

Jack Jouett's Ride, 1781



Jouett Outrides Tarleton

AND SAVES JEFFERSON FROM CAPTURE

BY VIRGINIUS DABNEY

Of the Richmond (Va.) *News Leader*

The power of a poet in creating fame is illustrated by this story of Jack Jouett, practically unknown save in Virginia, and the comparison of his ride with that of the well-known Paul Revere.

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John Jouett, Jr., known to posterity as "Jack," was born in Albemarle County, Va., on December 7, 1754. He was the second son of Captain John Jouett and Mourning Jouett. His father owned the historic Swan Tavern at Charlottesville, the county-seat. Like the Reveres of Massachusetts, the Jouetts were of Huguenot origin.

As the colonies moved nearer and nearer the brink of revolution, the Jouetts were to be found on the side of the patriots. They were among the first to favor the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, and both John Jouetts signed the Albemarle Declaration, whereby 202 citizens of the county re-

nounced allegiance to King George. Jack served in the Revolution as a captain in the State militia, as did his father and three brothers. One of the latter, Matthew, was killed at Brandywine.

It is in June, 1781, that our story begins. The dashing Colonel Banastre Tarleton, of the British army, had been detached in the spring of that year by General Cornwallis, with 180 dragoons and 70 mounted infantrymen, to make a surprise march to Charlottesville, where the legislature was meeting following its flight from Richmond, and to capture the governor and general assembly. Tarleton was hunting big game, for the governor happened to be Thomas Jefferson, and among the legislators were Patrick Henry, whose "Give me liberty or give me death!" had echoed through the colonies in 1775; Richard Henry Lee, who had introduced in the Continental Congress on June 7, 1776, resolutions which led to the Declaration of Independence; Benjamin Harrison, ancestor of two Presidents; and Thomas Nelson, Jr., who had advocated armed opposition in 1775, and had subsequently spent his large fortune in equipping soldiers for the Continental army. Jefferson had, of

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Up from the South rode the impetuous Tarleton. He directed his men to move with caution and to tell no one of their plans. By travelling the last seventy miles of the journey in twenty-four hours he hoped to surprise Jefferson and the assembly, and capture them together with a quantity of valuable stores. The intense heat compelled him to halt for a brief period in the middle of the day on June 3 to refresh his men and horses, but he pressed forward in the afternoon. Moving at top speed, he was successful in concealing his movements until he reached Cuckoo Tavern in Louisa County, about forty miles from his destination.

Captain Jack Jouett, Jr., chanced to be in the neighborhood when the British cavalymen arrived at Cuckoo between 9 and 10 o'clock at night. Why he was there we do not know. Possibly he had obtained a leave of absence from his military duties, and was attending to business of some sort relating to the near-by farm owned by his father, who had at one time owned the tavern also. Neither is it definitely known whether Jouett was inside the tavern when Tarleton's men swept past or whether he was elsewhere in the immediate vicinity. Perhaps, as one version has it, several of the troopers entered the inn for a cooling dram, and he overheard their plans from a rear room. Perhaps they did not enter, and he saw them from a window as they went by. There are various accounts of Jack's movements at Cuckoo, one of which declares that he captured a British dragoon, took away his uniform, and extracted from him the information that the invaders were en route to Charlottesville. This

yarn apparently was invented in recent years. Jouett was a young Hercules, standing 6 feet 4 inches and weighing 220 pounds, and in addition was an expert rider and dead shot, so that he could probably have captured almost any one in the British army had he set out to do so. But there is no mention of any such episode in the small number of revolutionary histories which describe Jouett's ride in any sort of detail.

The important fact, however, is that the Virginia militiaman saw the raiders when they passed Cuckoo Tavern and at once suspected their object. Tarleton clattered on toward Charlottesville, and Jack resolved to outride him. It was plain that the governor and legislature would be seized unless he could warn them of the impending danger. Fortunately he was thoroughly familiar with the region, and this made it possible for him to proceed by a different route from that taken by the British. The latter were on the highway, so that Jouett was forced to cut "across country." It was probably about 10 P. M. when he got under way. The distance by both routes was approximately forty miles, and Tarleton, in addition to being on the main road, had a slight start. Leaping upon his thoroughbred, described in one account as "the best and fleetest of foot of any nag in seven counties," Jouett plunged into what was a virtual wilderness. Virginia roads a century and a half ago were at best an endless series of bottomless ruts and mudholes, but the unfrequented pathway over which this horseman set out on his all-night journey presented difficulties which can only be imagined. His progress was greatly impeded by matted undergrowth, tangled brush, overhanging vines, and ravines and gulleys. His face

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Unluckily the Virginian left no written account of his ride, and we do not know whether he encountered any serious obstacles other than those offered by the well-nigh impassable route over which he travelled. It is likely that the moon was shining, for an astronomical calculation shows that it was within one day of full on the night of June 3, 1781. Unless there were heavy clouds, Jouett had sufficient moonlight to aid him in picking his way. This was a most fortunate circumstance, for on a dark night it probably would have been impossible for him to have traversed such rugged and hilly country at high speed without breaking his neck. Even with the aid of the moon, if there was a moon, his progress must have been arduous and hazardous in the extreme.

While Jouett toiled and sweated through the byways of Louisa, the British on the main road also were straining toward Charlottesville. They were not aware that he was racing to the same destination, and at 11 o'clock the tired troopers halted on a plantation near Louisa Court House for three hours. At 2 o'clock they resumed the march, pausing a few hours later to burn a train of twelve wagons loaded with arms and clothing for the Continental troops in South Carolina. Tarleton says in his account of the expedition that he burned the wagons with their contents, instead of taking them with him, in order that no time might be lost. He adds: "Soon after daybreak some of the principal gentlemen of Virginia who had fled to the borders of

the mountains for security, were taken out of their beds. . . . In the neighborhood of Doctor [Thomas] Walker's a member of the Continental Congress was made prisoner, and the British light troops, after a halt of half an hour to refresh the horses, moved on toward Charlottesville."

Meanwhile, through woods and fields, over creeks and gulches, Jouett was riding on in the hot June night. Like Tarleton's men, he must have halted several times along the way, for no horse or rider could have covered so great a distance under such conditions without stopping for breath. Dawn was breaking over the hills of Albemarle as he drew near Monticello. He had left the British far behind. When his steaming and panting steed drew up at the portico of Jefferson's stately mansion, it was about 4.30 o'clock, and the sun had not yet risen. The raiders were still many miles away. Jack gave the alarm to the governor, and the story goes that the latter rewarded him with one or more glasses of his best ante-Volstead Madeira. He then spurred his all-but-exhausted mount to Charlottesville, two miles farther on, and warned the legislature. He had beaten the British by about three hours. Paul Revere's fifteen-mile jaunt over fairly good roads in the moonlight seems almost nothing by comparison.

Despite the courier's timely arrival, Jefferson came within a hair's breadth of being captured. Several members of the general assembly had spent the night at Monticello, and their host apparently was unwilling to be hurried by the approach of the dragoons. He tells us that they "breakfasted at leisure," after which his guests joined the other legislators in the town. He directed his

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MR. SPEAKER,—The Senate have agreed to the resolution for calling forth a body of militia to reinforce the army under command of the Marquis La Fayette. And then he withdrew.

The House then, according to the order of the day, proceeded by joint ballot with the Senate, to the choice of a Governor or Chief Magistrate of the Commonwealth for the ensuing year; and the members having prepared tickets with the name of the person to be appointed, and deposited the same in the ballot boxes, Messrs. Nicholas, Page, Lee, Burwell, Dulaney and M^cCartey, were nominated a committee to meet a committee from the Senate, and jointly with them to examine the ballot boxes, and report to the House on whom a majority of votes should fall.

The committee then withdrew; and after some time returned into the House and reported, that they had, according to order, met a committee from the Senate in the conference chamber, and jointly with them examined the ballot boxes, and found a majority of votes in favor of Thomas Nelson, jun. Esq.

Resolved, That Thomas Nelson, jun. Esq. be appointed Governor or Chief Magistrate of the Commonwealth for one year, he having been so elected by joint ballot of both Houses of Assembly.

Ordered, That Mr. Nicholas do carry the resolution to the Senate, and desire their concurrence.

Resolved, That at the next session of Assembly an inquiry be made into the conduct of the Executive of this State for the last twelve months.

The Speaker made his resignation to the House, of his appointment to be a delegate to represent this State in Congress until the first day of November next; which was accepted.

The House then, according to the order of the day, proceeded by joint ballot with the Senate, to the choice of three members of the Privy Council or Council of State; and the members having prepared tickets with the names of the persons to be appointed, and deposited the same in the ballot boxes, Messrs. Page, Tyler, Travis, Lee and Mountjoy, were nominated a committee to meet a committee from the Senate, and jointly with them to examine the ballot boxes, and report to the House on whom the majority of votes should fall.

The committee then withdrew; and after some time returned into the House and reported, that they had, according to order, met a committee from the Senate in the conference chamber, and jointly with them examined the ballot boxes, and found a majority of votes in favor of William Cabell, Samuel Hardy and Samuel M^cDowell, Esquires.

Resolved, That William Cabell, Samuel Hardy and Samuel M^cDowell, Esquires, be appointed members of the Privy Council or Council of State, in the room of those who have resigned, they having been so elected by joint ballot of both Houses of Assembly.

Ordered, That Mr. Page do carry the resolution to the Senate, and desire their concurrence.

A motion was made, that the House do come to the following resolution:

Resolved, That the Executive be desired to present to Captain John Jouett, an elegant sword and pair of pistols, as a memorial of the high sense which the General Assembly entertain of his activity and enterprize, in watching the motions of the enemy's cavalry on their late incursion to Charlottesville, and conveying to the Assembly timely information of their approach, whereby the designs of the enemy were frustrated, and many valuable stores preserved.

And the said resolution being read a second time, was, on the question put thereupon, agreed to by the House.

Ordered, That Mr. Henry do carry the resolution to the Senate, and desire their concurrence.

The House proceeded to nominate persons proper to be balloted for as delegates to represent this Commonwealth in Congress for one year from the first day of November next.

Ordered, That Mr. Henry do carry lists of the persons so nominated, to the Senate.

A motion was made, that the House do come to the following resolution:

Resolved That the Executive be desired to purchase for General Edward Stevens, an elegant gelding, to replace one lost by him in the battle at Guilford courthouse; and also a set of furniture.

And the said resolution being read a second time, was, on the question put thereupon, agreed to by the House.

Ordered, That Mr. Taylor of Caroline, do carry the resolution to the Senate, and desire their concurrence.

A motion was made, that the House do come to the following resolution:

Resolved, That the Honorable Major General Marquis La Fayette, be empowered to impress such, and so many horses for the public service as he may find necessary.

And the said resolution being read a second time, was, on the question put thereupon, agreed to by the House.

Ordered, That Mr. Henry do carry the resolution to the Senate, and desire their concurrence.

A motion was made, that the House do come to the following resolution:

Resolved, That the Honorable Major General Marquis La Fayette, be empowered to dispose of the public arms and ammunition, by ordering the same to be delivered to the well-affected citizens at large, or otherwise, as he may judge most conducive to the public safety.

And the said resolution being read a second time, was, on the question put thereupon, agreed to by the House.

Ordered, That Mr. Henry do carry the resolution to the Senate, and desire their concurrence.

A message from the Senate by Mr. Fitzhugh:

MR. SPEAKER,—The Senate have agreed to the resolution appointing Thomas Nelson, jun. Esq. Governor of the Commonwealth; and to the resolution appointing Wm. Cabell, Samuel Hardy and Samuel M^cDowell, Esquires, members of the Privy Council or Council of State. And then he withdrew.

Resolved, That this House will, on Thursday next, proceed by joint ballot with the Senate, to the choice of a delegate to represent this Commonwealth in Congress until the first day of November next, in the room of Benjamin Harrison, Esq. who hath resigned.

Citation: Jouett resolution in Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia . . . in the Year of Our Lord One Thousand Seven Hundred and Eighty-One (1828), 15.

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