

Remembering Jouett's Brave Ride

On the night of June 3, 1781, John “Jack” Jouett spotted British Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton with 180 dragoons and 70 mounted infantrymen in Cuckoo, Va. A native of the area, the 26-year-old Jouett correctly guessed that Tarleton’s target was Charlottesville, the temporary seat of the Virginia government located about 40 miles west of Cuckoo. Tarleton’s goal was to capture then-Governor Thomas Jefferson and other high-profile Virginia delegates, including Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, Benjamin Harrison and Thomas Nelson Jr. **By Lena Anthony**

According to John Maass, a historian at the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington, D.C., who wrote about Tarleton’s raid in the Autumn 2000 issue of *Virginia Cavalcade*, General Charles Cornwallis had intercepted American dispatches and knew the Virginia assembly was meeting in Charlottesville. “The British commander was concerned that the assembly, recently reconvened in Charlottesville, would issue a statewide call for the mobilization of militia to repel his [Virginia] invasion,” Maass wrote. “Therefore, he dispatched ... Tarleton, his most combative and controversial lieutenant, ‘to disturb the Assembly.’”

Determined to warn the government of Tarleton’s approach, Jouett took off on his horse, covering the 40-mile journey in about six and a half hours, using the moonlight as his guide. He beat Tarleton to Charlottesville, thwarting plans for a surprise attack by the British and avoiding what some historians say would have been a decisive blow to the Patriot cause.

*Listen
my children
and you shall
hear of the
midnight ride
of... Jack Jouett.*

Unlike Paul Revere, whose shorter midnight ride was forever memorialized by poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, little is known about Jouett, who left Virginia for Kentucky soon after the war ended. Modern-day historians are discovering that much of what has been written about this forgotten Patriot is based on legend—making it harder to ferret out the facts of Jouett’s story.

Separating Fact From Legend

Jouett was one of four sons born to John Jouett, a commissary who also owned the Swan Tavern in Charlottesville, where many of the Virginia delegates were staying the night Jouett made his ride. Legend has it that all four of the Jouett brothers were captains in the Virginia militia. But that’s one of those fallacies that have followed Jouett throughout the years, according to Virginia historian Rick Britton, who wrote *Jefferson, A Monticello Sampler* (Mariner, 2008).

For starters, he says, it's unlikely that all four brothers were captains. What's more, Britton searched the University of Virginia's volumes listing all the officers in the militia and never found Jouett's name. Further, Britton cites Thomas Jefferson's own diary recounting the morning of June 4, 1781, in which he says that "a Mr. Jouett" came and warned him. "Later on that same morning, a fellow in the Continental line came to warn him, but Jefferson referred to him as Captain Hudson," Britton explains. "The fact that he referred to Jouett as 'a Mr. Jouett' suggests he wasn't a captain after all."

Other accounts of that day mention Jouett wearing "a scarlet coat and military hat and plume," according to Virginius Dabney in the December 1961 edition of *American Heritage*. But Britton says that doesn't mean he was a captain. "He had a habit of dressing up," he says. "We get the sense that he was a bit of a showboat." That said, the Virginia House of Delegates resolution from 1781 that honored Jouett for his heroic service the night of his ride states: "That the Executive be desired to present to Captain John Jouett..."

If he wasn't a captain prior to his ride, it is certainly safe to say that Jouett was loyal to the Patriot cause, as both he and his father signed the Albemarle County Declaration of Independence on June 21, 1779, renouncing their allegiance to the British throne.

A Treacherous Ride

As for the exact whereabouts of Jouett when he saw Tarleton and his men, that's another matter of speculation. According to Britton, it's likely that Jouett was in Cuckoo that night to help his father, a commissary selling supplies to the Continental Army, by working on the family farm near the Cuckoo Tavern. After assisting his father, Jouett probably had dinner at the tavern and spotted Tarleton and his men from inside. Some accounts of the evening—including an account published in August 1922 by DAR member Jennie Thornley Grayson of the Jack Jouett Chapter, Charlottesville, Va.—have Jouett capturing a British dragoon, stripping him of his uniform and



disguising himself as the enemy so he could eavesdrop on Tarleton without being noticed. Another account places him asleep under a tree as Tarleton approaches in the distance.

In any event, after spotting Tarleton, Jouett took off toward Charlottesville, leaving Cuckoo on horseback around 10 p.m. Unlike Paul Revere, who was accompanied by William Dawes on his ride and who was instructed to ride the 20 miles from Boston to Lexington to warn John Hancock and Samuel Adams of the approaching enemy, Jouett rode alone—and unprompted. "It wasn't something that he had to do," says Joel Meador, interim executive director of the Jack Jouett House Historic Site near Versailles, Ky. "He took the initiative because he believed in American independence."

Since Tarleton was taking the main road from Cuckoo, Jouett needed to find a back way to Charlottesville. Having lived in the area his entire life, Jouett had an advantage over the British—he knew the roads. Legend has it that Jouett rode 40 miles through brush and on cow paths. Britton says that description is likely an exaggeration and that the backwoods portion of his ride was closer to 15 miles long.

Matthew Harris Jouett

A Son Scorned?

Matthew Harris Jouett painted the portraits of many of his family members—but there is no record that he ever painted his father, Jack. Was there a strain on their relationship? According to Joel Meador, interim executive director of the Jack Jouett House Historic Site, family lore suggests that Jack disapproved of Matthew's decision to become a painter since he had sent his son to school to become a lawyer. "Some people believe this created a rift—with Gilbert Stuart later becoming a sort of surrogate father to Matthew," Meador explains. Matthew studied under Stuart and named a son—Alexander Gilbert Stuart—in honor of his teacher.

Among Matthew's most notable portraits is a full-length depiction of the Marquis de Lafayette, who sat for him in his Lexington, Ky., studio when Lafayette made his 1824–1825 grand tour of America.



Above: The Jack Jouett House near Versailles, Ky., was Matthew Harris Jouett's boyhood home. Left: The painting in the home's dining room is a reproduction of an original self-portrait of Matthew Jouett.

"He knew all the main roads, so he didn't have to go the entire 40 miles on back roads and trails," Britton says.

According to Britton's estimates, it's likely that Jouett rode 15 miles southeast from the town of Louisa on rough trails to reach Three Notch'd Road, a major Colonial Virginia thoroughfare that would have taken him directly to Charlottesville. (The road got its name from the notches cut into trees, which let travelers know they were on the right track.) "That's how he beat Tarleton," Britton says. "Twenty-five miles of his trip was on Three Notch'd Road."

Jouett's first stop was Monticello to warn Jefferson and a group of delegates who were staying with him. Most accounts have Jouett arriving there around 4:30 a.m. About 15 minutes later, he would have been headed for the center of town to alert the rest of the delegates staying at the Swan Tavern. It's unclear when Tarleton arrived—his book, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America*, written in 1787, does not mention that detail—but some of the delegates did not escape in time. That means Tarleton might have been just behind Jouett. Britton offers another explanation: "It actually took two men to get Jefferson to leave Monticello, so the assembly may have taken the same tactic," he says. "The government was on the run, so they had important papers on them. Maybe they spent some time collecting those, and that could account for why some of them were captured." In all, seven delegates were captured, although their identities are unknown.

Starting a New Life

Two weeks later, the Virginia General Assembly adopted a resolution honoring Jouett's heroic ride and awarded him a sword and a pair of pistols for his service. This recognition marks the end of Jouett's documented story in Virginia.

The next year, he set out for Kentucky, probably to claim land, according to Meador. He settled first in Mercer County, where he married Sally Robards in 1784. They had

12 children, including Matthew Harris Jouett, the famous American painter, born in 1788. (See sidebar on page 46 for more about Jouett's relationship with his son.)

After moving to Kentucky, Jouett started a career in politics: He played a role in helping Kentucky become a state in 1792, served as a state legislator for three counties during his lifetime, and counted Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay among his friends. About a decade after arriving in Kentucky, Jouett relocated his family to Woodford County, where he made money as a horse breeder, and also operated a water-powered grist mill and distillery from around 1798–1805.

Preserving a Hero's Legacy

The Jack Jouett House Historic Site, located in Woodford County, Ky., near Versailles, includes the home where Jouett and his family lived from 1797 until about 1810. Meador describes it as a modest two-story Federal-style cottage. The downstairs had a parlor, dining room and bedroom, while the upstairs had two bedrooms, where the children likely slept. A kitchen was housed in a stone cabin located next to the home. The property was vast, encompassing 530 acres. "It was very much a working plantation," Meador says. "He had 20 slaves, at least at one time, and around 40 horses."

While most of the plantation's buildings have long since been destroyed, the home itself was well-preserved, even prior to the restoration work that started in 1972. The reason, Meador says, is twofold: "For the last 100 years of its private existence, the owners had rented out the home to tenants," Meador explains. "There was always someone living there, hence it was being maintained, and because they were renters, they didn't have the right to change anything about the home." In fact, when Woodford County acquired the home in 1972, the property still had a working outhouse.

Today, the home is one of few lasting reminders of Jouett and his contributions to American independence. His legacy has all but disappeared. Many historians agree that Tarleton's raid on Charlottesville actually haunted Jefferson for the rest of his life. Jefferson's political opponents later called the future president cowardly for fleeing Monticello, even though he was vastly outnumbered. Jefferson's ongoing embarrassment and defense of the escape (see *American Spirit's* May/June 2010 review of Michael Kranish's *Flight From Monticello: Thomas Jefferson at War*) could be one reason why Jouett isn't more well-known.

Another reason for Jouett's exclusion from the history books has more to do with the vagaries of fame, agree Britton and Meador. Unlike Paul Revere, Jouett didn't have an agent—he lacked a poet as prominent as Longfellow to memorialize his heroic ride. 🍷

Lena Anthony profiles exemplary DAR members for the Today's Daughters department.

Saving the Records of Jefferson's County

By Eric G. Grundset

Untold quantities of historical records have been lost during conflicts, and the Revolutionary period is no exception. Wars have always presented challenges for records and their keepers. The Colonial records of New York were spirited away from Kingston in Ulster County in 1777 just before British forces arrived and burned the town.

While many other towns were not so fortunate, similar stories of record rescues fill the annals of Revolutionary history. Up and down the East Coast, clerks and other local officials hid records from destruction by enemy forces.

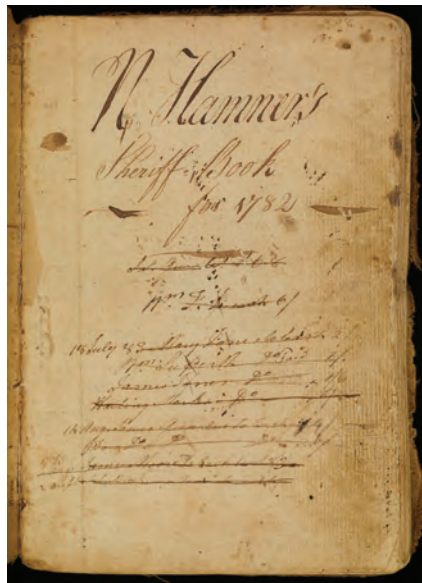
The seat of Albemarle County—an inland Virginia county far from the coast and likely British threats—seemed to be a safe place, or so the Virginia General Assembly assumed when it evacuated Richmond for Charlottesville in early 1781 as General Charles Cornwallis' army marched north to occupy the new capital city. Governor Thomas Jefferson also retreated to Monticello, his home on a mountaintop overlooking the county seat. On June 4, 1781, as an enemy force commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton approached, intent on capturing Virginia officials, Jack Jouett, as the *Our Patriots* feature describes, rode to warn Jefferson and the state's legislators of the advancing troops.

When Jouett arrived with the news, the small Piedmont court town of Charlottesville must have been in turmoil. The approaching enemy imperiled the security of the courthouse's contents. One can imagine county court officials hurrying to grab whatever records they could pack and make a speedy escape to the countryside.

In *Flight from Monticello* (Oxford University Press, 2010) author Michael Kranish notes, "Tarleton's main cavalry thundered into Charlottesville ... ransacked

the village and destroyed [arms, supplies, tobacco and] county records."

Rescuers of the county records, apparently focused on maintaining clear titles to land and property, were able to save deed and will records, but little else. Those precious volumes were secreted from harm by one or more rescuers until the British left and the documents could be returned to the ransacked courthouse. Where the



Albemarle County records were stored in the meantime remains a mystery.

The identities of those who saved the records also have long been unknown. One clue as to who may have helped lies in a small volume housed at the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

Among materials that the library purchased in 1950 from a Chattanooga, Tenn., resident is a battered booklet labeled "Albemarle Sheriff's Ledger, 1782-1783." Inside, the title page reads "N. Hamner's Sheriff Book." The ledger is bound in worn brown leather and contains listings of taxes collected. At the very back, however, is one page unrelated to taxes, titled "State

of the Record & papers belonging to the Office of [blank] Saved from destruction of the Enemy." The list mostly matches the volumes that still reside in the office of the Albemarle County clerk of court.

The compiler of the document was Nicholas Hamner (1742-1794). He was likely born in James City County and moved with his parents, Robert and Elizabeth, to Albemarle County as a young boy. He and his wife, Agnes Tompkins Hamner, raised six children on farmland 10 miles south of Charlottesville.

Hamner served as an Anglican vestryman of St. Anne's Parish in southern Albemarle County in the 1770s and was connected to many families in the area through kinship, business associations and official responsibilities.

In 1779, he and many other Albemarle residents signed the oath of allegiance to Virginia that became known as the Albemarle County Declaration of Independence. Shortly thereafter, he served as a captain in the Albemarle County militia and may have been involved in guarding the British and Hessian prisoners of war housed at the Albemarle Barracks just northwest of Charlottesville. His militia unit was later among the many present at Yorktown in the autumn of 1781.

And, apparently, Hamner was sheriff, or perhaps a deputy, of Albemarle County in the closing years of the Revolution, based on the title of his tax ledger. Given his responsibilities and general community standing, either he alone or with others spirited the surviving county records out of Charlottesville and into hiding as Tarleton's forces approached.

One cannot say with certainty who saved the records of Jefferson's county, but Nicholas Hamner's "Sheriff Book" points to his possible involvement and helps expand a small part of the story of Jefferson, Jouett and Albemarle County during the perilous time only four months prior to the siege of Yorktown and Cornwallis' surrender. 📖

Eric G. Grundset, director of the DAR Library, is a direct descendant of Nicholas Hamner.