



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on June 3, 2015

## June 3, 1781: The Midnight Ride of Jack Jouett that Saved Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry

Listen, my children, and you shall hear of the midnight ride of — *Jack Jouett*?

Jouett's mission, like that of his more famous fellow horseman, was to warn American patriots of the approaching attack by British regulars.

While most people have heard of Paul Revere and his ride, forever memorialized by the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, there are few who know anything of Jouett, even though his ride has been described as having had "a greater impact on the outcome of the American Revolution than did Paul Revere's ride."



This image is the only known portrait from life of Jack Jouett, drawn in silhouette by his son.

John "Jack" Jouett, Jr. was a man who looked the part of a hero. He stood 6 feet four inches tall and was described by his contemporaries as "muscular and handsome." He descended from a Norman Huguenot family accustomed to fighting against the oppression of tyrants.

Even though he didn't have the good fortune of having a Longfellow to immortalize his name and his exploits, Jouett's story and service to the cause of liberty are every bit as exciting as those of the Massachusetts silversmith.

Jouett was a captain in the Virginia militia and was deployed outside of Charlottesville, Virginia. Late in the night on June 3, 1781, Jouett was sleeping in front of a famous watering hole — the Cuckoo Tavern. He and his unit were bivouacked on the lawn of the building when they were awakened by a sound of several horses approaching the location quickly.

As Jouett roused himself, he saw a large number of "White Coats," the name given by locals to the British dragoons under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Banastre "the Butcher" Tarleton, a notoriously brutal man sent by Lord Cornwallis to retake Virginia as part of the wider British "southern strategy" to isolate the South from the rest of America and win the war piece by piece.

To Jouett's surprise and shock, the Butcher himself rode at the front of the White Coat force, composed of 180 dragoons and 70 mounted infantry ready to carry out their commander's orders with precision and ferocity.

Jouett instantly understood the reason for the British presence at the Cuckoo Tavern: to capture Governor Thomas Jefferson (and likely hang him for treason for having written the Declaration of Independence) and to disrupt the deliberations of the Virginian legislature.

Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and the other "rebels" in the Virginia General Assembly were meeting in Charlottesville, just 40 miles from where the British cavalry stood surrounding Jouett and his small detachment of the Virginia militia.



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Most of that force was deployed up north, fighting with George Washington, leaving the lawmakers of the Old Dominion — including Jefferson and Henry — practically undefended and helpless in the face of Tarleton's mounted force of British regulars.

Jouett realized what he had to do: He had to find a way to evade Tarleton and the scouts he undoubtedly deployed along the road to Charlottesville and warn Jefferson and the others to flee from what would be a sure slaughter and likely the hangman's noose.

Just before midnight on June 3, 1781, Jack Jouett set out on his horse (described as "the best bred and fleetest of foot of any nag in seven counties") to cover the more than 40 miles between the Cuckoo Tavern and Charlottesville.

Jouett rode through the middle of the night and through the thick and tangled backwoods of Virginia. The trail was rough and the mission was critical.

Jouett and every other patriot understood that the capture of Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry would be not only devastating for the American morale, but also a powerful public relations coup for Cornwallis and the crown that he served.

Narrowly escaping capture on several occasions, Jouett rode with urgency through the nearly impassible byroads and Indian trails he was forced to travel.

As one writer related in a *Scribner's* article published in June, 1928:

The unfrequented pathway over which this horseman set out on his all-night journey can only be imagined. His progress was greatly impeded by matted undergrowth, tangled bush, overhanging vines and gullies ... his face was cruelly lashed by tree limbs as he rode forward and scars said to have remained the rest of his life were the result of lacerations sustained from these lowhanging branches.

The next scene in the story was retold in an article published in 1934 by the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*:

By breakfast time Tarleton had reached Dr. Walkers in Albemarle County. Here he decided to take breakfast. It is thought that Mrs. Walker had been informed by Jack Jouett Jr. that he was on his way to warn Governor Jefferson and the Legislature for the British general had to wait some time for his breakfast. His troops were given the first and second breakfasts prepared.

General Tarleton became impatient, and made an investigation. He was told he would have to place the kitchen under guard, if he wanted breakfast, which he did. But he had been delayed for some time; time enough for Governor Jefferson and the Legislature to be warned.

On Jack Jouett Jr.'s way to Monticello he passed through the village of Milton at dawn, and shouted, "The British are coming." Some thought he was joking, as he was known to be a great joker. A few minutes later, the rider arrived at Monticello, and warned the Governor of Virginia, who quickly gave the rider a glass of madeira to brace him up, for his trip to warn the Legislature.

Having been warned by Jouett, Governor Jefferson sent his family away to Blenheim, the home of Colonel Edward Carter. He stayed back, going through Monticello collecting critical documents before following his family in haste.

Having realized that he had dropped his walking sword during his flight, Jefferson headed back to Monticello to retrieve it. While riding away, his sword in hand, Jefferson saw British dragoons heading toward his home. That was how close Thomas Jefferson came to being captured and executed by the



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British!

So narrow was the escape, in fact, one biographer of Thomas Jefferson claimed that “while Jefferson was on the lawn of Monticello, Captain of Dragoons McLeon was actually in the house.”

After Jouett arrived in Charlottesville and warned the legislators, seven of that number delayed their departure and were captured by Tarleton’s troops.

In honor of his heroism, the Virginia Assembly awarded Captain Jouett a “brace of silver mounted pistols and a jeweled sword.”

Despite being all but ignored by history books, Jack Jouett’s 40-mile ride through the unforgiving forest in the darkest hours of the night of June 3, 1781, has, as the *Times-Dispatch* claimed, “never been equaled in history.” For comparison, consider the fact that Paul Revere’s renowned ride covered fewer than 20 miles. Moreover, the Bostonian rode on a well-traveled public road on a night blessed with a bright moon to guide his mount.

After the war, Jouett settled in Kentucky, married his Virginia sweetheart, and the couple had 12 children. He served for many years in the Kentucky legislature before his death on March 1, 1822 while visiting his daughter in Bath County, Kentucky. Remarkably, the location of Jouett’s final resting place remains a mystery to this day.



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