

article based on interview  
with Supt. Historian &  
Mrs. Henry  
Manassas battlefield Archives  
August 2000 RT

### At The eye of the Hurricane

Look at the maps of the Manassas battlefield and read the descriptions. There is hardly a page which does not mention the low eminence known as Henry Hill, "the storm center of the battle," "the key to victory;" the focal point where the armies crashed together not merely at close range, but repeatedly at no range at all.

Now look again at the maps, and you will see a dot labelled "Henry House," squeezed between enemy and enemy. This is the place where Judith Henry died. For on Henry Hill at the very center of the center of the fighting, at the eye of the hurricane, was not a fortification but a small frame dwelling. Its occupants were a helpless old lady, A middle aged spinster, and a young Negro girl.

Judith Henry was eighty four years old and "bedridden from the infirmation of age," as her tombstone says; a widow who had expected to pass her remaining days in peace on her patch of ancestral soil. But instead of passing away quietly among her loved ones, she was blasted to death by an artillery shell, in her own bed in her own house surely the strangest and most pitiful casualty of the war.

She was born Judith Carter, daughter of Landon Carter, senior of "Pitsylvania" (that was how they spelled it in those days), Prince William County. She was a great granddaughter of the fabulous "King" Carter, who died in 1732 leaving 300,000 acres of patented northern Virginia land, a thousand slaves and ten thousand pounds.

In 1803 she married Dr. Issac Henry, a young Philadelphian with a handsome aquiline profile, who had served as surgeon's mate and then as surgeon on board the frigate "Constellation", under the dashing Commodore Thomas Truxton; this was during our naval troubles with France in 1798-1800. It is interesting to learn from a descendant that Dr. Henry "disliked the practice of medicine, which was not highly rated by the aristocracy of those days, and after his marriage into the "King" Carter family he discontinued the practice of the same." In the early 1820's the couple took up residence on Spring Hill farm, as it was called, a part of the old Carter estate; and Mrs. Henry continued to live there after her husband's death in 1829.

What did it mean to be eighty four years old in 1861? It meant that you spanned the whole lifetime of the Republic. Judith Henry was born the year after the Declaration of Independance; married the year of the Louisiana Purchase; she was a young matron with a growing family during the war of 1812; an aging widow with most of her life behind her when the first wagon trains started crawling westward to Oregon. And by the dawn of First Manassas, a feeble, lingering spark.

In "John Brown's Body", Benet saw her.

"The crows fly over the Henry House, through the red sky of evening, cawing.

Judith Henry, bedridden, watches them through the clouded



glass of old sight.

(July is hot in Virginia - a parched, sun-leathered farmer sawing  
Dry sticks with a cicada-saw that creaks all the lukewarm night.)  
But Judith Henry's hands are cool in spite of all midsummer's  
burning.

Cool, muted and frail with age like the smoothness of old yellow  
linen, the cool touch of old, dulled rings.

Her years go past her in bed like falling waters and the waters  
of a mill wheel turning.

And she is not ill content to lie there dozing and calm, remem-  
bering youth, to the rushing of those watersprings.

She will go in her sleep, most likely, she has sunk death-sleep  
of the old already.

(War bugles of the Potomac, you cannot reach her ears with  
your brass lyric, piercing the crowded dark.)

It does not matter, the farm will go on, the farm and the children,  
bury her in her best dress, the plow cut its furrow, steady.

(War horses of the Shenandoah, why should you hurry so fast  
to tramp the last ashy fire from so feeble and retired a spark?)"

The order which extinguished the spark was issued by Captain James Ricketts of the first artillery regiment, Franklin's Brigade, Heintzleman's division. Captain Ricketts was a brave officer who fell in the same battle a few minutes after his intended victim. His comrades thought he was killed; cut off his red officer's sash and sent the pieces of sash and his sword to his wife. Instead of dying however he survived and was taken prisoner, and Fanny Ricketts made her way through the Confederate lines to nurse him in a Richmond hospital. He recovered and was exchanged and became a general himself; a heroic story, but another story. Here all we need to know is that his six field pieces were moved into position at a short, deadly stones throw from the Henry House in the early afternoon.

Confederate sharpshooters began at once picking off men and horses. The following year Ricketts, testifying in Washington, told the Joint Committee (of Congress) on the Conduct of the War: "I had scarcely got into battery before I saw some of my horses fall and some of my men wounded by the sharpshooters. I turned my guns upon the house and literally riddled it. It has been said that there was a woman killed there by our guns...she was killed at the time I turned my battery on it and shelled out the sharpshooters there...It was the hottest place I ever saw in my life"

The historians make barely a passing mention, if that, of the frail old life which was snuffed out so casually and cruelly along with 4,500 younger, stronger and militarily more important losses on both sides. But today we know the details of Judith Henry's death through an unpublished memoir written by her granddaughter-in-law, Mrs. Arthur Henry, who still lives in Manassas; and who has set down the memories worn smooth in the family tellings and retellings of a hundred years.

With the old lady in the house were her unmarried daughter Ellen Phoebe, past fifty years old, and a young colored servant named Lucy Griffiths, the latter not referred to as a slave, but as a "hired girl." For weeks before the twenty-first of July the ripe land had been filled with

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marching troops who came and went and drilled and built breast works and road blocks; and raised a terrible dust which lay thick over everything. But the family had no thought of moving, not even after the 18th. when they could hear the firing from the skirmish at Blackburn's Ford. Possibly they had grown accustomed to the muttering's of the storm which threatened and threatened, but did not break.

On the twenty-first the older son, John Henry, had ridden down from Loudoun to spend Sunday with his mother--not a crisis, just another Sunday. And a second son, Hugh, had remained in Alexandria, twenty-six miles away, where he kept school for boys and provided the main support for his mother and sister, when he heard the first news of the battle he set out for his mother's house on horseback, but he had to go so far around that he did not arrive until Tuesday. By that time Judith Henry was buried.

Their day of Armageddon opened at 5.15 am with the crashing roar of a Union thirty-pounder in the vicinity of Stone Bridge. It must have wakened them all. For a few hours they listened to the firing at the bridge, which was too close for comfort, but far enough away to leave room for hope that the battle would pass them by.

That hope was short lived, as the glasses of a sharp-eyed Confederate signal officer picked on the glint of the sun on a brass cannon and bayonets, which told him that the Union army was crossing at Sudley Ford.

Again Stephen Vincent Benet

"The hands of the round brown clock in the kitchen of the  
Henry House point to nine forty five,  
Judith Henry does not hear the clock, she hears in the sky a  
vast din more like piles of heavy lumber crashingly falling.  
They are carrying her in her bed to a ravine below the Sudley  
Road, maybe she will be safe there, maybe the battle will go  
by and leave her alive."

The fight at Sudley ford grew hotter. Imboden of the Confederate artillery, on the north rim of Henry Hill not a hundred yards from the house, was shelling the Union positions over there and at the same time drawing heavy fire from the Union batteries of Ricketts and Griffin across the turnpike. It was their shells, falling all round the house which so terrified the occupants that John Henry, in desperation, resolved to carry his mother with the help of some Confederate soldiers to the home of a neighbor a mile away.

"But in the growing confusion," our informant continues, "this was out of the question. There was a spring house to the southwest of the house, in a depression which seemed less exposed. Here they did carry her, only to have her beg to be taken back to her own bed. This was done as it was seen the spring house was no safer than the house."

Judith Henry

Judith Henry, they have moved you back at last, in doubt  
and confusion, to the little house where you know every  
knot hole by heart.  
It is not safe, but now there is no place safe, you are between  
the artillery and the artillery...

By this time Evans and Bee and Bartow, who had daringly tried to hold superior Union forces



in check at Sudley Ford, were beaten and driven back south, across the turnpike. The main battle now surged up onto Henry Hill, with the house and its helpless occupants at dead centre between the armies. Both Confederate and Union soldiers invaded the premises; sharpshooters thought to be of Wade Hampton's brigade were firing through the windows; a northern soldier was shot by a Confederate and fell dead almost at Miss Ellen Henry's feet. With the first victorious rush of the Union troops came the Ricketts and Griffins batteries to the hilltop, Ricketts taking position a scant fifty yards from the house. At about 2.15 he discovered the sharpshooters and turned his batteries on the cottage at that fearful range, reducing it to a sieve.

The bed on which Mrs. Henry lay was struck by a shell and she was thrown to the floor, with wounds in her neck and side and one foot partly blown off.

Wave after wave of Federal attack rolled up to the Henry House, to be driven back by the fire of Beauregard's forces on the south edge of the plateau. Indoors, if the shell torn ruin of the Henry House could be called indoors, Judith Henry still breathed, to linger bleeding from her wounds, until the late afternoon or evening. General McDowell came to the house and climbed to the upper story for a view; Sherman came also. But the ironical honor of these visits seems to have been lost on the dazed and deafened occupants, since the family tradition makes no mention of them. Wade Hampton fell wounded in the yard.

At last the tide receded from Henry Hill and the roar of the firing dwindled away toward Cub Run, where the Unionists were now in full retreat. In the exhausted quiet of late afternoon, the free negro, Jim Robinson, whose house had had its own share of the battle, came over to see how his neighbors had fared. He was told by Miss Ellen how the old lady, dying, had tried to comfort her daughter and begged her not to weep. Years later a man turned up on a pilgrimage to the battlefield and told his recollections of that afternoon. In the words of Mrs. Arthur Lee Henry: "He was walking through the yard sometime after the close of the battle, noting the many dead men who had fallen fighting around the house, when he came to a man lying face downward; and as he came up to this man, the man raised his face and said, "They've killed my mother."

And again quoting Mrs. Henry: "The negro girl, Lucy Griffith, who had crawled under the bed when the awful shelling began, was wounded in the arm, whether by shell fragment or slivered wood wasn't told. But she was cook and laundress in my house at Gainesville...I remember that she carried her right arm somewhat stiffly, and it was especially noticeable when she hung clothes on the line. Ellen Henry sought refuge in the big chimney to the fireplace during the bombardment, and her subsequent deafness was attributed to injury to her eardrums from the violent concussion produced by the shelling."

A two story frame house, built by the family in the seventies stands today on the site of Judith Henry's ordeal, and the old lady sleeps in a small burial plot in the yard beside her faithful daughter Ellen. The scorched earth of that terrible day one hundred years ago is now a garden spot, and surrounding the dead is the strange peacefulness of old battle grounds.

#### JOHN BROWN'S BODY

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## JOHN BROWN'S BODY

The crows fly over the Henry House, through the red sky of evening, cawing,  
Judith Henry, bedridden, watches them through the clouded glass of old sight.  
(July is hot in Virginia-a parched, sun-leathered farmer sawing  
Dry sticks with a cicada-saw that creaks all the lukewarm night.)

But Judith Henry's hands are cool in spite of all burning,  
Cool, muted and frail with age like the smoothness of old yellow linen, the cool touch of old, dulled rings.  
Her years go past her in bed like falling waters and the waters of a millwheel turning,  
And she is not ill content to lie there, dozing and calm, remembering youth, to the gushing of those watersprings.  
She has known Time like the cock of red dawn and Time like a tired clock slowing;  
She has seen so many faces and bodies, young and then old, so much life, so many patterns of death and birth.  
She knows that she must leave them soon. She is not afraid to flow with that river's flowing.  
But the wrinkled earth still hangs at her sufficed breast like a weary child, she is unwilling to go while she still has milk for the earth.

She will go in her sleep, most likely, she has the sunk death-sleep of the old already,  
(War-bugles by the Potomac, you cannot reach her ears with your brass lyric, piercing the crowded dark.)  
It does not matter, the farm will go on, the farm and the children bury her in her best dress, the plow cut its furrow, steady,  
(War-horses of the Shenandoah, why should you hurry so fast to tramp the last ashy fire from so feeble and retired a spark?)

There is nothing here but a creek and a house called the Henry House, a farm and a bedridden woman and people with country faces.  
There is nothing for you here. And La Haye Sainte was a quiet farm and the mile by it a quiet mile.  
And Lexington was a place to work in like any one of a dozen dull, little places.  
And they raised good crops at Blenheim till the soldiers came and spoiled the crops for a while.



The red evening fades into twilight, the crows have gone to  
their trees, the slow, hot stars are emerging.  
It is cooler now on the hill - and in the camps it is cooler, where  
the untried soldiers find their bivouac hard.  
Where, from North and South, the blind wrestlers of armies  
converge on the forgotten house like the double pincers of a  
iron claw converging.  
And Johnston hurries his tired brigades. from the Valley, to  
bring them up in time before McDowell can fall on Beaure-  
gard.

Judith Henry wakened with the first light,  
She had the short sleep of age, and the long patience.  
She waited for breakfast in vague, half-drowsy wonderment  
At various things. Yesterday some men had gone by  
And stopped for a drink of water. She'd heard they were soldiers.  
She couldn't be sure. It had seemed to worry the folks  
But it took more than soldiers and such to worry her now.  
Young people always worried a lot too much.  
No soldiers that had any sense would fight around here.  
She'd had a good night. Today would be a good day.

The hands of the scuffed brown clock in the kitchen of the  
Henry House point to nine-forty-five.  
Judith Henry does not hear the clock, she hears in the sky  
vast dim roar like piles of heavy lumber crashingly falling.  
They are carrying her in her bed to a ravine below the Sudley  
Road, maybe she will be safe there, maybe the battle will go  
by and leave her alive.  
The crows have been scared from their nests by the strange  
crashing, they circle in the sky like a flight of blackened leaves,  
wheeling and calling.

Judith Henry, Judith Henry, they have moved you back at  
last, in doubt and confusion, to the little house where  
you know every knothole by heart.  
It is not safe, but now there is no place safe, you are between the  
artillery and the artillery, and the incessant noise comes  
to your dim ears like the sea-roar within a shell where  
you are lying.  
The walls of the house are riddled, the brown clock in the  
kitchen gouged by a bullet, a jar leaks red preserves on  
the cupboard shelf where the shell-splinter came and  
the cupboard apart.

The casual guns do not look for you, Judith Henry, they find  
you in passing merely and touch you only a little,

the touch is enough to give your helpless body five sudden wounds and leave you helplessly dying.

Judith Henry, Judith Henry, your body has born its ghost at last, there are no more pictures of peace or terror left in the broken machine of the brain that was such a cunning picture-maker:

Terrified ghost, so rudely dishoused by such casual violence, at rest; there are others dishoused in this falling night, the falling night is a sack of darkness, indifferent as Saturn to wars or generals, indifferent to shame or victory.

War is a while but peace is a while and soon enough the earth-colored hands of the earth-workers will scoop the last buried shells and the last clotted bullet-slag from the racked embittered acre,

And the rustling visitors drive out fair Sundays to look at the monument near the rebuilt house, buy picture postcards and wonder dimly what you were like when you lived and what you thought when you knew you were going to die.

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