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HISTORICAL RESEARCH COMMITTEE PAPERS

AARON BURR SLEPT HERE

BY

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(Lewis' Tavern Out - Chester Co., S.C.)

On a late afternoon in March 1806 a most singular group made its way up the muddy wagon road from the west and into the frontier town of Chester, South Carolina. There were ¹⁰ nine men in the little party and all were mounted on horseback. One man among the ¹⁰ nine stood out from the others, not only because of his appearance, but ^{also} because he seemed to be under guard, as indeed he was, for he was a prisoner. He wore coarse homespun pantaloons, a jacket of common drab cloth and an old hat with a broad flapping brim. This hat hung far down over his face but not sufficiently ~~so~~ to completely hide his brilliant eyes, nor could the crude garments conceal his distinguished bearing. It took no keen sense of observation to see that this man was no common creature. For instance, anyone would have immediately noticed that the superb horse on which he was mounted, with its handsome saddle and expensive harness, was in contradiction ^{to} with the rider's attire; and the high boots of fine leather and skilled workmanship were not in accord with the unseemly pantaloons which were thrust down into them. The man was dressed as a river boatman, but it was quite evident that he was not of that calling.

Who then was this mysterious stranger? And why was he here; and why was he under arrest? As a matter of fact, this man's name was a byword throughout the nation and only a short time before he had been the idol of a great political party. For the prisoner was none other than Aaron Burr until recently Vice President of the United States, slayer of Alexander Hamilton, brilliant statesman and father ^{of} the Beautiful Theodosia. He was under military arrest by the order of President Thomas Jefferson ~~XXXX~~ on charge of high treason and at the moment was being conducted to Richmond, Virginia, for trial. The charge of treason included a plot to divide the Union and seize the great city

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of New Orleans. Some weeks before he had abandoned the flotilla which he had manned and equipped on the Mississippi River and having assumed the disguise of a boatman had disappeared into the wilderness. For a few days he had been the object of some of the greatest man hunts in American history. He was headed, it was thought, for Pensacola, Florida, where a British man-of-war lay and in which he had hoped to find refuge until he could escape to some foreign country. The whole countryside from the Mississippi River to the Atlantic had been alerted.

The first few days of his flight to freedom had been most successful and his disguise misleading. He had proceeded unrecognized as far east as Wakefield in Washington County, Alabama. There fate overtook him. One late night, when he had stopped at a log cabin to inquire his way, his singular attire had aroused the suspicion of a young lawyer who with a companion was spending the evening in that lonely outpost of civilization over a game of backgammon. Only a few days before the young lawyer, whose name was Perkins, had read a description of Burr and also the President's proclamation ordering his arrest as a traitor. After Burr had gone on his way Perkins became more and more convinced that his suspicions were not without ground and eventually decided to pursue the stranger, though his companion laughed at his idea and refused to go with him.

We do not have time here to recount the details of the exciting evening that followed, but suffice it to say that within a few hours Burr's arrest had been effected by Perkins's efforts and he had been carried off to Fort Stedart where he was placed under military arrest. Here he had been held a week or more awaiting orders from Washington some 1,000 miles away - 500 of them through ~~the~~ the wilderness. Finally on March the fifth the party set out. Perkins, as commander, led the way. Burr was placed in the middle of the line of march with four guards in front of him and four behind. They

marched single file from necessity for the only way through the forest was a narrow Indian trail.

It was a long, perilous journey through the wilderness. Twelve days they plodded through cold and heavy rains, sleeping at night on the ground among howling wolves and passing by day through tribes of hostile Indians. It was not until they were within eighty miles of the Georgia - South Carolina line that they were sheltered by a reef. Through all the hardships and fatigue of the journey not once had Burr complained. Never had there been a mere courageous, courteous, or cooperative prisoner. Finally they reached the borders of the State of South Carolina. This presented a special problem to his captors for they were well aware of the danger in conducting him through this state where his daughter lived and where he had often been entertained in the homes of its most prominent citizens. In South Carolina Aaron Burr was not only personally known but he was admired and beloved by a host of strong supporters. It was even possible that an armed rescue might be attempted. With these facts in mind Perkins again alerted his guard and saw to it that the party kept far to the north, in this manner avoiding the larger settlements until Chester District was reached.

For what happened at the village of Chester let us quote Parton's biography of Burr for an eye-witness account :

" As he (Perkins) approached the principal village of this district, he halted the party, and changed the order of their march, placing two men in front of the prisoner, two more behind, and one at each side of him. In this manner they proceeded, without incident, until they passed near a tavern, before which a considerable number of persons were standing, while music and dancing were heard from within. Here, Burr threw himself from his horse, and exclaimed in a loud voice,

' I am Aaron Burr, under military arrest, and claim the protection of the civil authorities. '

" Perkins snatched his pistols from his holster, sprang to the ground, and in an instant was at the side of his prisoner. With a pistol in each hand, he sternly ordered him to remount.

night following his harrowing experience in Chester.

The story runs thus : After Perkins had secured the gig and rejoined the party, Burr was placed in it and the party started on its way again. Darkness overtook them near the old Lewis' Tavern and it was decided to stop there for the night. Perkins and his men, being ^{not being} humane rather than callous and unfeeling, took pity upon the prisoner, and agreed that he should be allowed to go alone to the bedroom on the upper floor, while a guard was set in the room below. Later in the night Burr's supper was sent up to him by a servant girl. While in his room, so the tale is told, Burr either persuaded her that he was an innocent, persecuted man or he bribed her to return during the small hours of the night and unbar the door that he might escape. This she did, guiding him in person down the steep stairs to the lower floor. In the general room of the Inn they were discovered and Burr's last hope of escape was thwarted. The remainder of the night Burr was compelled to sleep on a wooden bench on the front porch with two men standing guard over him.

And if you are inclined to disbelieve the story you may go to the public library in Chester and see the bench for yourself. It is a curious and interesting thing - low and broad and built of rough boards - a strange ^{resting} place for a great man, the Vice President of the United States. The Inn too is there by the roadside very much as it was in that far off day. Then, if you wish, you can go to Chester and there on the curb of the main street you can see the rock that Burr used as a horse block when he dismounted. Engraven on it are the words " Aaron Burr ".

But to return to the Inn - at dawn, or earlier, the next morning Perkins had the party on the move toward Virginia. It took 21 days to go from Fort Stoddart to Richmond. We have no other written record of any of the journey except a passing comment by John Randolph of " Bizarre " ^{Cumberland} in ~~Appomattox~~ ^{County, Virginia,} to the effect that Aaron Burr had passed his plantation that day but no one had seen him because his captors had the curtains of the

vehicle in which he was traveling up to conceal him from the gaze of the public.

The morning after Burr arrived in Richmond he wrote to Theodosia in South Carolina,

" It seems that here the business is to be tried and concluded. "
And so it was - but that is another story !

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