

John Henry of Lancaster.

John Henry was the younger brother of William Henry of Lancaster. His birth date is unknown. He married Elizabeth Russell (d. 1833), who seems to have been considerably younger than he. They had three children: William (1770-1846), Elizabeth (1772-1840), and Charlotte (1775-1859). Elizabeth and Charlotte lived out their lives as single women in Lancaster and are buried in its Anglican St. James Cemetery. In the 1790s William had opened a shop in Lancaster, partnering with George Moore, but by 1800 he had traveled west to establish himself as a trader at Detroit and Fort Michilimackinac. Later William settled at Baltimore.

John Henry himself worked as a gunsmith. It is possible that his brother William trained him before he left for England in 1760. In 1762, John Henry purchased the second lot in from Penn Square (#126) on East King Street and he worked and lived there until his death. His brother William lived on the other side of Penn Square, just behind the public market.

Material that can help us glimpse John Henry's activities as a gunsmith survives in the Henry Family Papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. In January 1765, for instance, John Henry purchased from Simon & Henry—his brother's hardware shop—a large number of gun parts. He was given credit for a year, which he was to pay off by supplying the firm with "Riffle Gunns." He seems to have flourished as a gunsmith. In 1772 Henry delivered a silver mounted rifle for John Inglis (1708-1775), a West Indies merchant and a founder of the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania), for which he charged £8.1.6. In June 1773, Henry left Lancaster for Detroit. His nephew, John J. Henry, not yet sixteen, accompanied him. He spent the end of June and half of July selling rifles. His diary seems to record selling 35 rifles, most at £7 or £8. His travel cost him £37 and he earned about £242. He seems to have been back in Lancaster by August.

Two surviving accounts (produced after he died) reveal that in the following years he did considerable work for McComb & Company and for Georg Rathvon (1747-1799), a local gunsmith. For McComb & Company between August 1773 and August 1774, Henry supplied seven rifles (at £7 each) and did considerable repair work on various types of guns. He cleaned and repaired locks, re-stocked rifles, hardened hammers, and straightened, cut, and ground gun parts. For Rathvon, Henry worked on rifles, smooth rifles, and muskets between December 1774 and February 1777.

John Henry, like his brother, was an early patriot as tensions grew with Britain in the mid-1770s. In May 1775 the Lancaster County Committee of Observation and Inspection asked Henry "to provide a Mould for Casting Bullets of different sizes to be ready for such Troops as may have occasion to march from this County," and in June of that year he was chosen to sit on the Committee itself. The Committee gave Henry the job of assigning a value on a batch of rifles before they were sent off to continental troops. He continued to work as a gunsmith. In November 1775, the County Committee named Henry among other county riflemakers who must "lay by all other kind of work and begin to make Muskets & Bayonets for this County" until March 1, 1776. He and his workmen were required "make & furnish as great a quantity of Muskets & Bayonets as he possibly can in that time" and "deliver them to the Commissioners & Assessors of this County or to this Committee." In March 1776, John Henry joined with Jacob

Dickert (1740-1822) to build a grinding and boring mill on land in Manheim Township, Lancaster County.

By June 1776, John Henry had been appointed a captain of a company in the First Battalion of Associators commanded by Colonel George Ross. The local militia association had been authorized by the Lancaster County Committee of Observation and Inspection in May 1775. Companies could contain up to 100 men and multiple companies formed battalions. Few details about John Henry's military service have emerged, except for a few receipts from when he was reimbursed for expenses of his company. Indeed, the only additional information comes from a letter that his daughter Elizabeth wrote on July 25, 1836 to her cousin, the gunsmith J. Joseph Henry at Boulton. Written nearly sixty years after her father's death, this extraordinary letter describes John Henry's revolutionary service: "My father was Captain and com[m]anded three companies and was gone with his men and so much trouble and got the camp fever from the Soldiers and died with it. Mammy often said, 'Johnny Henry you are giving all your work to the War and get no pay.' His answer was, 'We gain Liberty, pay day will come.'"

John Henry survived less than a year in the service of the new nation. He was dead by early 1777. His widow Elizabeth was given legal power to administer his estate and an inventory of his possessions was completed on May 26, 1777. The inventory, which stretches over six pages, reveals the tools that a working gunsmith needed: hand saws, vices, a large bellows, an anvil, chisels, knives, files, stocking planes, "tongs and a little shovel," and presses. And Henry had a large stock of components as well: screw plates, rifle barrels, musket locks, 30 rifle locks, 5 dozen unspecified gun locks, 30 sets of rammer pipes, 43 pounds of "old and new Brass," and 400 feet of planks (stocks) of maple and walnut. He had "5 old pistols" (valued at only at 10 shillings), perhaps expecting to salvage some parts. A "new barrel rough stock'd with one mounting" (valued at £2.15) suggests that his military service had interrupted his work. Other items in the inventory reveal the level of comfort in which the Henrys lived. Rugs, china bowls and plates, silver spoons and teaspoons, a half dozen Delph plates, a couch, a looking glass, several books, and a map and a "wall piece" (a painting, valued at £7) filled their home on King Street.

The inventory also valued "1 Negroe Man Jemmy" at £225. The man who fought to "gain Liberty" for himself and for his family, then, kept an enslaved man to help him with the hard labor of gunsmithing.