



## The origin story of West Virginia's Golden Horseshoe they don't teach you in middle school

by: Christian Meffert Feb 7, 2023

CLARKSBURG, W.Va. (WBOY) — Most people who grew up in West Virginia remember the one time in 8th grade when they were given the chance to show off their knowledge of the Mountain State's history through the Golden Horseshoe test. But what few people know is that the origin of the test's name was based on an expedition that involved illness, rattlesnakes, loyalty to the British throne and excessive amounts of alcohol.

The original Knights of the Golden Horseshoe were a part of the Transmontane Expedition, led by then Governor of Virginia, Alexander Spotswood, in 1716. The purpose of the expedition was to explore a recently discovered route through the Blue Ridge Mountains.

How many people were part of the expedition is not clearly known, often placed somewhere between 50 and 63; what is known is that they had an abundance of provisions and an extraordinary variety of liquors. Some accounts say that they also had an abundance of horseshoes to deal with the tougher terrain.

What is also unknown is the exact route that was taken. The most credible accounts often only describe their surroundings, which leaves a lot to be desired in terms of their precise location.

The most often cited account of the expedition comes from the journal of John Fontaine, a former ensign in the British army that was with Governor Spotswood from the very beginning of the journey. Fontaine's account has been transcribed and interpreted several times, so we will reference the original text and compare it with the notes of those that have shared their interpretations of the story.

The trip began on Aug. 20, 1716, at Spotswood's estate in Williamsburg, Virginia. With only a portion of the expedition crew assembled they traveled over the next

few days, staying at the homes of acquaintances, until, on Aug. 24, they reached Germantown (Germanna), a German settlement in Virginia.

They stayed in the settlement until Aug. 29, waiting for more of their travel companions to arrive so that they could properly begin the expedition. While there, Fontaine wrote that they explored the area, even getting lost for a time. Fontaine became ill, describing “a violent headache and pains in all my bones.” Fontaine also described the settlement as being a not-so-pleasant place, saying the beds were hard, the entertainment lacking and expressed doubt about the town’s mining operation, even saying “the Germans pretend that it is a silver mine.”

On the arrival of the rest of their companions, they departed on Aug. 29. As they traveled, they settled various camps to spend the night, naming the camps after different members of the expedition. At each of these camps, they ate well and drank even better. Along their journey, they hunted deer and bears, and they fought with hornets and snakes.

The first real setback came on Sept. 4, when a few expedition members contracted measles and a horse was bitten by a rattlesnake, one of many they ended up killing throughout the day.

The party moved on the next day, encountering more snakes and a steep descent down a mountain. They also drank to the health of King George.

“The day after crossing the Blue Ridge Mountains, and upon crossing the Shenandoah River (which they named the Euphrates) on 6 September 1716, they had reached the end of their expedition,” according to [germanna.org](http://germanna.org).

Upon arrival, Fontaine engraved his name onto a tree and Governor Spotswood buried a bottle with a paper that said he took possession of the area in the name of and for King George the First of England.

“Governor Spotswood, when he undertook the great discovery of the Passage over the mountains, attended with a sufficient guard, and pioneers and gentlemen, with a sufficient stock of provision, with abundant fatigue passed these mountains, and cut his Majesty’s name in a rock upon the highest of them, naming it Mount George; and in complaisance the gentlemen, from the Governor’s name, called the mountain next in height, Mount Alexander,” Fontaine wrote.

It is here where Fontaine also cares to mention the namesake of the journey, the golden horseshoes. He wrote that the Governor presented the golden horseshoes to

those who participated in the expedition upon their return, “some of which I have seen studded with valuable stones, resembling the heads of nails.” Also noted is the inscriptions, “Sic juvat transcendere montes” (Thus he vows to cross the mountain) written on one side and “the tramontane order,” Spotswood’s name for the party, written on the other.

These horseshoes were small and were meant to be worn like a brooch to show that they had drunk to his Majesty’s health upon Mount George, and also to encourage them to continue to explore and make discoveries. However, definitive proof of their existence has continued to elude historians since no golden horseshoes have ever been found.

They ended that final night with volleys of gunfire and many drinks, including “Virginia red wine and white wine, Irish usquebaugh, brandy shrub, two sorts of rum, champagne, canary, cherry punch, water, cider, etc.”

Fontaine and the rest of the party made their way back home the next day, while a couple of rangers continued forward.

After days of hunting and drinking along the way, including a bear attack that injured a few accompanying dogs and nearly injured one of the men, they finally arrived back in Germanna and departed with more of their party.

After more instances of sickness, including Fontaine’s servant, and the taking of a few ore samples along the way, they arrived in Williamsburg on Sept. 17.

“I reckon that from Williamsburg to the Euphrates River (Shenandoah River) is in all 219 miles, so that our journey, going and coming, has been in all 438 miles,” Fontaine wrote.

And so, the story became a legend, and the legend inspired many things, including the Golden Horseshoe test in West Virginia. As it was believed that Spotswood’s expedition had reached the region that would become West Virginia, it became an inspiration to encourage people to learn about the Mountain State’s history.

In 1929, Phil M. Conley, an editor of *The West Virginia Review*, brought the idea of West Virginia Clubs to State Superintendent of Free Schools William C. Cook, who wanted to use the idea to honor high-achieving students with a state award.

According to the West Virginia Department of Education, “in 1930 some 2,736 clubs were organized with more than 48,000 students as members. In the first

Golden Horseshoe ceremony, held in 1931, 87 students from 46 counties were honored as Knights and Ladies of the Golden Horseshoe.”

These “Knights and Ladies of the Golden Horseshoe” were then given golden horseshoe pins to tie them back to the original story.

So be sure to keep all this in mind the next time you attend a West Virginia themed trivia contest.

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**Alexander Spotswood's Transmontane Expedition:**

<https://archive.wvculture.org/history/settlement/spotswoodalexander01.html>

**Alexander Spotswood's Transmontane Expedition:**

**John Fontaine's Journal**

<https://archive.wvculture.org/history/settlement/spotswoodalexander02.html>