

Sketch: Marching Off to War - Henry Branch and the War of 1812

In July of 1812 Henry Branch of Chesterfield county Virginia was preparing to march off to War. He had been appointed a Captain in the 20th Infantry Regiment, US Army in the spring of that year.

The War of 1812 was fought between the Americans and British. It had multiple causes, and was fought in four very different theaters – the sea, the US east coast, the northeastern US along the US-Canadian border, and the US interior. Virginia was most involved with the coastline defense, though many Virginia soldiers moved north toward Canada. When a European War erupted in the early 1800's, Britain blocked American trade and impressed American sailors into British service. When the United States declared war in 1812, it was with the motto "Free Trade and Sailor's Rights."

In a descriptive pamphlet prepared to accompany the War of 1812 Discharge Certificate database at the National Archives, author Claire Prechtel-Kluskens gives helpful insight:

At the declaration of war with Great Britain on June 18, 1812, the Regular Army consisted of about 10,000 men, half of whom were new recruits. An act of June 26, 1812 (2 Stat. 764) mandated that the Regular Army was to consist of 25 regiments of infantry, 4 of artillery, 2 of dragoons, 1 of riflemen, plus engineers and artificers, for a total authorized strength of 36,700 men . . . In addition to these troops, volunteer regiments and state militia also took part in the conflict. Each Regular Army infantry regiment was recruited from a particular state . . . For example, the 12th, 20th, and 35th infantry regiments were recruited from Virginia.

On July 3rd 1812, Henry Branch wrote a letter to Major IA Coles, making a request concerning a soldier of his company. At that point in time, Henry Branch was writing from the Richmond Rendezvous, and styled himself, "Henry Branch, Capt US Army, 12th Infantry." Only a small portion of the letter is recorded here:

On the 25th of May last Lieut Ligon enlisted a man of the name of Richard Johnson and made a return of the same enlistment to me at Manchester, and on the last day of May I made a Muster roll of my company and included the said Johnson as a part of my company . . .
[source] Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General 1805 – 1821; NARA M566; located at Fold3 database.

I have not been able to confirm whether Henry Branch was serving in the 20th or 12th Infantry. The two regiments were fairly closely allied and after the close of the war in 1815, they were merged.

Near the same time that Henry Branch was gathering his company in Richmond Virginia, he prepared a legal document making provision for his two young children. It seems likely that the children were left in the care of their grandmother, Judith Scott Branch.

1812, July; Henry Branch is entering military and wished to make provision for his family. Names two infant children--George Branch and Catherine J Branch. Provides slaves, horses. Also turns over estate, now in possession of his mother, Judith, which was the property of his father William Branch, dec'd. Lists several pages of debts. Appoints William Elam to handle, in trust, for the maintenance and education of his children.

[source] Note from Deeds of Chesterfield County Virginia; Book 19, page 312; July 1812.

William Elam is probably the same as William Branch Elam, born about 1775 in Chesterfield county Virginia, son of Branch Elam, and grandson of Robert Elam and Mary Branch. He may be a distant cousin to Henry Branch.

On the 15th of August 1812, Major Isaac Coles prepared a document that was headed, "A conjectural estimate of the strength of the Detachment assembling at Richmond and destined for Albany." It lists eight groups of soldiers who have arrived or are soon expected to arrive. One of the groups listed is, "Detachment from Rich'd, Capt Branch, arrived, 20 men". The document goes on to list five detachments arriving at Fredricksburg (sic), and then follows with this list of officers:

A List of Officers

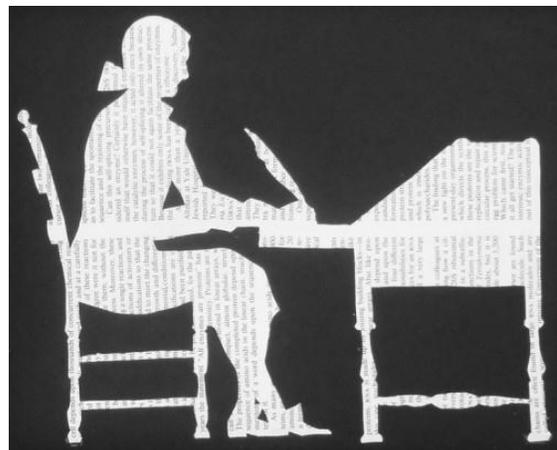
Capt: Henry Branch, Lewis Taylor, John Stanard

First Lt: Peyton, John P Duvall, Walter Hayes

Second Lt: John Howard, George Hatcher(?),
Thomas Blackwell

Ensigns: Saml Harris, Edward Randolph, John B
Hogan

Paymaster: Lt John Archer



When I began gathering notes for this sketch, I anticipated a light but interesting foray into the War of 1812. I suspected that Henry Branch died during, or shortly following the war. I hoped to locate enough clues to Capt Henry Branch's service to honor him with a simple account of his participation. Unfortunately, my searching eventually came up with this record:

Register of the Inspector General's Office 1812-1813; Henry Branch, Capt 20th US Infantry; notation – named crossed out, dismissed the service, Nov 21, 1812.

[source] Registers of Enlistments in the United States Army, compiled 1798 – 1914, NARA; located at the Fold3 database.

Though I have searched high and low, I have found no clear mention of Capt Henry Branch, after his 1812 dismissal from the 20th Infantry Regiment. I have no reason for his dismissal, but it seems to have come around the same time that the US Infantry Regiments of Virginia were moving north to fight and defend in New York and Canada. I have wondered if Henry Branch

continued to serve in the 12th Infantry Regiment that also moved north. But, the statement "dismissed the service" seems rather final.

After his dismissal Henry Branch may have returned to Chesterfield county Virginia, to serve in the Militia. There are two entries in the NARA records for a Henry Branch in the Chesterfield County Militia during the War of 1812. They may represent the same man:

Henry Branch; 23rd Rgt (Browns) Virginia Militia, pot [Lt Col William Brown, Chesterfield]

Henry Branch; Sgt; 2nd Rgt Virginia Militia, Lt Col Ambler and Lt Col Brown [Col John Ambler and Col William Brown, Chesterfield]

[source] Indexes to the Carded Records of Soldiers Who Served in Volunteer Organizations During the War of 1812, compiled 1899 - 1927, NARA Catalog ID 654501; located at Fold3 database.

According to Francis Lutz, in his 1954, "Chesterfield, An Old Virginia County",

A big training reservation named Camp Holly Springs was activated in the Summer of 1813 . . . on the outskirts of South Richmond. General John N Cocke was put in command of the camp at which the militia contingents from the counties south and west of Chesterfield were concentrated for training. More than a score of Chesterfield militia companies saw service for periods during the war. As frequently as they could be spared, the militiamen, many suffering with malaria and other camp diseases, were released and returned home to salvage what they could of the neglected crops . . .

The 23rd Regiment of Virginia Militia was made up of fourteen companies and served off and on during the War. In June of 1813 a large contingency of Virginia Militia were called to Craney Island to defend the city of Norfolk from the British. There they met with success. The 2nd Regiment of Chesterfield Virginia Militia was smaller, with four companies, and served primarily during the final year of the war 1814.

Perhaps a deeper dig into the Virginia Archives would yield more clues to Henry Branch's participation in the War of 1812. It is not certain whether Henry Branch ever returned from the war. A scribbled note in my files claims, "Chesterfield County Virginia Mixed Probate, Book 9, page 227, appointing administrator for Henry Branch, dec'd, died intestate." Somehow I failed to record a date, and have not had an opportunity to search further. Though my note is not clear, I seem to recall that Henry Branch died sometime around 1814-1815, but perhaps it was as late as 1818-1820. William Elam, who was appointed trustee of the Branch children prior to the War, administers Henry Branch's estate.

In a Report of the Secretary of the Treasury, arrearages balance 19 October 1824 we find - Henry Branch, Capt 20th Infantry, \$504. It is unknown if the family ever laid claim to this.

Do you want to know more?

[Link for Henry Branch](#)

Further Reading:

Defending the Old Dominion: Virginia and Its Militia in the War of 1812; Stuart L. Butler, 2012.

Virginia Militia in the War of 1812, 2 volumes; Virginia Auditor's Office, 2001.

A guide to Virginia militia units in the War of 1812; Stuart Lee Butler, 1988.

Sketch: Marching Off to War - Henry Branch and the War of 1812; Pamela Hutchison Garrett, 2014.