

Offbeat Kentuckians

by Keven McQueen

Illustrations by Kyle McQueen



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Jim Porter and Martin Van Buren Bates

Two Kentucky Giants

We are surrounded by tall people. Thanks to improvements in nutrition, since the turn of the last century humans have been getting taller with each generation. And yet, persons over six and a half feet in height are still uncommon enough to evoke surprise and wonder. Imagine, then, how a person of that height, or even taller, would seem in the mid-19th century, when the average man ranged from five-feet-six to five-feet-eight inches and most women were a little over five feet tall. Abraham Lincoln, for one, was considered extremely tall at six-feet-four. Perhaps this puts a little perspective on the noteworthiness of two Kentuckians from that era, Jim Porter and Martin Van Buren Bates, who were each well over *seven* feet tall.

The first, James D. Porter, was known in his time as the Louisville Giant. He was born in Portsmouth, Ohio, on December 15, 1811. (Some sources give the year 1810, but this is the date on Porter's gravestone.) When he was still a baby, his family moved to the Louisville neighborhood of Shippingport.

Nothing in Porter's childhood suggested that he would ever become a giant; quite the opposite, in fact. He was sickly and undersized as a child, so much so that around age 14 he was in training to be

a jockey at a racetrack near Louisville's Elm Tree Garden.

His phenomenal growth began when he was 17 years old. Indeed, he grew with such rapidity that neighbors insisted on measuring him every Saturday, as his increasing height was a subject of their wagering. Allegedly he once grew an inch in a single week. At age 21 he was six-feet-nine, and when he stopped growing around age 25 he was seven-feet-nine, or as Porter liked to say, "six feet, 21 inches." He was supposedly the tallest known man in the world at the time.

In his prime, Porter weighed 300 pounds. A portrait in the possession of the Filson Club reveals that he had surrealistically massive hands; they were 13 inches from base of palm to tip of middle finger. The club also owns a cast of his left hand, proving that the painter of the portrait did not exaggerate.

Obviously, a giant requires larger-than-average accouterments. Porter owned a 95-inch-long shotgun and a sword five feet long, both given to him by a manufacturer in Springfield, Mass. The Filson Club owns the rifle and one of his boots, slightly over 14 inches high. Collins' *History of Kentucky* notes that Porter walked with a spiral four-and-a-half-foot cane that resembled a bedpost.

The Louisville Giant could have made a fortune by exhibiting himself with traveling carnivals, but he refused almost every offer. Instead, he tried to make an honest living as a cooper, and then by driving a coach. In 1836 he opened a modest inn near the Portland Canal locks, and steamboat travelers from Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and New Orleans were eager to do business at the tavern in order to see its enormous proprietor.

Porter was so well-known by the late 1830s that when Charles Dickens toured America for the purpose of writing his travel book *American Notes* (1842), he made sure to see the giant when he reached Louisville. Legend has it that when Dickens imperiously sent word for Porter to meet him aboard a steamboat, Porter sent this testy rebuff: "Tell Charles Dickens Jim Porter is a bigger sight than Charles Dickens," after which the novelist humbly met Porter at his tavern. However, if this exchange actually took place, Dickens does not mention it in his book. Instead, after noting that real giants are almost invariably gentle and mild-mannered, Dickens describes his encounter

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with Porter, which contrary to legend seems indeed to have taken place aboard a steamboat:

"He had a weakness in the region of the knees, and a trustfulness in his long face, which appealed even to five-foot-nine for encouragement and support. He was only twenty-five years old, he said, and had grown recently, for it had been found necessary to make an addition to the legs of his inexpressibles. At fifteen he was a short boy, and in those days his English father and his Irish mother had rather snubbed him, as being too small of stature to sustain the credit of the family. He added that his health had not been good, though it was better now; but short people are not wanting who whisper that he drinks too hard.

"I understand he drives a hackney-coach, though how he does it, unless he stands on the footboard behind, and lies along the roof upon his chest, with his chin in the box, it would be difficult to comprehend. He brought his gun with him, as a curiosity. Christened 'The Little Rifle,' and displayed outside a shop-window, it would make the



Jim Porter, the
Kentucky Giant.
Courtesy Filson Club
Historical Society,
Louisville, Ky.

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fortune of any retail business in Holborn. When he had shown himself and talked a little while, he withdrew with his pocket-instrument, and went bobbing down the cabin, among men of six feet high and upwards, like a lighthouse walking among lamp-posts."

Porter's only known attempt to publicly exploit his height was when he was talked into performing for a year (1836-37) as the title character in a traveling road show of *Gulliver's Travels*. A couple of dwarves were also in the play, portraying Lilliputians. Porter must not have been impressed with life on the road, as he later turned down numerous lucrative offers to perform, even rejecting that greatest of showmen, P.T. Barnum.

Porter was known throughout Louisville for his kind nature, "modest and retiring—the very soul of honor and honesty," as the *Daily Courier's* eulogy phrased it. Politically, he was a Whig and an admirer of Henry Clay. It has been said that whenever Porter walked the streets, a long line of youngsters would follow their friendly giant. That he was a children's favorite is confirmed by A.J. Webster, who in 1930 wrote his reminiscences of growing up in Louisville for the Filson Club: "One of the things that the boys appreciated about as much as a circus was the Kentucky Giant—Jim Porter. Almost any day he could be seen driving on Main Street in his one-seat buggy, a big mule pulling it, and his knees higher than the dashboard. He always dressed in a long-tail frock coat, an old-fashioned standing collar and a high hat. I have forgotten his height, but I recall he had a measuring competition with the much advertised 'P.T. Barnum's giant,' and he overtopped him by sev-



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cral inches.”

Sadly, Porter's reach exceeded his grasp when in 1847 he decided to build a newer, larger combined tavern and hotel with his earnings. The new 18-room establishment was located on Front Street in Shippingport, but it was a financial failure as the burgeoning railroad industry began luring away steamboat passengers. To make matters worse, Porter's health began to fail. He suffered especially from heart troubles and inflammatory rheumatism. But even in this time of poor health and monetary distress, Porter had too much pride to make a quick dollar by exploiting his height before the curious.

On April 25, 1859, the Louisville Giant was found dead in bed when relatives went to wake him for breakfast. He died of a heart attack, possibly brought on by stress caused by his financial predicament. He was only 47 years old.

Porter was laid to rest in a specially-made casket slightly over nine feet long and two feet wide at the breast. Covered with black cloth and lined with white satin, the coffin “attracted more attention than anything of the kind that ever enclosed the lifeless remains of one of our citizens,” as a local newspaper quaintly noted. In 1937, an 85-year-old Louisville resident named William Carnes Kendrick mentioned in his memoirs that the undertaker, Mr. Wyatt, exhibited the empty casket to the curious, at one point placing his 10-year-old daughter inside “that those present might see the contrast in sizes between child and giant.”

Once Porter's body was placed in the casket, the funeral procession, which consisted of 40 carriages, carried him to a vault in Cave Hill Cemetery. Kendrick remembered that visitors could peck through the vault's ornamental metal door and see the giant's stone sarcophagus, beside which was placed a coffin of ordinary size for comparative purposes. Many years later, Porter's immense casket was removed from the vault and buried in a nearby plot. Other monuments in the cemetery may be taller, but certainly none of the graves are longer than his.

The second noted Kentucky giant was Martin Van Buren Bates, born in Whitesburg, Letcher County, on November 9, 1845, the youngest of 11 children. His parents, according to an 1896 book on medical curiosities by Doctors Gould and Pyle, were very much of average size. Bates's father, John W. Bates of Virginia, was five-feet-ten and

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Two married giants: Anna Swan and Kentucky's Martin Van Buren Bates, 7'5" and 7'2" respectively. The man at the far right is 6'2".

From *The Kentucky River Giant*.



his mother Sarah was five-feet-three. And yet they somehow produced a son who was slightly over seven-feet-two and weighed 450 pounds when he ceased growing.

The young giant was attending Emory and Henry College in Virginia when the Civil War disrupted his academic career. Bates joined the Fifth Kentucky Infantry of the Confederate Army under Col. John S. Williams in September 1861; after receiving several promotions, on November 14, 1863, he became a first lieutenant in Company A of the Virginia State Line Troops. Eventually this company merged into the Seventh Confederate Cavalry. (One can only wonder how he must have appeared galloping across a battlefield astride a horse.) The outfit specialized in chasing guerrillas, nearly wiping out one especially violent band that preyed on citizens near the Virginia-Kentucky border. By the time the war was over, Bates was a captain. His authentic military rank came in handy later, when he would be displayed in full uniform to impressed audiences.