Patrick Henry, Radical Revolutionary

Patrick Henry lived in Virginia. He was an early Patriot. At first, colonists thought his ideas were radical, or extreme. But his fiery speeches won him many followers. What role did Henry play in the march toward independence?

The year was 1763. The scene was a county courthouse in Virginia. The judge and jury were listening to evidence. The case was about a 1755 Virginia law. It dealt with how much money church ministers should be paid. Many ministers did not like this law. They felt that their pay was too low. They had complained to the British king. The king had overturned the Virginia law. Now a minister named James Maury was in court. He wanted money to make up for the low pay he had received under the old law.

Arguing against Maury was a young lawyer. His name was Patrick Henry. He certainly did not look impressive. His clothes were plain. He did not wear a wig, which fashionable men of the time often wore at court. But Henry took a daring approach to the case. He argued that the king had no right to overturn the law. The people of Virginia had agreed to the law, Henry argued. They had a right to make their own laws and rules.

But Henry did not stop there. He said that the king’s actions made him a **tyrant**. The people of Virginia did not have to obey a tyrant, Henry declared.

Some people in the courtroom were shocked. Maury’s lawyer said that Henry had committed **treason**. This crime could be punished by
death. The jury, however, agreed with Henry. They decided to award Maury just one penny to show they did not think the king should have overturned the Virginia law.

Henry’s performance impressed more than the jury. By standing up to the king, he had become a hero to many colonists in his community.

The Early Years
Patrick Henry was born in 1736. His family was prosperous, but they were not among the wealthiest in Virginia. Young Henry received a good education. He went to a local school until he was ten. Then his father taught him at home. By the age of 15, he had finished his education. He did not go to college.

Though he was bright, Henry had several failures. First, he opened a store with his brother. It was closed within a year. Next, Henry tried farming. A terrible fire put an end to that enterprise. Henry again tried running a store—and again was unsuccessful.

Then, Henry decided to seek a career in the law. He studied on his own for six weeks. He barely passed the exam for his law license. He began his law practice in 1760. At this, he was an immediate success. His business grew with each year.

Henry worked hard at his new profession. He traveled widely in order to build his practice. He also proved to be highly effective in court. His speaking style was compelling. He connected with his listeners. This skill helped him to win judgments in court and followers among Virginians.
Henry’s popularity reached a high point after his work on the James Maury case. His victory helped him win a seat in Virginia’s House of Burgesses. From this new position, he quickly built his reputation as a powerful voice for the people.

**Inspiring Words**

Patrick Henry entered the House of Burgesses on May 20, 1765. Less than two weeks later, he gave one of his fiery speeches. His words alarmed Loyalists but inspired the Patriot spirit throughout the colonies. The topic of Henry’s speech was the Stamp Act. Recall that many colonists hated this law. They believed it was taxation without representation.

For two days in May 1765, the House of Burgesses discussed the Stamp Act. Henry led the debate. He wrote five resolutions, or statements, of his views. Henry’s resolutions challenged the power of the British government. They declared that only Virginia could tax the people of the colony. Colonists, Henry argued, did not have to obey the hated law.

Henry wanted the burgesses to agree with his ideas. He made a speech in hopes of winning their support. As he spoke, Henry hinted at a daring threat. He listed the names of some rulers from history—and the people
who had killed them. King George III, Henry warned, should learn from these examples.

Some members of the House of Burgesses were horrified. They cried out that Henry was guilty of treason. But most members were won over by his speech. The House of Burgesses agreed to his resolutions. Henry had been a burruss for just a few days. But he was already a leading figure.

Word of Henry’s actions spread quickly. Newspapers printed his resolutions. Other colonial governments passed their own, similar statements. Colonists took to the streets to protest the Stamp Act. The spirit of independence was growing.

Henry’s Stamp Act speech and resolutions gained attention throughout the colonies. His fame as a leading Patriot grew.

Henry was known for his skill as a speaker. He spoke with great feeling and intensity. His speeches had a powerful impact on the emotions of his listeners. One man compared Henry’s words to "the mountain torrent [rushing stream] that swept away everything before it."

Henry did not follow the rules of debate that many other leaders of his day did. He used simple terms. He relied on emotion rather than complex ideas to make his points. Some people made fun of his plain style. But he was able to communicate with all kinds of people. This included people with little education. One of his friends noted that Henry "trampled upon rules [of speech] and yet triumphed."
Henry gave his most famous speech at St. John's Church in Richmond, Virginia, in March 1775. By this time, the colonies' relationship with Great Britain had become very strained. Still, many people did not want to go to war against the king and Great Britain. Henry was ready to fight to win freedom. In a stirring performance, he called on Virginia to get ready for war. His words are among the best known in American history: "Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace—but there is no peace.... I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

Henry's speech was convincing. And again, news of his words traveled far from Virginia. Soon colonists everywhere were repeating his call for freedom. It would not be long before his cry for war would be fulfilled in the colony of Massachusetts.