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The life of William Wirt Henry

Harvie J. Skelton

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THE LIFE OF WILLIAM WIRT HENRY

A Thesis
Presented to
the History Department
The University of Richmond

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts

by
John Skelton Harvie, III
May 1958
Acknowledgment

I must express my sincere thanks to Mr. Will Rachal of the Virginia Historical Society for his assistance in locating information concerning William Wirt Henry. Without his patient guidance, this paper would not be complete in detail.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Many great historians contribute much to our heritage, literature and history, but the people of the United States of America fail to remember or recognize these men for their contributions because a historian's life is not considered exciting enough to write about. In the following chapters this author will attempt to bring to light the life of a courageous, dedicated man.

William Wirt Henry is probably best known for his literary masterpiece, The Life, Letters and Correspondence of Patrick Henry. His works and activities beyond that are numerous, but not generally known. Mr. Henry lived during this country's most turbulent years. He took part in the making of the history which, in some cases, he wrote and spoke about.

William W. Henry could be considered one of the best historians the State of Virginia has ever produced. His conservative spirit helped his state in her most perilous days, and his literary contributions helped a New South emerge culturally from the charred ruins of a once great society.

Mr. Henry was a soldier, farmer, lawyer, writer, historian, politician and orator. In his day he was known throughout the world as well as throughout this country.
The Henry family in Virginia is best known for its brilliant member, Patrick Henry. William Wirt Henry was the grandson of Patrick Henry and found great joy in extolling the accomplishments and feats of his illustrious grandfather.1

Patrick Henry had sixteen children; six by his first wife, Sarah Shelton, and ten by his second wife, Dorothea Dandridge. The sixteenth and youngest child was a boy, John Bruce Henry. John was a robust young man but had little or no education. He preferred to work the land on his father's farm, "Red Hill". John Henry suffered no ill effects as a result of being the son of such illustrious figures as Patrick Henry and Dorothea Spotswood Dandridge, the granddaughter of Governor Alexander Spotswood. John married Elvira McClelland, the daughter of Thomas Stanhope McClelland and granddaughter of Colonel William Cabell of "Union Hill".2

John and Elvira Henry had six children. Two daughters, Margaret Ann and Elvira McClelland, came first. The third child was a boy, William Wirt. Following William Wirt came Thomas Stanhope, Laura and Emma Cabell. The predominance of


Elvira Henry's family names seems to indicate her strong influence on John Henry.3

"Red Hill" was built by Patrick Henry in his latter years. It is located in the southwest angle of Charlotte County, Virginia on an elevated hill. The house faces the Charlotte and Campbell County line which runs along the bottom of the hill. One quarter of a mile from "Red Hill" is the junction of the Falling and Staunton Rivers. The graves of Patrick and Dorothea Henry are enclosed by wooden paling beside the house. Cultivated fields surround the main house. Trees and colorful flowers enhance the beauty of the main house. In this beautiful countryside William Wirt grew into manhood and fame.4


CHAPTER II

EDUCATION AND MATURITY

William Wirt Henry was born on February 14, 1831, at "Red Hill". He was brought up in a Presbyterian family and was greatly influenced by his devout mother. The entire family would attend the small Cub Creek Church, which was the oldest church in Charlotte County.

The majority of William Wirt's childhood days were spent at "Red Hill". Frequently he was permitted to accompany his father into Charlotte Court House. This rural environment tended to make William Wirt conservative in his thinking. William Wirt accepted slavery and believed it to be morally right. His father owned many slaves. This is evident because at the time of Lee's surrender John Henry freed no less than fifty-four named Negro slaves. This investment in slaves meant economic security to John Henry and subsequently to William Wirt, who served as business advisor to his father during the Civil War.


7. Compiled list in William Wirt Henry Papers (in Virginia Historical Society Library, Richmond, Virginia), Box 1, fol. H.
At the age of sixteen William Wirt boarded a train on October 1, 1847, which carried him at the astounding rate of twenty miles per hour to the University of Virginia. This was a strange, new experience in William Wirt's life. He was housed in a snug brick dormitory with the other freshmen. The enrollment at the University of Virginia in that year was approximately 300. According to William Wirt the 300 boys made a strange mixture of personalities. His favorite building was the gymnasium where wrestling, running, jumping, and workouts on the parallel bars greatly interested him. The dignity of most of his fellow students was rubbed off except the city gents who, in his opinion, kept their snobbish air. He defined his professors as "a race of men useful enough; but to many of their hearers, great bores". During his college years he participated in college pranks and once acted as a second in a duel. In 1850 he received his Master of Arts degree. Following his graduation his future profession was decided upon. William Wirt wrote to John B. Minor, a lawyer and professor, asking what to study to become a lawyer. Minor advised him to study history; especially English history, municipal law


and constitutional law. Minor added with some sound advice, advising William Wirt "to read all these references impartially".\(^\text{10}\)

At Charlotte Court House William Wirt read law as an apprentice to Judge Hunter H. Marshall.\(^\text{11}\) By 1853 he had succeeded in attaining the legal bar. In 1854 he married Lucy Gray Marshall after a brief courtship. Lucy Gray Marshall was the daughter of Colonel James P. Marshall, soldier of the War of 1812 and brother of Chief Justice John Marshall.\(^\text{12}\)

During William Wirt's stay at Charlotte Court House he kept in touch with his family at "Red Hill". His advice was sought after by members of his family as well as close friends. Elvira Henry, William Wirt's older sister, wrote to him in 1853 asking advice following a broken love affair. She asked if she should go out into the world to work, thus causing her family to stoop from their social standing to associate with her.\(^\text{13}\) William Wirt's advice must have settled this crisis forever,

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\(^{10}\) Letter from John B. Minor to William Wirt Henry, August 7, 1850, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. M.

\(^{11}\) Malone, loc. cit.

\(^{12}\) The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, IX, 272.

\(^{13}\) Letter from Elvira C. Henry to William Wirt Henry, April 29, 1853, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 1, fol. H.
because Elvira went on to marry a few years later; never once having to go to work for her livelihood.

Close friends put deep trust into this young man, too. Nathan F. Cabell wrote to William Wirt in 1858, asking for copies of the collection of Patrick Henry's letters which William Wirt had carefully preserved. This letter not only exhibits the trust in William Wirt's ability; but the interest in his famous grandfather has evidently driven him in a search for manuscripts and information concerning Patrick Henry. It is during the 1850's that William Wirt assumed more responsibility by becoming his father's financial advisor.

Success loomed on the horizon for William Wirt when he was made Commonwealth's Attorney for Charlotte County in the late 1850's. 15

The threat of a schism between North and South became an issue in Virginia during the year of 1860. William Wirt had been an old line Whig in political theory. He did not believe in the doctrine of nullification set forth three decades before by South Carolina. When talk of secession began to spread like wildfire following Lincoln's election to presidency,


William Wirt's voice was one of the strongest in opposition to secession.\textsuperscript{16}

As secession drew near, William Wirt's love of country was surmounted by his love for his beloved State of Virginia. On April 17, 1861, the State of Virginia seceded from the Union. After the victory of Bull Run in July, 1861, William Wirt began to set his affairs straight with the anticipation of serving his state under arms.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
CHAPTER III

THE WAR YEARS

Having put his affairs in order, William Wirt was ready to offer his services to the Confederacy and his state. He found that his name and position had not reached the ears of the high command. Consequently he found that he must volunteer in a unit, trusting good fortune to secure him a commission. The problem of selecting a unit was most confusing. His mother, Elvira, urged him to secure an office in the administrative section of the government in Richmond. This would best facilitate a center where he could get treatment in case he should have trouble with his lungs. 17 This is the first mention of bad health and was probably a mild case of tuberculosis. His brother, Stanhope, knowing his desire to serve under arms for his state, advised William Wirt to join the command of a Captain Charles Bruce of Charlotte County. Stanhope recommended Bruce because of his apparent influence at headquarters in Richmond. The Home Defense Regiment or some artillery unit was suggested as a possible second choice. 18

17. Letter from Elvira Henry to William Wirt Henry, January 9, 1862, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 1, fol. H.

18. Letter from Stanhope Henry to William Wirt Henry, January 9, 1862, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 1, fol. H.
William Wirt decided upon Captain Bruce's command. Bruce commanded an artillery battery formed in Charlotte County in 1861. This unit was named the Staunton Hill Artillery. When the unit was first organized, it was used briefly in Northern Virginia; but was divided into three parts. One part was sent to defend the Cape Fear River in North Carolina under Captain A. B. Paris. The second part was dispatched to South Carolina under Lieutenant Bouldin. The largest section of the battery was sent to defend the port of Savannah, Georgia. William Wirt had to travel to Savannah in February of 1862 to enlist under Captain Bruce. On February 24, 1862, William Wirt enlisted in the Staunton Hill Artillery.19

During his tour of duty at Savannah William Wirt was continuously bored because of the complete absence of combat. His only contact with home was an occasional letter from his parents. On March 21, 1862, he received a letter from his mother and father informing him that the militia had left, but everyone was cheered by the late naval victory ["Merrimac" battles]. His mother again advised him to resign because of health if the camp life was too much for him. She prayed for an end to the war, which "God had sent to make men humble",

but she knew that He was on their side. 20

William Wirt was determined to stay in the Staunton Hill Artillery. About the early part of April, he was transferred to Cape Fear, North Carolina where he was declared ineligible for service under a conscript law ruling. Greatly disappointed, he was given an honorable discharge on April 20, 1862, at Camp Hedrick, North Carolina. 21

William Wirt returned home in May still determined to serve in the Confederate Army. He approached a close friend, J. R. Watkins, who had considerable influence in the government. J. R. Watkins wrote to Secretary of War George Wythe Randolph in William Wirt's behalf. He introduced William Wirt to Randolph as a candidate for a lieutenant's commission in the Ordnance Corps. Watkins explained that William Wirt, although exempt as Commonwealth's Attorney, had served for a while in Captain Bruce's unit. The reason for the candidacy for an Ordnance commission was influenced by William Wirt's state of health. 22

This bid for a commission failed, and William Wirt spent most of his time in Richmond. He remained financial advisor to

20. Letter from Elvira and John Henry, March 14, 1862, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 1, fol. H.


22. Letter from J. R. Watkins to George Wythe Randolph, September 11, 1862, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 25, fol. W.
his father. By 1864 the state of the Confederacy was on shaky ground. Elvira and John Henry wrote to William Wirt on February 8, 1864, telling him of the market price fall, debt piling up and times being bad all around.23 At the time of Lee's surrender, John Henry had to free his slaves. This was a deep financial blow, and William Wirt came home to rebuild and maintain "Red Hill".

23. Letter from Elvira and John Henry to William Wirt Henry, February 8, 1864, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box I, fol. H.
CHAPTER IV

AT "RED HILL"

William Wirt returned to "Red Hill" following the Civil War. His stay in Richmond had influenced his legal career. Opportunity for financial gain was great in Richmond, especially for industrious lawyers. William Wirt was endeared to his old home. He must first see that the ancestral home of the Henry family be repaired, cultivated and put on a sound financial basis.

He remained Commonwealth's Attorney for Charlotte County. His high merits as a man and a lawyer had acquired for him the affectionate confidence and patronage of Charlotte County and won for him among his people and brethren of the Bar an honorable distinction.

During his residence at "Red Hill" William Wirt took a deeper interest in his famous grandfather, Patrick Henry. His search for old manuscripts and papers in desks and trunks produced many priceless articles by and about Patrick Henry.

The farm became productive and self-sustaining by 1868. It is at this time that William Wirt lost his father. John

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Henry's influence and strict discipline had molded William's character. The simple conservatism of this gentleman farmer had produced in William Wirt the spirit of the Old South, while encouraging William to foresee a New South.

This unfortunate death delayed William's return to Richmond. The burden of settling the estate between his brother and sisters naturally fell on his shoulders as he was the only lawyer in the family.

By 1873 William Wirt had placed the operation of "Red Hill" completely in the hands of his brother, Stanhope. The prospects for success in the legal profession were increasing in Richmond. In that same year William Wirt moved his entire family to Richmond to capitalize upon the opportunities of urban life.25

CHAPTER V

LAW PRACTICE

In 1873 William Wirt moved his family to Richmond where he took up residence at 104 East Grace Street. He had four children; Elizabeth, Lucy Gray, William Wirt, Jr., and James Marshall. At the age of forty two with much experience behind him William opened his own office in the Shafer's Building on Main Street at the corner of Tenth Street.

William Wirt's local fame had preceded him and gave assurance of success with which he assumed a recognized position among the foremost of the Bar of the courts of the city and the Virginia Court of Appeals. Most of William Wirt's cases were appeals to the Virginia Supreme Court.

William Wirt's advice was sought by many throughout the State of Virginia. Following the war many estates had to be settled. Debts were outstanding and brought many suits. The

burden of these many cases compelled William Wirt to invite his son, William Wirt, Jr., into the law firm in 1885. The law firm's office was moved to the State Bank Building at 1111 East Main Street. It was also in that year that William Wirt and his family moved to 415 East Franklin Street. 31

Three years later William Wirt, Jr. quit the law practice and left his father to run the law firm alone.

William Wirt experienced many varying cases. One of these involved Mrs. Thomas J. Jackson, the wife of General "Stonewall" Jackson. She had William settle her estate by arranging for him to sell the Jackson home for money, which she used to travel to San Diego, California to live in retirement. 32 Charlotte County did not forget its successful son. A Charlotte County resident asked William Wirt to draw up a petition in 1889 for a shorter road from Richmond to Charlotte Court House. This William Wirt did, and the petition was successful in acquiring that road. 33

In 1897 E. Randolph Williams joined William Wirt's law firm. This resulted in a partnership in which William Wirt


32. Letter from Mrs. T. J. Jackson to William W. Henry, June 21, 1888, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. J.

was senior partner. By this time William and his wife had moved their residence across the street to 410 East Franklin Street. 34

William Wirt loved his profession. His deep rooted interest in law led him to high offices in law associations. He was elected president of the Virginia Bar Association. This distinction was followed by his election to the vice-presidency of the American Bar Association. William Wirt was also president of the Richmond Bar Association. 35

In an address before the Virginia Bar Association on August 3, 1897, William Wirt expressed in his own words the feeling he had for the legal profession. He said:

My profession has been my life's work, and my earnest endeavor has been to render myself, both in acquirement and conduct, a worthy member of our most honorable calling. 36

William Wirt was a great historian, but one must not overlook his profession. His legal advice guided many and was continuously sought after. Success in law enabled this industrious Virginia gentleman to spend much of his money and time in preparation of contributions to historical writings.


35. Compiled list in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 1, fol. H.

CHAPTER VI

LITERARY CONTRIBUTIONS

William Wirt's interest in his famous ancestor, Patrick Henry, increased following the Civil War. Following the war years he found it difficult to get any of his essays on Patrick Henry published in Virginia. It wasn't until 1877 that he was approached by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. This society published one of William's speeches about his grandfather. 37

His scholarly mind, his knowledge of the prominent part his ancestor had in moulding state and national events, and his state pride were potent influences in determining the bent of his mind. 38

William Wirt's claim to fame was almost assumed by another historian, Henry Stephens Randall, in 1859. In a letter from Hugh B. Grigsby to John Henry, Mr. Grigsby wrote:

Mr. Randall has left with me a copy of his life of Jefferson to give to you as a token of his esteem for Patrick Henry. No man has surpassed Mr. Randall in veneration of the memory of your father. Mr. Randall might even be persuaded to write a bio of Patrick Henry. To enlist the services of Mr. Randall...would be the most important service which a descendent...could confer


upon posterity. 39

Evidently John Henry did not solicit that favor, and left William Wirt the honor of writing a biography of Patrick Henry. From 1865 to approximately 1880, William Wirt collected letters and manuscripts by or concerning his illustrious grandfather. In 1881 enough material was at hand to start the biography. In the spring of that year the chapters were beginning to take shape. 40

William Wirt solicited help in securing information about Patrick Henry from many people. One of the most influential people approached was Robert E. Lee. In 1868 Lee sent William Wirt some letters from Patrick Henry to Henry Lee. 41

News of William Wirt's work reached historical circles throughout the world. George Bancroft wrote in 1885:

Glad to find a Virginian of today engaged in occupation of shedding new light upon the services of that courageous orator to Mankind.

M. D. Conway wrote in 1888:


41. Letter from R. E. Lee to William Wirt Henry, March 9, 1868, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 1, fol. L.

42. Letter from George Bancroft to William Wirt Henry, December 5, 1885, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. B.
Congratulations to "foreman of the jury of historians" competent to deal with the subject of Patrick Henry and his contributions to the founding of our republic.\textsuperscript{43}

By 1890 William Wirt was reviewing late manuscripts and finishing the last chapters with hopes of having the biography in print by Christmas of that year.\textsuperscript{44} Financial trouble delayed the publication almost two years from that date.

As early as 1882 William Wirt approached a publisher for his biography of Patrick Henry. The idea of publishing the biography was submitted to publishers in England by M. D. Conway, but they turned the idea down because of the predicted lack of demand for the biography in England. The publishers did agree to sell copies published in the United States to the British public. M. D. Conway asked William Wirt to send a copy to him and also to Alonzo Taft, U. S. Minister to Austria, who had requested one.\textsuperscript{45}

In 1890 William Wirt approached many publishing houses on the idea of publishing his biography of Patrick Henry. He desired terms which would place the entire cost of publishing on the publisher. Most of the publishers balked at these terms.

\textsuperscript{43} Letter from M. D. Conway to William W. Henry, November 28, 1888, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. C.

\textsuperscript{44} Letter from William W. Henry to L. C. Draper, June 10, 1890, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 4.

\textsuperscript{45} Letter from M. D. Conway to William W. Henry, June 17, 1882, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. C.
G. P. Putnam's Sons reviewed the manuscript but refused to publish it at the publisher's expense.\footnote{46} J. B. Lippincott Company of Philadelphia wrote that they "would hardly be interested in publishing the biography of Patrick Henry on their own account". They did offer to publish it if William Wirt would assume the manufacturing cost. He would then receive a commission on every copy sold.\footnote{47} Houghton, Mifflin and Company made the same offer.\footnote{48} William Wirt refused these terms and wrote to Charles Scribner's Sons in New York. Scribner's agreed to publish at its own expense, giving William Wirt commission on books sold.\footnote{49}

William Wirt accepted and requested that the biography "be published in two volumes in clear type with an engraving or etching of Sully's portrait of Patrick Henry in the first volume".\footnote{50}

Finally, in early 1892, \textit{Life, Correspondence, and}

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{46} Letter from G. P. Putnam's Sons to William W. Henry, July 12, 1890, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 4.
\item \footnote{47} Letter from J. B. Lippincott Company to William W. Henry, September 12, 1890, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 4.
\item \footnote{48} Letter from Houghton, Mifflin and Company to William W. Henry, July 2, 1890, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 4.
\item \footnote{49} Letter from Charles Scribner's Sons to William W. Henry, September 11, 1890, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 4.
\item \footnote{50} Letter from William W. Henry to Charles Scribner's Sons, September 12, 1890, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 4.
\end{itemize}
Speeches of Patrick Henry was published. There were three volumes instead of two. The price for the three volume set was twelve dollars. Critics looked upon the biography with favor. The Critic of New York stated:

With a love of order and sequence that reveals itself on every page, with a style at once lucid, concise and engaging, the biographer has made an offering of the first value to the splendid thesaurus of American history. Like Pillars of Hercules, this edition will stand at the end of the sea of Patrick Henry literature. As far as merit goes, we may write he "ne plus ultra"... In political and biographical literature it would be hard to point to anything superior to this work.

The New York Daily Tribune reviewed as follows:

This biography embodies a full, sympathetic and exhaustive study of noble life. It is published in almost sumptuous style with heavy paper, large type, ample margins and most tastefull bindings.

The New York Times stated:

...has met with a flattering sale, and it is conceded by history students and critics that it is likely to hold its place forever as the authority on the subject.

The Boston Evening Transcript referred to William Wirt Henry in the following manner:

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51. Pamphlet on Life, Correspondence and Speeches of Patrick Henry containing complimentary notices of the work; In William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 4.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.
It is a matter for congratulation that a biographer has been found gifted with an impartiality as broad as his knowledge.55

The Dial of Chicago favors William Wirt as follows:

No praise of Mr. William Wirt Henry's scholarly and impartial study of the subject and of his simple and graceful style of writing the narrative can be deemed extravagant.56

Response from individuals confirmed the critics praises. Congratulations and praise in the form of letters came from all parts of the world. M. D. Conway sent his congratulations from England.57 Joseph Anderson stated that William Wirt "had shown Patrick Henry as a great administrator and jurist".58

Henry C. Dixon, a lesser historian from Kentucky, wrote:

Thomas Nelson Page and other southern writers have harped on the saying, that the South needs a historian. This book has fully supplied that want.59

Chief Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court, Melville W. Fuller, commended William Wirt highly on the Patrick Henry biography.60

55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Letter from M. D. Conway to William W. Henry, December 23, 1891, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. C.
58. Letter from Joseph R. Anderson to William W. Henry, March 16, 1892, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. A.
60. Letter from Melville W. Fuller to William W. Henry, January 13, 1892, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. F.
Much time and expense had been put into the biography of Patrick Henry. The commission on the large sale of his book brought William Wirt financial security until his death. Of greater satisfaction to William Wirt was the overwhelming praise and recognition given him by world history and literary circles.

William Wirt wrote essays for magazines, historical associations, and defenses. Some of his essays were "The Rescue of Captain John Smith by Pocahontas", "The Truth Concerning the Expedition of George Rogers Clark", "The Scotch-Irish in the South" and "The First Legislative Assembly in the New World". William Wirt also wrote a chapter in the Narrative and Critical History of the U. S. by Justin Winsor. The chapter dealt with Sir Walter Raleigh.

George F. Holmes wrote to William Wirt from the University of Virginia, stating that he was impressed by William Wirt's defense of the credibility of the John Smith and Pocahontas legend. He also was determined to alter his textbook to dismiss any doubt about the legend.

William Wirt was ready at any time to defend his grandfathe

61. The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, IX, 272
63. Letter from George F. Holmes to William W. Henry, June 4, 1882, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. H.
name. When John Quincy Adams's diary was published, William Wirt attacked the statement in the diary which branded his grandfather, 'a dictator' in State government.  

William Wirt was known as a literary critic. P. A. Bruce, editor of the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, wrote William Wirt in 1898 to solicit a critical review of Alexander Brown's First Republic in America. Bruce stated that he feared Brown was "industrious" at collecting documents, but lacking in the art of composition. Bruce also thought that Brown depended on "damnable intuition" instead of "logical insight". Bruce stated that William Wirt "could have eight pages to damn Brown on being tedious on the subject of John Smith!". William Wirt condemned Brown's book and received a counter statement a few months later from Brown.

Brown wrote in the Virginia Magazine of History and

Biography:

Mr. Henry claims that I "indulge in many guesses where my evidence is at fault". His criticism is an attempt to prove his assertion; but it really proves that he sees as in a looking glass, and that the faults are his own.  

64. Letter from Hugh B. Grigsby to William W. Henry, June 21, 1875, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. G.

65. Letter from P. A. Bruce to William W. Henry, April 14, 1898, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. B.

66. Virginia Historical Society, Virginia Magazine of History and Biography (Richmond; Virginia Historical Society, 1899), VI, 324.
P. A. Bruce complimented William Wirt on his critical review stating:

I must express again my admiration for your article on Mr. Brown's book. I have read it a number of times, and I must say that if a more acute and destructive piece of criticism has ever been written, it is not known to me. 67

In 1887 Henry Cabot Lodge wrote William Wirt, thanking him for pointing out a weak point in Lodge's Life of Washington. 68

William Wirt received three dollars a page for his review in the American Historical Review of Woodrow Wilson's biography of George Washington. 69

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67. Letter from P. A. Bruce to William W. Henry, April 29, 1899, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. B.

68. Letter from Henry Cabot Lodge to William W. Henry, November 25, 1887, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. L.

69. Letter from J. F. Jameson to William W. Henry, October 20, 1896, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. J.
CHAPTER VII

ORATORY AND POLITICS

William Wirt Henry was considered in his time one of the outstanding orators and speakers in the country. His services were called upon for dedications, centennials and toastmaster duties.

He was an all-round scholar and his conversation drew upon a treasure house of anecdote and information. 70

As a religious speaker, William Wirt excelled. He was invited to speak at cornerstone layings and Presbyterian church services. On the hundredth anniversary of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America he spoke at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. 71

William Wirt was a popular college speaker. On June 21, 1892, he spoke at and presided over the yearly celebration by the Mu Sigma Rho and Philologian Literary Societies at Richmond College. 72 On June 14, 1897, he made the commencement address.


71. Pamphlet on Joint Celebration of the Hundredth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 4.

before the members of the Maury and Lee Literary Societies at V. P. I. 73

William Wirt was a guest orator at the Centennial Celebration of Washington, D. C. on September 18, 1893. 74 He also spoke at Philadelphia upon the Centennial of the Motion for Independence. 75 He was also Commissioner from Virginia at the Centennial of the Formation of the U. S. Constitution in Philadelphia. 76

Being a prominent historian, William Wirt made many addresses before historical societies. In 1893 he spoke at the International Congress of Historical Writers in Chicago. 77 He also delivered numerous addresses before the American Historical Association. Some of these were: "The Establishment of Religious Liberty in the U. S.", "Causes Producing the Virginia of the Revolution", and "The First Representative Body in America". 78


75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

77. Letter from M. Poole to William Wirt Henry, March 7, 1893, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 4.

On April 30, 1896, William Wirt was toastmaster at a dinner held by the Virginia Society of the Sons of the American Revolution. The Vice-President of the U. S., Adlai E. Stevenson, and the Governor of Virginia, O'Ferrall, were among those present.

An address which drew much praise was William Wirt's inaugural address, "The Trial of Aaron Burr", at the Virginia State Bar Association. 80

On May 14, 1894, William Wirt was the guest speaker at the William and Mary commemorative ceremonies. He spoke on Jamestown and its inhabitants. 81

William Wirt's political career was short but stormy. He was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1877. He served two years in the House. 82 During his second year in the House, William Wirt gave one of his strongest pieces of oratory. William Mahone was the political force in Virginia politics. He led his followers in both houses of the state legislature. In 1878 he was interested in readjusting the state debt. The


81. Letter from J. L. Hull to William Wirt Henry, February 20, 1894, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. H.

82. The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, IX, 272.
preamble of the infamous Barbour Bill was:

The preservation of the state government is the first necessity; the constitutional obligation to support the system of public schools is the second necessity; and the payment of the present rate of interest on the amount claimed as principle of the public debt is the third necessity in order of importance.  

The party that Mahone controlled was known as the Readjuster Party.

William Wirt opposed the readjusting of the state debt; as did most conservatives in Virginia. On February 2, 1878, William Wirt spoke to the House of Delegates. In his address, "The Debt of Virginia", he pleaded courageously for the defeat of the Barbour Bill. Despite this gallant speech the Barbour Bill was passed by both houses. Only a veto by Governor Holliday prevented a complete victory for the Readjuster Party and William Mahone.

William Wirt received praise for his brave opposition to the Barbour Bill. The Governor of West Virginia, Henry Lee Mathews, sent congratulations to William Wirt on his speech. The popularity of William Wirt increased over night. In 1879


85. Letter from Henry Lee Mathews to William Wirt Henry, May 9, 1878, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. M.
he was elected to the State Senate where he served until 1880. He refused to run again despite insistence by local supporters. His conservatism and opposition to readjusting the state debt made him an influential member of the Funder Party.  

William Wirt was considered an influential force in politics until his death. In 1896 he was invited to be chairman of the Virginia Sound Money Democratic Convention and Party.  

In his high and pure character, his graceful courtesy to young and old, his ardent devotion to the truth, his steadfast adherence to all that was right and noble, Mr. Henry was a model of what we still love to call, the old Virginia gentleman.  

CHAPTER VIII

RELIGION, TRAVEL, AND HONORS

William Wirt was very devout and was active in the affairs of the Presbyterian Church. When William moved to Richmond, he came in contact with Dr. Moses Hoge, the minister of Second Presbyterian Church. William Wirt joined the Second Presbyterian Church congregation and after a few years Dr. Hoge was one of William's closest friends.

William Wirt was a ruling elder of Second Presbyterian Church and was appointed to many religious groups and commissions.

In 1897 William Wirt and Dr. Hoge became involved in a dispute over the combining of Dr. Hoge's preparatory school, Hoge Academy, with Hampden-Sydney College. The motion by Dr. Hoge had bogged down in the Presbytery because of a statement made by Dr. McIlwaine, president of Hampden-Sydney. Dr. McIlwaine had stated that, in his opinion, Hampden-Sydney was not a Presbyterian college. William Wirt tried to influence the Presbytery in behalf of Dr. Hoge. The Presbytery labelled


90. Robert B. Munford, Jr., Richmond Homes and Memories. (Richmond; Garrett and Massie, 1936), p. 167.
Hampden-Sydney as unfit custodian of Hoge Academy. Dr. Hoge and William Wirt continued their arguments for the combination but to no avail. 91

William Wirt was interested in the history of the Presbyterian Church. When he travelled to Europe in 1898, William Wirt stopped over in Belfast, Northern Ireland, to browse through the minutes of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland. 92

When Dr. Hoge died, William Wirt wrote a biographical sketch of his dear friend and advisor. 93 William Wirt and Dr. Hoge were probably two of the most prominent figures in Virginia Presbyterian affairs in the late nineteenth century.

William Wirt's travels took him half way around the world. In the United States invitations took him to all sections of the country. In October of 1881 William Wirt and his family travelled on a steamer, the George Leary, to the Yorktown Centennial. 94 While at Yorktown William Wirt delivered an address and spent a day aboard the steamer, St. Johns, with Major General Hancock

91. Letter from Moses D. Hoge to William Wirt Henry, July 22, 1897, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 1, fol. H.

92. Letter from Moses D. Hoge to Rt. Hon. Thomas Sinclair, July 2, 1898, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 1, fol. H.


94. Letter from A. H. H. Stuart to William W. Henry, October 10, 1881, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. S.
and his wife. 95

Frequently William Wirt would spend a week at White Sulphur Springs with the elite of society. 96

The opportunity for world travel came in 1898. William Wirt was appointed a member of the Committee of Five to represent the American Historical Association at the International Congress of History at the Hague, September 1 through September 5, 1898. His associates on the committee were U. S. Senator George F. Hoar, Rev. W. E. Griffis, Lucy M. Salmon, and James G. Whiteley. 97

William Wirt left New York City on July 9, 1898, with his daughter, Lucy Gray, and a niece, Lucy Gray Harrison. At the age of sixty seven William Wirt was described by his passport as being five feet, nine inches tall; having a broad, full forehead, dark blue eyes, straight nose, medium mouth, square chin, light grey hair, and fair complexion. 98

William Wirt was well received in England and at the Hague. Dr. Moses Hoge introduced Mr. Henry as "an American

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95. Invitation from Major General Hancock to William W. Henry, October 15, 1881, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 4.

96. Letter from Moses C. Tyler to William W. Henry, August 7, 1886, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 1, fol. T.

97. Letter from Herbert B. Adams to William W. Henry, June 3, 1898, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 2, fol. A.

who cherishes warm regard for England despite being the grandson of Patrick Henry". 99

William Wirt attended meetings in the daytime and social affairs at night. The highlight of his visit was a reception given at the Vendredi House for his party by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Madame Beaufort on the evening of September 2, 1898. 100

Much of the praise and honor was bestowed upon William Wirt by various historical societies. William served as vice-president of the Virginia Historical Society until the death of A. H. H. Stuart. He then assumed the presidency. 101

In 1887 William Wirt delivered a speech before the American Historical Association on the part played by Virginia in establishing religious liberty. He said:

I am entirely safe in saying that it was the influence of the principle embodied in the Virginia Bill of Rights upon the American States and the steps taken upon the requirement of the Virginia Convention of 1788 that caused to be engrafted upon the U. S. Constitution its guaranty of religious liberty; and further that it was under the leadership of Patrick Henry that religious liberty has been established as a part of the fundamental


100. Invitation from Minister of Foreign Affairs and Madame Beaufort to William Wirt Henry, September 2, 1898, in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 4.

law of our land. 102

This speech brought praise and criticism; but what was impor-
tant, it brought William Wirt's name to the front.

Dr. Charles J. Stille criticized William's speech as follows:

With no desire to offend so respectable a sentiment, I am forced to say that the claim thus made for Virginia that she established; first, of all the nations in Christendom, the principle of religious liberty, seems historically inexact. 103

William Wirt defended his statement by saying that the original statement in the Virginia Bill of Rights on religious liberty was meager, but it was strengthened through a court decision in 1793. 104

Up until 1889 the South was not represented among officials of the American Historical Association. It was in 1891 that William Wirt Henry assumed the presidency and told the members at the annual meeting in Washington, D. C., of "The Causes which Produced the Virginia of the Revolutionary Period". Henry's presidency marked the high point of influence for Southern patriarchs in the Association, and thereafter


the names of young professionals appeared with increasing frequency on the programs and the lists of committee appointments. 105

William Wirt was vice-president of the American Historical Association in 1889. In 1891 he was elected to the presidency.

William Wirt's fame brought honors upon him from many states. He was made a member of the Long Island, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Southern Historical Societies. 106 He was an active member of the Society of American Wars, the Hampden-Sydney Board of Trustees, the Bible Society of Virginia, and the American Antiquarian Society. 107

William Wirt was president of the Virginia Society of the Sons of the American Revolution and the Scotch-Irish Society of Virginia. 108 He was vice-president of the American Sunday-school Union and Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. 109

He was a member of the Board of Trustees of the Peabody Educational Fund until his death and a member of the Board of


106. Compiled list by William Wirt Henry in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 1, fol. H.

107. Ibid.

108. Ibid.

109. Ibid.
Visitors for Mt. Vernon. 110

Besides his M. A. at University of Virginia William Wirt received a L.L.D. from Washington and Lee University in 1888.111 Later William and Mary College bestowed the same degree upon him.112


111. Compiled list by William Wirt Henry in William Wirt Henry Papers, Box 1, fol. H.

112. Ibid.
CHAPTER IX

SUMMARY

William Wirt returned from Europe in the fall of 1898. Although he was invited to speak at many historical and social meetings, the name of William Wirt Henry was fading from the public eye. Historians returning from Northern and European universities were determined to write a "true Southern history". The days were rapidly passing when a historian such as William Wirt Henry would arise and attempt to prove that his state was the first in the world to separate church and state. 113

During the summer of 1900 William Wirt suffered a heart attack. Recovering temporarily he spent the rest of the season at White Sulphur Springs. In the fall he returned to his desk at the law firm of Henry and Williams. 114

In November a mild attack compelled William Wirt to confine himself to a bed. Despite constant nursing by his wife and daughters, he passed away at three o'clock on the morning of December 5, 1900, at his home at 410 East Franklin Street. Heart failure was listed as the cause of death. 115

114. Obituary in The Richmond Dispatch, December 6, 1900.
115. Ibid.
His body was placed in a grave in Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond. Many of William Wirt's friends attended the funeral. Some of the honorary pallbearers were Governor J. Hoge Tyler, ex-Governor Charles T. O'Ferrall, and members of the Virginia Supreme Court. 116

The South had lost a true gentleman and senior historian in William Wirt. Throughout his sixty nine years William Wirt had accomplished many things, but the success which gave him more satisfaction was the completion and approval by the public of Life, Correspondence and Speeches of Patrick Henry.

Mr. Henry was warm and loyal in his friendships, and in his domestic relations he was tender and loving. He was characterized by a gracious and unaffected courtesy and a tender sympathy which won for him sincere respect and affectionate regard. Throughout his long, useful and blameless life, while animated by high and noble aims, he was most unobstentatious and simple. 117

The grandson of the "forest Demosthenes" was a self trained historian and was never fully emancipated from localism and hero worship. Practically all his historical work was confined to the Virginia field and was primarily motivated by

116. Ibid.
117. Ibid.
the desire to quicken interest in, and gain proper recognition for the contributions made to American life by his State, the Scotch-Irish, and his distinguished grandfather. If always to a considerable extent a patriotic, rather than a critical historian, he was not unaffected by the new emphasis on thoroughness and fairmindedness which characterized the last two decades of his life and occupies a place of dignity in American historiography. 118

With intense pride in the past of his native State, it was a labor of love with him to explore all the sources of information respecting her colonial history, and the results of his labors in many valuable contributions to current magazines were most highly esteemed by historical students at home and abroad. 119


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