

Jeb's Narrow Escape

From an article in the *Orange Review* (author not cited):

“A close encounter at Verdiersville

Marker JJ-12 Stuart's Very Narrow Escape

This is the 17th in a series of articles detailing the 31 Virginia historical highway markers located in Orange County. This installment describes Marker JJ-12 describing J.E.B. Stuart's good fortune in evading capture at Verdiersville.

“After the Battle of Cedar Mountain, and camping and resting near Gordonsville and then at Clark's Mountain, Confederate General R.E. Lee had plans to cross the Rapidan and go after Pope's army in the morning hours of August 18 but fate seemed to work against the move.

“According to *Return to Bull Run, the Campaign and Battle of Second Manassas*, by John J. Hennessy, Confederate Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart parted company with Fitzhugh Lee's brigade Aug. 16, 1862, near Beaverdam Station, 30 miles southeast of the Rapidan. Stuart gave Lee instructions to ride to Raccoon Ford, and Stuart took the train to join the army near Clark's Mountain.

“Lee took a meandering route, which led 20 miles out-of-the-way to Louisa Court House, in search of provisions.

“Unaware that Fitzhugh Lee would arrive late, Stuart rode into R.E. Lee's camp, confident his calvarymen would arrive in time, and after a brief meeting with R.E. Lee, rode on to Verdiersville, about five miles south of Raccoon Ford to await Fitzhugh Lee.

“Soon after Stuart's departure, R.E. Lee met with Maj. Gen. Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson and General Longstreet to discuss the lack of provisions and with no word from Fitzhugh, the elder Lee decided to postpone the crossing until the evening of August 18th.

“Longstreet sent orders, August 17, to brigade commander Robert Toombs, to picket the ford with two regiments. Toombs could not be located, and Colonel Henry L. Benning fulfilled the order, posting regiments at the ford.

“Toombs returned, and angered that someone else moved his regiments, ordered the two regiments back to camp, leaving the crucial ford uncovered.

“Two federal regiments under Colonel Thornton E. Brodhead crossed the unguarded ford. Brodhead and about 1,000 Union troops foraged through Confederate territory only

to find one Confederate soldier who accidentally wandered into their camp looking for food, who was taken prisoner.

“Stuart awaited Fitzhugh Lee at Verdiersville, unaware that the morning move had been postponed, Stuart was sure Fitzhugh Lee would arrive soon, and sent his adjutant general, Major Norman Fitzhugh down the Orange Plank Road to meet him. Norman Fitzhugh met Brodhead instead, was taken prisoner, and relieved of two satchels of important Confederate papers.

“Brodhead continued up Plank Road.

“Stuart and his staff had bedded down for the night at the Rhodes house [at Verdiersville].

“In the early morning light of Aug. 18, Stuart, hearing horses approaching in the distance, sent Captain John S. Mosby and Lieutenant Sam Gibson down the road with orders for Fitzhugh Lee.

“Mosby and Gibson were met with gunfire from the federals, and wheeled around to escape. From the yard of the Rhodes house, Stuart saw the two men being pursued by Brodhead’s troops.

“Stuart vaulted the fence and managed to escape to the woods. Stuart and his general had to watch from the woods as the Yankees took anything of value from the Rhodes house, including Stuart’s plumed hat.

“Frank Walker in his book, *Remembering: A History of Orange County Virginia*, wrote ‘The Civil War was fought in an era when a person was considered undressed, indeed, exposed, without a hat on when outdoors. The sight of a bare-headed J.E.B. Stuart riding around in Orange County on August 18, 1862, then was something that didn’t pass unnoticed.’

“Marker JJ-12 is on the right when traveling north on Constitution Hwy (Rt. 20) just prior to the intersection with Mine Run Road (Rt. 621).

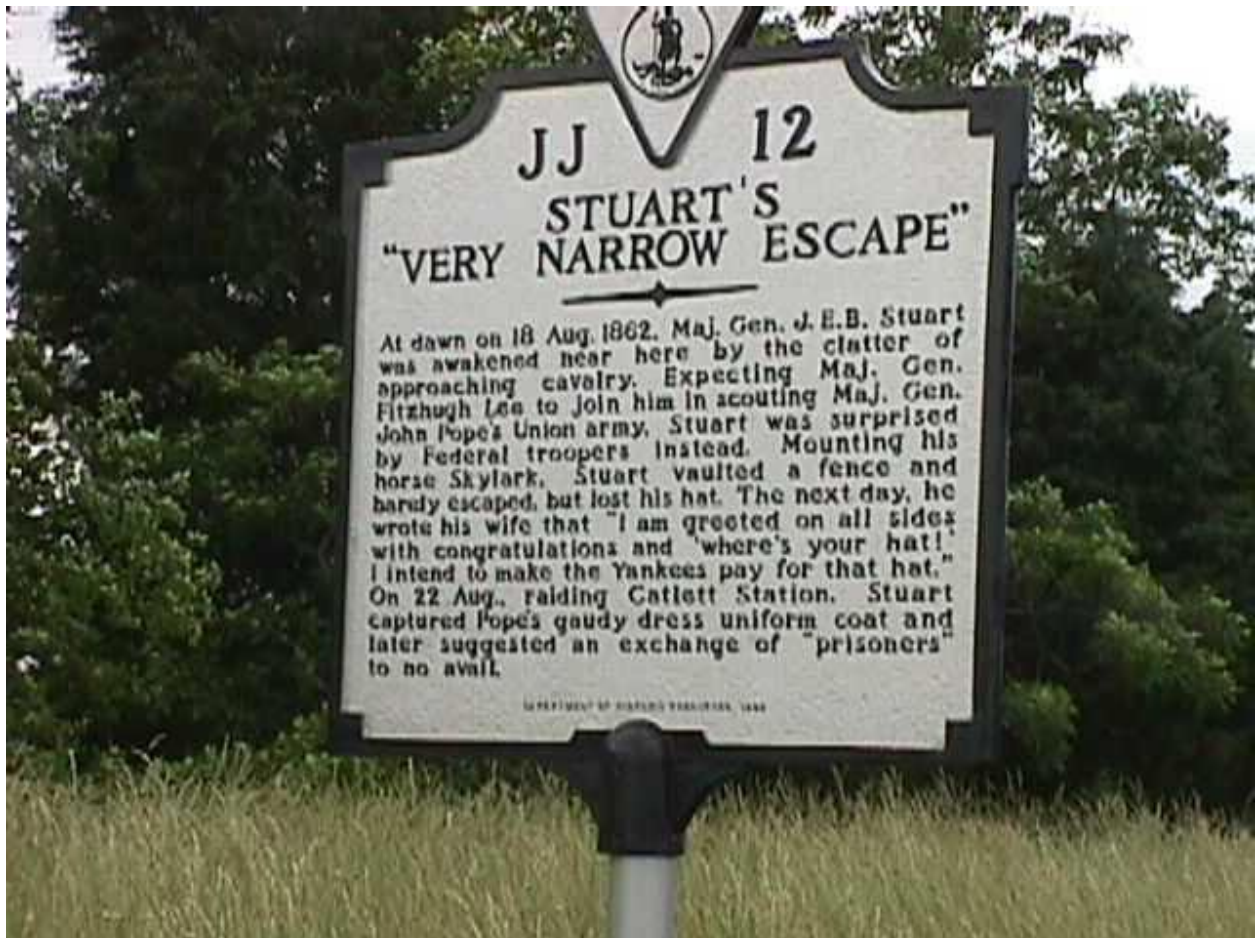
“Marker JJ-12 ‘Stuart’s Very Narrow Escape’ reads:

At dawn on 18 Aug. 1862, Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart was awakened near here by the clatter of approaching cavalry. Expecting Maj. Gen. Fitzhugh Lee to join him in scouting Maj. Gen. John Pope’s Union Army, Stuart was surprised by Federal Troopers instead. Mounting his horse, Skylark, Stuart vaulted a fence and barely escaped, but lost his hat. The next day, he wrote his wife that, “I am greeted on all sides with congratulations and ‘where’s your hat!’ I intend to make the Yankees pay for that hat.” On 22 Aug.,

raiding Catlett Station, Stuart captured Pope's gaudy dress uniform coat and later suggested an exchange of "prisoners" but to no avail.

"The bottom of the marker reads: Department of Historic Resources, 1998."¹

From the Virginia Department of Historic Resources:



Stuart's Very Narrow Escape²

¹ Author Unknown. "A close encounter at Verdiersville, Marker JJ-12 Stuart's Very Narrow Escape", *Orange County Review*, Thursday, September 17, 2015, A3.

² Author and photographer unknown. "JJ-12 'Stuart's Very Narrow Escape'." *Virginia Department of Historic Resources*, Google, Accessed June 12, 2021, <https://vcris.dhr.virginia.gov/HistoricMarkers/>

From Historian Frank Walker's book, "Remembering":

"...Something Lost, Something Gained"

"The Civil War was fought in an era when a person was considered undressed, indeed exposed, without a hat on when outdoors. The sight of a bare-headed J.E.B. Stuart riding around in Orange County on August 18 1862, then was something that didn't pass unnoticed. The actual details of how he came to be hatless were a source of even greater mirth at Stuart's expense. This is how it all came about.³

"Following Jackson's victory over Federal General John Pope's 'Army of Virginia' at Cedar Mountain on August 9, General Lee decided to seize the opportunity to destroy that army before it could be reinforced by troops returning from McClellan's failed Peninsula Campaign. Pope's three division commanders were Irving McDowell, whom the Confederates had drubbed soundly at Manassas in 1861; Nathaniel Banks, whom Jackson had thrashed both in the Valley and again at Cedar Mountain, and Franz Sigel, a 'political general' who wasn't expected to provide much in the way of a challenge.⁴

"Pope had also moved his army into the southeastern corner of Culpeper County, down into the Great Fork between the Rapidan and Rappahannock Rivers. He was positioning himself in anticipation of McClellan's troops disembarking from ships on the Potomac or Rappahannock and marching to reinforce him. Pope knew that he was vulnerable to an attack, but he figured that he would be reinforced and gone before Lee would react. Like a number of generals who faced Lee during the War, Pope seriously underestimated the speed with which Lee could move his army. He also was about to learn that McClellan, smoldering at being replaced by Pope as overall commander, was moving slower in retreat than he did on the advance.

"Lee began moving his army to Gordonsville as quickly as feet, hooves, and worn-out rail equipment could manage. Once there, the troops were ordered to assemble on the south flank of Clark Mountain and its accompanying Southwest Mountain ridge. An attack launched from that position would have the army across the Rapidan and trapping Pope in the Great Fork in a matter of hours. The attack was initially planned for August 18; however, some units were not in position, and Lee ordered a postponement to August 20. In the interim, J.E.B. Stuart and the Confederate cavalry were to make a reconnaissance in force, possibly resulting in another daring ride around an enemy army, just as he had done a couple of months earlier to McClellan.⁵

"In the early morning hours of August 18, Stuart was dozing on the front porch of the Catlett Rhoades' house, awaiting the arrival of division commander Fitzhugh Lee and the

³ Frank S. Walker, Jr., *Remembering: A History of Orange County, Virginia* (Orange, Virginia: Orange County Historical Society, 2003), 169.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

additional cavalry he would bring with him. The Catlett Rhoades' house was located at New Verdiersville, in the southwest corner of the intersection of today's Routes 20 and 621. Route 621 at that time was the Orange Plank Road. The Rhoades were Southern sympathizers and well known to the Confederate military. General Lee pitched his headquarters tent there during the Mine Run Campaign and spent his last night in Orange County camped, as he said, 'in Mrs. Rhoades' yard.'⁶

"Hearing riders approaching, Stuart reportedly said, 'There's Fitz now'. At that moment, gunfire erupted. Federal cavalry, making its own reconnaissance, had ridden right into the middle of Stuart's nap. In the pandemonium which followed, excerpts from the postwar observations of Ford H. Rogers, at the time a lieutenant in the 1st Michigan Cavalry, are pertinent. After briefly pursuing a Confederate officer who had jumped on a horse and ridden away bareback, Rogers returned to the house:

'I threw my reins over a post and went on the porch, which I found covered with blankets, long shawls, hats, haversacks, revolvers, pipes, tobacco, etc., showing that a party of officers had camped there for the night, but I still had no idea of how distinguished a party it was whose slumbers I had so rudely disturbed.

'I immediately began gathering up such articles as struck my fancy. I took a gentleman's long shawl marked *Chiswell Dabney*, a pair of revolvers, a broad-brimmed, light brown, soft hat with a long feather in it, which I immediately donned.'

"Rogers also picked up a patent leather dispatch case, which he gave to another Federal officer. That officer looked inside and discovered copies of various orders and dispatches to Stuart, revealing Lee's designs on Pope. Union spy Thomas Harter had already slipped across the Rapidan and given the initial alarm, but the cavalymen didn't know that. They decided that it was time to hurry back and report to General Pope. Returning to Roger's narrative:⁷

*On our way back to rejoin the column we fell in with Adjutant Wm. M. Heazlett of the First Michigan Cavalry and a few men who had Major Norman R. Fitzhugh, Stuart's adjutant-general, as a prisoner. Upon seeing me with the broad-brimmed hat on, Major Fitzhugh blanched and said in a quick troubled voice, 'Where is the man who wore that hat?' Upon being informed that he had escaped, he said with an air of great relief, 'Thank God for that, that's Jeb Stuart's hat.'*⁸

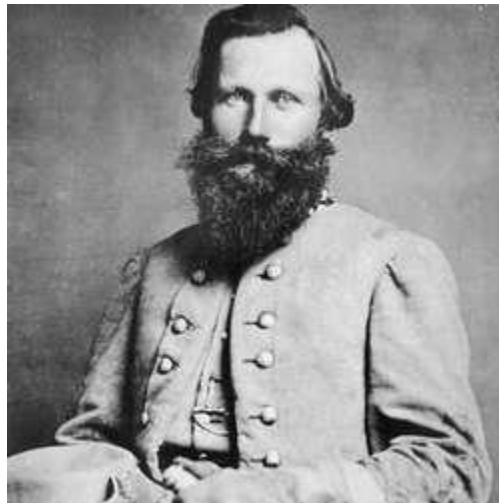
⁶ *Ibid.*, 170-171.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 171-172.

'The long shawl I now have at my house in this city. The hat I took to California with me, packed in a trunk, and being smashed very flat, I took it to a hat store in San Francisco to be put in order, where I allowed it to remain a long time, and when I called for it, it could not be found, having been cleared out with a lot of old second-hand hats.'⁹

"Stuart later wrote his wife and spoke of his embarrassment and discomfort as a result of the hat losing incident. Described as a brilliant cavalry officer with an almost childlike need for attention and praise, Stuart was upset by this event more than he would let on. On a raid into Pope's rear at Catlett Station a few days later, he got even when he captured Pope's full dress uniform. Stuart sent a message to Pope, offering to swap the uniform for the hat, but by then Pope was in no mood to deal. Lee had him on the run and his defeat at Second Manassas was only days away."¹⁰



James Ewell Brown "J.E.B." Stuart¹¹

Born: February 6, 1833 in Patrick County, Virginia

Died: May 13, 1864 near Richmond when mortally wounded a day after the engagement at Spotsylvania Courthouse trying to prevent the Union army from getting into Richmond

--Photo from Britannica.com

⁹*Ibid.*, 171-172.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 172.

¹¹Photographer unknown. "Jeb Stuart, Confederate Officer." *Britannica*, Google, Accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jeb-Stuart>