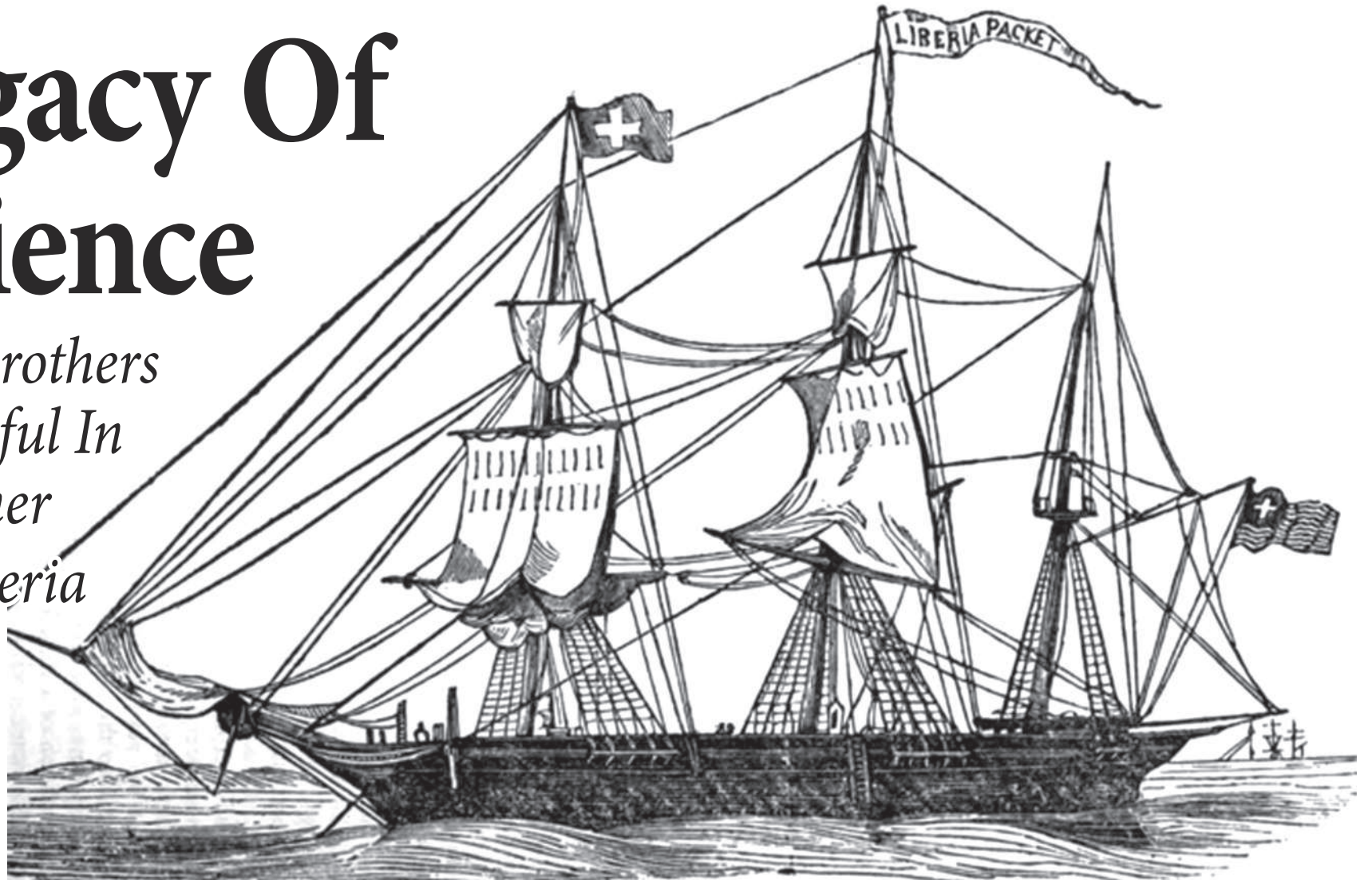


A Legacy Of Resilience

Two Henry Brothers Were Successful In Court, Another Sailed To Liberia

Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part series about the Henry brothers of Rockbridge County. The author is Larry Spurgeon, president of the Rockbridge Historical Society.

The first part of this series told the background story of the four Henry brothers, free men of color who lived in Rockbridge County. It also detailed the life of Patrick Henry, the first caretaker of the Natural Bridge, through an arrangement with Thomas Jefferson, the owner. This part covers the lives of his brothers John V. Henry, Duncan Henry, and Williamson Henry.



JOHN V. HENRY'S family and others from Lexington sailed on the Liberia Packet to Liberia in early 1850. The ship made many crossings for Liberian emigrants.

John V. Henry (1798-c.1850)

John V. Henry, the youngest brother by a decade, registered as free in 1827, described by the court clerk as a "bright mulatto" and 5'6."

In 1834, he lived with William Letcher, a contractor, and father of John Letcher, later Virginia's wartime governor. That same year Henry was recommended by Samuel McDowell Reid, clerk of the court, to Henry Boswell Jones, a farmer near Brownsburg, to barbecue meat for 100 guests for the "Agricultural Society, & visitors at the fair."



THIS PLAYING CARD shows Walter Jean of the Green Bay Packers, who was the great-grandson of Williamson Henry. (from Packers Past Perfect website)

An N-G Series

By 1835, John V. Henry was employed by Washington College as "college servant." His annual salary was \$150 in 1841, increased to \$300 in 1844.

Sally McDowell Miller, the daughter of Gov. James McDowell, wrote an article in 1883 about her Lexington memories, recalling a "splendid drummer" at VMI, Reuben Howard, a free man of color, who awakened the cadets and "put them to bed correspondingly early." The Staunton Spectator observed that she had given Howard "ample justice," but said "not a word about John Henry, the College janitor, and his tin horn! Many a cold winter's morning, while Reuben beat the reveille at the Institute, 'did Professor Henry's' musical blast arouse the writer to

attend prayers in the College chapel."

Henry purchased a house for \$400 at an 1841 auction, located near Henry and Randolph streets. Four years later he emancipated his wife Sally and their children for "love and affection which I have and bear to me." He had purchased Sally from Hetty Montgomery. Sally Henry filed a petition with the Virginia Assembly for "leave for herself and infant children Lavinia Mary & John to remain in this County as free persons of colour." 24 justices met to consider the petition and three fourths approved it.

In early 1850, 24 Black people from Rockbridge County emigrated to Liberia on the ship Liberia Packet. The American Colonization Society (ACS) journal re-

corded the emigrants by family group; John V. Henry, 51, a teacher, his wife Sally, 40, and their children, Lavinia L, 18, Mary Julia, 17, and John P. W., 10, adopted son, William Henry, 4, and nephew Patrick Henry, 24.

One of the emigrants was Diego Evans, a barber who advertised that he sold cigars and ran a livery. He built a brick house that still stands on Randolph Street.

Samuel McDowell Reid wrote a letter of recommendation for Henry and Evans, stating they were "men of intelligence and piety, they have a deservedly high standing in our community and are actuated by high and patriotic motives."

The ACS journal reported on the sendoff at Lexington Presbyterian Church on Jan. 19, 1850. Speakers included

Departure of Emigrants for Liberia.

SOME interesting services were held at Lexington, Va., on the occasion of the departure of the emigrants from that county, mentioned in another column, which we have not been able heretofore to notice.

Our correspondent says, "We had a farewell meeting on their account on Wednesday the 19th in the Presbyterian Church, which called a large audience. Col. Smith of the Military Institute, and Rev. Dr. Junkin, President of Washington College, addressed the congregation in effective speeches on colonization, and Maj. Preston addressed the emigrants in very appropriate terms. They were seated together on the

right of the pulpit. The Pastor of the Church, the Rev. W. S. White, also addressed the meeting, and led in prayer. The following original hymns, composed for the occasion were sung; the first by the people led by the choir, and the last by the emigrants themselves. The whole services were impressive, and, I believe, of good effect for the cause."

BY MISS MARGARET JUNKIN.
Sung on the occasion of the departure of a party of Emigrants to Liberia.

From bosoms warmly beating,
We send across the sea,
An elder sister's greeting,
Liberia! to thee!
With firm and steady patience
Thou hast maintained thy way,
Till one among the nations,
We see thee stand to-day.

THIS American Colonization Society Repository Journal article reports on the 1850 sendoff at Lexington Presbyterian Church for the 24 Black people sailing to Liberia. John V. Henry was among those.

Col. Francis Henney Smith, superintendent of VMI, J.T.L. Preston, professor at VMI, and the Rev. George Junkin, president of Washington College. The Rev. William S. White led in prayer, and hymns composed for the occasion were sung by the choir. One of the hymns was written by Margaret Junkin, novelist and poet. The words were printed in full in the ACS journal.

The motives of the leading white citizens of Lexington to promote Liberian migration was in part benevolent, but to a greater extent a desire to reduce the population of free Blacks in the community.

Mary Julia Henry wrote to her friends in Lexington that her family rented a house in Monrovia on "Broad Street and Diego rented a house on the water side, which all the old settlers told him not, but

he thought he could live there – being a good place to sell his goods. But all his family took the fever. We took the children home and they all got better, but Diego and his wife departed this life."

John V. Henry formed a mercantile firm in Liberia with nephews Patrick Henry and Desserline T. Harris, who was secretary of state for Liberia. He wrote to Reid in June with a favorable report.

The following year, Rufus W. Bailey, an ACS agent, expressed frustration about his lack of success in getting more people to emigrate: "I should have realized all my hopes of a company in Lexington but for the deaths. Almost every prominent man in that company – Henry, Evans, McClure, Lee..." Like many emigrants to Liberia, John V. Henry and one of his daugh-

ters died not long after arrival.

Duncan Henry (c.1790-c.1834)

Duncan Henry filed a complaint in 1815 in the Staunton Chancery Court, alleging that after Martin Tapscott's death he was hired out by the estate to two of Tapscott's brothers, Henry and then John, where he remained until the death of Henry B. Tapscott. He then "removed" to Rockbridge County. The new executor of Tapscott's estate, Thomas Rowand, half-brother to Henry B. Tapscott, attempted to deny Duncan's title to freedom, and hired James McDowell of Lexington to seize him "forcibly, subjecting him to slavery."

See Freedom, page B2



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Freedom

continued from page B1

He was not trying to evade the law, he argued, but believed the estate had sufficient funds to pay the debts, arguing that Tapscott's land should be sold to satisfy debts so that the enslaved people could be free. Henry asked the court to require McDowell to "state whether he has not threatened to take your orator into his possession forcibly & to sell or hire him out." The complaint requested an order restraining Rowand and McDowell from depriving him from his liberty.

Rowand answered that after Henry Tapscott's death Duncan Henry "left the lower country clandestinely & came to Rockbridge County in which he has been aided by a brother who had purchased his right to freedom." As executor, he needed to sell some of the remaining slaves to satisfy Tapscott's debts, and would exercise that discretion with "justice and humanity."

Rowand claimed he could not sell Alexander, Duncan's older brother, reasoning that Alexander had remained and provided labor to the estate while Duncan ran away. Duncan Henry had an "aging mother, his brother, his sister, & his other kindred."

Rowand argued that being a healthy young man, Duncan Henry's value was three times that of his female relatives. Therefore, it would not be "as humane as he seems to think to emancipate one person; it necessarily follows that it is more to emancipate three."

Robert Douthat and William Caruthers put up a \$750 bond to keep Duncan out of custody. The judge declared him free unless the defendants could show it was necessary to sell him to satisfy debts. The defendants did not do so, and finally free, Duncan Henry appeared in tax records for the first time in 1816.

Living with him in 1820 were his wife and two sons under 14. He registered as free on April 18, 1821, described as 5' 6," with "a large Roman nose, freckled face, hair almost straight, emancipated by the will of Martin Tapscott dec. of Westmoreland County, & his right to freedom confirmed by a Decree of the Staunton Chancery Court." He last appeared in tax records in 1833.

Williamson Henry (c.1786-1850)

By 1812 Williamson Henry was living as free in Rockbridge County, reflected in tax records as living with Robert Douthat, who operated the Stone Castle Tavern on Plank Road, two miles northwest of the Natural Bridge on Cedar Creek.

Two years later Williamson Henry was also subjected to legal measures by Tapscott's estate to re-enslave him. In 1814, he and Thomas Henry, probably a relative, filed a lawsuit in Staunton Chancery Court against Andrew Moore and Reuben Grigsby. Williamson and Thomas had lived as free men, but in 1813 Williamson learned that Andrew Moore claimed to have purchased him from Tapscott's estate, and Reuben Grigsby had purchased Thomas. The two men sought court protection from seizure until an investigation was performed to determine if their sale was necessary to satisfy Martin Tapscott's debts.

Andrew Moore was a graduate of Liberty Hall Academy, a general in the Revolutionary War, member of the Virginia legislature, delegate to the 1788 Virginia convention to ratify the Constitution, and served in both houses of Congress. He answered that in 1812 he planned to hire Williamson and Thomas, and was told that Grigsby planned to purchase one of them. Moore, "influenced by the character he had heard of the said W. & Thomas Henry" asked Grigsby to purchase one of them for him.

Moore went to Maj. Robert Douthat's house and "in the presence of witnesses offered to give bond with sufficient surety," prom-

FOR THE GAZETTE.

Extract of a Letter, from John V. Henry, dated Monrovia, April 1, to Col. Reid and others of this place.

We made Grand Cape Mount, 5th of March—6th, anchored in Monrovia,—at 8 o'clock in the morning, we went ashore, and were very much pleased. Took my family ashore the 7th, and found a nephew, who is Secretary of State, and he provided every thing for us,—so we were made very comfortable. 'Tis pleasant to see the colored man in his true character I have had the pleasure of being introduced to some of the naval officers. The Commodore and Purser have called on me several times, and invited me on board the ship to dine. Such a thing could not be in the U. S.

If you all could see the struggle made for National existence, you all would do all in your power to carry out the noble project.— All have to pay their footing—that is, the African fever. All the people that came with us, nearly, are down with few exceptions. Two very old persons died here, and Diego, wife, and one old man and girl up the river. Thank my blessed Lord, none of us have taken it yet. Old sister Sally's family are getting better.

JOHN V. HENRY'S letter to Samuel McDowell Reid appeared in the Lexington Gazette in June 1850, not long after John V. Henry and his daughter died from disease in Liberia.

FOR LIBERIA.—We understand that John V. Henry and Diego Evans, and their families, and a number of others of the free colored population of our town and county, expect to start to Liberia in a few days. John and Diego are men of fine character and excellent sense, universally respected for their honesty, integrity and sound morality. They have both raised their families well, and we hazard nothing in saying, that this party of emigrants will make useful and valuable citizens of the young Republic of Liberia. They may be assured, that leaving us for their new home, they will be attended by the best wishes of this community for their health, happiness and prosperity.—*Valley Star, of the 29th ult.*

JOHN V. HENRY was for many years the chief servant at Washington College. The character given him above will be heartily endorsed by all who know him, and every man who has been a student at the Institution, will bear witness to his genuine gentility and remarkable fidelity. Old Fess is indissolubly linked with the memory of their "Alma Mater" in the heart of every student, and many a man whose eye may chance to fall upon the above paragraph will breathe a warm wish for the welfare and happiness of the "Professor" most beloved of any in the College.

THIS ARTICLE in the Staunton Spectator on Dec. 5, 1849, part of it reprinted from the Valley Star, reported on the upcoming emigration to Liberia for the families of John V. Henry and Diego Evans.

ising that the two men would "not be removed from the county until their claim for freedom was decided." Moore added that he "has no wish to retain them as slaves if entitled to freedom."

Grigsby conditionally purchased Williamson and Thomas in 1813 for \$500 each. The money was not to be paid until the following winter, and in the meantime, he intended to "satisfy himself as to the truth of a report that those men Williamson & Tom were entitled to freedom." He met with both men and told them "he would be glad if they would procure & exhibit to this respondent some evidence of their right to freedom." Grigsby met with the executor in December 1813, who said Williamson and Thomas did not have a "shadow of right to freedom."

The Chancery Court held in 1817 that Williamson and Thomas Henry "are entitled under the will of Martin Tapscott deceased to their freedom, and that they cannot be deprived of the same unless it be necessary to sell them for the payment of the debts." The defendants failed to provide proof, and at long last, in 1819, Williamson and Thomas Henry were free.

Williamson Henry's first wife was a free woman of color and their children were free. He made a deed of trust to his brother Duncan on Oct. 13, 1824, to secure a promise to pay him in the amount of \$125. The property pledged as security included "one mare one yoke oxen two milch cows one yearling calf eleven hogs — two beds & bedding on burrow (bureau) — one book case — one cup-

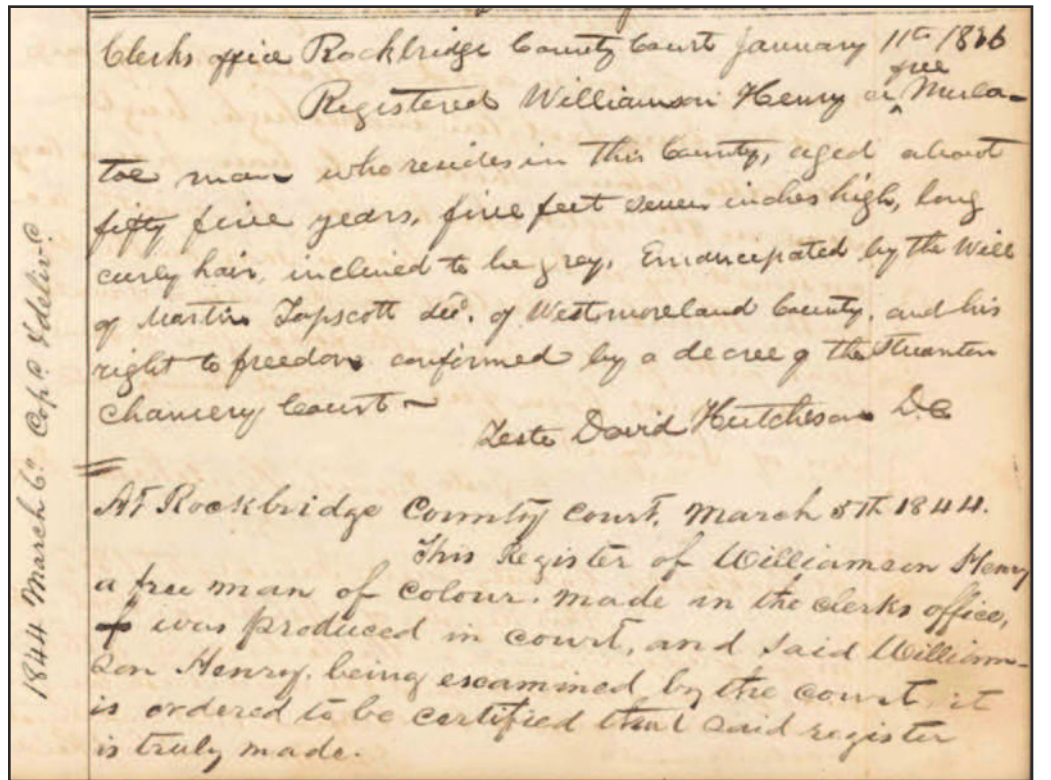
board twelve chairs — two trunks — one bed sted — four head sheep two... plows," and household goods.

Henry registered as free in 1836, age 55, described as 5' 7," with "long curly hair inclined to be grey." In 1844 Sarah Price made an emancipation deed for three children of Williamson Henry and his wife Mary, who was deceased. The children had been raised by him, and all three registered as free a few days later. Judith was 21, Mary Jane 17, and Joseph 14.

Later that year the family moved to Ross County, Ohio, where many free Blacks had settled, including some from Rockbridge. Williamson Henry died in 1850, and his son-in-law, Griffin Jean, was administrator of his estate. He has many descendants, including some living today.

Williamson Henry's great-grandson, Walter Jean (1898-1961), graduated from Chillicothe high school and attended the University of Missouri and Heidelberg University. After serving as a captain in World War I, he was named football coach at Bowling Green University. In 1925 and 1926 he played for the Green Bay Packers, the first Black player for the Packers — 25 years before the man given credit for that distinction. In 1927 Jean joined the Portsmouth Shoe-Steels as a player and assistant coach to the great Jim Thorpe, and became coach when Thorpe left.

Walter Jean successfully navigated a world that denied opportunities to Black people by passing for white, and sometimes, Chero-



THIS is the registration of Williamson Henry as a "free Negro" in Rockbridge County, 1836.

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Sunday, March 5, 2023 at 11:00 am.

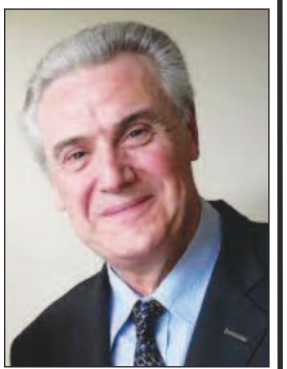


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