

William Henry Memoirs: 1748-1786

William Henry's active life was spent in Lancaster between 1748 and 1786. His fellow citizens recognized his merits and ability, and required his services in many positions of honor and trust, in fact, the best years of his life were unselfishly yielded to their demands.

William Henry was the first son of John and Elizabeth Henry, born May 19, 1729, at the old homestead in Chester County. The early death of his father caused him to forego a formal education, but Henry, possessed of a mind being strong in its powers, was evidently bent on the acquisition of knowledge. He was sent to Lancaster to be apprenticed, to one Matthew Roesser, a master gunsmith located on the third block of West King Street. This apprenticeship started about 1744.

In 1750 he embarked in business on his own account as a gun-maker and dealer in hardware and supplies for the Indian traders. He formed a partnership with Joseph Simon which lasted until 1759. In 1760 he sailed for England on the ship "Friendship" to purchase direct from English suppliers the goods he needed for his venture as trader merchant of Lancaster.

Henry started his military career as armorer for the provincial forces attached to Braddock's expedition against Fort Duquesne at Pittsburgh. The following year, he had a similiar commission under Gen. Forbes. This experience gave him a major's commission.

Henry started his public experience as canal commissioner in 1771. Following the outbreak of hostilities between England and the Colonies, he aligned himself to the patriotic cause with intense enthusiasm. Soon he was on the Committee of Safety for Lancaster county and the Supreme Executive Council for the Board of War.

He was made superintendent of arms and accoutrements and assistant commissary general. Henry was empowered to act as fiscal agent of the state and confederation for Lancaster and adjoining counties. He was a member of the Pennsylvania Assembly and sat upon the bench as one of its judiciary.

William Henry served nine years as treasurer of Lancaster County and finally in 1785 he was a delegate to the Continental Congress.

As superintendent of arms and accoutrements for the Continental Army, he exercised great judgment and power in the direction of arms procurement and supplies for the army in all eastern Pennsylvania.

An example of this authority is found in the report of the Assembly's Committee on Public Debts from 1777-1779. (These documents are in the Yeates Library at the Society.)

DR. the United States in account with William Henry, Cr.
Period March 11, 1779 to Sept. 1779—7 months.

To cash paid for repairing arms as fit items 1-54	£10,854-15-10
To cash paid for arms & accoutrements items 1-147	£20,091- 7-10
To cash paid for leather, shoes, Boots items 1-159	£47,474- 6-01
To cash paid for making shoes & boots items 1-549	£6349-17-06
To my expenses for this period	£209-18-11
To my commission on £54,034-2-6 @ ½%	£2701-14-0

FOR PERIOD TOTAL EXPENSES £56,735-16-6

This seven month account is evidence of the authority and trust placed on William Henry as procurement chief of the area.

The above brief sketch of the life of William Henry will give the reader a background of the man, who probably was not surpassed by any man in the period from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in his patriotism, devotion to the cause and contribution to the success of the Revolution.

He was also an inventor, and a devout Christian as will be evidenced by the following personal memoirs written five weeks before his death.

S. E. Dyke

MEMOIR
OF
WILLIAM HENRY

Born May 19, 1729 Chester County, Pennsylvania
Died December 15, 1786 Lancaster, Pennsylvania
Aged 57 years and 7 months less 4 days

Quiescat in Peace

Three weeks before his death he made the following memoir in the German language: (translated many years ago and given to the Lancaster County Historical Society August 4, 1972 by two sisters, Miss Grace and Miss Eleanore G. Nitzschke, 121 Oak Lane, Staten Island, N.Y. 10306, who are direct descendants from William Henry.

TRANSLATION

I was born May 19, 1729, in Chester County, Pa. My grandparents on my father's side came from Scotland and from my mother's side they were descendants of French refugees. [Huguenots]

My parents on both sides came from Ireland to Pennsylvania, and were married in this country.

My father was a Presbyterian and my mother a member of the Church of England, but as there were then no Anglican churches established in Pennsylvania, the whole family felt drawn to join the Presbyterian.

I cannot say that my education was a religious one, yet I was taught all that was good and moral and my parents were anxious to educate me according to their best abilities. The first time when I was led to dwell on the concerns of my soul was in my eighth year when it occurred to my mind what I had frequently read in school, that Jesus wished to possess our hearts and by faith to dwell therein. Then thought I to myself, "What shall I do." I do not know him, and I do not know how to find him. I made all kinds of representations of his personal form and at last hit upon the chill like thought, to take the name of Jesus from the New Testament and to swallow it. But these thoughts soon vanquished.

In my eleventh year, Mr. Whitefield and his people arrived in Pennsylvania and preached here and I heard him at different times and the thought impressed me anew that I should give my heart to God and be converted. But I finally concluded that for the present time it was too soon to do so and that I would postpone it to the time of my marriage.

My father died in my fifteenth year and our family was entirely scattered. I came to Lancaster and was apprenticed to Matthew Roesser (deceased) to learn the gunsmith's trade.

After having learned this trade, I became acquainted with several learned persons, who were Deists,¹ and who gave me books to read in which their views were presented in a very persuasive manner. I read them with great avidity and in a short time I became a decided Deist, and now I read the Scriptures with no other aim than to find fault with them. And I did not conceal my opinions but sought to spread them among my acquaintances, and I took pleasure to dispute the truths of the Christian Religion.

My pride led me to imagine that I had always gained the victory over my opponents.

¹The term "Deist" as used during the late eighteenth century meant an adherent of the movement prominent in England and among the educated or perceptive classes in the Colonies. Deists believed in one God but that God revealed himself to man through Nature rather than through the revealed religion of Christianity. Deists rejected the divine authorship of the Old and New Testaments, the idea of angels and miracles, and the

In the year 1756 I married Anna Wood. In the next year I was obliged to serve in the campaign as gunsmith contractor for the whole army. While encamped in Virginia I met an acquaintance in my neighbor's house and saw a pamphlet lying on the table which bore this little title: "Deism confuted by the present case of the Jews". I asked him for the loan of this little book, whereupon he presented me with it, as he did not want it. I took it home with me and perused it, and I was not a little confounded by its contents because it contained arguments which were very convincing, and which I was unable to refute. I read this pamphlet a second and third time with very great attention and was now fully convinced that the Scriptures were the word of God.

Great fear came upon me, and I thought "Who art thou?" Thou hast acted contrary to the word of God and disputed its truths, and thereby done all possible harm. I did not know what to do, but I resolved to do better, to lead a moral life and avoid as much as possible my former companions. This resolution I carried out as far as possible.

After the close of the campaign I returned to Lancaster and had my house repaired before moving into it.

Once as I came to look after my workmen, I saw the corpse of my neighbor's child laid out for burial. I was drawn to accompany the remains to the grave and following this impulse of my mind, I joined the funeral procession. On the way my heart was so affected that I could not restrain my tear. When we came to the church, I thought "Here you cannot remain lest you expose yourself. It was better for you to go out and seek a solitary spot, where you can pour out your heart before God." And this appeared to me to be the real design of my being drawn to accompany the remains to the grave.

I then went out, sought a spot where none could see, and prostrated myself upon my face, and said to God, "I know thee not, I wish to ask thee for something, but I know not what to ask for, for I am altogether ignorant of thy ways, but one thing I pray thee to give me, an open ear and an obedient heart so that if thou will impart aught to me, I may be able to understand thee and distinguish thy voice from all others".

I left this spot with the hope that God would have mercy upon

doctrine that Jesus Christ was sent among mankind on a redemptive mission. Some Deists questioned immortality. Among the American Founding Fathers deism had a strong following. Although many persons including George Washington nominally were Anglican, their writings and practices indicate a far greater tolerance for deistic thoughts than did the utterances of less-exalted Americans. Many of the early leaders such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams, evidenced a considerable attraction to deistic principles; indeed, the latter two became Unitarians. Thomas Paine, the fiery pamphleteer who stayed with the Henry household in Lancaster, was an avowed deist. Evangelical Christians usually classed deists with atheists as being equally abominable.

me. I now sought someone to counsel me in my anxiety for the salvation of my soul. Among others, I went to a vestryman seventy years of age, and said to him, "You are an aged man, and you will probably know the plan of salvation, for you have not long to live. Is it possible to obtain an assurance of our salvation in this life or not?" He replied that he did not know, that he had indeed heard of persons who professed to something of this kind, but that he had not attained such an advancement in his religious experience.

I next went to a minister of the English [Episcopal] church, as I had long ago left the Presbyterians on account of their doctrine of reprobation. I described to him the state of my soul, and that I desired to ascertain whether we would obtain the assurance of our salvation and how we would attain it. He replied that these were all mere fancies, that I should not entertain such notions, but seek gay society, and drink a glass of wine, and then these thoughts would soon vanish. I took great offence at this reply. I determined to hold no more communication with this person.

In the year 1759, I dissolved partnership with Joseph Simon of Lancaster in the iron business. This was the occasion of my going to England.

On this vessel in which I sailed, there were two Quaker ministers. A man and a woman with whom to pass away the time. I frequently disputed on religious topics and to whom I at last proposed the question whether we would obtain the assurance of our salvation in this life. But I received the same reply from them as I had been given by the above mentioned vestryman.

In the meanwhile they conversed much upon the guidance and leadings of the Holy Spirit which convinced me that the Holy Ghost had begun his work of grace in my heart.

Our ship was captured by a French privateer in the mouth of the channel and taken to Spain. Some months subsequently, I reached London. Having become acquainted on board the vessel with the above Quakers, I endeavored to obtain boarding in a Quaker family and succeeded in procuring one.

The man was a minister and welcomed me very cordially because I had brought with me his wife from Spain. They frequently invited me to attend their meetings, but I did not wish to become more intimately acquainted with them and I postponed it for some time.

Among the books of my landlord, I found one containing the memoirs of the primitive friends from which I ascertained that some of them had died in a very happy and joyous frame of heart, which proved a comfort to me and led me to a more intimate acquaintance with these people. I visited two of their ministers in Portsmouth and accompanied them to a house where they held a prayer meeting.

During a prayer meeting something indescribable penetrated my soul. I did not know what was the matter with me, and I begged God that he would not lead me further, otherwise I could no longer endure to live in this world. This circumstance and my feelings at this time led me to be drawn with particular affection to this denomination, although I found on my return to America that the Quakers of our country were inferior to those with whom I had associated in England.

I had left England at the close of November, and I very much dreaded the boisterous voyage. The first fourteen days we had very bad weather. I then resolved to make covenant with God, that if he would bring me safely to America, I would become his child and serve him to the best of my ability.

At the same time I obtained a conviction that he would grant my request and was afterward quite unconcerned about the result of the voyage. We were favored with the most beautiful weather and reached Delaware Bay six weeks after we had left Dartmouth.

When we reached the coast there hung a heavy fog before the river which had continued three weeks so that a vessel which had left England five weeks before us entered port subsequent to our arrival. But when we arrived, the fog disappeared so that we were not obliged to be detained in the least.

A few hours after we were in the river, however, the fog reappeared again. I embraced the first opportunity to land and as soon as I placed my feet upon the ground I remembered the vow I had made to God, and I thought he has fully kept his promise to me, but how will I perform mine? My own helplessness and inexperience stared me in the face, but I resolved to do what I could.

I came home and found that my wife was also in great concern about the salvation of her soul.

I tried to persuade her to join the Quakers into whose fellowship I had already been received. In obedience to my wishes, she went several times to their meetings, but she did not find that edification for which her heart craved, and all efforts on my part to induce her to join this sect were fruitless.

I felt unhappy and dissatisfied with myself. During this time my wife sought the acquaintance of Sister Russmeyer, whom she met several times and in whose entire demeanor and actions she perceived something very peculiar, which made her wish to be as happy and joyous as she (Sister Russmeyer), seemed to be. She also attended the meetings of the Moravian brethren. I also made attempts at four different times to enter their place of meetings but could not fully decide to do so. Therefore, I each time passed by their house of worship. On one occasion I wished to go to Grubb's furnace and take the road that leads direct through Lititz. But I lost my way and rode back on the road to Lancaster. When I found the right road, Bro. Mathew Heyl, who had left Lancaster after me,

overtook me and began to converse with me. He told me his religious experiences upon which I told him mine. In conclusion, he asked me whether I had experiences of happy change of heart. I could not return a positive answer to this question and I only replied, "I hope so". However this conversation left a good impression upon my mind. Subsequently the "sainted" Bro. Peter Bohler came to Lancaster before his departure for Europe and preached in the English language on a Sunday evening. My wife heard his sermon and spoke of it in the highest terms, and begged me to attend his German service on the next day, as I could understand that language.

I spent the following day in great distress of mind. I represented to God how much I had already suffered since I left the Church of England and joined the Quakers, and that it would be much worse if I would join these despised people. I begged him not to suffer me to disgrace myself the second time.

Finally, I resolved once more to covenant with and obey him if he would enlighten me on three doubtful points.

FIRST, whether the man Jesus Christ were truly God and of equal glory with the Father, for this I could not yet believe.

SECOND, whether [an] insignificant and despised society of Brethren [Moravians] were his people.

THIRD, whether it were his will that I should join this people.

Having made this resolution, my mind was quieted and I felt assured that the questions would be satisfactorily answered and I repaired to the [Moravian] Brethren's Church that very evening feeling quite comforted.

When I entered the audience chamber, I was penetrated with a peculiar sensation and so carried away by my feelings that I afterward could neither remember the text nor any portion of the sermon. But now I was convinced that Jesus Christ was truly God and the life eternal, and this conviction through divine grace remained unshaken until this hour.

Soon after I applied for reception into the Society of the Moravians and on the 23rd of June 1765 my wife and I were received into this congregation.

On the 31st of Jan. 1767 we partook of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Since then I walked with God in a happy frame of mind.

My dear Savior continued to manifest himself more fully to my poor heart and to show great mercy and grace to me, for which I shall thank him throughout all eternity. God blessed our marriage with 13 children, 10 sons and 3 daughters, of whom 6 are already

with our Savior and 7, namely 6 sons and one daughter are still living.

Of the two oldest sons I have lived to see four grandchildren.

Thus far in his own words, he approved himself among us as true and faithful member of our congregation who was esteemed and beloved by all. It was his delight to serve everyone, as much as possible he filled several in the city and county of Lancaster with faithfulness and general acceptance.

Two years ago he was elected to serve as a member of Congress and in consequence he remained in New York City the greater part of last year.

There he contracted a disease, the effect of a severe cold, which increasing from time to time, led to the extermination of his life. And in these trying times and circumstances also he gave evidences that he knew in whom he believed and although he wished to live some time longer for the sake of his family, he was never the least perfectly resigned to the will of God, should he (God) decide to remove him at this time.

The salvation of his dear children was the chief concern of his heart and he often exhorted them to give their hearts to Jesus Christ, to remain faithful to him. He testified to all that he placed all his sole dependence on the grace and mercy of God and that he felt full assurance in his heart and was ready to depart as soon as the hour of his release should come.

In this happy frame of mind he spent the remaining days and nights of his life, sitting most of the time in his chair and bearing his sufferings with patience and fortitude, seldom making complaints of his pains although suffering much.

During the last three weeks, his strength declined evidently; nevertheless he did not wish anyone to watch with him in the last night of the 14th & 15th of December. We heard him sigh at different times during the night, of his last petition to the Lord was—oh dear Lord and Saviour, if I had not Thee, and if thy blood did not plead for me, to whom should I, the poorest of the poor turn in this my extremity?

Toward morning he wished to be put to bed, and when preparations were made and his wife was called, we perceived that his departure was at hand, yea before we were aware of it, he had gently fallen asleep in Jesus while his only surviving daughter sang some verses of a hymn. She had arrived from Lititz a few weeks previously and had helped to nurse him with great faithfulness. He attained the age of 57 years, 7 months less 4 days. He rests now in peace.

While it is not uncommon for adults to experience inner conflict resulting in religious conversion—a phenomenon rather prevalent among youth—relatively few persons of William Henry's standing in the community have put in writing the anguish suffered as they wrestled with the problems of religious seeking and experience. Candid as he was, Henry apparently felt some constraint, because much of his outpouring borders on the superficial; that is not to say, however, that he did not feel a very deep anxiety. Perhaps it was not his nature to be introspective to the degree historians would have preferred. His travail—the word is used advisedly—illustrates an interesting wandering from a perfunctory religious attachment of his youth to a complete rejection of traditional Christianity, and then on to a seeking for the "right" religion. After the excesses of Deism he was dismayed by what he interpreted as the cynicism of an Anglican rector, warmed by the intimate relationship between God and Man of the English Quakers, annoyed by the American Quakers, and finally filled with the sense of having found the right religion in the Moravian Church. It is an old story, and one that is entirely human. In all probability the religious milieu in which he eventually found the answer to his quest was not very much different from the one he drifted from as a young man. What changed, we may surmise was Henry's outlook as it was modified by his experiences.

The reader is urged to place Henry's religious problem in the proper historical context. The American Revolution interrupted the movement known as the Great Awakening, a revitalization of Protestant churches begun in Great Britain, and which extended to the American colonies in the 1720s and 1730s. Disruption caused by the agitation for independence and moral degeneration resulting from the war diverted the American people from nurturing their religious institutions. The war not only destroyed the political authority of England in the new Republic; it landed a devastating blow on religious authority which throughout history often has been the ally of repressive rulers. Moreover, the heroes of the struggle for American Independence were more Deistic than conventional Christian. All of the Founding Fathers professed a belief in God, but few of them manifested much interest in denominational matters or gave much support to the promotion of evangelical Christianity. The new Republic was not ready for a re-awakening of religious fervor, or resumption of the Great Awakening, until the impact of the Revolution wore away. Some sensitive souls were already seeking religious leadership, and were like lost sheep in search of their shepherd.

William Henry seems to have been one of the lost sheep. His religious training as a boy did not armor him against the forces he would encounter in his association with the worldly-wise Revolutionary leaders and his famed Deistic boarder, Thomas Paine. William Henry's accounts of accepting Deism and then arguing with his tra-

ditional-minded antagonists is a familiar story to those who have observed college freshmen trying out their newly-found truth. Educated men of that day usually had a good liberal education; they were philosophical in their understanding of humanity, and charitable in their assessment of man's foibles. They took the arrogance of evangelical Christians as well as the cocksure attitude of "free-thinkers" in their stride.

We do not know if the Anglican rector was expressing to William Henry his sincere counsel which Henry interpreted as being rather cynical (skepticism was entertained among some of the Anglican clergy), or if he was trying to be helpful to one obsessed by deep anxiety. It does not seem plausible that local clergy would trifle with the very real problems of a prominent citizen seeking answers to tormenting questions.

The English Quakers Henry came to know were not in positions of authority in England; their close, personal, religious intimacy was not compromised by possession of political power as was the case in pre-Revolutionary Pennsylvania. The theology of the Friends was not too far removed from that of the Deists, and in later years the gap was closed significantly. A person who experienced the exciting rationalism of Deism but missed the warmth and intimacy of a God-to-Man relationship would find the Religious Society of Friends a compatible association. Henry was rather silent on his personal relationship with the Quakers in Lancaster other than to suggest it was not as pleasant as the English experience. His final conversion to the Moravian brethren brought him into a German-culture body with a neat balance between rationalism and a Christ-centered Protestantism. The cultural and educational qualities of the Moravians are well known. To Henry it surely was the spiritual home he had been seeking.

The translator erred in calling the Moravian brethren the "Church of the Brethren," and we have altered the manuscript accordingly. The Church of the Brethren stems from the German Baptists, or "Dunkers." They generally are included among the "Plain Sects" although the term is not entirely appropriate today, for the distinctive "plain garb" has all but disappeared except for church services in conservative areas. Members of the German Baptist Brethren usually were not referred to as members of the Church of the Brethren until later in the nineteenth century. Moreover, history records William Henry as being a Moravian.