

Report of the Annual Meeting Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

Ira Allen in Paris, 1800, Planning a Canadian Revolution

T. S. Webster

Volume 42, numéro 1, 1963

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300615ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300615ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Webster, T. S. (1963). Ira Allen in Paris, 1800, Planning a Canadian Revolution. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 42(1), 74–80. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300615ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1963

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

IRA ALLEN IN PARIS, 1800, PLANNING A CANADIAN REVOLUTION

T. S. Webster

University of Manitoba

Ira Allen, the hero of this story, was an eighteenth century Vermont politician. In spirit he was a citizen of the North Atlantic world. In an era before nationalistic school systems had established strong feelings of national loyalty, many of Allen's contemporaries felt they belonged to the large community of the western world. Perhaps in our own day this sense of community is emerging again. Such a man as Ira Allen may interest us, then, as a specimen of the rugged cosmopolitan, a citizen of the United States before one hundred per cent Americanism had been invented. Between 1795 and 1801 he travelled the circuit of the North Atlantic rectangle. His experiences on that circuit serve to remind us of the political relationship of that time. In particular, his experiences in France give us a glimpse of the policies of the French concerning Canada — a fragment of evidence that may be of interest to Canadians.

Ira Allen was a younger brother of Ethan Allen, leader of the Green Mountain Boys of American Revolutionary fame. Ira, in the years after the close of the American Revolution, became the leader of the faction that dominated politics in Vermont, and he, Ira, has been called the founder of Vermont. Like other frontier founding fathers, he rewarded his own labours with generous land grants. Involved in the lumber business in the Lake Champlain basin, he strove to preserve economic ties with the St. Lawrence valley, the natural outlet for the produce of Vermont. He fought to keep Vermont out of the American federation created by the constitution of 1789. He would have liked to create a North American Switzerland, free to look north or south at will. Ira Allen lost his fight. A contrary faction took Vermont into the American federation in 1791. Soon Ira Allen, no longer dominating politics, was finding it difficult to pay the rising taxes on his quite substantial land holdings. In political eclipse, he faced financial disaster.¹

Ira Allen did not accept his personal difficulties as the price one pays for citizenship in a great federal state. He did not submit with resignation to defeat in the roulette of the local democratic process. He raised his eyes and surveyed the wide horizon and set out to find, in the Old World, the means of redressing the balance in Vermont. He sailed for Europe in 1795.

¹ C. Williamson, *Vermont in Quandary; 1763-1825* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1949), pp. 220-224.

The Europe he approached was engaged in warfare. The Directory governed in France. The French had given up hope of having the United States as an active ally, but they hoped at least for benevolent American neutrality. The British harboured émigrés, and fought the Frenchmen of the Revolution. And the British were concerned about the security of French-speaking Lower Canada.

Ira Allen, sailing toward embattled Europe, hoped to obtain there the fire-arms and support that would enable him to carry off a military coup in North America and establish a new republic in which his influence would be dominant. He went first to Britain, where he obtained neither fire-arms nor support. He contrived to go to France in May 1796. He went, ostensibly, to buy arms for the militia of Vermont.² Soon he was engaged in planning the liberation of Canada from the British yoke.

Allen negotiated with General Carnot, President of the Directory. The scheme they devised called for a two pronged attack on the St. Lawrence. Allen would transport 20,000 muskets and some cannons to Vermont. In the summer of 1797 he would move north, whilst an expedition from France would enter the St. Lawrence River. The French-Canadian populace would be prepared for action by subversive agents operating from bases in the United States.³

Allen did put to sea, in a ship called the *Olive Branch*, but the British intercepted it on the open Atlantic and took it captive to Plymouth. Allen claimed the fire-arms as his private property. (To deceive any investigators, he had been given, by the French, a receipt for a substantial down-payment, which, in fact, he had not made.) "I find the court of admiralty the most litigious I ever met with," he wrote. "My detention quite tires my patience, and is extremely injurious to all my concerns, both at home and abroad." Allen demanded the restoration of his property. The admiralty demanded proof that the fire-arms really were his.⁴

Early in 1798, an appeal court decision gave Allen possession of the fire-arms on bail, and gave him more time to produce satisfactory evidence that the cargo was his private property. Allen decided to go

² J. B. Wilbur, *Ira Allen* (2 vols.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928), II, 67-89.

³ Talleyrand to Nogaret-Ramel, 13 fructidor, An VI (Aug. 30, 1798), Wilbur, II, 191-97; Minutes of orders of the Directory, 24 messidor, An IV (July 13, 1796), *ibid.*, 197-99; Létombe to Delacroix, 6 thermidor, An V (July 24, 1797), *Correspondence of the French Ministers to the United States, 1791-1797*, ed. Frederick J. Turner, Vol. II: *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1903 (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1904), pp. 1052-54; Petiet to Talleyrand, 8 germinal, An VIII (March 29, 1800), Archives des Affaires Etrangères, correspondance-politique, Etats-Unis, Vol. LI, fols. 398-98v.

⁴ Wilbur, II, 99-102, 131.

to Paris to seek the necessary documents.⁵ In Paris he found that the political climate had changed. Carnot was in exile in Switzerland. Talleyrand was the new minister of external relations. On September 1, 1798, for reasons mysterious, Ira Allen was locked up in the Temple prison. He proved a prolific letter-writer while in prison, but probably most of his missives never got out of the building. His legal aides, his friends, and a growing herd of creditors on both sides of the Atlantic wondered what was keeping him.

Allen was released in December, but only briefly. He was back in jail on New Year's Eve, apparently suspected of being an English spy, and he was held until September, 1799.⁶ By that time Talleyrand had resigned, and the government of the Directory was disintegrating. A French army was in difficulty in Egypt, another was in trouble in northern Italy. French shipping was suffering from an undeclared naval war with the United States. France was waiting for a man on horseback.

So was Ira Allen. The coup d'état in November brought Napoleon Bonaparte to power, and Allen, recently released from jail, looked to the new government with desperate hope. To solve his personal problems he needed swift, successful action. He had returned to Paris in 1798 merely to obtain documents to support his claim to the cargo of the *Olive Branch*, and he had been obliged to fritter away crucial months of precious time. Now he aimed higher again. He drafted a new scheme, similar to the old, for a revolutionizing of British North America.

Talleyrand was now back at the ministry of external relations. To him, Ira Allen submitted a long document in which he put forward an elaborate set of suggestions.⁷ He proposed that France should negotiate a settlement of her differences with the United States. This would make easier the recruitment of American citizens to support a French manoeuvre to revolutionize the British colonies. Such a revolution would establish a new, independent republic, to be called United Columbia.

The crucial military stroke would be, in Allen's scheme, the capture of Quebec city. For this purpose he urged the sending of an expedition of 4,000 French troops with surplus officers and fire-arms for the local population, who, he assumed, would support the French invaders. In anticipation of the arrival of the expedition, conspiring lumber dealers would pile lumber at Wolfe's Cove to dry, a usual business procedure, and this lumber would be available for the swift construction

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 172-76.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-273.

⁷ AAE, corr. pol., E.-U., Vol. LI, fols. 294-95v.

of scaling ladders for mounting the walls of Quebec on the side facing the Plains of Abraham. After Quebec, Montreal, then Halifax. When the military work was done, a convention of representatives should assemble at Quebec to organize the republic.

The government of Napoleon Bonaparte was not prepared to revive the scheme that had appealed earlier to General Carnot. The taking of Quebec must have appeared impractical. Bonaparte had already had, in Egypt, the experience of having his communications cut by the British navy. The United States was still hostile to France. More important, Allen had suggested an attack on Canada at the very moment when Bonaparte was extending to Britain and Austria an invitation to negotiate peace. When the olive branch was rejected, Bonaparte turned his attention to mounting his second Italian campaign. He devoted the spring of 1800 to re-establishing the French military position in northern Italy. Clearly, the time was not ripe for an expedition to the St. Lawrence.

Even so, the French government took an interest in Ira Allen, and he continued to submit his ideas. The theme of the communications shifted away from specific plans for an attack on Canada by an expedition from France. Instead, he spoke of the liberation of Canada by North American forces.⁸ This liberation was seen as part of a new arrangement of the North Atlantic area, in which France, the United States, and perhaps other interested powers, would act collectively to check the domineering British.

Allen saw France as a great and potentially prosperous state, whose maritime commerce had been deranged by the French Revolution. He saw the United States as a territory capable, ultimately, of supporting 100,000,000 people, but the United States was still in its infancy, with only the beginning of a navy. France and America, he thought, could benefit from acting together.

Allen's grand design would re-organize the pattern of sea power. France, the United States, and then other nations, would agree to limit their naval forces to one ship of the line and three frigates for each million of population. This force would be used by each state to protect its shipping from pirates and from any aggressive power. All the contracting nations would agree to act collectively against any state which refused to subscribe to the plan. In the event of any illegal seizure of the shipping of any of the contracting nations, all would seize the ships and property of the offending state. The seized property would be held until the offender had made complete reparation.

This plan, Allen believed, would assure the freedom of the seas. He saw, in the centuries that lay ahead, the two great republics, France

⁸ *Ibid.*, fols. 400-01v.

and the United States, leading the world and giving an example of peace and moderation. France, he felt, could soon become the greatest naval power in the world.

To provide a motive for American co-operation in this scheme, Allen felt that Spain should cede East and West Florida to the United States. Spain could be compensated with Gibraltar or Minorca, or a share in the Newfoundland fisheries. The Americans, possessing the tropical Floridas, would not be tempted to interfere with European holdings in the West Indies. In addition, the United States would be offered the right to conquer Canada and the adjoining British colonies, and this conquest they would undertake without French help. Prussia would be offered a British island in the West Indies, and commercial advantages in Europe, to win her participation in the scheme. Thus the mighty British could be humbled.

Allen had suggested that the first step to the attainment of his goal was a rapprochement between France and the United States. He suggested that he himself should be sent by the French government to participate in a secret negotiation with American leaders and arrange for a settlement. This, he thought, would be faster than formal, public negotiation. To cover his secret mission, and prevent British observers from suspecting his diplomatic role, Allen suggested that he could go to the United States on the pretext of getting proof that he had been authorized to purchase arms for the Vermont militia.

This intricate scheme was too devious even for Talleyrand, so Allen abandoned his plan of a hasty return to America, and resumed his interest in salvaging from the British court the cargo of the *Olive Branch*. He continued to pursue in Paris the documents that would establish his claim to the muskets, and he continued his geopolitical discussions with French officials. His comments were re-statements or slight expansions of the grand plan already considered.

Could the French government, under the Consulate, have had any interest in the ideas of Ira Allen? The fact that the exchanges cover a period of over three months implies that the administrators took some interest. The suggestion that the United States conquer Canada must have had some attraction for the French. Bonaparte hoped to make peace with both the United States and with Britain. He planned also to pursue a negotiation, opened by the Directory, for the re-acquisition of Louisiana from Spain. A conquest of Canada by the United States would assure a long period of unfriendliness between the United States and Britain and would destroy the rapprochement between those two powers embodied in Jay's treaty of 1794. The conquest would deprive the British of their naval base at Halifax, and this deprivation would facilitate trade between the United States and the European continent in the event of a future war involving Britain. The dominant position

of the British in the Newfoundland fishery would be threatened, perhaps destroyed. The conquest of Canada would be a blow to Britain's prestige and would balance the effect, in international circles, of the French failure then threatening in Egypt. Such a conquest would also provide a diversion for the Americans that might be useful when the French obtained Louisiana. The French at that moment had much to gain from an American conquest or liberation of Canada. They had nothing to lose. The French-Canadians would still speak French, and if France acquired Louisiana, who could tell what the future might bring?

Hope for a military coup in Canada gave Ira Allen and the French government something in common. Under the Directory, the French had invested considerable time, energy, and property in Allen's original scheme. Bonaparte's government, busy with other things, gave Allen what help it could in getting on with his modified plan of liberating Canada from the British.

Allen was trying to win a court case in Britain to regain possession of the *Olive Branch* and its cargo. He had negotiated in 1796 with General Carnot and two of his assistants, all three of whom were active in the government of Napoleon Bonaparte. These three men, one of whom was a councillor of state, and in addition three ministers, Talleyrand, minister of external affairs, Fouché, minister of police, and Forfait, minister of the navy, all were involved in helping Allen.⁹ The councillor of state certified that Allen, in 1796, bought the arms in question from the French government.¹⁰ Talleyrand witnessed the councillor's signature and endorsed the contents of the statement. The Swedish consul-general in Paris certified Talleyrand's signature. These documents and a friendly note from Talleyrand were delivered to Allen in April, 1800.¹¹ The trouble taken by the French administration to provide Allen with his documents, at the time when Bonaparte was preparing to cross the Alps, shows that the Vermont adventurer received serious attention.

Alas, the litigious British courts were hard to please. The documents would not suffice. The judges wanted Allen to show where he obtained the cash to buy the arms. He had sailed from England to France in war time, and so could not possibly have carried money with him. It would have been illegal to export cash to France. Where did he get the money he allegedly used in Paris? Allen could not very well admit that he had not really needed any money. He settled down to write letters from Paris through the summer. Not till November 1800 did he sail for the United States.

⁹ *Ibid.*, fols. 348, 375.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, fols. 398-98v.

¹¹ Wilbur, II, 294.

Ira Allen visited in the new capital, Washington, from January to April, 1801.¹² There the government was somewhat confused. Aaron Burr and Thomas Jefferson were tied in the presidential election. Allen sought support from the government in his claim to the *Olive Branch* cargo,¹³ and perhaps he talked about Canada.

In May Allen returned to Vermont. Pressed by his creditors he stayed out of jail with difficulty.¹⁴ Soon after Allen's arrival in Vermont a group called the Civil Society, with a nucleus of United States citizens, was organized in Montreal, and was associated with a Vermont group inspired by Ira Allen. Canadian authorities smashed the Civil Society with the arrest of five members in September.¹⁵ Allen was running out of time. He was protected from arrest for a year by an act of the legislature of Vermont, then in 1802 spent a short time in jail.¹⁶ Early in 1803 he left the state, never to return. He died in Philadelphia in 1814.

What can we conclude from the experiences of Ira Allen? He was a frontier business man and politician who believed in freedom of enterprise, and the freedom of any section or segment of the community to pursue such political ends as would satisfy its needs. He was in many ways an ordinary opportunist, but he had sufficient imagination to expound a grand scheme of collective security, designed to deal with the preponderant sea power of Britain and to preserve the freedom of the seas. Finally, his relations with the French government established that the French administrators, under the Consulate as under earlier French governments, still had an interest in their former North American colonies. They were interested not only in Louisiana but also in the valley of the St. Lawrence.

¹² *Calendar of the Ira Allen papers in the Wilbur Library of the University of Vermont* (Montpelier, Vermont: Historical Records Survey, 1939), p. 117, item 892.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 117, items 888, 891, p. 118, item 893.

¹⁴ Wilbur, II, pp. 315, 341-53.

¹⁵ *Report on Canadian archives, 1891*, ed. Douglas Brynmner (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1892), pp. 81-84. Wilbur, II, 318-32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 337-38.