

Was Patrick Henry Illiterate?

Patrick Henry is a name familiar to many Americans. But let's be honest, few of us who know of him could offer more than a detail or two about the man.

Like Paul Revere, Henry, an admirable patriot and statesman, is primarily remembered for a single act. While Revere is remembered for his famous Midnight Ride, Henry is remembered for his "Liberty or Death" speech, delivered on this day (March 23) in 1775.

There is not a lot of detailed biographical information on Henry available online, an irksome fact when you want to write catchy things about someone on the anniversary of a historic speech. So I dusted off a few biographies of the man.

To my astonishment, I found some question around the certitude on whether or not one of America's most famous orators was even *literate*.

In fact, biographer John Torrey Morse dedicates an entire chapter to the issue of Henry's alleged illiteracy. ([Chapter II: Was He Illiterate?](#)).

The allegations of illiteracy seem to stem primarily from the following:

1. There is [a very thin record](#) of primary personal documents left by Henry.
2. Henry had little formal education and was a lousy student. (As a youth, he was "an indolent, dreamy, frolicsome creature with a mortal enmity to books," writes Morse.)
3. During the Revolution, around learned men such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, Henry often spoke of his

disdain of books and formal learning. This created suspicion in men like Jefferson and Adams, who routinely devoured books. Both men hinted at a possible lack of literacy on Henry's part, and their writings were preserved by posterity. (In his old age, Jefferson would exaggerate of Henry: "He was a man of very little knowledge of any sort. He read nothing and had no books.")

4. To his more polished peers, Henry sounded like, well, a hick. The Virginian apparently spoke with a heavy drawl that made him difficult to understand, a problem exacerbated by Henry's penchant to play up his accent in certain company. (Henry's "vulgar and vicious" dialect, however, often disappeared during speeches, Jefferson noted to a young Daniel Webster.)

5. Not a single written copy of any of his famous speeches has survived.

For these reasons (and perhaps a few others), Henry's literacy was called into question by his peers and historians. So what's the answer?

A thorough review of Henry's record, Morse concludes, reveals that "the Jeffersonian tradition of Patrick Henry's illiteracy is, at any rate, far too highly tinted."

Henry was not only literate, but the letters he wrote that did survive reveal a "real intellectual cultivation," Morse wrote. In fact, the biographer concluded that the few written documents penned by Henry that survived suggest the great speaker was a stronger writer than many of his peers: "In penmanship, punctuation, spelling, syntax, they are, upon the whole, rather better than the letters of most of the great actors in our Revolution."

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