



## **The Capture of Liberty Arsenal (Missouri Depot) and the Service of Secessionist Col. Henry Louis Routt**

**April 20, 1861**

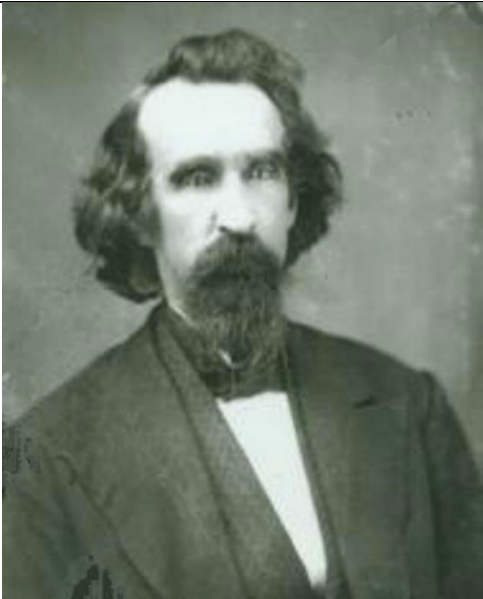
by Jerry R. Fry

In 1860, Missouri voters elected Claiborne Fox Jackson to be their next governor. During the campaign, candidate Jackson held himself out as a Unionist. However, during his inaugural address, he shocked the Unionists that voted for him by stating that Missouri's "honor, interests, and sympathies point alike in one direction and determine her to stand by the South." Less than a week later, Kentucky-born Probate Judge Henry Louis Routt in Liberty, Clay County, Missouri, started organizing a "Southern Rights" company. The members of the unit organized by Routt called themselves the Liberty Mounted Rangers and elected Routt as their leader, probably because of his impressive anti-Union and military credentials. His anti-Union credentials included openly proclaiming "Unionists should be driven out of Missouri," that citizens of Missouri should be armed "to prepare them to resist federal power," and that the arms at Liberty Arsenal should be seized. Routt's military credentials included his time as an army officer during the Mexican War period and his participation on the Missouri pro-slavery side during the "Bleeding Kansas" border war between Missouri and Kansas. (In 1855, Routt participated in a raid on the Liberty Arsenal when arms were taken by pro-slavery Missourians for use against anti-slavery settlers in Kansas.)

As for the capture of the Liberty Arsenal, two days after the fall of Fort Sumter, militia commander General Daniel M. Frost sent Governor Jackson a list of actions that he recommended in order to clandestinely prepare to resist federal authority. Item number three on that list was:

*Send an agent to Liberty [Arsenal] to see what is there, and to put the people of that vicinity on their guard to prevent its being garrisoned, as several United States*

*troops will be at Fort Leavenworth from [Fort] Kearney [Nebraska Territory], in ten or fifteen days from this time.*



**Henry Louis Routt**  
Findagrave.com

Within days of General Frost alerting Governor Jackson of the possibility the undefended Liberty Arsenal may be fortified, the governor ordered its seizure. On the morning of April 20, 1861, three separate armed groups, totaling 200 men under the overall command of now Captain Routt, rode into the still undefended Arsenal, placed its commander, U.S. Army Major Nathaniel Grant and two employees under guard, then carried off the Arsenal's contents. The units joining Routt's Mounted Rangers were: a mounted company from Independence (Jackson County), under Captain John H. McMurray, and a mounted company from Kansas City, under Captain George S. Moorman. A wagon master that transported a captured cannon to Captain Routt's

home was offered an "order on the state" treasury for payment, but after he refused to accept it, Routt told him he would cash the voucher and give him his money. The man later reported he was never paid.

The Arsenal raid was the first act of war by Missouri secessionists, coming only a week after the surrender of Fort Sumter. While the raid provided weapons to the governor's followers in northwest Missouri, it also alerted U.S. Army officials to the necessity of improving security at other arsenals in the region. The day after the Liberty raid, Captain Nathaniel Lyon wrote the following to Senator Frank Blair from the St. Louis Arsenal.

*You will see by the news this morning that a large supply of arms, ammunition and artillery have fallen into the hands of our foes by their possession of the Liberty Arsenal, and they may be turned upon us here soon. You will see also that Captain Steele, at Fort Leavenworth, has accepted volunteers to defend that arsenal and post, and if I had the command proper here, and no interference from General Harney, I would do the same. I have just sent a note to the general, asking him to allow me to accept volunteers....*

*Note: General Harney, the commander of the Department of the West, considered*

*a Southern sympathizer by Unionists, rejected Captain Lyon's request.*

The St. Louis Federal Arsenal, about which Captain Lyon was concerned, held the largest collection of armaments of any of the slave states. It contained 60,000 rifles and muskets, numerous cannons, and a large quantity of military supplies and war materials. If the governor had focused on capturing the St. Louis Arsenal, which was also undefended in early 1861, rather than the meagerly stocked Liberty Arsenal, his forces could have been better armed than the Union volunteers they would eventually be confronting. As it was, Captain Lyon transferred a sizable percentage of the arms to Illinois for safekeeping and upgraded the Arsenal's defenses to a level that forced the governor and General Frost to abandon their plans to capture it.

The governor's next task for Captain Routt and his Rangers was to deploy to and defend Jefferson City after Captain Lyon had surrounded and demanded the surrender of the militia encampment at Camp Jackson on the outskirts of St. Louis on May 10, 1861. Lyon's stated objective in seizing the camp was to recover cannons and other war materials taken from the federal arsenal in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Those cannons were sent to St. Louis by Confederate President Jefferson Davis, at the request of Governor Jackson for the stated purpose of capturing the St. Louis Arsenal.

On June 12, 1861, Captain Routt and his Rangers again deployed after Governor Jackson called for 50,000 volunteers to resist federal authority. They crossed the Missouri River and went into camp in the vicinity of Col. Weightman's Brigade, of Brigadier General Rains's 8th Division, Missouri State Guard. When Rains's division headed south to link up with the remainder of the fleeing governor's forces, Captain Routt remained in the north to gather both volunteers and conscripts subject to the draft requirement of Missouri's new Military Law. Over the next two months, Captain Routt collected around 1,200 men that he organized into what was called an infantry battalion. In the *1881 History of Lafayette County*, Routt was now being referred to as Col. Routt.

In early September, approaching Union cavalry forced Col. Routt to move his men south, where they linked up with the rebel army of General Sterling Price returning north after the Battle of Wilson's Creek. After the link-up, Routt's force was reorganized, and Col. Benjamin Elliott became their commander. Routt returned to Liberty at this time, reportedly as a result of poor health.

Once back in Liberty, Routt surrendered himself to Union authorities and signed a pledge of loyalty that was offered to those who returned home and remained peaceful. However, he was arrested in March 1862 and charged with treason and conspiracy against the United States. Tried in St. Louis, Routt was found guilty and sentenced to hang, but President Lincoln

pardoned him on April 16, 1862, four days short of the one-year anniversary of the capture of the Liberty Arsenal. Lincoln’s justification for the pardon was:

...It appears that the said Henry L. Routt’s offences were committed early in the progress of the present rebellion and that he immediately repented thereof, returned to his allegiance, and signed the pledge of loyalty established by Gen. Prentiss—which obligations he has ever since honorably and zealously fulfilled... Now therefore, I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America, do grant to the said Henry L. Routt a free and full pardon of all treason, felonies, and other crimes and misdemeanors against the United States, for which he is now undergoing indictment and imprisonment...



Map from *1861 Missouri Speaks, Series 12, Vol. 1*  
 Judge Routt.

After the pardon, Routt returned to Liberty and became city attorney in late 1862. After the war, he again became a judge and served the citizens of Clay County until his death, around 60 years of age. On February 23, 1881, *the Liberty Tribune* reported that “Col. Routt died in Liberty, Clay County, Missouri, survived by his wife Katie, son Rodham, and daughter Mattie Jane.” Judge Routt was buried in Fairview Cemetery, Liberty, Missouri.

Much of the information on Judge Routt was drawn from a book written by Chery Carr Holtman,<sup>1</sup> a descendant of

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<sup>1</sup> Chery Carr Holtman, *The Life and Times of Col. Henry Louis Routt* (Clay County Historical, 2015).