

Patrick Henry's Military Role in the Area

American politician and orator Patrick Henry delivered his famous "Give me liberty or give me death!" speech to the Second Virginia Convention on March 23, 1775, at St. John's Church in Richmond. In May of 1775, while Henry was in Philadelphia attending the Second Continental Congress, the Virginia convention created two provincial regiments and elected him colonel of the 1st Virginia Regiment. Henry had little military experience, but this was not considered a major drawback at the time. In his new role Henry did much to recruit and organize troops, even organizing a navy.

In September 1775, Virginia's Committee of Safety, which served as the executive branch of the Virginia Patriot government, designated Henry as commander-in-chief of all Virginia's forces. Despite the high title, Henry was placed under tight civilian control – likely reflecting the view of some of the more moderate members of the Committee that in that role the volatile Henry could be contained.

On October 24, the Committee of Safety ordered Henry's rival, Patriot Col. William Woodford and the 2nd Virginia Regiment to cross the James River to secure the citizens and their property and free Norfolk and Princess Anne Counties (modern cities of Chesapeake, Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Virginia Beach) from royal colonial rule. On October 25, Col. Henry, although serving as commander-in-chief of Virginia military forces, was ordered to support the deployment of Col. Woodford's militia forces in their mission.

Before making the crossing of the James, Col. Woodford's troops engaged the British on October 27 and were victorious at the Battle of Hampton. The determined resistance from the Patriot militia forced the British to retreat after suffering casualties. The town of Hampton emerged largely unscathed. Henry and his men saw no action.

On November 4, 1775, the Virginia Committee of Safety reminded Col. Henry that the Committee had the authority to decide what units would advance to confront the royal governor and his forces near Norfolk. The committee advised Henry and the officers of the 1st Virginia Regiment that they were subject to the orders of the civilian government. These instructions would later be included in the commission warrant or orders of each military officer and are the basis of civilian control of the military, still practiced today. Henry resigned his commission in early 1776 and became Virginia's first post-independence governor on July 5, 1776.