

Behind the NC: Shenandoah Valley history

Governor Spotswood, the Knights of the Golden Horseshoe and the first great endurance ride in American history

FIRST OF FIVE PARTS

The autumn brilliance of the scenery along the 2006 AERC National Championship trail is the most colorful of anywhere in our nation. Renowned for its natural beauty and splendor, the Virginia Blue Ridge and Massanutten Mountains of the Shenandoah Valley are the favorite gathering place for millions of visitors every fall who seek out the breathtaking panoramic collage of autumn trees and vistas to be found in the continental states.

For the entrants in the national championship ride to be held in Fort Valley in October, their views from atop the embracing arms of the North and South Massanutten Range and the hidden hollows will be incredible as the riders sweep around the orange, red, and gold tipped valley. But brilliant trees aren't the only thing the valley has in abundance. Many portions of this trail follow old roads or trails that still echo

the footsteps of those who made history in our nation.

Many, however, are unaware that the first group "endurance ride" in our nation's history took place within sight of the 2006 AERC Championship trail when, in 1716, 63 riders rode from Williamsburg to the Shenandoah River at the base of the Massanutten, and back. The story, as history records, is told thus:

Four centuries ago, when all of America was Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley, a fertile and bountiful 140-mile natural thoroughfare formed by ancient oceans, was the site of old legends and revered tales. Native Indians detailed to the first Englishmen arriving on American soil in the 1600s of vast herds of grazing animals and endless forests of American chestnut trees, many 600 years

old and 100 feet high. For thousands of years the American Indians had thrived in the bountiful Shenandoah Valley hunting ground, later trading highly valued furs to be worn in Europe.

One intrepid explorer who made that journey to the wondrous valley, with Indian guides, wrote:

"In these old virgin forest, where chestnuts were so commonplace that in the spring, covered with their fragrant long creamy flowers, they created a vision of the mountains looking as if their crests were covered with snow."

Such an abundance of pristine land and game was not to go unnoticed back in England (still in the late 1600s) where young Lord Fairfax, a court favorite of Charles I and II, had just recently become heir of

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TALES FROM THE TRAIL
History, Stories, and
Legends of Fort Valley and
the Shenandoah Valley
 Site of the 2006 AERC
 National Championship Rides

5,282,000 acres of land in Virginia—which included the Massanutten and the entire 2006 AERC National Championship trail. Lord Fairfax, residing in regal splendor at his comfortable abode in England, heard about a German explorer in the 1670s that told of the Shenandoah Valley as “wonderfully fertile with grass so tall that the tops could be tied together in front of your chest as you sat in your saddle.” Many other explorers in the intervening years brought back similar tales. Naturally, since this was Fairfax’s land, he curious to see if all he heard was true.

Ride plans formulated

While Lord Fairfax was unable to leave England at the time due to one reason or another (later he was to live out the remainder of his life in Virginia, riding almost every day for uncountable miles), he found the perfect explorer in the person of Alexander Spotswood, the first Governor of Virginia.

Spotswood had become acting governor of Virginia in 1710, by which time pressure on the colony to expand had become more acute than ever. An adventurer at heart, and a great horseman who loved the saddle, Spotswood needed little encouragement to leap upon Lord Fairfax’s request to ride to the Blue Ridge and see what lies beyond.

With ample funds from Fairfax to finance the ride, capable support staff and all the liquor that could be carried and consumed, Spotswood gathered a group of 11 fellow riders, all gentlemen cavaliers.

As the vanguards of the Old Dominion tradition in naming riding teams, they promptly dubbed themselves “the Knights.” As explained to them, their ride was to be comprised of riding 320 miles of narrow Indian and game trails from Williamsburg over the Blue Ridge to the Shenandoah River, and back.

The principal source of this historic event comes from the diary of John Fontaine, a member of the party. The 12 gentlemen riders, plus “rangers and assorted servants and guides”—the proverbial “crew” of their time—accounted for a total of about 50 horsemen in all. The main body of these “gay young cavaliers” would, for the first time ever, not only surmount the Blue Ridge but descend into the hitherto seen-but-never-explored Shenandoah Valley.

Old-style endurance: s-l-o-w

Unlike today’s endurance horses and riders that will be traversing 100 miles of the National Champions trail in Fort Valley in 24 hours or less, Spotswood’s party took eight days to travel the 160 miles, moving swiftly at first from Williamsburg to Germantown, then more slowly as they met with minor accidents, rough country, steep slopes and thick underbrush along the way. There was a long hold at one point when they decided the horses would need shoes because of the rough going ahead—a theme that still resonates today for riders who seek to challenge the rocky sections of the famous OD trail.

During such delays, when their crews

were busy attending the horses, the adventurers passed the time by toasting the King, toasting the Royal Family, toasting their friends and relatives, and toasting anyone else they could think of while intermittently firing “volleys” into the air for the sheer fun of it. Where the endurance rider today would favor water and human electrolytes for the ride, Fontaine says of his equestrian companions, “...we had several sorts of liquors, viz., Virginia red wine and white wine, Irish usquebaugh (whisky), brandy, shrub, two sorts of rum, champagne, canary, cherry, punch, water, cider, etc.”

It was no wonder it took them over a week to make it to the mountains.

Entrancing, unparalleled views

But the spirit of adventure pulled them onward, and upwards. After the long hard climb of ancient Indian trails up to the summit of the mountain, the Governor and his men found themselves standing at the summit, looking out over what has since been called the Valley of Virginia! An early Victorian writer, waxing poetic in the flamboyant manner of his day, wrote, “What a panorama there burst upon the enraptured vision of the assembled young chivalry of Virginia! Never did the eye of mortal man rest upon a more magnificent scene!”

In unparalleled rapture the writer exclaimed how the vale beneath “looked like a great sea of vegetation, rising and falling in undulating and picturesque lines, as far as the eye could reach towards the north-east and south-west; their vision interrupted only by the majestic walls of the Massanutten and Alleghanies.”

For hours Spotswood remained on that spot, drinking in the rapture from the vision which he beheld. Few words were spoken by anyone after the first exclamations of surprise and enthusiasm. The royal standard of the King flapped gently overhead, the only sound in a scene too overpowering to describe. The grand solitudes, the sublime stillness, the great beauty of the land gave rise to profound emotions which found no utterance. At length Spotswood turned to his nearest companion, Moore, who sat alongside no less entranced, and said, “They call me a visionary, but what imagination ever conjured up a vision like that?”

The mighty Shenandoah

History recorded that they eventually descended the Blue Ridge, continuing their

International Committee launches electronic newsletter

In March, the AERC International Committee released the first issue of *Endurance International*, an electronic newsletter for American endurance riders already competing or aspiring to compete at the international level. The premiere issue features highlights from the AERC convention, the latest on the national team standings, reports from the training clinics, profiles on chef d’equipe Tom Johnson and members of the International Committee, and a complete calendar of FEI endurance events.

Readers will find each issue of *Endurance International* full of articles and news briefs covering all aspects of riding at the international level, including tips on training and nutrition, profiles on competitors and updates on selection trials, clinics and competitions.

Endurance International will be published quarterly in 2006 and bi-monthly beginning in 2007. Former *Endurance World* and *Paint Horse Journal* editor Jennifer Nice is producing the newsletter for the committee.

“There is a lot going on in international endurance,” said Nice. “FEI-level riders really need a news source created just for them. The International Committee recognizes this, and I am happy to be able to offer my skills to help with their efforts.”

The first issue can be downloaded in PDF format from the International page on the AERC website. To receive the newsletter via email, send your request to Jennifer Nice at jnice@pjarvis.com.



ride until they reached the mighty river below. There they stood in vast awe of the deep and flowing waters and, directly across the river, the eastern ridge of the mighty Massanutten. As the riders reverently gazed upwards, visually seeking out the millennia-old moccasin-beaten trails, they may have well seen the one steep trail leading up the Massanutten to the grave sites of the ancient Indians. That same trail, known to later explorers as "Indian Graves Trail," will be traversed by the 100-mile championship riders midway through the ride as they head down off the Massanutten at Milford Gap, descending to the Shenandoah River where they will follow the gentle flat gravel river road until they meet the Indian Graves trail. At that juncture they will climb up this ancient pathway, cross over the crest of the Massanutten, and begin the return trip home.

Just as this year's National Championship riders will only admire the river from the banks and mountain overlooks, Spotswood and his fellow riders merely christened the Shenandoah as "Euphrates," and noted in their journals that it was "very deep" (assuming they sent one of their expendable crew in to test the depth) and "fourscore yards wide in the narrowest part." Having met their goal of conquering the Blue Ridge and reaching the river, the gay cavaliers drank a toast to everyone's health, and took possession of the entire vista with a standard planted in the name of George I.

Fontain records that at dinner they drank the King's health in champagne and fired a volley; they drank the Princess's health in Burgundy and fired a volley; they drank to other members of the royal family in claret, and fired a volley; they drank the Governor's health, and fired a volley. After which, one can only presume, they finally got down to serious drinking.

Knights of the Golden Horseshoe

Weeks later, back in Williamsburg, after the hard 10-day return ride of 160 miles, mitigated only by the final consumption of whatever liquor was left remaining, Governor Spotswood called together all his fellow riders and awarded each "knight" of his expedition with a small golden horseshoe bearing the inscription *Sic jurat transcendere montes* ("All sworn to have climbed the mountain"). No more perfect symbol could have been devised to encompass the

romance and adventure of the first true endurance ride at the birth of our nation.

Were a rider to step in the 400-year-old footprints of Spotswood and his "Knights of the Golden Horseshoe" as they stood on the Blue Ridge overlooking the Shenandoah Valley one would look slightly to the right directly at the lofty heights of Kennedy Peak at the southern point of Massanutten. Here is where the final leg of the 50-mile National Championship follows the natural gaps in the mountains threading a descending ribbon of cool forest trails down to the finish on Hickory Land near the base camp at Fort Valley Stables.

The beauty of the vistas remains today

every bit as magnificent, undiminished by time. Sadly, the golden horseshoes are now all lost, their memory relegated to the dusty archives of ancient writings in old history books. However, the echo of horseshoes and hooves on the Massanutten trails still rings even today, and this coming October will herald the continuation of that great equestrian adventure for the horses and riders of the AERC National Championship as they travel the forest and mountain peaks that held those first endurance equestrians in such awe 400 years ago.

I believe Governor Spotswood would be quite pleased.