

ANN WOOD HENRY,

1732-1798

Another sketch of a noteworthy pioneer woman in Lancaster is included in her series by Marian W. Reninger. Setting aside her own story on Ann Henry, Mrs. Reninger presents as fitting tribute to her friend and compatriot, the late Adelaide Hall, the unpublished last work of Mrs. Hall.

On January 21, 1732, a little Quaker girl named Ann Wood was born in Burlington, New Jersey, the daughter of Abraham and Ursula Taylor Wood. All Ann's ancestors were substantial, well-educated English Quakers. Among them were Philip Taylor of Chester County, George Wood, one of the first settlers of Darby and John Bevan, an eminent Welsh Quaker preacher and friend of William Penn. All these men served in the Pennsylvania Assemblies and were prominent in the political life of the Colony.

Ann's father had died a few months before she was born. Mrs. Wood married for her second husband Joseph Rose, a member of the Lancaster bar, so it was in that city that Ann grew up and met and married William Henry, a young man who was head of a large gun manufacturing establishment and active in the life of the community.

William Henry was born May 19, 1729, in Chester County, the son of Scotch parents who came from Coleraine, Ireland to settle in Chester County, Pennsylvania. At the age of 15 he was sent to Lancaster to be apprenticed to Matthew Roesser, at that time probably the leading gunsmith in the town. Henry's mechanical ability made him an ideal apprentice and probably he served the regular term of five years, during which time the apprentices lived in the house of their master. In 1750 when William Henry was 21 he went into the hardware business with a wealthy Jew of high character named Joseph Simon. This apparently was a general hardware business which included the selling of guns, no doubt of Henry's making. The business was conducted on some of the land where the Central Market stands (1960) but the site of the gun shop is not certain although it was probably near Lancaster on one of the streams, for in 1750 water power was used by many of the early gunsmiths for forging, boring and grinding their gun-barrels. In 1756 when William Henry and Ann Wood were married he was a successful business man and in 1760 he was able to buy a house and lot for £350 and take a trip to England.

Ann Hollingsworth Wharton, in her delightful book "In Old Pennsylvania Towns," tells a rather amusing incident in the courtship of William Henry of Ann Wood. At the time a widowed sister, Mrs. Bickman,

was keeping house for her brother and thinking it was time he took a wife, invited three young ladies for tea, one of them being Ann Wood. While the young people were out in the garden, Mrs. Bickman placed a broom across the hall through which they would all have to pass when they came in for tea. When they were called and the first young lady saw the broom, she pushed it aside, the second young lady stepped over it, but the third, Ann Wood, picked it up and set it in its place. Young Henry, it is said, was impressed with this evidence of order and efficiency and determined then and there to marry Miss Wood, which he did on March 8, 1756 and the young people went to housekeeping on North Queen Street.

It was no doubt in this first home of the Henrys that they entertained and encouraged Benjamin West, the young Quaker tinsmith's apprentice from Springfield, who had had very little education but who possessed a great native talent which both the Henrys recognized. There seems to be some difference of opinion as to the exact time of West's visit to Lancaster but it must have been after 1756 when the Henrys were married and before 1760, for in that year West sailed for England and never returned.

There is no question, however, but that West stayed in the Henry house and here for the first time he was urged and encouraged to follow his ambition to paint. The Henrys provided him with a room to work in, they supplied him with all the essential material for his painting and lent him the first books he had ever known, other than the Bible. A small group picture "The Death of Socrates" which still belongs to the Henry family was one of the first pictures Benjamin West painted, inspired by a woodcut he saw in Rollin's Ancient History in William Henry's library.

John Galt, in his life of Benjamin West, writes "that among those most helpful to West in his early career was William Henry of Lancaster, Pennsylvania" and I think it is quite probably that Ann Wood Henry, with her own Quaker heritage had great sympathy for a young man whose first paints are said to have been the colors given him by some wandering Indians and whose first brush was made from hair from the cat's tail.

Benjamin West's portraits of William and Ann Henry, which today hang in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, were probably finished in Philadelphia but the original drawings undoubtedly were done in Lancaster and they are remarkable works for an 18 year old boy who later became President of the Royal Academy. When the youngest son of the Henrys, named Benjamin West Henry, became an artist himself, he was invited to visit the great artist for whom he was named. It is interesting to note that the portrait of William Henry shows him holding a rifle, put there no doubt to indicate that the subject of the painting was a master gunsmith. By this time Henry is credited with having one of the best equipped gun works in the colonies and he came into prominence as Armorer of the Pennsylvania forces attached to Braddock's expedition against Fort Duquesne. Later when hostilities between the colonies and the mother country broke out he was appointed to the Committee of Safety and other committees of the Revolutionary Cause, including the Supreme Executive Council of the Board of War. He was a patriot, an administrator and a financier.

The Henry household was an active one and the house was always full. All together Ann Wood Henry had thirteen children, six of whom died in infancy, but a household of seven children is a responsibility and there was usually a widowed sister, three servants and probably several apprentices to crowd in. There were usually visitors and some of them very distinguished. When the British occupied Philadelphia during the Revolution, John Hart, a signer of the Declaration of Independence from New Jersey and member of the Continental Congress, came to Lancaster and stayed with the Henrys; the eminent astronomer and Treasurer of Pennsylvania, David Rittenhouse and his wife spent some time as the Henry's guests; and at the same time Thomas Paine, the famous political essayist, occupied one of their rooms. Mr. Paine was not as welcome as the others; he was a difficult guest. John Joseph Henry, who was home at that time recovering from a wound received in the siege against Quebec, says in his "Reminiscences" (1809) that it was Paine's daily habit to take a walk in the morning until twelve, then home to eat a huge dinner, after which he retired to his room to take a nap, seated in a large armchair, wrapped in a blanket, with a bottle of spirits within easy reach. When he did his writing is not clear, but probably during the night. Paine made no secret of his atheistic views which distressed Mrs. Henry very much and finally she told her husband that British or no British, Paine was no longer welcome in her household.

The Henry home was comfortable and dignified, showing evidence of culture and luxury. There was a fine carriage, silver spoons and gold buttons ordered for Mrs. Rose. Mr. Henry was away from home a great deal, particularly during the years of the Revolution, so much of the responsibility fell on Mrs. Henry but she made everyone welcome while she carried on her various tasks, quite a test for her fortitude and patience. Everyone who met her considered her a remarkable woman, one member of the Assembly wrote that she entertained with dignity and grace with an attractive face which brightened in conversation. David Rittenhouse wrote of her that she was a woman of great intelligence and extensive reading and I feel sure she explored many of the volumes from the Juliana Library while it was housed for several years under the Henry roof. This library was founded in 1759 by William Henry and other prominent citizens of Lancaster and named for the wife of William Penn, Jr. It was the third circulating library in America.

How did this little Quaker girl become a member of the Moravian Church? Her husband attended the Church of England but Ann was not entirely in sympathy with that denomination yet she did not want to return to the Quaker faith of her antecedents. During this period of uncertainty she met the wife of the clergyman of the Moravian Church of Lancaster and became an occasional attendant there. When Bishop Boehler was preaching in Lancaster, Ann persuaded her husband to go with her to his services and they were both so won by his eloquence and sincerity that in 1765 they joined the congregation. All the children were baptized in the Moravian Church and William and Ann Henry were buried in the graveyard.

Besides the important posts which William Henry held in the colony and the new Republic and the conducting of his business, William Henry was somewhat of an inventor. He was the first man in America to apply steam to navigation. John Fitch, who is generally given credit for completing a steamboat, was an acquaintance of Henry's. There is also no doubt that Robert Fulton, a young boy in Lancaster interested in all that went on, got his first ideas of the steamboat from William Henry.

In all William Henry's activities, political, social, business or inventive, Ann Wood Henry encouraged and assisted him. The tablet placed in her honor on the Moravian Church in Lancaster mentions her as "an energetic and patriotic helpmate of her husband." That is telling only half the story for it seems her charm, firm character and practical ability made a deep impression on all who knew her. During the years of the Revolution, a most critical period, Mr. Henry was Treasurer of Lancaster County, which office he held until his death in 1785. During the last years of his service he was a very ill man and his wife did the work of the Treasurer as well as being her husband's constant nurse.

At William Henry's death, the Governor offered the office of the Treasurer to his widow and she filled it for four years, with great credit, being the first woman to be given such a position and I think the only one ever to have such an office in Pennsylvania. During the last years of her life visitors to Lancaster still sought out the Henry household, among them Herr Schoepff, an eminent German traveller and Joseph Priestley, the famous chemist and Unitarian clergyman.

Of the Henry children the best known are William Henry, Jr., who became Associate Justice of the Northampton County Courts, John Joseph Henry who was Judge of the Courts of Lancaster County and Benjamin West Henry, an artist of some merit, who died young.

Ann Wood Henry died on March 8, 1789, after 66 full and active years. She was buried in the Moravian Cemetery beside her husband. Probably no woman in Lancaster's history has been more truly "a Colonial Dame."

Lancaster, Pennsylvania

ADELAIDE BROOKS HALL

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SOURCES

"The Life of William Henry" by Francis Jordan, Jr. 1910.
Lancaster County Historical Society Papers Vol. 54, #4, 29, #5 and others.
Records of the Moravian Church of Lancaster, Pennsylvania.