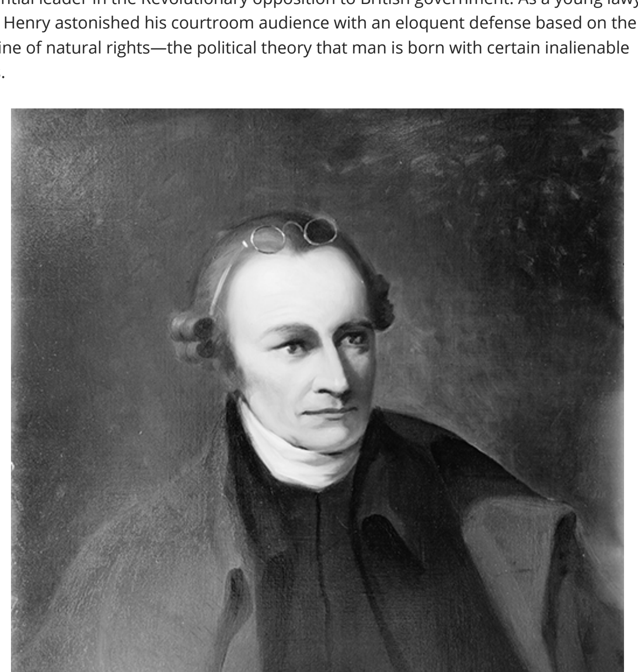
Today in History - May 29

Patrick Henry, Orator of Liberty

Patrick Henry was born on **May 29**, 1736, in Studley, Virginia. He was a brilliant orator and an influential leader in the Revolutionary opposition to British government. As a young lawyer in 1763, Henry astonished his courtroom audience with an eloquent defense based on the doctrine of natural rights—the political theory that man is born with certain inalienable rights.

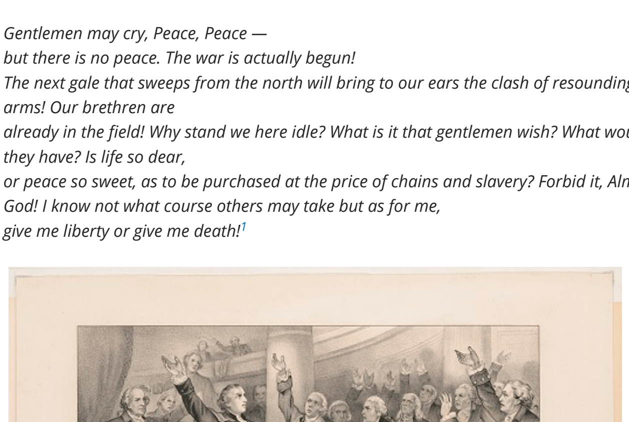


Patrick Henry, half-length portrait. (Photograph of a painting by George B. Matthews in the United States Capitol). c1904. Detroit Publishing Company. Prints & Photographs Division

On his twenty-ninth birthday, as a new member of Virginia's House of Burgesses, Henry presented a series of resolutions: the Virginia Resolves on the Stamp Act, which opposed Britain's Stamp Act. The Resolves were adopted on May 30, 1765. He concluded his introduction of the Resolves with the fiery words "Caesar had his Brutus, Charles the First his Cromwell, and George the Third—" when, it is reported, voices cried out, "Treason! treason!" "—and George the Third may profit by their example! If this be treason make the most of it."

Henry went on to serve as a member of the first Virginia Committee of Correspondence, which facilitated inter-colonial cooperation, and as a delegate to the First Continental Congresses in 1774 and the Second Continental Congress in 1775. At the second Virginia Convention, on March 23, 1775, in St. John's Church, Richmond, he delivered his most famous speech. As war with Great Britain appeared inevitable, Henry proclaimed:

> *Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace —*
> *but there is no peace. The war is actually begun!*
> *The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are*
> *already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? 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!*[1]



"Give me liberty, or give me death!" New York: Currier & Ives, c. 1876, Popular Graphic Arts. Prints & Photographs Division

Henry was the first elected governor of Virginia, serving five one-year terms in this office from 1776 to 1779 and again from 1784 to 1786, alternating with terms as a member of the state legislature. There he led the opposition to the bill that became the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom because of his belief that state taxes should be directed to the support of all Christian denominations. The Statute, written by Thomas Jefferson and passed by the Virginia General Assembly on January 16, 1786, is the forerunner of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment protections for religious freedom. Throughout his public career, Henry retained his leadership role, having a profound influence on Virginia's role in the new nation.

In 1788 Henry opposed Virginia's ratification of the new U.S. Constitution because of his concern that the new central government would have too much power. After the Constitution was adopted, he continued to work for the addition of the first ten amendments guaranteeing the freedoms that came to be known as the Bill of Rights. His last speech before he died in 1799 was a plea for American unity in response to early arguments favoring primacy of states' rights.

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1. No text of the "Liberty or Death" speech in Henry's hand has survived, nor has any contemporary version of it, so the precise text is not known. However, U.S. Attorney General William Wirt recreated the speech from the recollections of those who had heard it. In 1817 Wirt published the speech, along with descriptions of Henry's speech-giving mannerisms in a biography of Patrick Henry: Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry. Another reliable full text of the speech is available on the Yale Law School's Avalon Project Website.(Return to text)

Learn More

- Search on *Patrick Henry* to find correspondence, memoranda, and other items of interest relating to this American patriot in the following document collections:
  - George Washington Papers
  - Thomas Jefferson Papers, 1606 to 1827
  - Andrew Jackson Papers
  - James Madison Papers, 1723 to 1859
  - A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875
  - Documents from the Continental Congress and Constitutional Convention, 1774 to 1789
- A timeline of events related to the formation of the United States and the essay To Form A More Perfect Union, provide an overview of the events leading up to ratification. The timeline and essay also provide an introduction to the Documents from the Continental Congress and Constitutional Convention, 1774 to 1789 collection. Search the collection on *Virginia AND Constitution*, to find more documents pertaining to ratification by Virginia.
- Learn more about the Constitution and the Bill of Rights in the Primary Documents in American History.

Wisconsin

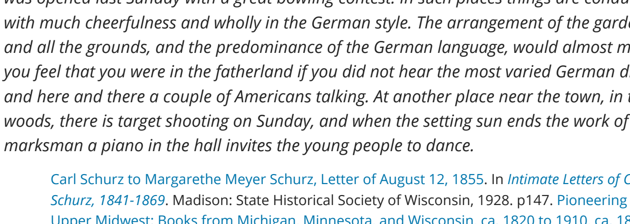
On **May 29**, 1848, Wisconsin became the thirtieth state admitted to the Union. The "Badger State" was the last state formed in its entirety from the Northwest Territory. Textured with beautiful landscapes and abundant natural resources, Wisconsin has a rich legacy of concern regarding their conservation. Tourist sites include the Wisconsin Dells and Devil's Lake.

Crystal Lake, Wis. Albert A. Kreuter, c1913. Panoramic Photographs. Prints & Photographs Division

> *Wisconsin is a beautiful land… by reason of its wooded hills and the multitude of its beautiful little lakes. I had imagined it to be less well settled; for although one finds the borders of civilization so near at hand that in hunting one often encounters Indians, yet the southern half of the state is developing into a great, blooming, densely populated agricultural district.*
>
> Carl Schurz to Margarethe Meyer Schurz, Letter of October 9, 1854. In *Intimate Letters of Carl Schurz, 1841-1869*. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1928. p139. Pioneering the Upper Midwest: Books from Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, ca. 1820 to 1910. General Collections

The Winnebago, Menominee, Potowatomi, Dakota (Sioux), and Ojibwa (Cherokee) were among the Native American tribes to reside in the area. Among the first Europeans in this region were Jean Nicolet, who started a profitable fur trade between France and the native population, and Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet, Catholic priests who first explored the upper Mississippi territory.

The first permanent European settlement in this area was established in 1717, but only after the War of 1812 did the number of settlers increase notably. In 1832, the Sauk and Fox, under Chief Black Hawk, sought to regain their lands in the Illinois and Wisconsin territory but, after their defeat, settlers rapidly moved in. Miners poured into the southwestern sector of Wisconsin early. Lumberjacks came to the northern and central portions of the state. Farmers found abundant fresh water sources and rich land. Factory workers populated the southeastern industrial belt along Lake Michigan.



Panoramic View of Milwaukee, Wis... Milwaukee, Wis.: The Gugler Lithographic Co., c1898. Panoramic Maps. Geography & Map Division

> *Last evening I went with my parents to a summer refreshment place near the city, which was opened last Sunday with a great bowling contest. In such places things are conducted with much cheerfulness and wholly in the German style. The arrangement of the garden and all the grounds, and the predominance of the German language, would almost make you feel that you were in the fatherland if you did not hear the most varied German dialects and here and there a couple of Americans talking. At another place near the town, in the woods, there is target shooting on Sunday, and when the setting sun ends the work of the marksman a piano in the hall invites the young people to dance.*
>
> Carl Schurz to Margarethe Meyer Schurz, Letter of August 12, 1855. In *Intimate Letters of Carl Schurz, 1841-1869*. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1928. p147. Pioneering the Upper Midwest: Books from Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, ca. 1820 to 1910, ca. 1820 to 1910. General Collections

Political refugees from Germany found a haven in Wisconsin during the mid-nineteenth century, especially around Milwaukee. German immigrants contributed their social idealism to community life and German influence was also seen in the development of music, theater, and leisure activities. The Progressive Movement of the early 1900s, which introduced innovative ideas in education and government, found a particular resonance in the state, resulting in legislation that made Wisconsin a leader in the social reform of industry and government.

Weimar Manner Gesang Vereine, Milwaukee. Geo. R. Lawrence Co., c1907. Panoramic Photographs Prints & Photographs Division

> *A singing society [Gesangverein] has been organized which has already given a very successful concert. A lot of balls were given during the winter, and an amateur theatre is organizing. Of course all this is only a beginning, but it is something. It is a sign that spiritual needs are strongly making themselves felt….*
>
> Carl Schurz to Margarethe Meyer Schurz, Letter of March 4, 1855. In *Intimate Letters of Carl Schurz, 1841-1869*. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1928. p143. Pioneering the Upper Midwest: Books from Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, ca. 1820 to 1910, ca. 1820 to 1910. General Collections

Learn More

- Search the following collections using the keyword *Wisconsin* or the names of Wisconsin localities for more images of the state:
  - Panoramic Photographs
  - Detroit Publishing Company
  - Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives
- View the Today in History feature on Carl Schurz, a German-American conservationist and politician. Read more of Carl Schurz's correspondence in Pioneering the Upper Midwest: Books from Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, ca. 1820 to 1910. Discover other first-person accounts and historical documents from the state of Wisconsin in the same collection. Also featured is a collection of essays titled The History of the Upper Midwest: An Overview.
- Manuscripts related to Wisconsin in the collection American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940, provide other stories of those who have lived in this state.
- View a manuscript map of Indian lands of eastern Wisconsin annotated by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, ca. 1831. This item is found in the Manuscript Division's collection of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft Papers.
- Map Collections include early maps of a number of Wisconsin cities. In the Cities and Towns section, search on *Wisconsin*. See, for example, Appleton in 1867, River Falls in 1880, or Menomonee Falls in 1886. Zoom in to see houses, parks, factories, railroad trains, and more in fine detail.