

THE TRUE STORY
OF
Cap^t. David Mathews
AND HIS
State Line House

BEING THE VINDICATION OF THE MEMORY
OF A REVOLUTIONARY PATRIOT & THE
EXPOSURE OF FANTASTIC LEGENDS
CONCERNING THE HOUSE
HE BUILT



BY JOHN SPARGO

PRESIDENT OF THE BENNINGTON HISTORICAL MUSEUM

BENNINGTON HISTORICAL MUSEUM PUBLICATIONS N^o. 1

The Tory Press Rutland Vermont

MDCCCCXX

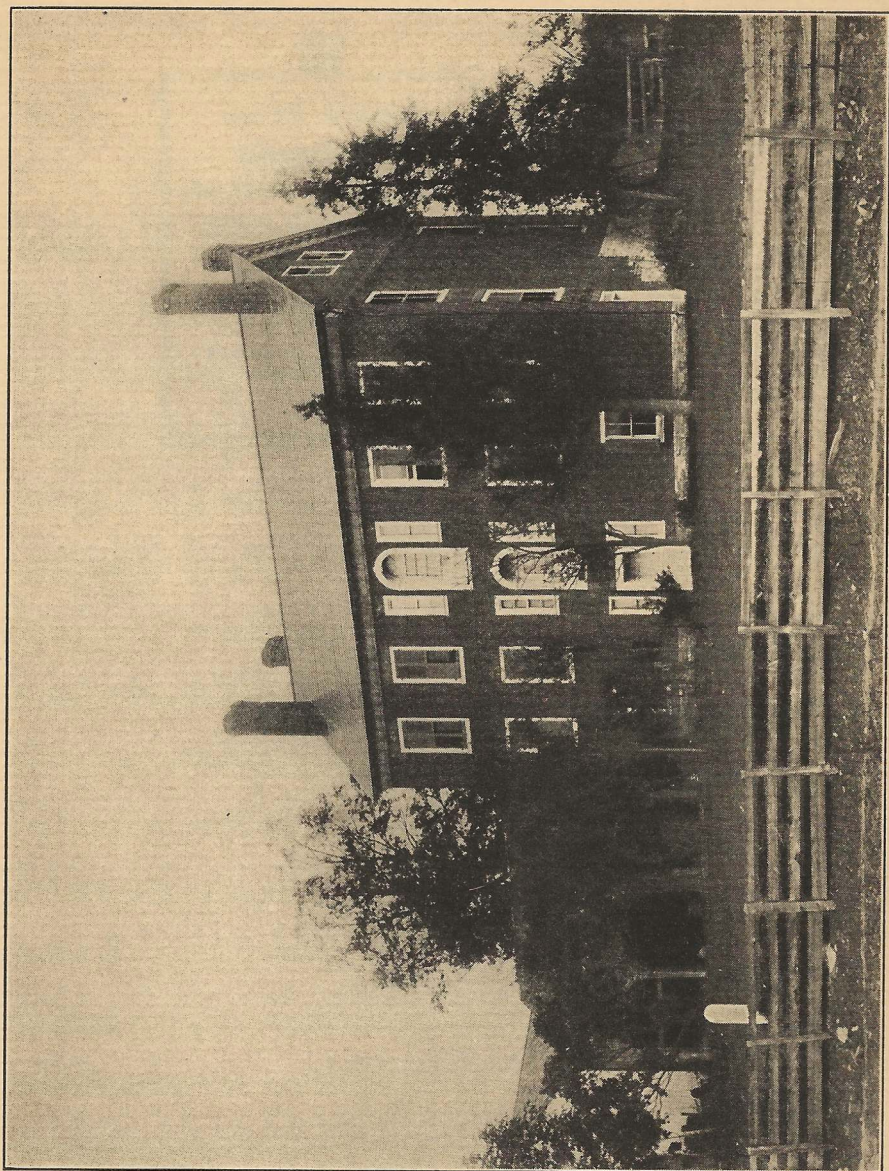
VF

VERMONT



THIS BOOK
Copyrighted
BY JOHN SPARGO, 1930
Edition Limited
to 2000 Copies
Set in CASLON O. S.

Typography by VREST ORTON
Printed in U. S. A.
BY THE TORY PRESS



THE STATE LINE HOUSE
Built by David Mathews and Miscalled "The Tory House"



THE STATE LINE HOUSE

By John Spargo



LOSE to the battlefield where, on the sixteenth of August, 1777, John Stark's motley army of New England militia defeated the expedition sent out by General Burgoyne and commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Baum, there stands a stately old brick house. It is one of the very finest examples of flemish bond brickwork to be found within a radius of two hundred miles. It is notable as a good specimen of domestic architecture, and as such is the object of attention by numerous visitors.

The house is of even greater interest by reason of the romantic legends which have come to be associated with it. There is at present, or was quite recently, a sign upon the old house stating that it was built by David Mathews, a Tory in the Revolution. That is an old legend, deeply rooted, but probably quite untrue, from which is derived the name that is sometimes applied to the house locally, "Tory House." More generally it is called the "State Line House" because it is built on the boundary line dividing New York and Vermont. By the latter name it is widely known throughout the region.

The visitor who makes inquiry in the locality concerning the house is likely to be told that it stands in two states, three counties and four towns. He is rather more than likely to be regaled with fantastic accounts of the house having been built for the express purpose of providing a refuge for debtors when imprisonment for debt was the rule, and of the sheriff of Rensselaer County sitting on the New York side of the dining table unable to arrest or serve a warrant upon a man seated on the Vermont side of the table, the ends of justice being effectually thwarted by the jurisdictional division.

The State Line House

The facts about the situation of the house are interesting enough and require no embellishment. Whether by design or accident, the house was built upon the boundary line which divides the states of New York and Vermont. Of course, being in two different states it is likewise in two different counties, Rensselaer County, New York, and Bennington County, Vermont. One part of the house stands in the town of Hoosick, New York, and the other in the town of Shaftsbury, Vermont. Quite frequently it is said that the house stands in three counties and four towns, Bennington, Vermont, and White Creek, in Washington County, New York, being added to the foregoing. Nearly every printed account of the old house makes this statement, but it is inaccurate. No part of the house stands in either Bennington, Vermont, or White Creek, New York. It is almost half a mile from the line of White Creek, Washington County, and while nearer to the town line of Bennington, is well removed from it. Whoever is interested in such details can accept as final and authoritative the statement that the house stands in two states, two counties and two towns.

The other legend, that it was built by a notorious Tory in the Revolution, thence deriving the name "Tory House," is not so easily disposed of. Although there is not a scintilla of credible evidence to support it, the legend persists. When a picturesque story has been repeated over and over for fourscore years or more, it is not easily uprooted. All the known facts are opposed to the story and warrant the statement that the builder of this remarkable old house was a patriot in the Revolution. His Revolutionary service, long uncertain, is a matter of record, as will presently appear.

As far back as 1848, Benjamin J. Lossing, the eminent historian, heard the story that the builder of the house was a Tory. He records it on page 399 of the first volume of his great work, *The Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution*, in these words:

"From the heights we could plainly discern a brick house in the valley, that belonged, during the Revolution, to a Tory named Mathews. It is remarkable only for its position, and the consequences which sometimes resulted therefrom. It stands upon the line between New York and Vermont, and in it center the corner points of four towns—Bennington, Shaftsbury, Hoosick and White Creek; also those of the counties of Bennington, Washington and Rensselaer."

Whether Lossing obtained his information about the house from the Mr. Richmond of Hoosick Corners who accompanied him on his trip is not stated, but it was misleading in various ways. We have already seen that

The State Line House

the house does not touch Washington County, or White Creek or Bennington. That is certain. It is certain also that the house did not exist during the Revolution nor until many years after that event. *Falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus* is a rule worth remembering in such matters.

Another writer with no competence or merit as a historian, but with a faculty for presenting fantastic legends as sober history which has won her no little renown, has given further currency to the legend that David Mathews who built the house was an active Tory in the Revolution. She has likewise given wide circulation to the silly error about the house being in three counties in two states. We need not linger over *The Hoosac Valley*, by Grace Greylock Niles. Its disrepute among historical scholars is such as to remove that necessity.

It was left for one Paul H. Shannon, a special feature writer for the *Boston Globe*, twenty-five years ago, to weave the most amazing fabric of imagination and invention which has yet appeared about this old house. With not so much as a shred of factual evidence to support the statements, this writer asserted that "it is generally agreed" that the house was built "in the neighborhood of 1770," by Colonel David Mathews, who was "an intimate friend of the Colonel Baum who led the British forces to defeat at the Battle of Bennington."

Having laid this groundwork, Shannon proceeded to give free rein to his imagination. He described how all the brick was "burned and shaped in the fields adjoining the house"; how the house was "regarded as the manor house of the town, and formed the meeting place for the gentry of Bennington and the surrounding country as well"; and how, in pre-Revolutionary times, the house was the scene of lavish hospitality and much gaiety. Then followed this circumstantial account of how the house became a meeting place of Tories on the outbreak of the Revolution, and the manner in which it was used as headquarters where Tory plots were "framed up for the intended destruction of American forces and the hope of American liberty":

"This was the time of plot and counter-plot, and, night after night, secret meetings held within the safe shelter of the Mathews house boded no good to Stark and his Green Mountain Boys. Night after night, while the red wine flowed and the log burned fiercely in the chimney-place, plans were exchanged and secret intelligence of the patriots ultimately carried to the ears of those who would best know how to profit by it.

The State Line House

"And then came war, the colonists' and farmers' exchange of the ploughshare for the gun, the occupation of the surrounding country by British soldiers and the passing of Colonel Mathews, for a time as proprietor of the stately mansion.

"With the departure of its original proprietor the house became a tavern, and while the British forces remained within the vicinity the crowded taproom was the scene of the wildest revelry and mirth. Swashbuckling officers in the service of the King thronged the stately mansion nightly, and Tories, eager to curry favor with the bewigged minions of King George III, congregated in the tavern as well, and kept the hot-headed soldiers plentifully supplied with the liquor that they had small desire to pay for.

"Varying the drinking with the cards and dice, quarrels arose from time to time, and in those days the only means of avenging a fancied insult was to wipe it out in the blood of the person offending. So oftentimes the cringing landlord was suddenly called to the chamber now known as the duelling room, ordered to clear the furniture away, lock the doors and retire, and then, while the frightened attendants awaited the shot or muffled cry which preceded the death of one or other of the contestants, the hot-headed duelists engaged in their death struggle with ringing swords or, separated only by the width of the table, blazed away with old-fashioned pistols.

"Thus for a long time peaceable folk gave the famous tavern a wide berth, and although known for miles around on account of the excellent table supplied by the cunning host, fear of the quarrelsome soldiers and now and then hot-headed young gentry of the neighborhood kept the tired or hungry traveller from seeking food or shelter within its spacious walls.

"With the battle of Bennington, however, the red-coats were forced to make a hasty departure from their pleasant rendezvous, and many who had wine and feasted as host or honored guest were given a chance to enjoy the prison fare that the irate Minute Men of Vermont served out to the prisoners within those self-same walls. Often, too, this same duelling room, then used as a dungeon, was the scene of bitter quarrels among the prisoners, and many a lifeless form has been carried out from the chamber on this account and hastily buried in the cemetery near by with neither slab nor headstone to tell where the unfortunate ones' remains were buried."

How little truth there is in all this we shall quickly see. In 1770, when David Mathews—who was never a colonel, either then or later—is said to have built this mansion, he was twenty-four years old. He was

The State Line House

not a man of wealth, but a simple farmer. Whether he lived in the neighborhood at that early date is not known. We do know, however, that in 1777 the mansion did not yet exist, and that David Mathews, a farmer, was living in a very humble frame dwelling on the goodly farm he owned in Shaftsbury. This house stood until 1865, or a little later; there are still people living in Bennington who remember it. I have talked with many people who remembered it well. This is the house in which Lieutenant Colonel Baum and Colonel Pfister died, and which was known locally both as the "Colonel Baum House" and as "Tory House." Governor Hiland Hall, who was born in Bennington in 1795 and knew personally many of those who participated in the famous battle, erected a sign to mark the house, writing the inscription himself. In 1927 the Vermont Society of the Sons of the American Revolution marked the site of this house with a granite and bronze memorial marker. There is not the least shadow of doubt that in 1777 when the Battle of Bennington was fought David Mathews lived in this humble abode. The brick mansion did not then exist nor for a long time afterward.

There is no definite record of the date when the brick house was built. There were no building laws in those days, no authorities to be consulted whose records might help us if they chanced to survive. Such old deeds as have been preserved refer to land titles, not to the building. There is practical unanimity on the part of students of the history of the locality in setting the date as between 1800 and 1805. The year 1802 can be accepted as fairly close to the exact mark. In addition to the evidence of the house itself, there is the fact that when he had passed his fiftieth year David Mathews inherited considerable money. He was fifty in 1796. The inheritance which he received some time after that date, together with money saved from the earnings of his farm, made him fairly wealthy for those days. It was after he had become wealthy that he decided to build a more pretentious and commodious house. The eighteenth century was practically over when David Mathews became the possessor of means large enough to build the mansion.

All the fantastic rigmarole about the gatherings of "the gentry of Bennington" in this "manor house of the town" in pre-Revolutionary days, the later Loyalist plottings within its walls, the revelries of British soldiers there, the bloody duelling, and the use of the house as a prison following the Battle of Bennington, is a tissue of audacious inventions

The State Line House

without a single thread of fact. Had the writer taken the trouble to look up the military history of the region, he would have found abundant easily accessible evidence that there were no British military forces located in the vicinity except for a few days in August, 1777, immediately prior to the famous battle, and certainly there were no such revelries.

It is true that the humble frame house in which David Mathews lived at the time of the battle was used as a prison, in a very limited sense, for two days or so. The unfortunate Baum, mortally wounded, was carried into the house as was Colonel Pfister, commander of Tories, also mortally wounded. Both died within forty-eight hours. Captain Samuel Robinson, of Bennington, watched at the bedside of Baum in his last hours. Baum and Pfister were the only prisoners confined in the Mathews home. There is no evidence anywhere to indicate that David Mathews ever saw Baum before that eventful day; the statement of Shannon that the two men were intimate friends is without the least shadow of foundation in fact, or even in tradition.

So much for the legendary lore concerning the fine old house. Blurred memories and unscrupulous inventions have become intermingled in the most extraordinary manner. There is good reason to believe that in some way imperfect recollections of Colonel Pfister and his home in Hoosick have become mixed up with stories of this house. There is also the undoubted fact that unscrupulous writers have palmed off as sober history wild and fantastic stories invented for the sake of gain or, in some instances, spurious literary fame. Again and again when I have tried to find the origin of somebody's remantic account of the house, the inquiry has led back to the Shannon article in the *Boston Globe*, which was widely and eagerly read in the locality, and generally accepted as the work of a trustworthy historian.

But what of the stories of David Mathews, is there any evidence at all that he was a Tory, or that he was actively engaged in the service of King George III? In the course of the last twenty years it has been my lot to read practically every account of the Burgoyne campaign in print, together with an enormous mass of collateral material, particularly as it had any bearing upon the expedition against Bennington led by Baum and the victory of Stark's yeomen. My studies of this subject have included much of the original source of material in the principal collections, public and private, in this country and abroad. In the aggregate I have read, also, many thousands of pages of such other material as local

The State Line House

diaries, reminiscences by participants in the Battle of Bennington, muster rolls, letters, and reports. In all that material, comprising practically all the source material known and accessible to historians, I have not found a single statement of fact indicating that David Mathews was a Loyalist, or suspected of being one during his life time.

His name is not to be found in any list of Tories, or persons suspected of being Tories, either in the archives of New York or those of Vermont. The voluminous records of the Albany Committee of Correspondence give the names of many Tories and people suspected of being Tories, but not his name. In the lists of Tories and Inimical Persons compiled in Vermont his name is not found. The long lists of persons whose properties were sequestered for their adherence to the Loyalist side, both in New York and Vermont, do not contain the name of David Mathews in whose home Baum and Pfister died. It does not occur in the famous Haldimand papers in the Canadian archives. In diaries and letters by early Benningtonians containing accounts of the famous battle and of the events immediately prior to and following it there has never been found as much as one sentence indicating that David Mathews was suspected of being a Loyalist in his sympathies, much less an active leader on that side. There remains only the remote chance that his name may yet be found in some British list of American Loyalists not yet published.

Long, long ago I reached the conclusion that some grotesque error had crept in somehow and somewhere; that it was impossible that no word of the inevitable contemporary scorn, censure, contempt and hatred for such an active foe would have survived in writing or in print. Could it be possible, for example, that when in 1802 the anniversary of the victory was held on the battlefield itself, attended by many survivors, arranged by a committee including several survivors, and attended by organized delegations from Bennington, Shaftsbury, Hoosick, and White Creek, there would have been no mocking demonstrations as they passed the house of David Mathews had he been known as a Tory in the Revolution, no taunt or jeer to be recorded somehow and by somebody? The more the subject was considered from this angle the more preposterous did such a conclusion appear. To my very great delight, I found that the late Dr. Henry C. Day, whose researches into our local history give him a high place as an authority, had made similar investigations over a long period and reached similar conclusions. At least there was no evidence which justified belief in the legend of Tory Mathews. Tradition there was, but it was significant that neither

The State Line House

Doctor Day nor I could trace it back farther than the middle of the last century, or more than sixty years after the Battle of Bennington.

Mere absence of evidence, however significant it may seem to be, is not a satisfactory basis for historical opinion or judgment. What may be called the presumption from negation, no matter how regarded by scholars, is ineffective as an argument against a popular tradition, however foolish that tradition may be. In addition to the presumption arising from the absence of direct evidence, however, there was the strong presumption arising from certain facts which are well known and disputed by none. Let us examine this presumption briefly:

Baum and Pfister had been taken into the humble home of David Mathews and had died there. Afterward Baum's uniform and boots were kept by Mathews. His ownership of these things was well known locally. They were the objects of interest for many years, frequently exhibited. After his death the things passed into the possession of his son and then to the son's son. In the light of these facts the inherent improbabilities of the tradition that David Mathews was an active and known Tory loom up as formidable objections to it. The facts cannot be harmonized with the tradition without some act of mental violence. Knowing what we know of the period, of the bitterness of feeling on both sides, it is incredible that the victorious Patriots would have taken the two wounded and captive enemy leaders into the home of a known Tory, unless they took the precaution of arresting the latter. David Mathews was a man of character and intelligence, as we know from his achievements. The famous old mansion is proof of that. Left free in his house with the wounded and dying officers, such a man might easily become a dangerous menace to the Revolutionary cause. The most elementary prudence would have dictated the necessity of his arrest—unless he had already fled.

The latter supposition is untenable. The distinguished captives lived not more than forty-eight hours. David Mathews would hardly have possessed Baum's uniform if he had fled from his home and left it to his foes. The fact that he kept the things is strong evidence of his presence. Captain Robinson, who watched over Baum in his last hours, and Jonathan Armstrong who carried Pfister on his back most of the way from the battlefield where he fell into the Mathews house, left descriptions of the events in which they were participants. It is impossible to believe that had Mathews been made a prisoner, or had he fled from his home in fear, the fact would not have been mentioned in these descriptions, or any others. No. Such

The State Line House

a dramatic circumstance as making prisoner of the man into whose home they brought the mortally stricken enemy leaders, or even as making such use of the home of an obnoxious Tory, would have appeared in some of their narratives.

David Mathews was not a Tory, but a Patriot. His name appears in the list of New York soldiers who fought in the Battle of Bennington, compiled in 1904 by Nelson Gillespie, of Hoosick Falls, and there is every reason to believe the list accurate in this particular, at least. In 1781 the State of New York, in order to stimulate enlistment in the militia forces, by legislation issued the well known Land Bounty Rights. Every man who enlisted as private or non-commissioned officer received as "bounty" a grant of land—500 acres. David Mathews enlisted in the Charlotte County Militia and received his grant of land, the same being duly recorded. His name will be found in the list compiled thirty-two years ago and published by the Comptroller of the State of New York, under the title *New York in the Revolution as Colony and State*. There is no doubt that this David Mathews of the Charlotte County militia was the man to whom the stigma of Tory has been so undeservedly applied, the original proprietor of the State Line House.

The fact that his name appears on the records of the militia of Charlotte County, New York, while his residence was in the town of Shaftsbury, Vermont, will be readily understood by students of the history of the region; others will require some explanation. At the time of the Battle of Bennington, and throughout the Revolution and after, down to 1790, the entire territory of Vermont was claimed by New York. The County of Charlotte embraced the section in which the town of Hoosick lies. David Mathews held his land under New York titles and may have been a "Yorker," that is, one who favored New York in the conflict over jurisdiction. We do not know, but that was the attitude of many of his neighbors. Such an attitude would, if widely known there, make him unpopular among the people of Bennington. It was quite common for hatred of "Yorkers" to be more violent and bitter than hatred of Tories. It is not impossible that unfavorable comments about David Mathews as a "Yorker" became, in the course of a generation or two, distorted and transformed into the tradition of David Mathews the Tory. Be that as it may, the fact is clearly established by the records that David Mathews served in the Revolution as an enlisted man, a private in the militia of Charlotte County.

The State Line House

That distinguished authority, Dr. Alexander C. Flick, the State Historian of New York, at my request, looked into the records for the purpose of ascertaining whether the conclusions drawn by me and set forth above were accurate, or whether they were negatived by any other records in the Division of Archives and History. He wrote: "The David Mathews who is associated with the Battle of Bennington was undoubtedly the man who appears in New York's records as a militiaman in Charlotte County. He is the man who was associated with The State Line House." So far as I am concerned, the decision of that eminent authority is final.

One possible explanation of the manner in which the Tory myth arose, by a simple and unconscious transition from "Yorker," has already been set forth. It is a hypothesis only, and nothing else is claimed for it. There are other possible explanations. Dr. Flick suggests that, like many others who eventually took the right side after wavering in the beginning, David Mathews may have inclined to the Loyalist side in the early period of the Revolution and then, later, enlisted in the Revolutionary rank. Of course, that was true in many thousands of cases. It would go hard with a large proportion of the membership of bodies like the Daughters of the American Revolution if they had to prove that their ancestors never hesitated or waited to weigh the chances, but enlisted in the Revolutionary ranks immediately the call came, without wavering. It does not seem likely that the Tory tradition would have persisted in the face of known Revolutionary service. And in any case we still have to face the fact that there is no record of Loyalist activities during any period of the Revolution, early or late, against the name of David Mathews. There is no record of as much as hint of Loyalist activity; there is a definite record of Revolutionary service.

It has seemed to me to be much more likely that in some manner this David Mathews has borne the stigma belonging to another man of the same name. I refer to the notorious David Matthews, the Loyalist Mayor of New York City, the last of the Colonial mayors. This was the man who was charged with being connected with the famous plot to assassinate Washington and his officers, the plot in which Thomas Hickey was concerned, in June, 1776. In some of the New York records this David Matthews' name is spelled with one "t," notably in the *Calendar of Land Papers*. While I am certain that no importance should be attached to such variant spellings, knowing well that in those days it was quite common for people of intelligence and education to variously spell their own names, to

The State Line House

say nothing of variations occurring when names are written by different people of varying degrees of education, the point may as well be mentioned in passing. The Loyalist David Matthews of New York had his property confiscated, and there was so much published concerning his Tory activities, so much bitter and hostile comment in Whig papers and by pamphleteers, that I am inclined to believe that confusion of the two names is primarily responsible for the Tory tradition associated with the name of David Mathews of Shaftsbury and Hoosick.

In a little cemetery not far from the mansion he built, a little to the east of Battlefield Park, his grave is still to be seen. Upon the tombstone there is carved this inscription:

CAPT. DAVID MATHEWS : Died March 29, 1811, Aged 65 years.

*Man wants but little
Nor wants that little long.
Soon he must yield his dust
That frugal nature lent him but an hour.*

So far as I have been able to discover, there is no record of how or when he acquired the military title carved upon his tombstone. It is to be presumed that he rose to that rank in the militia, but there are no records to prove the fact. There is, however, no reason to doubt the accuracy of the inscription or to suppose that anyone used the inscription upon the tombstone to publish a lie. His son, David Mathews, Junior, had an active and honorable career in the militia of Washington County, embracing the adjacent village of White Creek. He was ensign in 1807, captain in 1808, major in 1814-15, and colonel in 1821. He was the "Colonel Mathews" whose name and title are so closely associated with the State Line House that to this day it is quite commonly called "The Tory Colonel Mathews' House." The original Mathews was never a colonel, and it is certain that he was no Tory. The younger Mathews was a colonel, but in his day "Tory" in the sense in which the word is here used, had ceased to have any meaning.

Before closing this discussion, in which I have fulfilled a self-imposed obligation of long standing, I may as well refer to another romantic story associated with the name of the elder David Mathews. It has long been told in the locality, in tavern and fireside gossip, that Mathews stole Baum's treasure chest at the time of the Battle of Bennington. The chest is said to have contained three thousand pounds in gold, supplied to Baum for

The State Line House

the purpose of purchasing horses, cattle and other supplies. Sometimes it is said that the chest was buried in the cellar of The State Line House.

When I first heard the story it was told thuswise by an old man in White Creek: When Baum was captured, his treasure chest was taken along with him into the Mathews house. From there it disappeared. Mathews denied knowing anything about it and protested his innocence. Watch was kept on him for a long while, but without result. He was never detected in any act, or in the possession of any money which would fasten the guilt upon him. But "a few years later" he became a rich man and built a new house, the brick mansion. When I pointed out to the old man that this story could not be reconciled with what he had previously told me of the brick mansion being there before the Battle of Bennington, and in use as a Tory headquarters, he took refuge in the formula "Well, I know what my father learned when he was a boy."

It is a preposterous story. If Baum had a treasure chest with three thousand pounds in gold in it, would it have been carried into battle? And if it was, and fell into the hands of the victors, we may be quite certain that David Mathews would never have come into possession of it in any such manner as that described. Such an article could not have been taken into his house in the manner described without the knowledge of such men as Samuel Robinson, Jonathan Armstrong, and others. The prize would have been well guarded. It is a safe assumption that its loss would have been reported to the Council of Safety at Bennington. John Stark's official report of the battle sets forth in detail that he had promised the men under him that, as a reward, they should share among themselves all booty captured, and that it was so shared on the field, at the close of the first action. Pre-occupation of the greater part of Stark's men in the task of gathering and dividing the plunder almost delivered them into the hands of Breyman's force, which arrived too late to succor Baum's outnumbered forces.

The story of the theft of Baum's treasure chest by Mathews is part of the enormous tissue of confused traditions and unscrupulous inventions, all of a piece with the lurid stories of bloody duels, secret burials, Tory plots, revelries by British soldiers, and all the rest of it.

One hundred and twenty years after his death, and after more than four score years of misrepresentation and unjust condemnation by irresponsible tale-mongers, I find pleasure in turning to the authentic records and writing after the name of David Mathews his proper title

A Revolutionary Soldier and Patriot.



HOUSE IN WHICH BAUM DIED
Residence of David Mathews at the time of the Battle of Bennington.