

## MAJOR JOHN KENNEDY By Louise Pettus

John Kennedy, a native-born Irishman, has been called the "Father of Chester." He came to Chester to live with his brother George in 1784, a year after the peace treaty with Great Britain was signed, two years before Chester County was created and 11 years before "the Hill" was chosen as the site for Chester's first courthouse.

Chester in 1784, like all of the South Carolina Piedmont, was a wild, undeveloped territory with tall trees, vigorous streams, and plenty of game. To a 14 year-old-boy, far from his County Antrim birthplace, it must have been a very exciting place. In his old age, Kennedy related a tale of his boyhood feat of killing a deer where the city hall stood.

When he was 23 he married the daughter of a Revolutionary War veteran, Catherine Evans, whose father had fought with Sumter and at Kings Mountain. She had attended one of the best schools of the upcountry - Moses Waddell's Academy. The couple had five children: Margaret, Mary Ann, John, Jr., Catherine and Eliza Jane.

John Kennedy had practically no education but he did see to it that his children and other deserving youth received a college education. Joshua Hudson, who became one of South Carolina's finest judges, wrote that when his father died and left a poverty-stricken family, that John Kennedy gave them a half-acre of land on which to build a crude house with the help of neighbors and gave his mother work as the jail-keeper (as long as he could since the law forbade women working in jails). This was only one of the examples of the Kennedy family's charity.

John Kennedy is thought to have built the second or third house in the village of Chester. It was from the back piazza of the newly-erected house that Mrs. Kennedy saw the approach of Aaron Burr, former vice-president of the United States. Burr, escorted by 4 cavalymen, was under arrest for treason.

Kennedy's house was small but he kept adding to it - always adding to the back of the house. The front of the house was never changed, it was said, because he wanted the house to always appear the same way it did when he took his bride through the front door.

Kennedy was twice elected sheriff of Chester District. He was active in many other ways in Chester affairs. With a son-in-law, George W. Coleman, he organized the first Masonic Lodge in Chester.

When the Mexican War broke out in 1845, Kennedy raised a troop of volunteers who elected him major, a title by which he was known the rest of his life. However, Kennedy did not go off to war. He was then 75 years of age.

The Kennedys enjoyed hosting travellers, especially ministers of the gospel. The denomination of their guests did not matter to the host, but it was the Baptist Church that he presented with a land deed of slightly over one acre.

Chester's First Baptist Church had been founded in 1833 and erected a

wooden church with a tall steeple in 1836 on land informally given to the congregation by Kennedy. The first sentence of the deed: "In consideration of my obligation to God and my regard for the success of His cause and in consideration also of my regard for the prosperity and welfare of the Baptist church at Chester." The site took advantage of nearby Tanyard Branch, which served as a baptismal spot for many years.

The surveyor dated the First Baptist deed, July 12, 1859. Kennedy was 89 years of age when he formally presented the church with the land on which they had built. It was no sacrifice on Kennedy's part. He had accumulated a great deal of land in the Chester area.

Kennedy also accumulated mementos, or curios. One of his curios was a silver bugle that was captured during the Revolutionary War by one of Francis "the Swampfox" Marion's soldiers from Lord Rawdon, an officer under Lord Cornwallis. The bugle and other curios were lost when Kennedy's home burned.

Kennedy lived through the Civil War and into the Reconstruction Era. He died April 7, 1867. The "Father of Chesterville" was buried in Old Purity Graveyard.