



A narrow escape from the British, thanks to Jack Jouett

By Gaye Wilson

In 1781, Virginia felt the full force of the Revolutionary War. Beginning in January, troops led by Benedict Arnold conducted raids along the James River. By May, Arnold's men and troops led by Maj. Gen. William Phillips had joined a larger British force under Lord Cornwallis that had moved into Virginia from the south. This invading army would scatter the Virginia government and create turmoil through a swath of the state – before ultimately surrendering to the combined French and American forces at Yorktown on Oct. 19.

Within the turmoil of invasion, a heroic action by a young Virginian thwarted the British capture of Virginia's governor, Thomas Jefferson, and members of the Virginia Assembly. The hero in this instance was John "Jack" Jouett, Jr., a 26-year-old resident of the small town of Charlottesville near Jefferson's Monticello.

Upon learning that Virginia's legislature was reconvening in Charlottesville after evacuating the capital at Richmond, Cornwallis dispatched Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton to capture the governor and assemblymen. Tarleton traveled swiftly, mostly at night, and counted on catching the Virginians by surprise. He pushed hard before stopping to rest men and horses somewhere in the vicinity of the Louisa Court House on the evening of June 3. This is where Jouett observed the British and guessed their destination.

Jack Jouett was a captain in the 16th regiment of the Virginia militia. His

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Jack Jouett
House

The only known from-life image of Jack Jouett, a silhouette made by his son Matthew.

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Monticello



Jack Jouett

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older brother, Matthew, had been killed at the Battle of Brandywine, and his two younger brothers also were militiamen. His father John Jouett, Sr., served as a “commissary” supplying the Continental Army with beef from his farm in Louisa County. As the Jouett family lived in Charlottesville, ownership of this farm could explain why Jack Jouett happened to be in Louisa on the evening of June 3.

According to Jefferson’s account, Jouett knew the “byways of the neighborhood, passed the enemy’s encampment, rode all night, and before sunrise of the next day [June 4] called at Monticello.” This would have been a hazardous ride of approximately 40 miles. Legend has Jefferson offering Jouett a glass of good Madeira before he continued on to Charlottesville to rouse the assemblymen there.

After Jouett’s departure, Jefferson ordered a carriage made ready for his family and offered breakfast to the members of the legislature who were staying at Monticello. Jefferson sent his family to safety at a neighboring farm but remained behind, perhaps to gather needed papers, when he received a second warning from a neighbor, Christopher Hudson, that the British troops were ascending Monticello mountain. Hudson related that he found Jefferson “perfectly tranquil, and undisturbed” but urged him to leave immediately. According to Hudson, Monticello was surrounded “in ten minutes at farthest by a troop of light-horse.” Jefferson described how he avoided the main road and traveled through the woods to join his family.

Tarleton did not remain long in Charlottesville. He managed to catch seven legislators, but most of the assemblymen escaped across the Blue Ridge Mountains to the town of Staunton. Meanwhile, believing his term as governor had expired, Jefferson escorted his family to safety at their farm, Poplar Forest, near Lynchburg, and remained there until the middle of the summer.

When the members of the General Assembly reconvened in Staunton, they immediately voted Jack Jouett a pair of pistols

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Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton, as depicted in a London magazine in 1782.



Jack Jouett

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and a sword as symbols of gratitude, but a proposal was put forward for an inquiry into Jefferson's actions. The inquiry ultimately was dropped, yet Jefferson insisted on appearing before the lawmakers in December to respond to charges of mishandling his duties and abandoning leadership at a critical moment. He reported that he had believed it understood that he was leaving office and that he had discussed with other legislators the advantages of Gen. Thomas Nelson, a commander of the state militia, being appointed governor. Jefferson recognized that he was "unprepared ... for the command of armies" and that given the critical conditions, "the union of the civil and military power in the same hands, at this time would greatly facilitate military measures."

(Nelson in fact had been named Jefferson's successor later in June, and he effectively led both Virginia's civil government and military forces through the end of the war.)

Though Jefferson succeeded in justifying his actions to the legislature, the events surrounding the British invasion of Virginia would haunt him. In subsequent national elections, political opponents would accuse him of incompetence, negligence, and even cowardice in his handling of the governorship during the events of 1781. Through the rest of his life Jefferson wrestled with the stings of these accusations, and he worked to ensure that his actions were accurately represented in the history of the American Revolution.

As for Jack Jouett, he had to wait a few years to receive the promised pistols and sword. And though sometimes referred to as the "Paul Revere of the South," Jouett never gained the widespread fame granted Revere by Longfellow's poem.

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