

Repeat of July 8, 1988

REACTION OF YORK COUNTY TO NEWS OF
THE DEATH OF THOMAS JEFFERSON

July 4, 1826 was the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. All across America special celebrations were planned. York County celebrated with the nation.

Yorkville had a "Committee of Arrangements for the Celebration of the 4th" and that day the local citizens had a parade and listened to the oratory of X. H. Cushman. A York newspaper, the Encyclopaedia, a highly intellectual collection of essays and copies of articles from leading national newspapers but little local news, printed Cushman's address.

The issue for the following week has been lost but it told of the death of Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence. For the next three months the pages of the Encyclopaedia were dominated by details of Jefferson's life and death and that of John Adams who died the same day.

The July 21 issue reported that the students at Ebenezer Academy were planning a special memorial service for Jefferson. The students had elected Beverley D. Thomasson to read the Declaration of Independence and William Jefferson Hanna to deliver the oration in Fayette Hall. The students planned to wear black crepe arm bands.

A funeral ode was prepared to the tune of "Bruce's Address". An anonymous student composed 11 verses to be sung by the student body. The last verse: "Rule a world, Majestic name! / Once proud kings, till kings be tame! / Thrones confront with his high fame—/ Thomas Jefferson's!"

When the students received word of the death of John Adams they held another memorial service. Beverley D. Thomasson gave the oration on Adams' contributions and the local Revolutionary War veterans were invited. H. M. Tompkins addressed the veterans.

In late July the newspaper printed some of the last letters of Thomas Jefferson along with the letter saying that his health would not permit him to participate in the ceremonies at Washington, D. C. One of the letters contained a notable quotation in favor of democracy as a form of government: "...the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few, booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God."

Eulogists were struck by the coincidence of Jefferson dying on Independence Day (Jefferson had said a month before that he was not sure he could hold out that long). Then the citizens heard that Monticello, Jefferson's home and plantation, was heavily mortgaged and that a New York bank would foreclose. Nationwide, citizens were determined that a republic should not be ungrateful and that Jefferson's daughter, Polly Randolph, should have her father's property. A great subscription drive was mounted.

York District's leading citizens immediately responded to, in the words of Yorkville's Hon. William Smith, "relieve the pecuniary embarrassment of Thomas Jefferson". By August, Jefferson's property was saved.

The newspaper did not print the amount of money raised in the district for the Jefferson subscription but it indicated that the drive headed by John Springs, Gordon Moore, George Rainey, Samuel Rainey and S. Holmes was quite successful.

Yorkville decided to hold a special event to commemorate the lives of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams on September 2, 1826. with Senator William Smith as the orator of the day (his "Eulogium" address was later sold by the newspaper at 12 1/2 cents a copy).

On September 2, a procession began at 11 a. m. at the courthouse and marched to a grove in the northeast part of town where a stand had been constructed. Leading the parade was Col. Rooker, Marshall of the Day, with Capt. Fleming's Company of Artillery followed by Capt. Hill's Company of Infantry. Next, in order, were the Orators and Clergymen, the Committee of Arrangements, Ladies, Revolutionists (veterans of the war), Citizens and the Cavalry.

Rev. Robert B. Walker gave the prayer which was followed by William Smith's eulogy in honor of Jefferson and Adams. The procession marched out in the same order and "both times minute guns were fired".

At the request of the Committee of Arrangements, the citizens of Yorkville wore black crepe bands on their left arms from September 2 to October 2, 1826.