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America's Revolution (31) – Patrick Henry and the Parson's Cause – I

Lead: In the 1700s the United States broke from England. No colony in history had done that before. This series examines America's Revolution.

Intro: A Moment in Time with Dan Roberts

Content: Patrick Henry was a new man, often referred to in the early years of his storied career as a “young man,” this in contrast to the older leaders of the Commonwealth that hailed from the first families of Virginia. When his rich, powerful

rhetoical abilities carried him to fame during the Stamp Act Crisis in 1765, he was already famous, a brilliant speaker, but many of his elders considered him pretty much an upstart lawyer from Louisa County out in the Virginia heartland. His reputation and fame came from many court proceedings but largely as a result of a famous court case known as the Parson's Cause.

The dispute arose from the price of tobacco. So ubiquitous was the smoky weed that nearly all arable land in Virginia was planted in the stuff. Fiscal notes representing tobacco stored or planted and to be stored in warehouses were treated as if they were money. Debts and obligations

could be paid with those tobacco notes. In 1758 a severe drought cut into the crop and the price of tobacco escalated to four pennies per pound, a level four times the normal rate causing enormous hardship among those owing debts based on the price of tobacco. Among those benefiting from the precipitous rise in the cost of the weed were Anglican clergymen whose annual salary was pegged by a 1748 Virginia statute at 17,280 pounds of tobacco.

The General Assembly moved to help the debtors by passing the Two Penny Act allowing debts to be paid in cash for one year at the rate two times the normal cost of tobacco, still high but not as high as the market price

caused by the drought. Most creditors accepted this compromise, but several Anglican clergymen complained to London about the Act and the English government backed them and declared the Act to be null and void. The result was that debts had to be paid at the four-penny market rate rather than the two-penny statutory rate. The Privy Council also insisted that laws declared in violation of London's will were voided retroactively, making local governance problematical. Next time: Mr. Henry's royal tobacco tyrant.

At the University of Richmond's School of Professional and Continuing Studies, I'm Dan Roberts.

Resources

Beeman, Richard. *Patrick Henry: A Biography*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1974.

Isaac, Rhys. “Religion and Authority: Problems of the Anglican Establishment in Virginia in the Era of the Great Awakening and the Parson’s Cause,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 30 (1973): 3-36.

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