

Away We Go: **Richmond's St. John's Church: A prelude to liberty**

**Patrick Henry's famous
speech brought to life in re-
enactments**

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March 23, 1775: Patrick Henry's finest hour!

Testimonies and tempers were heating up at the Second Virginia Convention. More than 100 delegates had assembled in Richmond at Henrico Parish Church - now known as St. John's Church - to organize their protests against the actions of the British Crown. Wanting to avoid the anger and possible punishment by the royal governor, Lord Dunmore, the group decided to meet here; the church was the only place in town large enough to hold the meeting.

While this get-together began with the gentlemen voicing their differing opinions in courteous fashion, the delegates were not unanimous as to what should be done about England's tyranny and the defense of the Colonies. All too soon, no words were being spared out of politeness; no emotions went unexpressed. As the debate heated-up, Patrick Henry - while underscoring the need to vote for his resolutions to establish a militia - led the verbal surge with the most famous speech of his life:

"Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

On April 19, 1775, less than a month after the great "Orator of the Revolution" had aimed his impassioned pleas at America's Founding Fathers, skirmishes broke out between the Massachusetts militia and British soldiers at Lexington and Concord. The fight for liberty had now become much more than a war of words.

History loves company, and the pleasure of yours is welcome this summer at St. John's "Liberty or Death" re-enactments. During this visitor-friendly happening, professional actors in 1770s dress will portray 10 of the most important "players" at the Second Virginia Convention. Leading this colonial-period cast will be Patrick Henry, with George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Peyton Randolph and Richard Henry Lee appearing in supporting roles.

Visitors will be seated next to these famous personalities as if they too were in attendance on that fateful day. Everyone will realize the politics of the time; feel the passionate feelings of the delegates for and against Henry's resolutions to defend the rights of the colonists; and witness their body language as they attempt to influence the vote.

Re-enactments will take place every Sunday through Aug. 31. Beginning at 1 p.m., free tickets will be distributed at the front entrance to the church. Because of the performance's popularity and an open seating policy, it's best to arrive at least 15 minutes early. A music program will be presented on the church's rare Adam Stein organ before the re-enactment begins at 2 p.m.

After the 45-minute-long performance, linger and learn about St. John's memorable history, going back in time to the structure's completion in 1741. Visitors will be taken on a tour by docents who really know their way around the Episcopal church's interior, the other buildings on the grounds and the graveyard (the first public cemetery in Richmond) where many Virginia notables are buried.

Tours are conducted on the hour and the half-hour, and last approximately 20 minutes. On re-enactment Sundays, visitors can join the guides at 3, 3:30 or 4 p.m. Regular tour times are 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday. Tour tickets can be purchased at the gift shop, located at the rear of the churchyard. Tickets cost \$6 for adults, \$5 for senior citizens, and \$4 for children ages 7 to 18. Children younger than 7 are admitted free of charge.

An "Away We Go" tip: Arrive in Richmond's Church Hill neighborhood several hours in advance of the re-enactment at St. John's. Take this time to explore its charming historic district, discovering the abundant array of restored 19th-century private residences and rear gardens; its eclectic restaurants and cafes; and its fine assortment of art galleries and specialty shops. The complimentary brochure, "Visitor's Guide to Historic Church Hill," is available in the church's gift shop. This is also the ideal place

to acquire the free "Road to Revolution Heritage Trail" guide.

St. John's Church is handicapped accessible. For more information about the offerings presented at St. John's Church, call 804-648-5015 or visit the Web site at www.historicstjohnschurch.org.

Visitors seeking a more in-depth interpretation of the prolific life and exceptional times of Patrick Henry are encouraged to first experience the "Liberty or Death" re-enactments at the church, then stay overnight in the Richmond area, heading out the next day for a trek along the Road to Revolution Heritage Trail. This newly developed activity - created to bring one of Colonial America's greatest patriots into focus more clearly than ever before - winds its way around the capital city and through Hanover County before turning south to Hampton-Sydney College in Prince Edward County, and finally on to Brookneal, Va.

Ten significant sites become the "chapters" that help to tell Henry's fascinating story: from his birth at "Studley" in 1736 to historic Hanover Courthouse, where he began his public career; from his Richmond office as first governor of the newly independent Virginia to Red Hill, his last home and the place where he was buried in 1799.

More information concerning the Road to Revolution Heritage Trail can be found online at www.roadtorevolution.com.

For general information about the Richmond area and accommodations, call the Richmond Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau at 800-370-9004 or visit the Web site at www.visit.richmond.com.

How to get there: To reach St. John's Church, located at 2401 E. Broad St. in Richmond, trek west on Route 50 to I-495 south (Capital Beltway); continue along the Inner Loop, crossing over the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, then take the ramp for I-95 south; follow I-95 to the Richmond city limits, watching for Exit 74B (Franklin Street); take the exit ramp to the traffic light, then turn right onto Franklin Street; proceed and turn right onto 14th Street, then right again onto Broad Street; follow Broad Street to the church and the parking area, both located on the right.

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