



## *Or Give Me Death* by Ann Rinaldi

**Subjects:** Henry, Patrick—1736–1799—Family—Fiction; Family life—Virginia—Fiction; Mental illness—Fiction; Virginia—History—Revolution, 1775–1783—Causes—Fiction

**Awards:** Parents' Choice Award

**Book Lists:** America

**Props:** Period hat



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March 23, 1775, in Richmond, Virginia delegate Patrick Henry spoke these famous words that roused a nation to arms, “Give me liberty, or give me death.” Yes, he was a famous statesman and he gave a great speech, but it was his secret that inspired this book. His secret that his wife, Sarah Henry, was insane. It was his daughter, Patsy, who first saw that her mother had a problem. (*Put on period young girl’s hat*)

(*As Patsy*) “I was the first one in the family to notice when mama started to go insane. Somewhere along the line, when Pa was away speechifying against those laws and writs and resolutions, she took leave of her senses. I tried to ignore it at first. But then she took Edward and dipped him in water. Edward was just two months old and he wouldn’t stop crying. It seemed no one could make him stop. Mama dipped him in water saying the water would calm him.

But she had that look in her eyes. The same look she had that day I found her in the middle of the English garden trying to take all her clothes off. She said that the sun was her only friend. And then she put

Edward under the water and he near turned blue. She had that look in her eyes and she wouldn’t let him up. I talked gently to her, worked my hands past hers and pulled my brother up. He was choking, but I laid him on the wooden table and pushed his chest until he started to breathe again.” (*Take hat off*)

In 1775, there were no hospitals with prescribed drugs and treatment for mentally ill patients. There were no doctors to tell Patrick that his wife suffered for a genetic mental disorder and that one of his children would inherit the disease. No, in 1775, there were only small cells where the insane were chained, put in dunking chairs and there was no treatment. Patrick Henry loved his wife but she was a danger to herself and to her children. He had no choice but to lock her in his cellar. She died just three weeks before he gave his famous speech. Was his speech inspired by his wife’s captivity? Did she plead for her freedom? And will he have to lock one of his children in the cellar next? (*Hold up book*)  
Read this story based on the not so well known life of the famous Patrick Henry.