Bonus Episode – *Dagger or Paper Cutter? Patrick Henry's Prop*

[00:00:00] **Announcer:** Welcome to *Revolution Revisited,* your crash course in the American Revolution. As the 250th anniversary of America's independence approaches, dive into the stories of Virginia's rebels, rule breakers, and rabble rousers who shaped a nation. This podcast is brought to you by the Virginia Museum of History & Culture and made possible by William and Karen Fralin.

[00:00:34] **Maggie Creech:** Welcome back to *Revolution Revisited.* I'm your host, Maggie Creech. Season Two is still in the works, but there were too many stories and fascinating objects to wait. So, we're bringing you the mini-sodes: bite-sized episodes with the same deep dives into the people, places, and artifacts of the era.

Today we're spotlighting an object that witnessed one of the most iconic speeches in revolutionary and American history two and a half centuries after it was used, Patrick Henry's paper cutter is taking center stage again. We're joined by Cody Youngblood, Director of Historic Preservation and Collections at Patrick Henry's Red Hill, to unpack the story behind this unassuming artifact.

[00:01:16] **Cody Youngblood:** My name is Cody Youngblood. I'm the Director of Historic Preservation and Collections at Patrick Henry's Red Hill.

[00:01:23] **Maggie Creech:** For anyone who doesn't know, Red Hill is the last home and burial place of Patrick Henry located in Charlotte County, Virginia. It was his thirteenth and final home where he lived with his second wife, Dorothea Dandridge, and about 10 of their children from 1794 to 1799.

Virginians often know Patrick Henry as a fiery orator and a revolutionary figure, but it's just as important to understand him as a person, not just a politician.

[00:01:59] **Cody Youngblood:** There's a lot about Henry that we don't know because he just didn't write a lot down. There's no diary of his that exists. So much of what we do know about his personal life comes from his great-grandson, Edward Fontaine. And Fontaine, although he wasn't alive during his great-grandfather's life, his father Patrick Henry Fontaine was in his twenties when Patrick died. So, he recollected a lot of stuff to his son who then wrote this down, and it exists today in what we call the Fontaine manuscript. But in there, Edward Fontaine goes into some great detail.

He talks about Patrick Henry being a very simple gentleman who was somewhat eccentric. Many of his contemporaries came from wealth, but Henry was really the opposite in that he was raised on a farm and came to power through his own sheer will. He was well versed in the ancient classics like his contemporaries, but he was also, as Lord Byron called Patrick Henry, the forest-born Demosthenes.

I think many people, especially the older gentry who came from the wealthier English background, really looked down upon that, and in some cases they were afraid of that because these middling lower class people, they're getting these weird ideas about not wanting to pay taxes and wanting to go against our sovereign here. So, as you'll see in many of the cartoons of the day, people like Patrick

Henry were portrayed as really ridiculous, outlandish, backwoods farmers. But in the end, I think Henry showed them.

[00:03:29] **Maggie Creech:** While Henry Rose to political power through determination and skill, much of his personal life remains in the shadows, pieced together through oral histories. What we do know reveals a man who was both deeply committed to his family and shaped by the contradictions of his time. As a husband, a father, and, and an enslaver, Henry's legacy is complex, marked by sometimes conflicting attributes of care, conviction, and complicity. One story that exemplifies this is connected to his first wife, Sarah Shelton, who—as some listeners may know—Henry reportedly locked in the basement of Scotch Town.

Like other parts of Henry's personal life, the historic record surrounding this story is not particularly robust. What historians do know is that Sarah was likely dealing with serious mental health challenges, including violent outbursts and bouts of depression that were onset after the birth of her sixth child. In the eighteenth century, options for care were extremely limited and often brutal. Henry's efforts, while imperfect, were made to provide care for Sarah outside of institutional settings.

[00:04:40] **Cody Youngblood:** Henry's first wife is fraught with myths and misconceptions, unfortunately, because again. A lot of the historical record was not written down and it's left to oral history, which as we know, can sometimes go into a bit of fantasy.

But from what we do know, we know that Sarah Shelton was well cared for at Scotch Town, even though she was likely relegated to a room in the basement of the home. This was an English basement. It had large windows. The floor was bricked. It had a fireplace. So, during the Virginia summers, I could imagine it'd be very cool down there and with a house full of children, the basement would be very quiet for Sarah.

So, in that instance, he would rather have his enslaved nurses care for Sarah at Scotch Town rather than putting her in Eastern State Hospital at Williamsburg, which was known for mistreating its residents because mental illness was so misunderstood in the eighteenth century. As a father, we know he was very good despite having 17 kids. He gave his attention to them equally. He homeschooled many children. At Red Hill, we know that he educated his grandson, Patrick Henry Fontaine in the study of law. He taught them Greek and Latin. Even though Henry wasn't alive for most of the lives of his 77 grandchildren, he paid very close attention to their future and left them many things in his will.

But at the same time, he did treat enslaved people as property. There's only one letter that exists in Henry's life that he wrote to a gentleman named Robert Pleasants in 1773, where we really get a good look into his personal conflicts with the institution of slavery. He admits that as a Christian man, this is a terrible institution to be engaged in. But at the same time, he finds that it would be a quote unquote general inconvenience to live without his enslaved people. And ultimately, Henry would die without doing anything to push for the abolition of his enslaved persons. We know that in Henry's will, he did allow for Dorothea to free one or two of his enslaved people—quote unquote, if she wished-but we only have documentation that she freed one individual. At the same time.she did separate twenty of the sixty-seven enslaved individuals from Red Hill. As allowed by her husband and his will, which was the largest forced separation of enslaved people in Red Hill's history.

[00:07:12] **Maggie Creech:** As a young man, Henry bounced between careers and not always successfully. He tried his hand at farming—not an ideal time for him. His efforts were met with fire and drought. And store-keeping twice. As it turns out, you do have to actually understand how credit works to make a livelihood from a storefront.

But by his early twenties, he was working in his father-in-law's tavern when he started reading law. Self-taught underqualified and supremely confident, he convinced a panel of elite lawyers to admit him to the bar. That's when things finally clicked for our man Patrick. He launched his law career in 1763 with the Parsons' Cause case, where he boldly challenged Parliament and won. That courtroom performance, made him a rising star in Virginia, and just two years later he won a seat in the House of Burgesses. And, as we've explained in other episodes, he's eventually chosen as a delegate for the first Continental Congress.

[00:08:10] **Cody Youngblood:** So, he ultimately is elected as a delegate to the second Virginia Convention, and that's where we know him best because he delivers his "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech in Richmond in 1775 at that convention.

[00:08:22] **Maggie Creech:** Now let's take a closer look at the object at the heart of today's episode: Patrick Henry's paper cutter. What role could a paper cutter possibly play in one of Henry's most famous speeches?

[00:08:34] **Cody Youngblood:** When Henry was at the second Virginia Convention, he held this item when he declared, "Give me liberty or give me death," and in fact pretended to plunge it into his breast as if it were a dagger. This is a really unique item because when most people see it, they say, oh, it looks like a tongue depressor. It belongs in my doctor's office. It's about eight inches long. And again, imagine it looks like a big Popsicle stick or a tongue depressor, so it's very thin. It's rounded on both sides. It has these long kind of horizontal black streaks through them.

[00:09:08] **Maggie Creech:** This object's simple appearance can lead to some confusion. Why is it called a paper cutter? Why not a letter opener? And for those who know a little bit about book binding and the paper arts, how can it be distinguished from a bone folder?

[00:09:22] **Cody Youngblood:** We had someone comment on Facebook, isn't that called a bone folder? And technically it could be, but Henry was not involved in printing or book binding in his life. In fact, paper cutters in the eighteenth century were really a symbol for the learned and the literate. So, when you look at the bookmaking process, books are often formatted en quarto, which means full sheets that were printed with eight pages of text, four to a side. They were then folded twice to produce eight total pages, and those folded pages would be glued into the spine. So, when you purchase this book and you read it for the first time, a paper cutter would be required to slice open that book's fold and allow two pages to separate. And as we know, Henry had a library of over 210 books at Red Hill, so he was certainly someone who would use this quite often when he would purchase his own books.

[00:10:15] **Maggie Creech:** This item was once identified as ivory. However, now 250 years after Patrick Henry wielded it at the second Virginia Convention, there are some new discoveries around the artifact.

[00:10:27] **Cody Youngblood:** It does have a very similar color to ivory, kind of that off-white tan color, but ivory does not have these black latitudinal lines across it. And that is really what ignited the research frenzy into the material of this piece. In fact, those lines are an indication of the presence of blood vessels. Oftentimes, um, in the eighteenth century many things that you'd use in your daily lives from umbrellas to stays in corsets were made from whalebone, specifically baleen, which is really the teeth of whales because it's very thin and very flexible. And these vessels are part of the superior alveolar artery, which. delivers blood to these teeth in the whale, and these blood vessels are not present in ivory. And they help the bone to grow inside the whale's mouth [to] filter seafood and water. And interestingly, baleen is made from keratin, which is the same material as your fingernails, whereas ivory is made from dentine.

So, we can use these blood vessels to compare our item to other items of whalebone and ivory that date to the same period. And again, because whalebone was used in many things that were used by the average person in the eighteenth century, there's lots of baleen things that still exist in museums. The blood vessels really did match a lot of the items that we looked at, most of them being in stays and umbrella ribs, piano keys, even. And we did also bring this to an ivory expert who handles these sorts of things with museums, and she did confirm that ivory does not look anything like this. So, she kind of reminded us that we're on the right track here. I. We have not tested it chemically because that would involve some destruction, but we're really glad that these blood vessels are so obvious. They've become more obvious as the item has worn.

It's really important to keep this at a steady humidity level and temperature level because just like with any other item you might have, it's very sensitive to fluctuations in that environment. If the humidity is too low, the baleen could crack. If it's too high, you have warping issues. So, we really try to keep it at those steady levels. And we also try to keep it under low light as well, because too much UV radiation from the sun will make it very brittle and it could break over time.

[00:13:00] **Maggie Creech:** Let's talk about Patrick Henry's flare for the dramatic, it's easy to picture him paper cutter in hand, thrusting it toward his chest for emphasis, but that wasn't his only move. He was known to swan around in a flowing red cloak. He'd shove his glasses onto his head, mid-speech, and he fully commanded a room with his presence. He even reportedly ate raw rhubarb before speaking because the natural coating soothed his throat and helped him project during long fiery arguments. Ironically, that habit may have contributed to intestinal issues that later led to his death. Still, it helps to paint this very vivid picture of Henry as a performer.

Unfortunately for historians, no one wrote down Henry's “liberty or death” speech as he gave it. The version known today wasn't published until forty years later. Around 1815, William Wirt interviewed surviving eyewitnesses, piecing together the speech bit by bit. One key source was St. George Tucker, who admitted his memory was a little fuzzy, but still gave Wirt valuable fragments. And the famous line, “Give me liberty or give me death” holds up—not a single eyewitness disputed it. And Henry's own son-in-law recalled wearing a militia shirt with those exact words, a full decade before Wirt published his book in 1817. The paper cutter is not mentioned in Wirt’s text. However, there are other accounts that recalled a prop.

[00:14:32] **Cody Youngblood:** It's believed that the paper cutter descended through his family, and we really get our first eyewitness recollection of it in 1859 when former President John Tyler meets with a great grandson of Patrick Henry's, and he recalls this great speech and this interesting paper

cutter that Henry's holding. And the great grandson says, 'Well, guess what? I've heard the same story from my side of the family and I own the very paper cutter of which you speak.' So there again, we have some oral histories coming together. They both verify each other, and about 120 years later the paper cutter is donated by the Henry family to Red Hill.

So, the idea behind Henry using this as a prop with a dagger we believe comes from a very popular play written by Joseph Addison in 1713 called *Cato, a Tragedy*. And this dramatized the final days of Cato the Younger who was a very important Roman senator. And rather than live under the tyranny of Julius Caesar, Cato acts upon his virtues and gutted himself with his long sword. And in this play, there is a part where Cato is speaking to the Senate. He says something like, 'It is not now time to talk of ought to talk of nothing but chains or conquest, liberty or death.' So, using those words with the similar movement of Cato's sword, all the theater-going members of the second Virginia Convention recognize Henry's imitation.

[00:16:02] **Maggie Creech:** The phrase liberty or death would've been instantly recognizable to Henry's audience. *Cato, A tragedy* was a popular play at the time. In fact, it was a favorite of George Washington's, so the reference likely landed. I. But it might have also been a subtle flex, a way for Henry to say, 'Hey, I've read the classics too. I'm just as educated as the rest of you.'

The paper cutter offers a physical link to one of the most iconic moments in American history and to the man behind the words. It's a small object, but one that invites a deeper look at Patrick Henry's life beyond the speeches. His legal theatrics, his personal contradictions, and the everyday items that have outlasted generations.

Thanks so much to Cody Youngblood for sharing his insights on today's minisode. Patrick Henry's Red Hill holds the largest collection of Henry artifacts in the country and is open every day. Except for select holidays, you can explore more at RedHill.org. The paper cutter featured in this episode is on display in *Give Me Liberty: Virginia and The Forging of a Nation*. Learn more at VirginiaHistory.org/GiveMeLiberty.

Thanks for joining us for this mini-episode of *Revolution Revisited*.

[00:17:22] **Announcer:** Thanks for listening to *Revolution Revisited.* The American Revolution was not an ending, but a beginning. The stories continue to unfold. Subscribe now and catch the next episode for another journey through history. This podcast is made possible by William & Karen Fralin and presented by the Virginia Museum of History & Culture.

[00:17:42] **Maggie Creech:** *Revolution Revisited* is a production of the Virginia Museum of History & Culture. Our production staff includes Hailey Fenner, Maggie Creech, Nicole Martorana, and Tracy Schneider. Be sure to subscribe to get notified about upcoming episodes. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.