

John P. Countryman

Warrant for a Felony

by Louise Pettus

On July 3, 1825, a laborer, John P. Countryman, "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 a 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, along with a \$10 note on the Bank of North Carolina, several small notes, and a few silver coins. The total amounted to around \$30.

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 September 10, 1825, he was apprehended by Abraham Petty and Rutherford Hayden. The two 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 M. 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 twenty-one assembled jurymen were summoned by a state court called the Court of Oyer and Terminer. The court had the power to try treason and felony and the power of general gaol delivery.



"...one Spanish milled dollar of the value of one dollar..." The scroll and pillars on reverse of the coin are said to be the origin of the dollar sign.

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

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

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

Elijah Carroll then took the stand and swore that he received the

marked dollar from Currier on the same day.

John Countryman was found guilty by the jury. If he ever 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 that the records showing the judge's decision are in the State Archives.

Actually, John Countryman's guilt or innocence is irrelevant. 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 August 5.

The people undoubtedly would have preferred all United States currency rather than dealing with a variety of foreign coins. It was certainly easier to calculate the relative value of domestic currency by using the decimal system devised by Thomas Jefferson some 35 years earlier than it was to translate Spanish, English, and Dutch coins into American money.



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 out-producing the older cotton lands of the Carolinas.

A significant number of York, Chester, and Lancaster District farmers sold their land for what they could get and formed wagon caravans with their slaves and many of their relatives and neighbors and headed west to grow in far richer soil. For the most part, they prospered in the west and soon persuaded more folk to join them in a western migration that lasted until the outbreak of the Civil War.



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



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