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## INDEPENDENCE On the road to Revolution with Virginia's famed orator Patrick Henry

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For The Free Lance-Star

REVOLUTION seems like risky business at this moment in Richmond's historic St. John's Church. It is here that Patrick Henry gave his "Give me liberty or give me death" speech at the Second Virginia Convention of March 1775.

Now the rhetoric is flying as costumed actors re-enact the landmark occasion on a Sunday afternoon. I find myself coming down on the side of cautious patience, directly opposing fiery young Henry.

"War! Are you crazy? You don't have an army, arms or even a way to make money without the Brits," I want to tell him.

Thomas Jefferson is sitting on the pew beside me, arguing in his intellectual, civilized manner against the increasingly unreasonable demands of the British government. But when Henry jumps up and declares it time to put our lives on the line, I want to bail. Fine patriot I would have been.

Delegates Benjamin Harrison and Edmund Pendleton disagree with Henry in the calmer, more pained and reasoned tones of old men. Pendleton warns against the horrors of war, of loosing "a tornado of death and destruction."

But Henry prevails.

"Gentlemen may cry, 'Peace, peace'--but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms!" he cries. "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



A bust of Patrick Henry is on display at the state capitol.



Patrick Henry and his family lived at Scotchtown in Hanover County while he was building his legal career until he became first elected governor of Virginia.

as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

The vote is taken. The ayes prevail. But it is close. A mere five votes carry our fledgling nation into war.

I look around. If the audience in St. John's on this afternoon were to vote, the outcome might be different.

#### Overlooked statesman

Although Patrick Henry uttered perhaps the most unforgettable words to spark the American Revolution, he is a nearly forgotten hero. Almost the only thing most people know about the Scots-Irish statesman is his role in distilling his countrymen's choices down to death or slavery that spring day. He was the orator of the Revolution, but few know where he was born, where he went to church as a boy, where he launched his public career or where he lived as an adult.

Richmond historian Jon Kukla, who lived and worked at Henry's last home, Red Hill, says that the recent attention to another founding father, John Adams, in the HBO series indicates it's time to take a new look at Henry.

"Henry was active in what became the Revolution earlier than anybody," said Kukla, who is working on a book about Henry's role in the birth of the nation. "He was near the center of events for all of the American founding. No other patriot had that kind of presence."

The new Road to Revolution Heritage Trail is a motor route that connects historic sites central to Henry's life, many of them south of Fredericksburg in Hanover County. It is the state's first trail focusing exclusively on the Revolution.

I began with the definitive drama, the St. John's re-enactment. Other sites on the self-guided tour include:

Polegreen Church, the "dissenter" church Henry attended as a boy. There he listened to the Rev. Samuel Davies, whom Henry later credited with "teaching me what an orator should be."

Hanover Courthouse, where Henry, as an obscure country lawyer, spoke out eloquently in 1763 against King George III in the Parson's Cause, a political dispute viewed by some as a foreshadowing of the Revolution.

Hanover Tavern, near the site of another courthouse tavern where Henry lived and studied law.

Scotchtown, Henry's home from 1771 to '78 and the place from which he traveled to give his "Liberty or Death" speech at St. John's Church. He left Scotchtown when he became Virginia's first elected governor.



This structure marks the site of Polegreen Church, the first legal 'dissenter' church at a time when Virginia supported a state Episcopal church. Patrick Henry said he learned oratory here.



Patrick Henry made a name for himself arguing cases at the Hanover Courthouse, across the street from his in-laws' tavern, which now houses the Barksdale Theatre.

Hampden-Sydney College, the 10th-oldest college in the United States, which Henry helped establish in 1775. Six of Henry's sons studied there.

Red Hill, in Brookneal, which was Henry's last home and burial place.

Three other Henry-related sites in Hanover are **Studley**, where he was born; **Rural Plains**, where he married Sarah Shelton; and **Pine Slash**, a tobacco farm included in his wife's dowry. They are not open to the public, but are expected to become part of the trail when parking and signage are put into place.

Diverse sites

The sites along the trail vary widely in the amount of information and activity they offer visitors. Patrick Henry's homes at Red Hill and Scotchtown are established house museums with tours, special events and admission fees. Red Hill houses the largest collection of Patrick Henry memorabilia in the world, including the Rothermel painting of Henry delivering his famous "If this be treason, make the most of it!" speech in opposition to King George III's Stamp Act.

Scotchtown includes many period artifacts, but the most interesting feature of the tour is the basement cell where Henry's first wife, Sallie Shelton Henry, was confined because of her mental illness, probably acute postpartum depression. She died in February 1776 and was buried in an unmarked grave on the plantation.

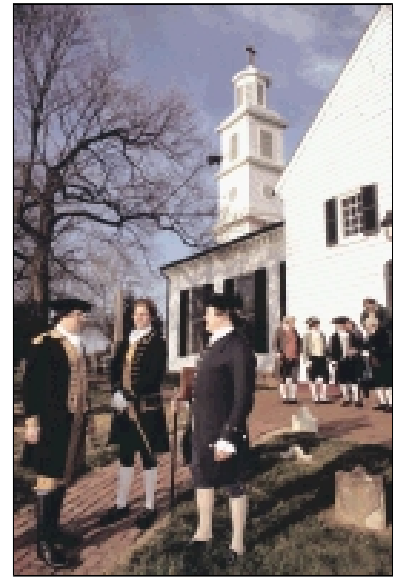
Nearby Hanover Tavern was a center of community life for more than 200 years. The original tavern was owned by Henry's in-laws and was recently renovated and opened to the public for tours and luncheons. The Barksdale Theatre puts on plays in an amphitheater in the basement ([barksdale richmond.org](http://barksdale-richmond.org)).

The 1735 Hanover Courthouse, where Henry launched his law career, occasionally hosts re-enactments of Henry's famous "Parson's Cause" case, in which he successfully argued for whittling down the tax that maintained the Anglican clergy in grand style.

Polegreen Church may not look like a full-fledged destination yet, but it is a place to contemplate the man who had a major influence on Henry's oratory and this country's sometimes halting steps toward religious freedom.

Polegreen was a "dissenter church," built at a time when non-Anglican churches were suppressed. Nevertheless, Henry's mother took him to hear the remarkable young Rev. Samuel Davies, a Presbyterian who pioneered in educating black slaves and was known for his stirring sermons.

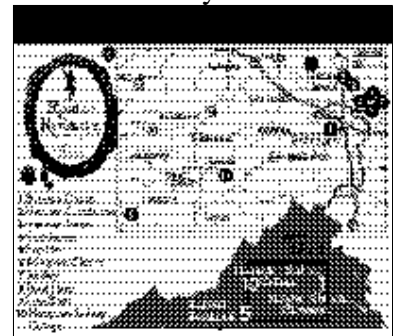
The Rev. Robert Bluford Jr., who located and preserved Polegreen's remnants, sometimes finds people praying in the white silhouette



Re-enactors gather outside St. John's Church in Richmond, where Patrick Henry made his 'Give me liberty or give me death' speech in 1775 that sparked revolution.



A guide waits to conduct tours outside historic St. John's Church in Richmond where a re-enactment of Patrick Henry's speech is given every summer Sunday.



structure that represents the church site. "It is a special place," he says.

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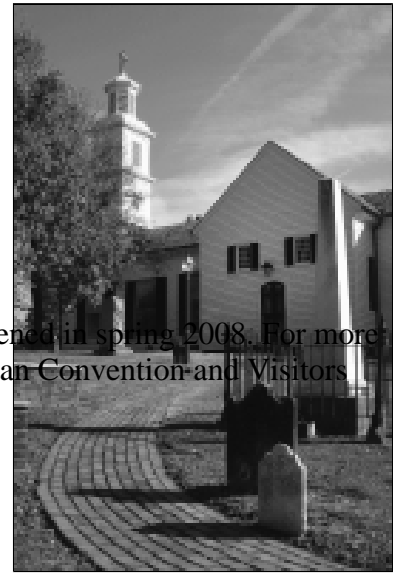
Email: [gwoolf@freelancestar.com](mailto:gwoolf@freelancestar.com)

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**HIT THE TRAIL!** The Road to Revolution Heritage Trail officially opened in spring 2008. For more information, visit [roadtorevolution.com](http://roadtorevolution.com) or call the Richmond Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau at 800/370-9004.

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A pathway leads to St. John's Episcopal Church.