

Laborer's Crime Indicative Of Era, Westward Dreams

By LOUISE PETTUS

On July 3, 1825, a laborer, John P. Countryman of York District, "entered the dwelling house of Robert Love" and stole "one Spanish-milled dollar of the value of one dollar, one quarter valued at twenty five cents, one seven pence in silver of the value of twelve and half cents and one three pence half penny in silver at the value of six and one quarter cents."

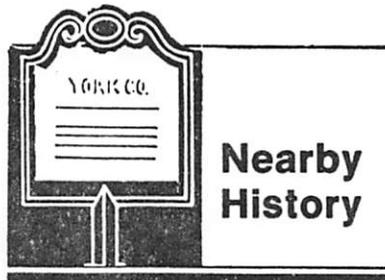
The same day or soon thereafter, Countryman stole from James Love some paper bank bills — a \$10 note issued by the Bank of the State of South Carolina, a \$10 note on the Bank of North Carolina and several small notes — and a few silver coins, in all amounting to around \$30.



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Countryman's apparent motive was to get enough money to allow him to move to the west. To South Carolinians in 1825, the west was Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee or Kentucky.

Countryman only got as far as Chester District where, on Sept. 10, 1825, he was apprehended by Abraham Petty and Rutherford Hayden, who took Countryman to Clement Wood, a justice of the peace. Wood charged Countryman with theft, placed him in the Chester Gaol (jail) and informed York District Sheriff John Harris of the money found on Countryman.



The records are not clear on what Sheriff Harris did next, but they do show that before the quarterly court session assembled he had secured three material witnesses against Countryman and had required the three, William Currier, John Turner and Elijah Carroll, to post bond of \$200 each to guarantee their appearance in court.

A "Warrant for Felony" was issued for Countryman. The case was officially recorded as "The State vs. Countryman" and the 21 assembled jurors were summoned by a state court called the Court of Oyer and Terminer, which had the power to try treason and felony and the power of general "gaol" delivery.

In the October 1825 court session the story unfolded in the testimony of the three subpoenaed men.

William Currier testified that on Aug. 5 he received from John Turner the 1822 Spanish-milled dollar, which was marked, apparently with a knife, "on the edge opposite the foot of the left-hand pillar."

John Turner took the stand to testify that earlier on Aug. 5 he had received the same dollar from John P. Countryman.

Elijah Carroll then took the stand and swore he received the marked dollar from Currier on the same day.

John Countryman was found guilty by the jury. If he testified in his own defense, the record does not show it. The judge's verdict did not appear on the records filed in York. Since the judge was a circuit judge trying a state case, it is probable the records showing the judge's decision are in the State Archives.

Actually, John Countryman's guilt or innocence isn't relevant. What is instructive in the case of Countryman is that as late as 1825 in York District, foreign coinage was still in general circulation as demonstrated by the exchanges on Aug. 5.

The other point of interest is John Countryman's wish to move to the West. This area was in a state of economic depression in 1825, a depression that became particularly severe by 1827.

Cotton had created great prosperity in the uplands of South Carolina following the invention of the cotton gin in 1794. By the mid-1820s, new cotton lands in the West were producing more than the older cotton lands of the Carolinas.

We do not know whether John Countryman ever joined the westward migration.

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