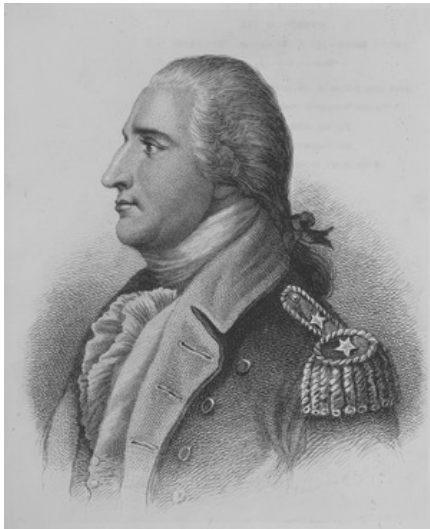


Little-Known Heroes of the Revolution

by Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

The year was 1781 and things were not going well for American Patriots fighting for their independence. Conditions would get much worse for Virginia over the next few months before culminating in the surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown on October 19th. A number of circumstances, happenstances and heroic feats led to this unlikely end to the war – notably the actions of two little-known heroes helped make ultimate victory possible: One was a young man from Charlottesville and the other a slave from New Kent County.

The year began with the newly commissioned British General Benedict Arnold entering the Bay with 27 ships loaded with soldiers, mostly Huguenot mercenaries and American Tories. Notable among the troops were the notorious Queen's Rangers composed of American Loyalists, including some Virginians. Arnold's orders only authorized him to establish a base around Portsmouth and Norfolk and recruit or otherwise support and encourage loyalists in the area. Arnold had other ambitions and quickly launched a full-scale invasion.



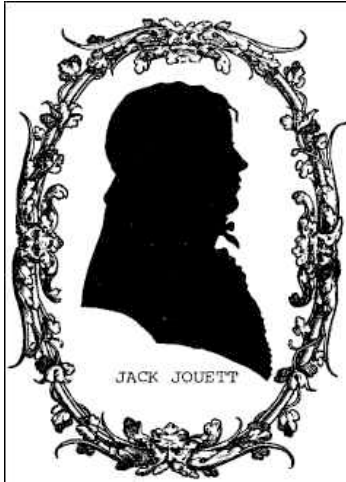
Benedict Arnold
Engraving by H.B. Hall, after John Trumbull.

Only months before, Arnold, the American general in charge of the key fort at West Point on the Hudson River, had entertained General George Washington and the Marquee de Lafayette while conspiring to surrender the fort to the British and simultaneously arranging for the capture of Washington and Lafayette. Arnold was to receive £20,000 and the rank of Brigadier General for his treachery. The plot was discovered and Arnold escaped to join General Clinton in New York. He was awarded his commission, but only £6,000 in blood money, and sent south to Virginia with an occupation force. Within the first two weeks of January, Arnold and his army had sailed up the James and ravaged, pillaged and plundered Richmond, encountering little resistance from the ill equipped, poorly trained and grossly undermanned Virginia Militia. His primary objective was the capture of Governor Thomas

Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, and Virginia Legislators, some of whom were signers, but Jefferson escaped and watched the destruction from nearby plantations.

Several months later, Lord Cornwallis moved his massive army up from the Carolinas and Arnold sailed back to New York. Jefferson and the General Assembly retreated to

Charlottesville and Jefferson's nearby estate of Monticello, considered to be relatively safe from British capture. Cornwallis sent Colonel Banastre (the Butcher) Tarleton and his regiment of dragoons to capture Jefferson so that he could be sent to England, imprisoned, and possibly hung for treason. Also targeted were Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, Benjamin Harrison, Thomas Nelson, Edmund Randolph and many other



leaders of the Revolution in Virginia. With Tarleton at the head of the column, the mounted regiment moved swiftly intending to catch their prey by surprise. On June 3rd they passed Cuckoo Tavern in Louisa County disturbing the slumber of one Jack Jouett, a captain in the Militia, who was reportedly asleep on the tavern lawn. Jouett was a large muscular man of 27 years, standing six-feet four and weighing 220 pounds. His father acted as a commissary for the Continental Army supplying meat and provisions and he also operated the Swan Tavern in Charlottesville, where the legislature met and some members stayed. Young Jack was probably in Louisa attending to the cattle on one of their farms. History does not speculate as to why Captain Jouett was asleep on the lawn. He waited for Tarleton to

pass, saddled his thoroughbred mare, Sallie, and set out across country to warn Jefferson and the legislators, some 40 miles away, that Tarleton was coming. Certain that British sentries had been posted along the road, Jack took off through familiar woods and trails of the countryside. He arrived at Monticello before dawn, severely slashed and bruised by brambles and tree limbs resulting in scars that he would carry for the rest of his life. Jefferson calmly ordered breakfast served and, according to legend, offered Jouett a glass of Madeira before he left for Charlottesville to rouse the assemblymen. The Governor sent his wife and daughters south in a carriage while he leisurely wandered about putting affairs in order. In spite of the warning, Jefferson barely escaped. He watched dragoons enter Charlottesville then advance on Monticello. He was still on the grounds when enemy soldiers entered his main house.

Everyone is familiar with the midnight ride of Paul Revere because of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, but few are aware of the greater significance of Jack Jouett's ride. Revere only rode 15 miles on good roads to alert the militia, an event which is notable because it marked the beginning of open hostilities, but had no bearing on the outcome of the war. Jouett, on the other hand, rode 40 miles cross-country and altered the course of history.

Against the advice of Arnold, Cornwallis positioned his forces on the coast and fortified Yorktown. Lafayette, commanding a much smaller army, took up positions nearby and awaited the arrival of General Washington and the French fleet so that the British could be contained on the land and could not escape by sea. Enter our second unlikely hero, a 32-year-old slave from New Kent County. James and his master, William Armistead, joined Lafayette to act as commissaries, supplying the needs of the army. James requested that he be allowed to pretend to seek refuge with the British so that he could pass messages to Lafayette from spies already in place. As a "forager", one who was

sent out to find food and supplies, James could move freely through the lines of both armies. James was also a gifted observer with an excellent memory. He somehow gained the confidence of Cornwallis and was assigned as a waiter at the General's table.

Officers spoke freely and discussed plans in his presence so he was more effective in obtaining useful intelligence than any of the other spies. James then proposed to Cornwallis that he could spy on the patriots and thus became the first African-American double agent. On several occasions, misinformation provided by Lafayette through James altered British tactics and the intelligence that he provided allowed Lafayette and then Washington to out-manuever the British resulting in surrender. A few days after the surrender, Lafayette entertained Cornwallis at dinner. When a uniformed James walked into the room, Cornwallis suddenly understood how the Americans had anticipated and thwarted his maneuvers.



James Armistead Lafayette
The Valentine Richmond History Center

After the war, James moved back to New Kent as a slave. He was not eligible for freedom under the Manumission Act of 1782 as he had been a spy, not a soldier. On hearing of this, Lafayette wrote a letter of commendation and William, now a legislator, petitioned the General Assembly for his freedom. James then took the name of Armistead as his middle name and Lafayette as his surname. He settled as a farmer near New Kent and had three slaves of his own, which was not an uncommon practice for free black men at that time. When Lafayette returned to the area in 1824, he spied his old friend in the crowd, stopped his carriage and embraced him warmly. James Armistead Lafayette died a few years later leaving a legacy of unparalleled service to his country.

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