annah in 1744, John remarried to a woman whose name is unknown, and moved his seven children west to the small town of Brookfield. Settling in a large house on Foster Hill along the Post Road highway that stretched from Boston to Albany, New York, he soon opened his doors as an innkeeper. There John would remain until his death in 1761, watching his family grow until his offspring numbered 12.

The local tavern occupied an important place in the social and political lives of early New Englanders, and John Wait was soon a well-known and respected member of his community. His inn, Waite's Tavern, became a popular destination for travelers and soldiers, bearing his name long after the Waits sold it.

(It should be noted that historical records from Massachusetts generally have the family name spelled with an "e" at the end, while in all available documents from the Waitsfield period, Benjamin signed his name "Wait." The reason for this discrepancy is not known.

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As Marcus Warren Waite, who compiled a partial family history in 1952 put it; “The spelling of the name means nothing, and the name appears as Wayte, Wait, Waite, Waight and perhaps others.”)

Growing up in this environment must have been exciting for a boy of Benjamin’s age. The traffic of soldiers traveling to and from the northern battles between the British and the French over possession of Canada would have provided a steady stream of heroes and stories for the young boy. Seven brothers in the family meant that a small army always stood at the ready to reenact the previous night’s tales of adventure and bloodshed. Nightly stories spun by weary soldiers over pewter mugs of New England rum and hard cider worked their way into the dreams of the Wait family boys, and eventually their plans for the future.

Being an innkeeper’s son in colonial New England meant that young Benjamin probably wasn’t shackled to a plow all day. While doubtless he had his chores, town life gave a young man the luxury of attending school from the age of six until he was perhaps as old as fifteen, more if he had aspirations of attending university.

A young boy of that period spent his free time chiefly in warlike pursuits; hunting birds, making bows and arrows, practicing marksmanship with a musket and racing horses. Those activities and a steady stream of soldiers’ stories made it almost inevitable that a young man would desire to break free of his quiet, small town home and head north seeking adventure and glory with colonial troops supporting the British army.

This environment produced a family of soldiers. All seven of John Wait’s sons served in the French and Indian or Revolutionary war armies at some point. Even their father served a brief tour of duty in the military in 1746. Military enlistment terms were much shorter and more flexible then. Frequently, whole companies of soldiers would be released at the end of a major campaign.

It was the second-oldest Wait son, Joseph, born in November of 1732, who first joined the army and set the tone for the whole family, especially Benjamin.

## **The French and Indian War**

For 22 years following his enlistment in Captain Eleazer Melvin’s company of Massachusetts troops, Joseph’s military career was marked by spectacular adventures, important historical events and no doubt a bit of sibling rivalry. His younger brother, Benjamin, who stood by his side during several critical moments in his life, would have a career easily a match for Joseph’s in accomplishment and drama.

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Joseph was promoted to the rank of corporal near the end of his first year in the service, joining John Burke's company of Rangers, a hastily-formed company intended to protect the eastern frontier from invasion by the French. The Rangers were stationed in Falltown, one of a long line of forts that stretched from Massachusetts to the Canadian wilderness.

Prior to 1761, tribes of French-supported natives frequently launched aggressive attacks against the small group of settlers in this region, known as the New Hampshire Grants. It was rumored the French offered bounties for live captives and the scalps of English settlers, so most were driven into forts like these, and found themselves fighting alongside overwhelmed provincial soldiers.

These natives, recruited from all the major tribes and nations in the Northeast, were generally allied to the side that offered them the most respect and bounty for their services, more often the French. Accustomed to fighting in the wilderness, they were a fierce enemy.

Joseph probably encountered many skirmishes his first year, but soon he was to get his first taste of real war.

In 1755, Joseph was part of a regiment raised in Hampshire County, Massachusetts that became part of a larger force comprised of troops raised in New England, New York and New Jersey. The troops were sent to counter French forces under the Baron Dieskau, a Germany commander, at Crown Point. This offensive was, in turn, part of a still-larger campaign to subdue French forces at different points along the northern and northwestern borders of the frontier occupied by English-speaking colonists.

These campaigns, called the Seven Years War, were the final battles of a conflict which had raged between England and France over the territories of Canada for more than 130 years. The war crushed the Algonquin and Iroquois nations, and was a major part of the battle for supremacy of Europe between the two powers.

Joseph, under the command of Major General William Johnson, was sent to Fort Edward, located in a bend of the Hudson River about 10 miles south of Lake George. He would remain there through the defeat of Dieskau and into the following year.

It was during the campaign of 1755 that Benjamin followed Joseph into the service, joining a Massachusetts regiment under the command of General Shirley. Just 18 years old, Benjamin's military baptism must have marked one of the most horrifying experiences of his life.

Sent west in an attempt to capture Fort Niagara, Shirley's forces were halted in the wake of English Major-General Edward Braddock's stunning loss at Fort DuQuesne, near present-day Pittsburgh.

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Braddock, a 60-year-old commander of the old school, had aligned his army of English redcoats and colonial troops in columns, intending to fight a traditional battle. Their enemy opened fire from behind trees and fences. Braddock's forces turned and fled after losing 977 soldiers. French-Canadian casualties numbered 23. Braddock's aide, a young Virginian named George Washington, learned some hard lessons about wilderness warfare from this battle.

Meanwhile, in New York, Shirley's forces built a makeshift fort and settled in to spend a brutal winter in Oswego, by the shores of Lake Ontario. Without adequate provisions and in close proximity to strong French forces, more than half of Benjamin's regiment reportedly died. In the course of that winter, the young man undoubtedly witnessed hundreds of horrible deaths due to starvation, frostbite and sickness.

The coming of the spring of 56 brought no salvation. In the first of a series of spectacular victories by French General Montcalm, the 1,400 survivors of the Oswego garrison were soundly overrun, and control of the Great Lakes fell to the French-Canadians. Many soldiers, including Wait, were captured.

In the post-battle chaos before Montcalm could establish more merciful proceedings, prisoners probably endured some measure of brutality. Benjamin was reportedly forced to run the gauntlet, a native American war ritual in which a victorious tribe would force prisoners to run between two rows of young warriors armed with clubs. Survival depended upon the runner making it to a lodge located at the far end.

Benjamin, though still a young man, was uncommonly large and strong. Summoning all his strength that remained after the winter's ordeal, he fought back in a manner one of his grandsons later described:

“He ran through with clenched fists as vicious as a wild bull, knocking them from one side to the other, and when they see him approaching they had little time enough to take care of themselves.”

Other accounts had Benjamin grabbing up a rifle from a nearby guard, sending the natives scattering to the great amusement of older tribe members.

Surviving this, legend has it Wait would experience a remarkable series of adventures.

Matt Bushnell Jones, writing in the early 1900's, doubtless gathered stories from Waitsfield residents who knew Wait and his descendants.

According to Jones, Wait was rescued from the natives by a French woman, who hid him in a cask in her cellar before turning him over to authorities to spend several months as a prisoner of war. His French captors inexplicably sent him overseas to France, but the ship was intercepted by a British man-of-war and Wait eventually was brought back home, possibly after being taken to England.



Benjamin's sword was passed from his second wife, Mehitable (Burdick) Wait, down through generations of the Burdick family. Eventually it came to rest in the Joslin Library. It is now in the possession of the Waitsfield Historical Society, to be displayed in the Wait house.

While Benjamin endured these trials, Joseph entered the next phase of his military career, transferring as an ensign (a rank just above sergeant) into a company of Rangers under the command of Major Robert Rogers.

Rogers, a tall, charismatic leader, was forming an elite unit of soldiers, who were; "accustomed to traveling and scouting and in whose courage and fidelity the most implicit confidence could be placed."

Rogers' forces, a brainchild of General Shirley, were an early attempt to adjust to the realities of warfare in the New World. Recruited from the

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settlers of New England who were accustomed to the region's terrain, the Rangers were used much like Marines: to scout ahead and act as the eyes and ears of the regular forces.

Fierce soldiers who traveled light and deployed quickly, Rangers were known to dress in bearskin, and adopted many of the fighting techniques of the Native Americans they fought, including the Acadians, Abenakis and Micmacs. Brigadier James Wolfe, who led the English to a decisive victory in Quebec, found it necessary to forbid his Rangers from taking the scalps of any soldiers except natives.

Joseph entered Rogers' Rangers in February of 1757, and was soon to be followed by Benjamin upon his return from the sea journey. By this point, the Rangers' worth had been proven, and several other companies were being prepared for battle.

In the spring of 1758, the war against the French-Canadians took a turn for the better upon arrival of British General Jeffrey Amherst.

Taking command of the armies of English-occupied territories, Amherst began gathering a force of regular British soldiers, natives, and provincial troops, which naturally included companies of Rangers.

The tide began to turn when Brigadier Wolfe led his troops on a successful sea campaign against the French fort at Louisburg, on the Isle of Cape Breton on the eastern tip of Nova Scotia. Strategically valuable and heavily fortified, Louisburg guarded the entrance to the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. Armed with 148 guns situated behind a 30 foot wall that stood behind an 80-foot wide ditch, Louisburg was a challenge indeed.

On the 8th day of June, after 49 days of fighting, a British fleet commanded by Admiral Boscawen, with support from Wolfe on the ground, successfully overtook Louisburg. This victory cut off the supply line to French-occupied Canada and many French soldiers were captured.

Benjamin Wait commanded a small troop boat to a successful landing through a hail of gunfire, reportedly berating his men to stop cowering, sit up and row. Wait, even at a young age, had little tolerance for cowardice.

During the late winter of 1758, Joseph was experiencing his own series of trials. He was part of a 180-man expedition of Rangers sent to Fort Ticonderoga to obtain information about troop numbers and movement. Traveling to the west of the fort on ice skates and snowshoes, the Rangers were overtaken by a larger force of natives, and quickly overwhelmed. Only 55 soldiers, including Joseph and Robert Rogers, managed to escape and survive a harrowing retreat down to the northern end of Lake George.

Benjamin, who had been transferred to Boston after the successful Louisburg campaign, now had a chance to cross paths with his brother. He re-enlisted, as an ensign, into the company of Rangers led by Joseph, who was now a captain.

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The two brothers would remain together, off and on, for several years until the end of the war. During these years they would begin to take an interest in the fate of the future Vermont territories.

The summer of 1759 saw a steady advance of British-led forces drive the French out of Ticonderoga and Crown Point to more northern regions of Lake Champlain.

While greatly encouraged by these victories, Amherst was still largely cut off from Wolfe, who was fighting the northern campaign in Quebec. After the capture of two of his messengers by the Saint Francis natives, a division of the Abenakis tribe, Amherst sent a message to Major Rogers, dated September 13, 1759;

*“Sir: You are this night to set out with the detachment as ordered yesterday, viz: of 200 men which you will take under your command and proceed to Misisque (now spelled Missisquoi) Bay, from whence you will march and attack the enemy’s settlements on the south side of the River St. Lawrence in such manner as you shall judge most effectual. Remember the barbarities that have been committed by the enemy’s Indian scoundrels on every occasion.”*

The villages of the St. Francis tribe lay near the junction of the St. Francis and St. Lawrence rivers, near what is now Trois-Rivieres in Quebec - a journey of more than 300 miles through dense wilderness from Rogers’ headquarters at Crown Point. A daunting task, the St. Francis expedition was the only offensive mounted by Amherst following the French retreat, and is said by historians to have been the result of the General’s anger over the capture of his messengers.

The company of 200 soldiers, including the Wait brothers, reached Missisquoi Bay after a fortnight of rowing. Bad luck had badgered them from the beginning. Illness, injury and an accidental gunpowder explosion had reduced their number by more than 50 soldiers, including sufficient numbers to escort the wounded back into safe territory.

Undaunted by this, and by reports that they were being pursued by superior numbers of French troops, Rogers continued up the St. Lawrence towards their “Christian Indian” enemy.

Attacking the St. Francis village shortly before sunrise following a night of celebration by the natives, the Rangers killed more than 200 men, took 20 prisoners and freed five English women held in captivity. Rogers’ troops burned the town and left only a few children and women to tell of the slaughter.

The ferocity of the Rangers’ attack was doubtlessly fueled by 600 scalps of their countrymen found hanging on poles throughout the village. Only one Ranger died in the assault.

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Realizing the passage back to their boats was blocked, the weary troops now were faced with the considerable problem of escaping from enemy territory on foot. Rogers' plan was to head south through unbroken wilderness to Lake Memphremagog, and then travel home via the Connecticut River.

Supplies were low, consisting mostly of native corn taken from the St. Francis. After ten days of eluding their captors by hard marching, Rogers realized his company of 140 soldiers made an easy target for pursuers. He decided they should split up and rejoin where the Connecticut meets the Ammonoosuck River (now Wells River), in the vicinity of Ryegate. Rogers had sent word to Fort #4 in Charlestown, New Hampshire to have supplies waiting for them at their rendezvous.

Joseph led one of the small companies on this treacherous retreat. By most accounts, his brother was by his side.

Supplies were becoming so low that soldiers resorted to eating beech nuts and boiling leather in an effort to gain some nourishment. After nine more days, the first Rangers arrived at the re-outfitting point, and found the still-warm campfire ashes of re-supply troops, who had retreated. Apparently they had heard gunfire from a Ranger shooting at some game, and abandoned the dangerous territory fearing a native attack. Desperately needed supplies left with them.

The starving, cold and disheartened troops pushed down the river on rafts. Joseph, in a moment of luck, managed to get a clear shot at a deer, and with it a small place in Vermont's history.

The legend of Joseph Wait and that deer has been retold many times in the lore of the town of Bradford, with history books portraying him as everything from a wise and respected leader of men, to a young boy.

Most reports say that Joseph shot the deer some 10 or 12 miles south of the failed re-supply station, providing a meal just as his men were collapsing from hunger. Revived, Wait hung some meat in a tree and carved his initials in the bark, hoping the next division of Rangers would find it.

By a small miracle, the meat was discovered, giving another group of soldiers the sustenance and hope to push on. In commemoration, a small river flowing into the Connecticut has henceforth been named Waits River. The title is shared by a small town along its shore. Another nearby town bore the name Waits Town until it was renamed Mooretown, and finally Bradford.

How much truth there is to this legend is unknown, but as the Rev. Grant Powers wrote back in 1841:

“There is nothing extravagant or unnatural in this narration; and if the town cannot give a more satisfactory account of the origin of this name to their river, it may stand for the true one.”



Waits River, close to where it meets with the Connecticut River, in Waits River town.

While accounts of the story differ over whether Benjamin was with his brother during the retreat - some have even claimed it was Benjamin who shot the deer - most agree he was.

“it seems wholly reasonable that both Captain Joseph and Ensign Benjamin were here together near the confluence of the Waits and Connecticut Rivers when the deer was shot,” wrote Harold W. Haskins in A History of Bradford Vermont. “In that case, the spelling of our river which has been used so long, Waits - without the apostrophe but with the plural “s”- is more nearly correct than we ever realized, and most appropriate.”

This campaign, marked by mistakes and brutality as it was, became a popular legend. New Englanders and colonial troops, so accustomed to playing a marginalized role in the war, probably rejoiced more over the fall of the St. Francis’ village than the capture of Quebec.

France was by now losing its grip on North America. Following the surrender of Quebec, Rogers’ Rangers found themselves leading up the advance toward Montreal from Crown Point, as French troops began to draw back to their own territory.

On September 8, 1761, France turned control of Canada over to the British, although the war between the two European nations would not officially end for three more years.

Just days after the capitulation of Canada, British commanders ordered several companies of Rangers, including those of the Wait brothers, west to

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take control of Detroit, Michilimackinac and other forts in the western territories, and to help subdue small outposts of French troops.

This final journey of the Rangers was cold, brutal, tediously long and marked by skirmishes with bands of natives.

Benjamin, who apparently was no longer enlisted with Joseph's company, traveled with a detachment of 20 men into Illinois to capture a small garrison of French troops. While ultimately successful, it was a journey Wait would later call one of his hardest experiences.

After more than a year of arduous living in the wilderness, the various companies of troops advanced as far west as Fort Pontchartrain near Detroit, and eventually returned to New York, where they were disbanded.

In October of 1761, Benjamin Wait headed home to Brookfield. At the age of 25, he had seen combat in more than 40 battles ranging over a huge portion of New England. While he had never risen past the rank of ensign, he had secured a reputation as a brave and loyal soldier that would grow during the coming stages of his life.

Now a young man accustomed to a hard, dangerous yet exciting life as a frontier soldier would have to readjust to small town life.

## The Windsor Years

No records exist on what occupied Benjamin's time for the next five or six years.

John Wait died in 1761, and several of his sons, principally John, Jr. took over the running of Waite's Tavern. Both Benjamin and Joseph must have helped out with the family business, and appear to have developed an interest in convincing Massachusetts colonists to look towards the New Hampshire Grants as a promising new frontier.

The Wait brothers may have grown bored with the pace of Brookfield, and longed for the unexplored territories they had seen as soldiers. During this period they met their future wives and formulated plans for migration northward.

Joseph married Martha Stone, the daughter of Ezekiel Stone, in 1763. That same year, as he was heading to the New Hampshire Grants to scout for areas fit to settle, an interesting event occurred.

He was traveling in the vicinity of Springfield, Massachusetts during a winter storm, when he lost track of the road connecting Boston to Albany, and had to seek shelter in a settler's home he was lucky to run across.

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Determining that no other traveler should make the same mistake, Joseph erected a six-foot monument stating to travelers that they were indeed on the Boston Road. Bearing symbols of the Freemason society he had recently joined, that sandstone monument still stands today, about 20 feet from its original location. The oldest standing monument in Springfield, it clearly shows several bullet holes, a reminder of the violence of Shay's rebellion, a farmers' revolt following the Revolutionary War.

Benjamin met Sarah Gilbert, a 19-year-old native of Brookfield, and married her early in 1767. Several months later, accompanied by his bride and the family of Joseph Wait, he headed north into the Grants. His destination was the fledgling town of Windsor (now Windsor, Vermont). Several of his other brothers would soon follow.

At that time, the adjacent New York territories claimed the land that lay to the west of the Connecticut River by order of the British Empire. Traditionally, however, its governance had fallen under the jurisdiction of New Hampshire, which had established many of the Grant's new towns and property rights.

From the beginning, Windsor would be deeply involved in the battle for control of these properties. Although most of the Grant's settlers supported New Hampshire authority, it was by no means universal. It was never clear which side, if any, had a right to control this territory, and a period of confusion and shifting loyalties resulted. Occasionally there was bloodshed.

For the first few years, however, the founders of Windsor had their hands full just building a town.

Most early New England towns began when a group of citizens of adequate means agreed to take on the responsibility of developing a town. They would then make their case to the appropriate authority, who would decide if the land should be granted to them. Proprietors did not always settle the land themselves, but sold or rented their property.

On November 3, 1767, Windsor proprietors held their first recorded meeting. Benjamin Wait, along with Israel Curtis and Colonel Nathan Stone were elected as a committee to lay out town roads. This appointment marked the beginning of what would become a long history of public service in Wait's life. He apparently demonstrated a talent, or at least a keen interest in municipal development, because no more than two months later townspeople selected him as moderator for future proprietor's meetings.

With a new bride, some farmland of his own and the chance to make his mark on a new land that still had no proper name, this was undoubtedly an

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exciting time in Wait's life. These years, and his enthusiasm, may hold part of the mystery of what inspired him to settle Waitsfield. He may have been trying to recreate a happy time in his life. The year 1767 also marked the birth of their first child, a son they named Ezra.

Both Benjamin and Joseph Wait had sought individual patents for land grants in 1766, in consideration of their service with the Rangers. Both applications were passed by the Provincial Legislature of New York, which awarded to each brother a farm.

According to Windsor historian Henry Steele Wardner; "The major part of Benjamin Wait's considerable holdings were on the east slope of the Sheddsville Hill. If his brother, Richard Wait, had at that time a separate farm of his own, the writer has not been able to locate it."

It's possible that Richard, a younger Wait brother, lived with Benjamin or Joseph for a period before settling down with his own farm.

Joseph was eventually awarded 500 acres along the eastern shore of the Connecticut River in the nearby town of Claremont, New Hampshire, including three small islands. Nothing is known about his property in Windsor, except that it was connected to Benjamin's farm by a road, later of some historical significance.

Joseph would serve on several committees in Windsor, and in 1769 he won election to a position of town selectman. On the whole, however, he seemed less involved town matters than Benjamin. He apparently was a member of the Church of England, which may have stifled his political career - New England at this time was strongly Congregationalist, and affiliation with an English church hinted at loyalty to New York's authority.

Windsor was a rapidly growing town, with the 16 original families growing to a population of 203 within four years.

Benjamin had served as a surveyor on committees active in laying out the town, and, judging from his position in the community and the wealth he acquired in his lifetime, was a successful farmer. He also might have kept his hand in the family business. In 1772, the Cumberland (later Windsor) County court issued him a tavern keeper's license.

In 1769, another son, John, was born. All seemed to be going well for the retired soldier, who was now 33. From the beginning, however, he showed signs of dissatisfaction with the direction the New Hampshire Grants were taking.

As early as 1765, before they had even applied for a land grant, both Benjamin and Joseph Wait, along with fellow officer and future Windsor

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resident Colonel Nathan Stone, had signed their names to a petition calling for the establishment of a single county to encompass the entire region between the Connecticut River and the Green Mountains. They seemed to be trying to establish a separate identity for the territory they intended to settle, even suggesting the name "Colden." The Provincial Council of New York refused to pass it.

Control of these lands had been in contention since very early in the colonies' history. New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth took a decisive step by issuing township charters under New Hampshire authority beginning in 1760, as soon as the threat of attack by French and native soldiers eased. This territory had been called the New Hampshire Grants since 1745, and he probably felt it was his duty to set up rules for its settlement.

The governor of New York countered in 1763, by claiming the territory in the name of King Charles II, and determined this decree would apply to towns already chartered by New Hampshire authority.

Wentworth continued to issue charters until 1768, putting settlers in a difficult position. Some landowners were threatened by New York with expulsion from land already purchased under New Hampshire charters, or a second payment was demanded. Windsor was reportedly comprised exclusively of New Hampshire supporters.

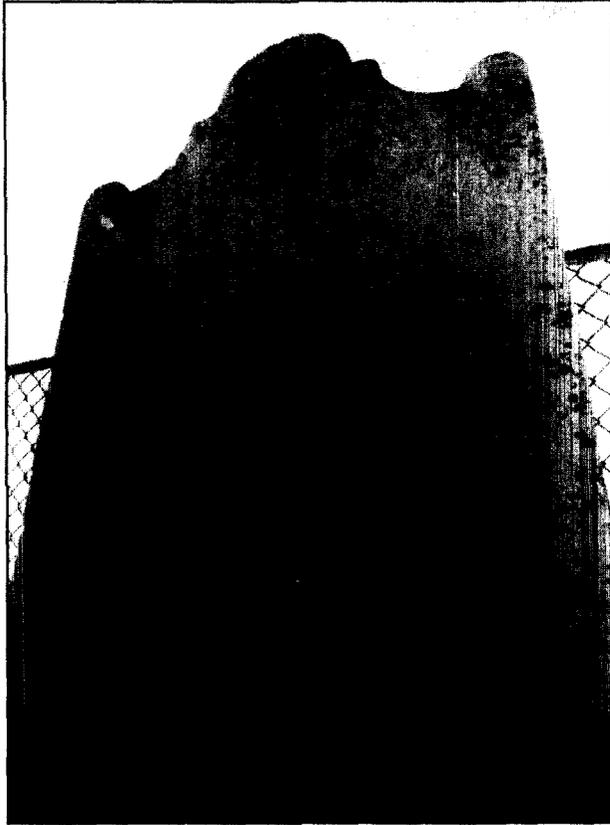
In May of 1770, the Wait brothers were arrested by New York's Cumberland County Sheriff Daniel Whipple for rioting in connection with their New Hampshire Grant sympathies. With them were Colonel Nathan and his father, Zedekiah Stone, Joseph's father-in-law.

Apparently, Nathan Stone had been circulating a petition requesting that regions west of the Connecticut River be annexed to New Hampshire. Fanning the flames was a townwide resentment of the conviction of their neighbor, William Dean, for cutting the "king's" white pine.

The four did not languish in jail long. A group of 40 Windsor residents - close to the entire adult male population of the town - came into town armed with swords, pistols and clubs, and freed the captives, returning to lands owned by the Waits.

Sheriff Whipple quickly raised a posse and pursued the small militia, intending to re-arrest the four men. The two groups apparently met on the road linking the properties of the two Wait brothers.

Some violence ensued, with Joseph reportedly cracking the sheriff over the head with a club. The posse was subdued and imprisoned for seven hours in the home of Joseph Wait before being released.



**The gravestone of Joseph Wait, still well-preserved, stands alone on a farm in North Clarendon, along the Alfresha Crossroad. The engraving reads; *"To perpetuate the Memory of Lt. Col. Joseph Wait. An Officer in the American Revolutionary War who died on his return from an Expedition into Canada."***

Remarkably there is no record of any retaliation for this incident, despite it being in direct opposition to the dominant authority of the time. The New Hampshire Grants were still very much a frontier, and laws, particularly unpopular ones, were very difficult to enforce. New York wasted a great deal of effort trying to enforce extradition orders and arrests for non-compliance with its authority.

"The resistance of the Sheriff of Cumberland County by the men of Windsor on the road from Joseph Wait's to Benjamin Wait's was actually the first violent blow in that long and bitter fight between the settlers on the New Hampshire Grants and the Government of the new province of New York," Mary Beardsley wrote in Parish and Town, The History of West Windsor Vermont.

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The stage was set for the formation of The Green Mountain Boys, a home-grown militia of settlers banding together to enforce their own property rights, recognized under the laws of New Hampshire. The Wait brothers offered their services to this organization, which was extremely successful, largely without bloodshed, in hindering any attempts by New York to establish a foothold in the Grants. Most of their leaders were outlawed as felons in New York.

It was with the Green Mountain Boys that the brothers would first come into contact with Colonel Ethan Allen, under whom Joseph, and possibly Benjamin, would serve in the capture of Fort Ticonderoga by colonial troops in May of 1775. This was the first significant Revolutionary War victory for the fledgling colonial army.

In 1773, Joseph was to leave Windsor and settle on his property in the nearby town of Claremont, New Hampshire, where he served for two terms in the House of Representatives. As the threat of British troops grew closer, however, Joseph was to direct his efforts and experience to the growing conflict between Britain and her American colonies.

Early in 1776, Joseph was sent by the New Hampshire House of Representatives to Canada, as a lieutenant colonel, as part of the unsuccessful campaign against the enemy located near Montreal and Trois-Rivieres. The entire army was forced to retreat in June, and Joseph found himself moving from one position to another in the Lake Champlain region.

Stationed temporarily at Rangers' Island off Isle la Motte in Lake Champlain in July of 1776, Joseph was put in charge of an advanced guard for Benedict Arnold's fleet.

After about two months at this post, a few days before the naval battle of Valcour Island, Joseph was wounded in the head by a fragment from an exploding gun carriage during a skirmish.

He died on September 28, somewhere in the vicinity of Clarendon, Vermont, during the journey back to his home. A lone marker standing in a field in North Clarendon still marks his passing.

Over the next five years, Benjamin Wait would see his family and status within the community grow. Tensions with New York would also build, mirroring the larger conflicts brewing between the Crown and her 13 colonies.

A man who would openly oppose the laws of the British Empire, in the form of New York's provincial government, was a sure bet to join in the revolution for his nation's own identity. Soon Benjamin Wait, the gentleman farmer, would be fighting a war for independence on two fronts.

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## The War On Two Fronts

*“(W)e will resist and oppose the said acts of parliament in conjunction with our brethren in America, at the expense of our lives and fortunes to the last extremity, if our duty to God and our country requires the same.”*

*-quoted from an unknown source at the convention at Westminster*

In 1775, Benjamin Wait was selected to represent Windsor at a gathering of delegates in Westminster from what are now Windsor and Windham counties. It was one of the earliest attempts to bring together the crude community governments of the loosely associated towns in the Grants. Their inspiration, no doubt, were the first battles of the American Revolution, fought at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, just a few weeks earlier.

Grant settlers had no association, at this point, with the fledgling Continental Congress down in Philadelphia, but it is no surprise they supported secession. They had, after all, openly rebelled against the authority of New York with its expressed loyalties to the Crown. Independence from England promised to give them the best opportunity for creating their own destiny. Their position can't be called patriotic, for they were understandably looking out for their own interests.

Wait had swallowed his pride a short time earlier, and signed a letter along with several other officers to the Provincial Congress of New York, offering his services as a Lt. Colonel in the coming crisis. The Grants had no authority to raise an army on their own at that time.

Wait was undoubtedly concerned for the safety of his family, and urged the Provincial Congress to begin raising a company of men to defend the area. New York, heavily divided between its loyalties to the Crown and the new call for independence, was slow to respond to his offer, probably due to his history of opposition.

His allegiance to the greater cause, however, is beyond doubt. Reportedly he even converted some of his own property into gold at the beginning of the revolution, loaning the government \$4,000 towards the war effort. The Continental government eventually repaid him in scrip so worthless he bought half a pound of tea and a quarter pound of indigo dye with \$1,200 of the money.

It was not until October of 1776 that he received a commission as captain in the first company of Joab Hoisington's Rangers, raised to protect the northern frontiers.

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Wait re-entered the army at perhaps its low point, as General Washington was being driven out of New York to spend a miserable winter at Valley Forge. A considerable portion of the population already considered the revolution over.

Opposition to any New York authority in the Grants remained fierce, putting Wait in a difficult position. He was still an active member of the Green Mountain Boys, yet was obligated to follow orders from New York. His soldiers, predictably, never quite put these hostilities behind them. Many wondered why they were fighting a war for a proposed union of states with whom they were already locked in bitter conflict.

“It may be truly said that after the campaign of 1775 Vermont’s position was defensive;” wrote Matt Bushnell Jones, “she did not fight except to defend her own borders from invasion, and with good reason, for she was an outcast, strained to the utmost, and maintaining her existence as best she might by force or by diplomacy against the foreign enemy upon the north and the still more bitter opponent on her western border.”

The troops so opposed any New York authority, that Wait was sometimes unable to get them to cooperate.

In June of 1777, the New York Council of Safety ordered his company of Rangers to travel to Kingston, New York, as part of defensive measures against the southward advance of British General John Burgoyne. Wait was unable to get his troops to move. The soldiers refused to go to New York, claiming their own families and property needed defending.

Wait explained his difficulties in a letter to the New York Council of Safety:

*“Gentlemen:*

*Agreeable to my orders received from the Honorable Council of Safety, dated June 27th, I proceeded to New-Borough in the County of Gloucester, and when I arrived there found my officers and men marched to Ticonderoga on account of the alarm there, and as soon as they returned I called them together and ordered them on the 14th inst. to prepare for marching down immediately, which they refused, giving for their reason that at the time of their engaging they did not expect to be removed from the three counties of Cumberland, Charlotte and Gloucester, and that now the enemy being in possession of Ticonderoga, leaves the frontier open to them, and that they could not think of leaving their wives and children in so dangerous and helpless a situation. This, gentlemen, being the case, I would beg leave to lay the same before you for your consideration.*

*Your most obedient and very humble servant,  
Benj. Wait, Capt.*

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In the year 1777, residents of the New Hampshire Grants organized a second council in the town of Westminster to formally declare the Grants independent, and form a new constitution. Wait was again the Windsor delegate. Delegates chose Vermont as the name for the independent republic.

Although Vermont would not be recognized as a state for another 14 years, the newly formed Vermont Council, despite a lack of funds, quickly took control of the state's regiment of Rangers and commenced to defending its own authority fiercely.

For example, one statute of the town of Windsor declared that anyone who acted as a public officer in the state under any authority other than Vermont's would be flogged, have their right ear cut off and nailed to a post, and have the letter "C" branded on their forehead.

One interesting point about the Vermont Constitution; it was the first state Constitution outlawing the practice of slavery.

In September, Wait, apparently now a major, traveled once again to Lake Champlain, in the vicinity of Fort Ticonderoga, in an attempt to cut off British General John Burgoyne's lines of communication and supply. Burgoyne had begun a grand assault in the summer of '77, planning to sail south down Lake Champlain, then move overland to the Hudson River, capturing the Hudson River basin.

General Washington, trapped with the Continental army in New Jersey, put out a call to all New England militia to stop this campaign. Angered by Burgoyne's legendary arrogance, and with a practical fear of the Iroquois warriors allied with his army, New Englanders set themselves to the task of harassing Burgoyne at every turn.

Wait's company moved more than 40 miles to the rear of the British Army, capturing a number of boats and nearly 300 prisoners.

Burgoyne had nearly reached Albany, New York, his goal, when his forces were overrun at Saratoga by the "citizen soldiers" of New England. Burgoyne and his entire army were captured.

The few British soldiers who remained along re-supply lines abandoned their posts and fled back to Canada. The Rangers pursued them in their retreat, nipping at their heels and throwing terror into the defeated redcoats. Burgoyne would later describe his tormentors as such:

*"The Hampshire Grants - a country unpeopled and almost unknown in the last war - now abounds in the most active and the most rebellious race of men on the Continent, and hangs like a gathering storm on my left."*

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The rout and capture of Burgoyne was a major victory for the Colonial army and a major contributor in gaining the support of France. Wait's own contributions were apparently not forgotten. He was promoted to lieutenant colonel in February of 1778, the next step in the astounding rise his military career took during the Revolutionary War.

Burgoyne's disastrous march also marked the last major battle Wait would be a part of. It would also be the last significant Revolutionary War incident in Vermont. Wait turned his attentions to his family and the tension still simmering with New York.

In October of 1779, Wait was elected sheriff of Cumberland county, soon to become known as Windsor county, and appointed to the state's new Board of War - a council of seven men who oversaw the movements and expenditures of the state's militia. He would occupy both of these positions, with some time out for more military service, beyond the conclusion of the war.

In 1782 Wait, along with General Roger Enos and a company of supporters, applied for proprietorship of a vacant tract of land in the Mad River Valley. The charter was granted by the Republic of Vermont on February 25, and Wait could now begin to realize his dream of setting up a new town in the wilderness. He had but to wait out the war, and maintain faith that a victory would allow him the freedom to pursue his dream.

Wait had begun to settle into his life as a local statesman, and was undoubtedly ready to give up the hard, dangerous work of military leadership. He now headed a family with five children, and was a wealthy man by the Puritan standards of New England. It is a mistake, however, to believe his life was quiet and devoid of conflict.

Windham County was populated by a particularly large number of residents who still upheld the authority of New York. In 1783, settlers in the southern portion of that county had gone so far as to ignore Vermont authority entirely, attracting the attention of then-Governor Thomas Chittenden. The Governor called for the raising of a company of 100 men to assist in enforcing Vermont law. Wait was chosen as its leader, and awarded the rank of colonel.

The pot first boiled over on Jan. 20, 1784 when a small uprising began in Brattleboro. After a show of strength by Wait's regiment and other militia, the resistance was quelled peacefully, and the soldiers were able to return home. But there was one final conflict in Wait's future.

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An armed mob of men from Barnard and Hartland had gathered in November of 1786 to protest the sitting of the court in Windsor, and to demand certain legislation. Their actions mirrored the famous Shay's rebellion in Massachusetts. Wait, acting as sheriff, was given the task of dispersing them.

"On the 5th of November, 1786, being the day assigned by law for the sitting of the court of common pleas for that county, in that town, a mob of about thirty men, under arms, assembled, supposed with the design to stop the court," reported a Windsor newspaper. "Sheriff Benjamin Wait and State's Attorney Jacobs waited on them, ordered them to disperse, and read the riot act, etc. The insurgents, finding their views baffled, dispersed and the court proceeded to business without molestation."

Sensing the conflict was far from over, Wait sent for a company of men from the third regiment of Vermont militia to march down from Weathersfield.

Several days later, leading 40 men, he attacked the house where the rioters were assembled and believed to be discussing the rescue of an imprisoned companion. The 27 major instigators of the conflict were captured, in what turned into a bloody incident. Wait himself was wounded rather badly in the head, leaving him confined to bed for 26 days.

Did Wait, the former rebel, see the irony of his own actions in the service of the state in flattening this uprising? Perhaps he well understood the motivations of the insurgents, which might explain the swiftness and fierceness of his retaliation. Presumably he believed he was defending the same ideals he had fought for with the Green Mountain Boys.

In later years he would bemoan the fact that he was never wounded during years of warfare, but was nearly killed trying to throw some of his old comrades in jail.

Five months later, Wait won promotion to the rank of brigadier-general of the third regiment, an office which he would resign in August.

Refusing to accept his retirement, the General Assembly in Rutland saw fit to honor him with the rank of major-general, the highest military title of the age. His rank appears to have been largely ceremonial, for he no longer participated in military matters. Instead, his sights were set on Waitsfield.

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## Waitsfield

Significant social changes in the world order were afoot in 1789, a year that historians have often defined as the beginning of the modern age.

In the summer of that year, a prison in Paris called the Bastille was stormed, bringing the French Revolution to its full fury. A man named Fletcher Christian led a largely successful mutiny against the brutal leadership on the English ship *Bounty* in April, and the abolitionist movement was gaining momentum in Britain.

It was the year that Mozart performed a series of variations on Handel's *Messiah*, and two books of poetry by William Blake; "Songs of Innocence," and "The Book of Thel," were published.

Here in the new United States, Congress inaugurated George Washington as our first President, and instituted its first tax. Americans observed Thanksgiving as an official holiday for the first time.

Benjamin Wait was probably aware of little of this as he rolled into Waitsfield, probably with his sons in tow, a few companions and what meager possessions they could carry in a wagon. They traveled on the beginnings of a rough, muddy road laid out the year before by a committee that included Wait.

"The preparation of this man to return into the wilderness of Waitsfield to make another home, at the age of fifty-three years, and with such an experience in life, appears to have been a movement to settle a large and rapidly maturing family, under what he supposed were favorable circumstances for the times in which he lived," wrote Dr. Walter A. Jones.

Matt Bushnell Jones might have shown a bit more insight into the character of the man when he said that in his former home, Wait was a leader. In Waitsfield, he was *the* leader.

The town had been surveyed about the time the roads were planned, and was divided into 75 lots of about 318 acres apiece, as stipulated in the 1782 charter. Each of the 70 proprietors were required to pay eight dollars, to cultivate at least five acres for planting, and to build a house of at least 18 feet square, inhabited by a family. The rest of the lots were slated for use by the town for a school, a church, etc.

Each proprietor had three years from the conclusion of the war to accomplish this, or the land would revert to the state.

Waitsfield was being settled much as were other New England towns, as described by historian Richard Hofstadter:

"New England has always been set off by certain methods of colonization - a measured approach to the settlement of the western wilderness, the



**A modern view of Waitsfield from the site of Wait's home.**

careful preliminary survey of new lands, the creation of new towns under a system in which the lands were divided - though not equally - largely among resident proprietors, a soberly marshaled progression based upon relatively compact settlement.”

The laws of the town charter were not precisely adhered to. Such a state of confusion and widespread poverty existed following the war that to try to support such laws would have been impractical, if not an out and out waste of effort. Horse-trading and land speculation had already taken place in the seven years since the town was chartered, and the practice of land speculation was already beginning to change the New England character.

No longer were people content to build a small home where they would remain their entire lives. People were moving more, seeking more space, more solitude, more opportunity and more money. Small farmers now had the ability to move quickly beyond formerly accepted standards of living, and with less back-breaking work. The tradition of the American entrepreneur, with all its hopes, dreams and disappointments, was forming.

Wait and two of his sons, Ezra and Gilbert, were the only original signers of the charter actually to move to Waitsfield. Some of the proprietors made their mark on the town by sending their offspring. Most of the early settlers came either from Windsor, or the county of Cheshire, in New Hampshire, and bought their land from one of the proprietors. Many of these people, legend has it, were drawn to the town by Wait, on the strength of his request and his reputation.

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Following the survey, a plan was drawn up by the proprietors dividing the town into 150 plots of about 150 acres each. From the lottery, Wait drew a lot lying at the Warren line, and soon had purchased three more plots in what is now the town center, lying adjacent to the plot drawn by his son, Gilbert. Trading and purchasing continued over subsequent years, but Wait apparently owned a farm of 600 acres, and supplied each of his sons with a 150 acre plot of land during their stay in the town.

Benjamin's brothers, Jeduthan and William, followed him to the town, where they also set up homesteads.

Real estate seemed to be a bit of a hobby for Wait, and the earliest records of the town, beginning at about 1793, are filled with his signature as witness or party to various land deals. Some deeds are written in Wait's own tight, neat script.

The exact site of the small cabin which Wait and his sons constructed that spring is not known, but it presumably stood somewhere in the vicinity of the small cemetery which now stands behind the fire house.

Common practice among settlers was to move to a new piece of land alone, or with a few sons useful in the early hard labor. The rest of the family would remain at home and plant one final crop. Much of the first few years would be spent clearing ground, planting crops and cultivating new herds of livestock.

A New England farmer might raise a variety of grains, beans, peas, parsnips, Indian corn, turnips, onions, cauliflower, potatoes and other vegetables. They also cultivated orchards which brought in apples, pears, cherries and peaches. Berries and nuts were gathered in the forests. Game was also plentiful.

There was pork, venison and bear meat for the mid-day meal, while in the evening settlers would sit down to milk and mush, or hominy. The most common drinks were cider and New England rum. Meals were served in pewter dishes and wooden bowls with spoons. Any fine china or pottery were deemed excessive.

Waitsfield at this time was, of course, very much a frontier town, and a tough place to live. It lacked a saw mill and brick-making operation, and survival was still largely dependent upon farming and hunting techniques learned from natives.

Dress for Wait and his sons those first few years probably consisted of a hunting shirt, made up of a loose frock which hung down to the thighs, and deerskin breeches. On their feet they wore deerskin moccasins. This was quite a change from the attire Wait probably wore in the court house of Windsor, but nostalgia for simpler times and his early years in Windsor may have been part of the reason he headed north in the first place. The old Ranger in him was certainly no stranger to the hardships of the frontier.



The old cellar hole of the Wait house.

At any rate, those first few years were kind enough to the Wait family to allow them to move out of their small cabin and begin construction of a more comfortable dwelling.

Houses on the New England frontier were not usually built with logs, as myth tells us. Settlers usually built small frame houses of the type they'd known in England, with a central chimney and walls of mud and plaster. The size of the house depended upon the needs as well as the means of the owners, and a second story was only attempted if more than three or four rooms were needed.

The general built his house in 1793 on a terrace to the west of the original cabin, on property now owned by the Flemer family. A cellar hole still clearly marks the spot where the house stood before it was moved closer to the river in the 1830s.

The original house was a moderate-sized one-story affair, built to accommodate a family of seven. The three oldest offspring, Ezra, John and Benjamin, Jr., were by then building their own homes. Joseph Jr., the youngest Wait son, was probably just entering his teens.

This was the first frame house in the Valley, and would occasionally serve as a meeting hall for the town in those early years. Wait also had a barn which was a popular local spot for discussion, religious services or evening dances and celebration.

More often, however, town business was transacted at the house of Ezra Wait, whose wife was paid a small stipend by the town for her troubles as hostess.

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The Wait house was a fairly simple building, with two front rooms and three rear bedrooms surrounding a central fireplace. Several small details discovered during the recent renovation indicate the relative wealth of the Wait family; their home was insulated with brick - an expensive undertaking at this time, and traces of some of the earliest known block-printed wallpaper, printed in Boston, have been found in a closet. Wait's family obviously was moving quickly beyond the Spartan frontier life when they built their home.

The house probably had a two-pitched, gabled roof covered with wood shingles. It also had a sleeping attic, accessed by a ladder. The house would remain in that location until about 1830.

Then the house was purchased by Roderick Richardson, later a State Senator, and moved down to the west side of the town's main road (now route 100), where it was rebuilt and a second story added. There it remained until recently, when it was moved across the street, closer to the location of the original Wait cabin. After a careful re-construction, it was opened in the summer of 1997 as town municipal offices and a tourist center. The original parlor where Waitsfield town residents met to discuss taxes, schools and churches is now being put to much the same purpose.

Few of the Wait children would remain in the Valley long after the death of their father in 1822. Benjamin's second wife, Mehitable, would live in the house until her death five years later. Little is known about either of Wait's wives.

By the time the Waits had finished their home, Waitsfield was growing at a healthy rate. In 1791 Vermont was finally admitted into the union, and a statewide census was taken. In just two years, the small band of settlers had grown into 61 people, divided amongst 13 families, and expansion would continue. Settlers included the family of Samuel Pike from Brookfield, Massachusetts, several families of Shermans from Brimfield, Massachusetts, and other émigrés from Windsor and Claremont, New Hampshire.

New town residents cleared land, cut new roads and built bridges. A saw mill and a grist mill were opened by a man named John Heaton, Jr. Families spread out along the banks of the river, and up in the hills towards the east.

The main road at the time began at the "Great Bridge," now the covered bridge, and stretched east towards Northfield along what is now a portion of the East Warren Road. This was a primary reason early settlers regarded the Common as the obvious town center.

Admission into the union strengthened people's confidence that land agreements would now be more binding and permanent. This is perhaps the reason immigration to Waitsfield and Vermont in general escalated so quickly. By 1794, community leaders thought it necessary to organize the town.

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General Wait, a justice of the peace appointed by the Legislature, held the first meeting at his own house, and served as moderator. He was elected as the first selectman, and to several other minor offices.

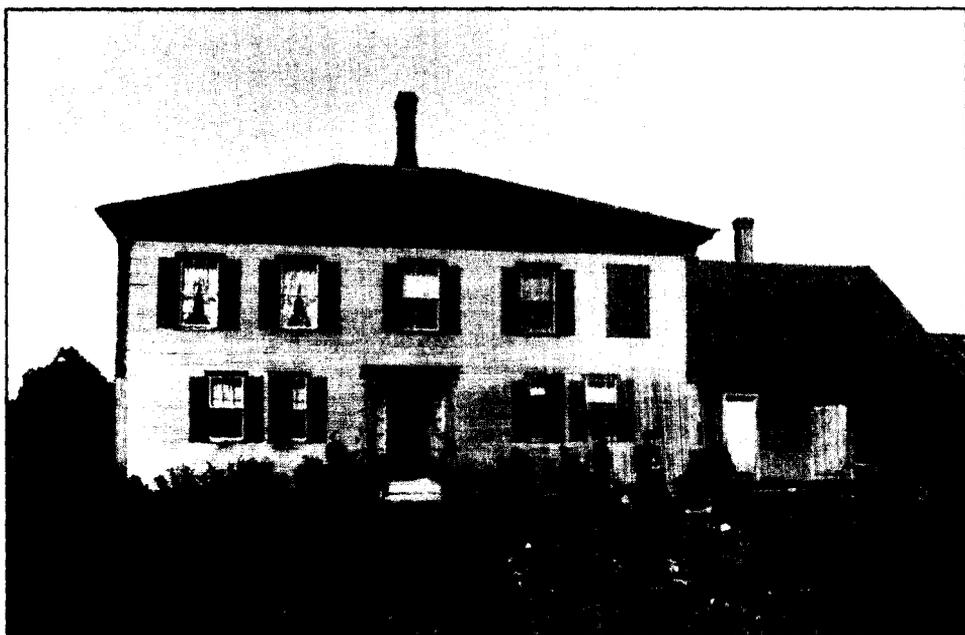
The following year townspeople selected Wait as a delegate to help establish a court house in the County of Chittenden, which at that time included Waitsfield. Wait also had the honor of serving as Waitsfield's first representative to the General Assembly of Vermont, a position he would hold for seven terms.

One of the unique attributes of New England town government is that it allows anyone with the support of his or her peers the opportunity to serve in many important positions in a town's government, and Wait took this to heart. He knew he was founder of Waitsfield, and set about making the town his own.

One of the most important decisions facing the town, and one which caused considerable controversy, was of where the town's center was to be located. In 1796, the town set aside land on what was to become the Common, located where Joslin Hill Road now turns into the North Road.

This area, at the time, was thought to be the geographic center of Waitsfield, and was planned as the location for a cemetery, a meeting house and a military training ground. It was still uncleared at this point.

That summer, community members founded the Congregational Church, the first church of any denomination in what is now Washington County.



**A photograph shows the Wait house after Roderick Richardson added a second story. The photo, courtesy of the Waitsfield Historical Society, was probably taken about 1860.**

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Early church documents record its opening on June 27, 1796, under the tutelage of the Rev. Ebenezer Kingsbury of Jericho, and contain the signatures of John Barnard, William Joiner, Ezekiel Hawley, Jared Skinner, Bissell Phelps, Daniel Wilder, Eli Skinner, Daniel Taylor and Samuel Bayley. It would be five years until bylaws were established, and longer still until there was a church building.

Church and state matters were very much intertwined at this point in New England history, and it was common for a town to raise tax money to support the faith of the majority of its residents. The church building often served as the school and public meeting house, so it was a necessary expense. Funding of the Waitsfield Congregational Church would continue in such a manner until 1843.

Since 1793, the town supported a preacher named John Barnard. A small committee, upon which Wait served, oversaw raising those funds.

People were still occasionally gathering for services at Wait's barn, although the congregation seemed to move in and out of several houses and barns. Barnard presumably stayed at the houses of townspeople. Before Barnard, the town must have sought the services of roving preachers whenever possible.

In 1801 the Congregational Society voted to award the town's new preacher, Williams Salisbury, a lot in the town and an annual salary of \$166.66. There was still, however, no proper church.

Townspeople first tried, unsuccessfully, to erect a building on the Common in 1798. Salah Smith was hired as contractor, and he began to erect a 36 ft. x 18 ft. frame.

Before he could finish, however, negotiations with the Northeast School District, which the town had hope would pay for part of the combination meeting and school house, broke down and the project was abandoned. The frame was eventually moved to another location, and Smith was apparently never paid for his work.

Wait served on at least one committee set up to consider the matters of fundraising and the size of the building. Principal funds for its construction were to come from the selling of pews, of which Wait himself initially purchased seven. He soon pulled out of the whole operation, however, over a disagreement about its location.

Wait had, from the beginning, expressed doubt that the Common was the most appropriate place for a meeting hall, and the recent settling of Fayston by Lynde Wait strengthened his resolve. He felt that by locating the town center closer to its present location, it would create an important economic tie between the two towns.

Lynde Wait was a settler from Connecticut, unrelated to the Waitsfield family, who married Benjamin's daughter Lois in 1800.

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The year 1804 began what was to be a difficult period for Wait. His wife Sara died early in the year of unknown causes. He quickly remarried, this time to Mehitable Burdick, widow of Wait's friend and fellow settler John Burdick. There was little time to mourn the passing of loved ones in a frontier culture.

His rift with the church would intensify, as it became apparent that things were not going to go his way. Early in 1805, town voters determined that the house of public worship would be built on the Common, leading Wait to formerly dissolve his ties with the Church.

Wait would remain alienated from the church for several years, which must have had a profound effect on him and his standing in the community. Wait was a man living in a pious society where religion could not be separated from politics or business. The church was also the cornerstone of social life in such a tiny village.

"That was a grievous disappointment to Gen. Wait," wrote Dr. Walter A. Jones, "and when, about two years later, the preliminaries of a final and successful movement to build the large, and for those days elegant house of worship, on the Common were begun, made keenly sensitive by former defeat, he withdrew from the ecclesiastical society, of which he was a member, and had no participation in its work."

In 1807, the construction of the building finally began, which must have deepened his sense that Waitsfield was no longer his community. It had taken on a life of its own.

In November of the following year, Benjamin's son, Thomas, died at the age of 27. followed in 1814 by his son Ezra and his wife, Elizabeth, from a fever epidemic.

But Wait managed to put his bitterness behind him, and in 1810 threw himself back into the spiritual and economic life of Waitsfield. Perhaps he was revived by the children of his departed sons, who came to live in his home, or perhaps he simply missed being a part of things. Wait made his peace with the church and rejoined. It was now under the clergy of his friend, Pastor Amariah Chandler, who would say of him in an epitaph;

"In early life he made a profession of the religion of Christ. But for many years was in a state of great backsliding. About ten years before his death his graces seemed to revive. His remaining years he lived lamenting his former lukewarmness, and died in the joyful hope and expectation of a happy resurrection through the abounding mercy of the Great Redeemer."

Wait might have had some satisfaction had he learned that, as the importance of transportation between Warren and Moretown began to eclipse that with Northfield, the center of business in Waitsfield moved to the river on its own. In 1846, the Congregational Church abandoned its original building and moved to a new site on Mill Hill.

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Wait was by now an old man, perhaps content to let matters of politics go to younger men. He did help establish a chapter of the Masonic Lodge in 1817, and was raised to the third degree, the highest position in Blue Masonry.

Wait was now 79 years old, and his signature on those early Masonic records was shaky and weak. He is only listed as having attended occasional meetings.

His fellow Masons obviously held him in deep respect, however. His was the first signature under the adopted set of bylaws, and was always the first person mentioned in the attendance column of the minutes of the meetings.

On the morning of June 28, 1822, Benjamin Wait was feeling in good spirits. Obviously still robust at the age of 86, he set out walking with an attendant to settle some business near the Common. Returning home, he stopped to visit at the house of his deceased friend John Burdick, about a mile and a half from his own home.

Upon arriving his health declined rapidly, and Wait died before his family could be summoned.

The exact site of Wait's grave is not known, but a monument to the General and his first wife stands alongside the headstones of several of his sons in a small cemetery in the vicinity of the probable site of his original cabin, on the west bank of the Mad River. Historians believe his headstone was located nearby.

General Benjamin Wait will forever remain a minor figure in our country's history. Always a participant, he was rarely the instigator of the transforming events of Vermont.

Still, his life and accomplishment were remarkable.

While he was but one man, and the creation of a town is accomplished only through the hard work and collective vision of every settler, Waitsfield is his legacy, for he was indeed the father of this town.

He is also a near-perfect symbol of several critical moments in the development of the United States.

In 1889, the town of Waitsfield held a Centennial celebration. Amidst all the ceremonies, a presentation was made by Walter A. Jones about the life of their town founder. Amongst the people in attendance were many who had friends and family members who had known Wait, and had experienced the early years of the town. For those people, the gap since those early days must have seemed much shorter. For a moment, and they could see how far the town had come in such a short time.

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*"One hundred years ago this very day, probably at this very hour, a little company of men and women assembled not far from where we are now met together.*

*Mighty forests were all about them, with here and there a little opening made by the settler's ax, and rude logs supplied the only shelter."*

*-from a Congregational Church Centennial souvenir, author unknown.*



**A burial monument, on the far right, dedicated to Wait and his first wife, Sara.**

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