

## Famous Virginians: Patrick Henry



"The gentlemen may cry, Peace, peace! But there is no peace. The war has actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that the gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, **give me liberty or give me death!**"

**Have you ever felt like a failure? Patrick Henry did. When he was young he failed at everything he tried. But he never gave up. By the time he died, Patrick Henry was known as the most successful public speaker of his day.**

Though he had unique talents, during his early years Patrick Henry was a failure. He tried storekeeping twice, and farming, but was unsuccessful at both. He ended up owing a lot of money that he couldn't pay back. Then, his house burned to the ground and he lost all his possessions. By the time he was 23, Patrick Henry had failed not once, not twice, but three times, and he was all but bankrupt. Still Patrick Henry did not give up. Eventually, he chose to study law. With difficulty, he passed the required examination and set up a law practice. After three years, Henry had established himself as a successful attorney. By the time he died many years later, Patrick Henry was wealthy and famous and known as the most successful orator of his time. Today he is remembered as one of the greatest speakers that ever lived. His fiery speeches kindled the flames of the American Revolution and inspired the colonists to fight hard to win independence from Great Britain.

**Orator**  
Public speaker

It was when Patrick Henry was a young lawyer that he began to impress others with his skills at public speaking. During one trial he became so passionate while pleading the case that the fire and eloquence of his words stunned onlookers. Wildly cheering, they carried Henry out of the courtroom in triumph. After, word spread about his ability as a lawyer and Patrick Henry rose to the top of his profession.

The King of England and his Parliament ruled over the thirteen colonies in America, but the colonists were unhappy with the laws Parliament passed. How could a king and his Parliament far away across a great ocean possibly know what kind of laws the colonists needed? England was such a great distance away that the colonists could not be part of Parliament. The colonists began to think that the best solution was to make their own laws.

**Parliament**  
A group of leaders elected to make laws and impose taxes

The colonists in America and the Parliament in England could not agree. They argued over important ideas:

1. Parliament believed it had legal authority in the colonies, but the colonists believed their local assemblies had legal authority. Who do you think was right? Should Parliament make laws for the colonists to obey? Should the colonists make their own laws?
2. Parliament believed it had the right to tax the colonies. The colonists believed they should not be taxed because no colonists could serve in Parliament and help make the laws. The colonists believed that if they had to pay taxes, they should have a voice in deciding what would be taxed and how much tax they should pay.

**Local Assemblies**

In Colonial Virginia groups of leaders who passed laws and imposed taxes

The arguing went on for a long time. The more they argued the madder many colonists became. Neither side would budge. Patrick Henry was furious and he wanted the colonies to join together to take action. He spoke before the House of Burgesses in Williamsburg bellowing so loudly and with such force that the other delegates cringed. Finally, a defiant Patrick Henry shouted a challenge at King George, "If this be treason, make the most of it." This was an extremely bold statement.

**Treason**

An attempt to overthrow one's government

Years went by and nothing changed. Many colonists thought that they should be rid of the king and his Parliament. They wanted to create their own government. More and more people began to speak out against the king. Then, on March 23, 1775 at St. John's Church in Richmond, Patrick Henry rose, and, with great passion and courage gave his most famous speech. It ended with these famous words, **"I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death."** This speech gave many colonists the courage to take the next step. The following year the *Declaration of Independence* was signed, and we went to war against Great Britain in efforts to become our own country. Patrick Henry's powerful words inspired patriots from other colonies and gave them the courage to fight the British.

**Liberty**

Freedom; independence

After a long and bloody war, the colonists defeated the mighty British army and created their own government. They developed a plan for a government that would be fair, one that would give the citizens a voice in making the laws. Patrick Henry worked tirelessly to make sure that the people would have civil liberties like the right to choose their own religion and the right to speak out against the government.

As he became famous, many people admired Patrick Henry and asked him to serve the new country, but Patrick Henry said, "No." He chose, instead, to stay in Virginia. Five times he served as governor of Virginia, but he refused many other opportunities:

- He refused an offer from our first president, George Washington, to serve as Secretary of State;

- He refused an offer from President Washington to serve as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court;
- He refused an offer from the General Assembly of Virginia to again serve as governor;
- He refused an offer from President John Adams to serve on the Mission to France.

After his terms as governor, Patrick Henry retired to his home at Red Hill. He was one of the wealthiest men in Virginia. For a man whose early life had been filled with failure, Patrick Henry's later years were enormously successful.