

Abbot(t), Henry ^[1]

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Abbot(t), Henry

by Jerry W. Cotten, 1979

ca. 1740–May 1791

Henry Abbot(t), Baptist minister and revolutionary patriot, was born in London. His father was the Reverend John Abbot, a minor or petty canon of St. Paul's Cathedral and rector of the city church of St. Michael in London. The younger Abbot was baptized in the Anglican church, received a "tolerable" education, and in the 1750s migrated to America "without the consent or knowledge of his parents."

Henry Abbot settled in [Camden](#) ^[2] (until 1777 Pasquotank) County, occupying himself first as a schoolmaster. In 1758 he embraced the General Baptist faith and was baptized by Elder [Joseph Parker](#) ^[3]. Shortly thereafter, however, like many others in his region, Abbot switched from the General to the more Calvinistic Particular Baptists. He was ordained by Elders Charles Daniel and James Gamewell and began a lifelong effort to spread the gospel along the Pasquotank River. From 1758 until about 1764 Abbot was a traveling evangelist and undoubtedly became well known to congregations on both sides of the river. He served briefly as minister for a group at Tar River and in 1764 or 1765 accepted an invitation to become pastor of Shiloh Church in [Pasquotank County](#) ^[4], following the death of the previous minister, John Burgess.

Organized in 1729, Shiloh was the first permanent Baptist church in North Carolina. Forty years after its founding, Shiloh, with Abbot as pastor, participated in the formation of the historic [Kehukee Baptist Association](#) ^[5]. Within five years, however, a dispute over the association's proper relationship with the Separate Baptists, who had spread south from New England, led to division and gave rise to a fundamental reevaluation of qualifications for church membership. Formerly, a mere desire for baptism was deemed sufficient evidence of salvation, but a new wave of religious fervor produced in many churches a purge of members who by their own admission had been baptized prior to conversion. One who made this confession was the Reverend Henry Abbot, and consequently, Abbot had to be baptized for a third time in about 1779, before his church could be admitted formally to the reformed Kehukee Association.

While distinguishing himself as a minister, Henry Abbot did not ignore political developments within the colonies. During his gubernatorial administration, [William Tryon](#) ^[6] had made no effort to conceal a personal dislike for North Carolina Baptists; when a later governor, [Josiah Martin](#) ^[7], initiated a conciliatory policy regarding the [Regulators](#) ^[8], Abbot and another Baptist minister presented the governor with a letter of commendation from the Kehukee Association for his spirit of toleration.

In 1776 Abbot and four other men were chosen to represent Pasquotank County in the [provincial congress](#) ^[9] that met at [Halifax](#) ^[10] and endorsed American independence. At this gathering the minister from Shiloh Church actively participated in the work of at least four committees, including one delegated to "take into consideration the defence and the state of the Sea coast," another (the Committee of Privileges and Elections) empowered to "send for Persons, Papers and Records" and report to the congress, and a third requested to "devise a more effectual way for apprehending deserters." Undoubtedly one of Abbot's most important contributions came with his service on the committee that drafted a constitution and bill of rights for North Carolina.

Henry Abbot had an interest not only in political guarantees but in religious liberties as well. Under colonial rule only the established church was authorized to perform the marriage ceremony, and this privilege was extended to dissenting sects only after ties with the mother country had been severed. Near the conclusion of the last session of 1776, Abbot, quick to take advantage of the move toward independence, introduced a resolution providing that ministers of all denominations might perform the marriage rite. Although passed in a slightly amended form, this resolution was the forerunner of a state law approved by the legislature some fifteen months later.

During the [American Revolution](#) ^[11], Abbot served as recruiting officer for Pasquotank County and held a seat on the three-member Salt Commission for [Edenton](#) ^[12] (Port Roanoke). His interest in affairs of state continued after the war. In 1788 he was one of Camden's representatives at the [Hillsborough Convention](#) ^[13] that rejected the proposed United States Constitution and suggested written assurance of certain individual liberties. A year later, when a second convention gathered in Fayetteville, he was again a delegate and voted with the majority to ratify the historic document.

Abbot was a peer of the most learned men in North Carolina. He is generally recognized as author of the nineteenth article of the state constitution, which made formal acknowledgement that "all men have natural and inalienable rights to

worship almighty God according to the dictates of their own conscience." Various described as an "elegant gentleman" and "popular idol," Abbot came to exercise an influence hardly equaled by ministers from his area before or since.

At his death he possessed six slaves and resided on a three-or-four-hundred-acre estate in [Camden County](#) [2]. Between 1766 and 1772, he married Mariam Caroon Lurry Wilson, and although there were no children by this union, Abbot's wife had two sons, William and Thomas, by the first of her two previous marriages. The Reverend Henry Abbot died after a short but "violent" illness and was possibly buried at a now obliterated site on his plantation northeast of Shiloh.

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