

# 'Father of Chester' aided county's growth

John Kennedy, a native-born Irishman, has been called the "Father of Chester."

He came to the area to live with his brother, George, in 1784, a year after the peace treaty with Great



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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 S.C. 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.

At 23, he married Catherine Evans, the daughter of a Revolutionary War veteran who 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 have five children: Margaret, Mary Ann, John Jr., Catherine and Eliza Jane.

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, John Kennedy gave them a half-acre of land on which to build a crude house with the help of

## ■ Kennedy had far-reaching impact on region.

neighbors. And he gave Hudson's mother work as the jailkeeper (as long as he could since the law forbade women working in jails).

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 former U.S. Vice President Aaron Burr. Burr, escorted by four cavalymen, was under arrest for treason.

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

When the Mexican War broke out, 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 75.

The Kennedys enjoyed hosting travelers, 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 an acre.

Chester's First Baptist Church had been founded in 1833, and members erected a wooden church with a tall steeple in 1836 on land informally given to the

congregation by Kennedy.

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 the members 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 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.

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

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