

Sergeants Jasper and Newton Rescuing American Prisoners from the British

(August 1779)

About two miles north of Savannah, Georgia, in August 1779, two patriots dramatically rescued a desperate group of Americans held prisoner behind British lines. Now legendary, this Revolutionary War incident was recounted by Parson Mason Locke Weems, who also popularized the fabricated tale of George Washington and the cherry tree. Although scholars have not been able to verify Weems's account of the rescue, it appears to be essentially accurate.

The story involves General Francis Marion and two of his scouts. Known as the "Swamp Fox," Marion commanded guerrilla operations in South Carolina throughout the Revolutionary War. The scouts—William Jasper, who had previously distinguished himself at the Battle of Fort Moultrie, and John Newton—observed a group of about 10 American prisoners while visiting Jasper's brother, a loyalist encamped with the British forces. The Americans were about to be sent downriver for trial at Savannah and probable execution. Sergeants Jasper and Newton were said to have been particularly moved by the plight of a young man accompanied by his grief-stricken wife and child. The two scouts—who were dressed in civilian attire and trained to move through the woods undetected to gather information and intercept British patrols—hid and followed the party as it headed to Savannah. Without arms, they waited at a watering hole in hopes of waylaying the British escort. As the guards rested their guns, Jasper and Newton overpowered them, took the muskets, and freed the grateful prisoners.

John Blake White, in his painting *Sergeants Jasper and Newton Rescuing American Prisoners from the British*, depicts the daring rescue recorded by Parson Mason Locke Weems. Though stylized and rife with patriotic romanticism, White's account is less fanciful than most artistic renderings of the event, including a Currier and Ives engraving titled *The Rescue*. In White's depiction, the two sergeants stand with the muskets they have snatched from the British. The young father who inspired the rescue holds his son, while his wife sinks to her knees in gratitude. Recounted Weems: "Directing her eyes to Jasper and Newton . . . she ran and fell on her knees before them . . . crying out vehemently, 'Dear angels! dear angels! God bless you! God Almighty bless you for ever!'"¹

The Senate, by resolution of February 17, 1899, accepted the painting, *Sergeants Jasper and Newton Rescuing American Prisoners from the British*. Octavius White, son of the artist, presented this work, along with two other paintings by his father: *General Marion Inviting a British Officer to Share His Meal* (p. 268) and *Mrs. Motte Directing Generals Marion and Lee to Burn Her Mansion to Dislodge the British* (p. 290). Two years later, Octavius White donated a fourth work by his father, *The Battle of Fort Moultrie* (p. 32).

This painting of Sergeants Jasper and Newton, as well as John Blake White's painting of General Marion and the British officer, were engraved by John Sartain for popular sale. They were widely distributed by the Apollo Association for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in the United States, a subscription organization better known by its later title, the American Art-Union. For an annual fee, members would receive engravings of

selected works as well as the opportunity to win originals through raffle drawings. The association's choice of the White paintings for distribution gave them a broader, national audience. The same two paintings also appeared on Confederate banknotes issued in 1861 by South Carolina, the home state of John Blake White.



This 1861 Confederate banknote reproduces John Blake White's painting of Sergeants William Jasper and John Newton.

(Private Collection)

Sergeants Jasper and Newton Rescuing American Prisoners from the British

John Blake White (1781-1859)

Oil on canvas, date unknown

24 1/8 x 29 inches (61.3 x 73.7 cm)

Unsigned

Gift of Octavius A. White (son of the artist), 1899

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1899

Cat. no. 33.00003

