

Annie Henry
and the Birth of Liberty



Adventures in the American Revolution

Annie Henry and the Secret Mission

Annie Henry and the Birth of Liberty

Annie Henry and the Mysterious Stranger

Annie Henry and the Redcoats

Annie Henry
and the Birth of Liberty

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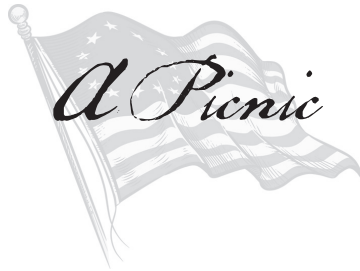
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For my sons:
Pete, David, Daniel, and Ben

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Annie Henry looked up at the blue sky. The May air felt warm on her skin as she hurried through her morning chores of gathering the eggs, feeding her chickens, and putting fresh hay in the nesting boxes. Normally, Annie dawdled over those tasks in the hope of delaying her lessons, but today she wanted the morning to fly by because she had planned an outing for the afternoon.

It was not common for girls in 1775 to have regular lessons. Once a girl could read and do arithmetic, she was excused from school. Annie, however, was no ordinary girl. Her father, Patrick Henry, expected all his children to be well educated. As a lawyer, politician, and gentleman farmer, he had enough money to hire a tutor to live on the plantation and teach the Henry children.

Mr. Dabney, the tutor, was a stickler for lessons. Every day at nine o'clock he rapped his willow cane on his desk and called the class to order. The class consisted of Annie, age ten, and her two older brothers, William, fifteen, and John, thirteen. Andrew Thacker, a thirteen-year-old neighbor, came some days if his father could spare him from his chores. The class met in Patrick Henry's library, amid bookshelf-lined walls that made it look as though learning was going on. But that wasn't always true.

The boys were hopeless students. They suffered through Greek and Latin, sprawling lazily in their chairs until Mr. Dabney, in frustration, issued a reminder with his willow cane. Then they straightened up and were attentive, at least for a while until the lure of a bird's song or a scent on a soft breeze drew their attention back out the window to the pastures and woods beyond.

Annie liked her lessons, although she didn't like Mr. Dabney, a distant cousin of her father. He could turn an interesting subject like history into a grand bore. Great battles waged by brave soldiers for glorious causes became dried-up facts on brittle paper.

Today the boys were supposed to recite a poem in Latin. When it was Andrew's turn, he stood clumsily in front of the class, shifting his weight from leg to leg, never raising his eyes to meet Mr. Dabney's at the back of the room.

Annie stared at her desk, wishing that Andrew could just sit down and be spared the embarrassment, but that was not Mr. Dabney's way. He let the boy suffer for five minutes before excusing him with the words, "Why your father wants to educate you is beyond me. You're the thickest boy I have ever had the privilege of knowing. Sit down."

As Andrew slunk to his seat, he avoided eye contact with Annie. William stuck out a long leg, and Andrew tripped over it, nearly falling to the floor. He glared at William, who assumed a look of complete innocence. Mr. Dabney looked up from his ledger book and scolded Andrew. "Surely it is not too much to ask you to walk quietly to your seat. Please sit down."

When the boy finally reached his seat, it was John's turn to recite. He stood in front of the class and recited the first line of the poem flawlessly. Mr. Dabney smiled, and John flashed a smile in return. Annie relaxed in her seat. For a minute she daydreamed

as her brother continued to recite in Latin, but a giggle from William brought her attention back to the classroom. She looked up at John, who was still reciting, and over at Mr. Dabney, whose angry face was as red as a British uniform.

“Stop this instant,” he bellowed.

Next to her, William hid his face in his hands, barely containing his laughter as John stopped and looked innocently at his tutor. Andrew looked as puzzled as Annie. What had John said?

Mr. Dabney stood in front of the class, his willow rod in hand, looking as though he might explode. “So you think it amusing, young man, to alter the words of a famous poem. And you think it amusing to compare your tutor to a donkey.” Even speaking the words caused the timid Mr. Dabney to blush, which set John and William into another round of laughter.

What had come over her brothers? Annie wondered. How could John have insulted the tutor? What would their father say? But that was easy. Patrick Henry wasn’t home. The colonies were close to war, and he, as one of Virginia’s leaders, was often away.

Just when it seemed as though the tutor had lost control of his small classroom, he glanced at Andrew and Annie. Clenching his jaw, he glared at John, saying pointedly, “If you were attentive like your sister, you would be fine scholars. But instead, you are loafers with heads full of sawdust.”

Annie squirmed uncomfortably with the attention, sure that it would bring her brother’s disapproval on her head once they were beyond the watchful gaze of the tutor.

Without letting up, the tutor continued his tirade. “You may be excused, Annie. Your brothers will be staying for a while yet. And you, Master Thacker, there is surely no reason to prolong your evident dislike of my classroom. You too may be excused.”

The boy didn't hesitate. In two swift strides he was out of the room with Annie close behind. The two tiptoed out of the house so that Patsy, Annie's older sister, would not hear them.

"What will you do now?" Annie asked.

"Don't know," Andrew muttered. "Blasted tutor. Why should I have to learn Latin? Give me one reason a farmer needs to know an old, dead language nobody uses anymore."

As they reached the stable where the boy had tied his horse, Annie asked, "Did you study the poem?"

He shrugged, flashing a smile. "Nope. Didn't study it a minute."

"Then you can't very well be angry that you were embarrassed, can you?"

"That's the kind of thinking that separates boys from girls," Andrew said scornfully as he mounted his horse. "You care about old Mr. Dabney, and I just want to hunt."

Annie waved as her friend rode away. *What kind of trouble will he be in when he comes home hours earlier than expected?* she wondered.

As for Annie, she was pleased with the early dismissal. She walked briskly to the kitchen, a small building behind the main house where several slaves cooked for the family. Earlier in the day, before her lessons, she had asked one of the cooks to fix a picnic basket for her.

She found the basket in the kitchen, full of food. There were fresh currant scones—a kind of sweet biscuit—and some slices of ham. It also contained a jar of cold cider and a piece of mince pie. Although Annie had planned to walk, she could barely manage under the weight of the fully packed basket. She lugged it across the yard to the stable where Joseph, the stableman, saddled her small horse. She loaded up the saddlebags with food. Then, with

his help, she mounted the horse and rode out of the yard toward the beech woods.

The Henrys owned about 1,000 acres of prime farmland in the middle of Virginia. The land was rolling hills, but on a clear day young Annie could see all the way to the mountains in the west. The largest town was a village about ten miles away called Hanover. It had a courthouse, a tavern, and a small store, but the Henry plantation, Scotchtown, did not need to purchase much from the store. It produced most of its own food and even had a blacksmith who could shoe the horses and make nails.

She had lived there for nearly five years and loved it. Even though her mother had been sick for much of that time and had died just a month earlier, Annie still thought the plantation was a happy place. She particularly liked walking and riding around the familiar grounds. Today she had picked a special place on the bank of the creek for her picnic lunch. It was a hidden place, blocked from view by a grove of trees and shrubs. The young girl tied her horse up to a sturdy branch and pushed through the shrubs until she reached her secret spot. Except for the horse's presence, Annie knew she was invisible to the world.

As she lay back on a blanket and watched the windblown clouds drift across the sky, she daydreamed about her recent adventure in Richmond. She had been lying in her special place for a short time when she heard a noise on the other side of the bushes. Raising herself on one arm, she felt with the other hand for the saddlebags. They were not there! Annie realized she had left them hanging on the horse.

Beyond the bushes, the horse nickered softly. Rising to her feet, Annie listened, sure that someone stood beyond the dense stand of shrubs.

"Who's out there?" she demanded.

When no one answered, the girl felt the first twinge of fear. Her father had said that these were “unsettled times,” and that his children had to be careful about strangers. Shaking off the fear, the girl pushed through the bushes. “Nothing to worry about,” she assured herself in a voice that was calmer than her feelings.

There was no one around, and the horse was grazing contentedly. Annie was about to go back into the hideaway when she remembered her lunch. That’s when she noticed that the saddlebags were missing. “Great,” she muttered with a little stamp of her foot. “Just great. Now someone has taken my lunch.”

When Annie drew near to the horse to investigate, she saw a crudely written note. “Another way that boys think differently than girls,” it said. That’s when Annie lost her temper.

“Andrew Thacker,” she yelled, “you bring that lunch back now!”

She knew she looked ridiculous. Even if Andrew could hear her, and Annie thought he probably was hiding nearby to see her reaction, how would a slightly built ten-year-old girl take back her lunch from a boy who was almost four years older and weighed probably forty pounds more? Impossible.

But Annie didn’t always think logically when she was angry, and she was angry now. “Andrew!” she yelled.

The only response was a peal of laughter. Without thinking, the young girl ran toward the sound. She was slowed by long skirts that twisted around her legs. “You’d better not eat my lunch, Andrew Thacker!” she shouted as she ran.

When she finally caught up to Andrew in the beech woods, she found him sitting on a log and grinning at her as he stuffed the last of the scones into his mouth. Annie glared at him.

“I hope you enjoy that scone, Andrew Thacker,” she said. “I will never, and I mean this, share my food with you again.”

She held out her hand and marched forward, expecting Andrew to be sorry and hand over the rest of the lunch. But he just grinned, clambered to his feet, and began running once again. Annie knew that she could not outrun the boy. He was taller and wore breeches. She was slowed down by her long skirts and petticoats that caught on branches and dragged in the dirt. She tried anyway, but the boy's swifter strides soon carried him out of sight. She was following his trail by the sound of crunching leaves and snapping twigs when suddenly there was a thump, followed by silence, followed by a scream.

A few more steps and Annie saw the strangest sight. There was Andrew dancing about, awkwardly hitting himself on the face, arms, and shoulders. The girl began to giggle but stopped laughing when she saw that her friend was no longer running away but running toward her, his hands continuing their wild motions. He drew closer, and Annie saw the problem. A swarm of bees surrounded him.

Without thinking, she turned and ran, ignoring the branches that tugged on her skirts and scratched at her skin. When she reached the clearing, she slowed down to catch her breath. Behind her came Andrew, and Annie yelled, "Run for the creek," as he streaked past. She didn't need to tell him; her terrified friend had already reached the water and plunged in.

Like a turtle stretching for air, the boy lifted his head out of the water, warily surveying the air around him.

"They're gone!" Annie yelled. "You can come out."

He rose up and walked shakily to the bank. Annie's first reaction was to laugh. The boy looked ridiculous. His clothes clung to him, and water ran down from his hair into his eyes and mouth. Her laughter turned to fear, though, when she saw how hard he was breathing and watched him lower himself painfully to the

ground. She thought he was reacting to the bee stings. She had heard that bees could kill a man. But after a minute's rest, his breathing went back to normal, and she gave a sigh of relief.

It was hard not to stare at the welts forming on the boy's face and arms. His white knee-high stockings were mud splotted, and Annie couldn't tell whether there were stings under them as well. He groaned, and the young girl bit her lip nervously, not sure what she could say that wouldn't make him yell at her.

"Andrew?" she whispered.

He opened one eye and glared at her.

"Are you hurting?" she asked.

"What do you think?"

"Do you want help getting home?"

Andrew groaned louder.

"What's wrong, Andrew?" Annie asked worriedly.

"Pa spared me from some plowing this morning because Ma insisted that I go to school. Now how am I going to explain how I got wet and bee stung at school this morning?"

The tension of the last fifteen minutes dissolved, and Annie hooted with laughter. "What a sight you were," she said, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Serves you right for stealing my lunch."

"How can you laugh when I feel so miserable?" her friend groaned. "Do I look as bad as I feel?"

"Other than a fat lip, a swollen eye, a couple of unsightly red marks, and torn and dirty clothes, you look fine," she answered honestly.

Groaning again, Andrew rose slowly to his feet. "I wish it was just my clothes. But I hurt bad, and there's no way I can hide this from Pa," he said ruefully. "I guess there's no reason to postpone my lickin' any longer."

“Do you want me to take you on my horse?” Annie asked.

“No, thank you. Pa will be mad enough,” he answered.

With shoulders hunched, he walked slowly in the direction of the Thacker farm. Annie could picture Andrew’s father, a stern-faced, hard-working farmer who had only Andrew to help him in the fields, and she didn’t like to imagine what Mr. Thacker might say when he saw his son. She watched until she could no longer see the boy. Then she gathered up her saddlebags, got on her horse, and rode back to Scotchtown.