

WILLIAM HENSHAW (1735-1820), c. 1800

Anonymous

23 5/8 x 20 5/8 (60.01 x 52.39)

oil on canvas

Bequest of Harriet E. Henshaw, 1896

Weis 66

Hewes Number: 66

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; through the family to his granddaughter, the donor.

Exhibitions:

1977, 'Wellsprings of a Nation,' Worcester Art Museum, no. 163.

William Henshaw of Leicester, Massachusetts, was a vigorous participant in the political and military activities of the revolutionary era. According to one reminiscence, 'he never gave up the cocked-hat, boots, and spurs which were characteristic of the men of the Revolution.'¹ His first experience in military action was during the French and Indian Wars, and his three periods of military service are documented in his five surviving orderly books. One contains details about the campaign in the summer of 1759, and the other four volumes relate to the siege of Boston and other revolutionary campaigns from April 20, 1775, through October 3, 1776.²

The Henshaw family was one of the early proprietors of Leicester, and although William was born in Boston, his father returned to the family farm there in 1748, when William was thirteen. Because of this move to the country, William had to give up a study of Latin as preparation for following his older brother to Harvard College. Although his education was curtailed, his 'taste for literary culture...[was] applied...to practical use in the preparation of important papers and documents of a public character connected with the Revolutionary movements in which he took a part.'³

In 1759, at age twenty-four, Henshaw was commissioned a second lieutenant in his local militia company and accompanied it to New York to fight under the direction of General Jeffery Amherst (1717-97). He 'set out from Leicester' for Fort Edward on May 10, 1759, and arrived 'Home at Leicester' on November 28, after the campaign ended.⁴ Shortly after his return to Leicester, he purchased a farm and, in 1762, married Ruth Sargent. They had three children before she died on January 1, 1769. His second wife was Phebe Swan (1753-1808), whom he married on September 12, 1771; together they had ten children, all but one of whom lived to adulthood.

Henshaw's correspondence, dating from May 1766 through August 1774, and the orderly books provide details about grievances and actions against British authorities.⁵ One issue related to the Superior Court. Henshaw was one of fifteen grand jurors at a session held in Worcester in April 1774, which turned out to be the last under British administration. He led a protest that disrupted the court session, and soon afterward--June 17, 1774---the General Court was dissolved. During the next thirteen months, government was conducted through the Provincial Congress (terminated on July 19, 1775) and local committees of correspondence. Their charge was to plan for defense, and Henshaw recommended raising a force of seven regiments from Worcester County 'ready to act at a minute's warning' by enlisting one-third of the population of men aged between sixteen and sixty. On April 19, 1775, when word arrived that British troops had marched for Lexington, companies of minutemen were mustered and with Henshaw as colonel of the Worcester County regiment, reached Cambridge the next morning. They remained there until they were discharged on June 16. About a week later, General Artemas Ward of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, who was then the commander-in-chief, commissioned Henshaw to extend his service. Both were superseded by the arrival of George Washington to take command on July 3, 1775. After introducing Horatio Gates, Washington's adjutant-general, to the regiments, Henshaw prepared to go home. But 'he [Gates] requested me to stay through the campaign, as he could not do without an assistant, and I should have the same pay and rations as a colonel,' Henshaw wrote.⁶

In his orderly book for October 1775, Henshaw noted a call by Washington for enlistment through December 30, 1776, and in an entry more eloquent than most that detailed camp life, wrote: 'The times & the importance of the great cause we are engaged in allows no room for hesitation and delay. When Life, Liberty & Property are at stake, When our Country is in Danger of being a Melancholy scene of Bloodshed & desolation - When our Towns are laid in Ashes and innocent Women & Children driven from their peaceful Habitations...it little becomes the Character of a Soldier to shrink from Danger....'⁷ Henshaw remained in service until February 1777, seeing action in engagements on Long Island and at White Plains, Trenton, Princeton, and Morristown.

Because of their factual accounts and records of legal and military commands, Henshaw's orderly books are important documents of military life in eighteenth-century America. They were given to the American Antiquarian Society along with his portrait and are

preserved in the Society's manuscript collection. The Society also owns a musket made by Thomas Earle (1737-1819), which was used by Henshaw during his service.⁸

After retiring from military life, Henshaw became active in local politics, serving as a justice of the peace in Leicester and as a state representative. He was also one of the founders of Leicester's first public library. He was remembered as a 'gentleman of the old school.... He was social in his feelings and his habits, an agreeable talker, and a pleasant and interesting companion. He was a liberal supporter of the religious and educational institutions of the town.'⁹

The identity of the artist of this portrait is unknown. Henshaw, who was the father of the artist Ruth Henshaw Bascom (1772-1848)¹⁰, may have commissioned the portrait in Boston during his service as a state representative. The portrait was copied in the nineteenth century, and the copy, now owned by the Worcester Historical Society, has been reproduced several times.¹¹

¹ Memoir by Emory Washburn, first published in Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 15 (1876-77): 65-73, and reprinted in 'The Orderly Books of Colonel William Henshaw, October 1, 1775, through October 3, 1776,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 57 (April 1947): 18-29. Material quoted, 28-29.

² First deposited at the Society in 1830, these volumes were withdrawn on two occasions by the family. Included with the gift of the portrait in 1896 were the five orderly books and additional correspondence and papers relating to his military service. The condition of Harriet Henshaw's gift was that these orderly books be published. Until this could be achieved, two typewritten copies were prepared and made available to readers in the library and still form part of the Henshaw Collection at AAS. The orderly books have been published as 'Manuscript Records of the French and Indian War...', Charles Lincoln, ed., Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society 11 (1909): 178-254; and 'The Orderly Books of Colonel William Henshaw, October 1, 1775, through October 3, 1776,' 17-234. The second volume of the orderly books appeared first in Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 15 (October 1876): 75-160, and was reprinted with selections from the family papers by Harriet Henshaw in 1881, as The Orderly Books of Colonel William Henshaw, April 20-September 26, 1775 (Boston: A. Williams and Company).

³ Memoir by Emory Washburn in 'The Orderly Books of Colonel William Henshaw, October 1, 1775, through October 3, 1776,' 19.

⁴ 'The Orderly Book of Lieut. William Henshaw,' Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society 11 (1909): 185, 254.

⁵ The role of Henshaw and like-minded members of committees of correspondence in Worcester County towns during the summer of 1774 forms the basis for Ray Raphael's study, The First American Revolution: Before Lexington and Concord (New York: The New Press, 2002).

⁶ Washburn quoting Henshaw in 'The Orderly Books of Colonel William Henshaw, October 1, 1775, through October 3, 1776,' 26. Henshaw did not apply for pay for this period of service, as Gates had advised him to do.

⁷ William Henshaw Orderly Book, October 26, 1775, Henshaw Family Papers, 1757-1892, AAS Manuscript Collection.

⁸ Rodger D. Parker, Wellsprings of a Nation (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1977), 92, no. 164. Parker identifies the musket as a silver-mounted firelock gun made in 1773.

⁹ Washburn, Historical Sketches of the Town of Leicester (Boston: John Wilson & Son, 1860), 238.

¹⁰ Ruth Henshaw Bascom Papers, 1789-1849, AAS Manuscript Collection. Bascom did not mention her father's sitting for a portrait in her diaries for 1794, 1796, or 1797.

¹¹ The copy is illustrated in Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 15 (October 1876): 65, and in Worcester Sunday Telegram, July 5, 1936. The AAS Graphic Arts Collection includes an oversize heliotype print of the original portrait, c. 1879.