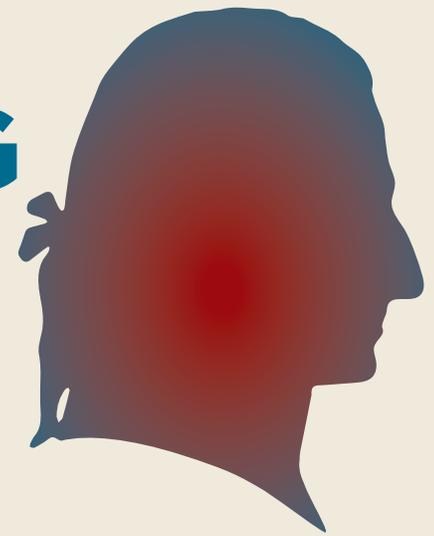


FOUNDING RIVALS



Thomas Jefferson's simmering feud with Patrick Henry

By John A. Ragosta, historian at the Robert H. Smith Center for Jefferson Studies at Monticello

Thomas Jefferson first met Patrick Henry at a Christmas party in 1759. Henry, 23 years old, was popular, gregarious and light-hearted. The 16-year-old Jefferson, although quieter, was always engaging. Some speculate that the two played violin together at the party, but the story appears to be apocryphal. In any case, these two young men, who could not yet imagine the critical role that each would play in a coming revolution, apparently liked each other.

Different Approaches to the Law

In April of 1760, a few short weeks after Jefferson entered the College of William & Mary, Henry – ill-dressed, dusty and unkempt – rode into Williamsburg with hopes of convincing three of Virginia's law councilors to sign his license to practice law. Having already failed at several careers and with a growing family, Henry was a young man in a hurry. Instead of a lengthy clerkship with an experienced attorney, he chose to “read the law,” studying several heavy legal tomes from two to nine months. Even at the higher estimate, this was a remarkably short period of time. In the end, he convinced three learned lawyers that, while not quite well-enough read, he would continue to study and had the drive and ability to be given his license.

The too-studious Jefferson later reported bitterly that the confident, cocky Henry told him that he only studied for six weeks. This seemed to infuriate Jefferson, who spent years of tedious study under George Wythe. One might wonder whether the affable Henry, known for practical jokes, teased the wide-eyed and bookish Jefferson over a mug of ale at a tavern with a story of only studying for six weeks. Jefferson also later insisted that Wythe “absolutely refused” to sign Henry's license, but a copy found in the 20th century proves otherwise. Whatever the source, the assertion that Henry was unprepared for the practice of law played into Jefferson's later claims about Henry's alleged incompetence.

Young Revolutionaries

At the time, the incident did not hurt their relationship. By 1765, as Henry's fame as an orator grew and he reported to Williamsburg as a new legislator, Jefferson was under

Henry's spell. Within days of taking his seat, Henry gave his electrifying speech against the Stamp Act, warning King George that tyranny might beget regicide. “Caesar had his Brutus,” Henry thundered, a hardly disguised threat met with cries of “Treason!” Jefferson, listening spellbound from the crowded public gallery, later enthused that Henry “appeared to me to speak as Homer wrote.”

When Jefferson was elected to the House of Burgesses in 1768, Henry led the young, radical members who opposed the waxing effort of Britain to control its American colonies. In 1774, after Boston's port was closed in retaliation for the Boston Tea Party, Jefferson was among a small group led by Henry who “cooked up” a proclamation for a day of fasting and prayer in support of Massachusetts. As revolution simmered, four weeks before the battle of Lexington and Concord, Henry rallied opposition, imploring, “[l]et us not ... deceive ourselves longer; ... the war is actually begun!” He called on Americans to join him in a crusade for “liberty, or ... death.” Even after he became a committed political foe, Jefferson had to concede that Henry “gave the first impulse to the ball of revolution.” Jefferson granted that “it is not now easy to say, what we should have done without Patrick Henry.”

Dueling Governors

Henry became the first governor of the commonwealth of Virginia, and he led the state through the first three difficult years of the Revolutionary War. Jefferson became the second governor of Virginia and found himself also struggling with running a state during wartime. In 1780, the British invaded Virginia, and Governor Jefferson tried without success to rally war-weary Virginians. In spite of having moved the state capital from Williamsburg to Richmond, in May 1781 Jefferson found himself fleeing with the legislature from Richmond to Charlottesville before an unstoppable phalanx of Redcoats.

By June 1781, Jefferson's second one-year term of office was expiring, and he recommended that the Virginia legislature choose someone with military experience as governor. Before the legislature could do so, Redcoats drove Virginia's government from Charlottesville and Jefferson from Monticello. The legislature again fled west. Unfortunately, Jefferson fled with his family to Poplar Forest. Jefferson probably had few options to stop the British, but hindsight tells us that he should have accompanied the legislature to Staunton until a new governor was chosen. Instead, when

the frightened and angry legislators reconvened in Staunton, the House of Delegates found the state without an executive and, after choosing Thomas Nelson Jr. as the new governor, launched an investigation of Jefferson's governorship and failure to stop the British, effectively accusing the proud Virginian of incompetence, cowardice and dishonor.

The request for the investigation was formally introduced by a young George Nicholas, reportedly a Henry partisan (although later a devoted Jeffersonian). Jefferson, though, saw Nicholas' involvement as "trifling;" he was a mere "minner" (minnow).

Jefferson blamed Henry, "the whale himself was discoverable enough from the turbulence of the water."

Historians differ on whether Henry was responsible for the investigation. Henry, better than anyone, would have been aware of the enormous problems facing the governor. On the other hand, Henry

might well have been angry that Jefferson seemed to abandon his post to seek safety with his family. While the record is not perfectly clear, it seems more likely than not that Henry was behind the investigation. Jefferson would not have blamed Henry based on pure conjecture, and he had allied "eyes and ears" in the legislature.

An Unresolved Conflict

After the American victory at Yorktown over Lord Cornwallis in October of that year, the investigation of Jefferson was dismissed, and the legislature (including Henry) unanimously gave a vote of thanks to Jefferson, expressing "the high opinion which they entertain of Mr. Jefferson's Ability, Rectitude, and Integrity as cheif [sic] Magistrate." Despite the belated vote of confidence, Jefferson saw the investigation as an attack on his honor – the ultimate affront to an 18th-century Virginia gentleman. He was equally outraged that the dismissal of the investigation denied him the opportunity to defend himself publicly, something for which he had been preparing for months at great length. Jefferson stewed for years on the allegation. In 1782, he wrote bitterly to James Monroe that the abortive investigation "inflicted a wound on my spirit which will only be cured by the all-healing grave." For years afterwards, especially during political campaigns, opponents would rub salt in the still festering wound by claiming that Jefferson acted the coward

when he fled from the British, abandoning the state.

Within a year, Jefferson's animosity toward Henry was unleashed; he wrote to George Rogers Clark that Henry was "all tongue without either head nor heart." In 1784, discussing a proposal that he thought would be blocked by Henry, Jefferson suggested to Madison (in cypher) that they should "devoutly ... pray for his [Henry's] death."

For the rest of his long life, decades after Henry's death in 1799, Jefferson detested him. Jefferson called him "avaritious & rotten hearted." He said that Henry "read nothing, and had no

books.... he could not write...." His legal reasoning was "not worth a copper."

Henry undoubtedly joined the "feud." In one report, he sarcastically remarked at a dinner that he did not "approve of gentlemen abjuring their native victuals," a backhanded swipe at Jefferson's fondness for French cuisine, but it was not the good-natured Henry who maintained the feud.

Seeds of Discord

Why did Thomas Jefferson have such strong feelings about

Patrick Henry? The proposed 1781 investigation of Jefferson's governorship, what Jefferson perceived as a personal and unjustified attack on his honor, could not be forgiven.

Was Jefferson also jealous, as some historians claim, of Henry's great oratorical skills, easy familiarity with people, and success as a lawyer and planter – each an area in which Jefferson struggled? Perhaps. Certainly no one can fall as far as the idols of our youth.

Notably, Jefferson's animosity toward Henry is distinctly different from his strong disagreements with Alexander Hamilton and John Adams. Those were political disputes. Jefferson could reconcile with Adams. Even with respect to Hamilton, in his personal notes on 1790s politics, Jefferson related a report that Hamilton and others had been promised English offices if the United States failed, suggesting a corrupt financial reason for Hamilton's support of Britain in the turbulent 1790s. But the sage of Monticello noted that the report was "impossible as to Hamilton. He was far above that." Jefferson's sometimes vitriolic disputes with Adams and even Hamilton were political, and he could see past them. His enmity toward Henry was personal and permanent.

In many respects, Jefferson's and Henry's political philosophies were very similar, but they would clash again in the late 1790s over states' rights and the Constitution. That, however, is a different story ...

