

Thomas D. Johnston

by Katharine Kendall - March 3, 1973

From 1830-1880 a prominent name in Yanceyville was that of Thomas D. Johnston, merchant, banker, and civic leader. Born Nov. 20, 1800 between Yanceyville and Milton, he was the son of John and Frances Donoho Johnston. His grandfathers, Thomas Donoho and Dr. Launcelot Johnston, served in the Revolutionary War.

In 1825 he married Sarah McAden and evidently moved to Caswell Court House soon thereafter. Deeds show he purchased large tracts of land in 1827 and 28 from Solomon and Barzillai Graves. The commissioners named him to a commission to draw up plans for a "poor and work" house in 1826, and in 1833 when the town name was changed to Yanceyville, he was one of the five commissioners named by the Legislature to establish a town government. (The others were Col. Thomas Graves, Paul A. Harrelson, Dr. Allen Gunn, and John C. Harvey.)

Mr. Johnston built a large brick home in Yanceyville which still stands southwest of the post office, now owned by the Jones family. He established a thriving mercantile business, and a blacksmith shop in the town. Estate papers of many families in this period show lists of merchandise purchased from Thomas D. Johnston. The Milton Gazette and Spectator carried ads of his mercantile business in many issues. A wealthy man, he was president of the bank of Yanceyville and is generally regarded as "owner of the bank". Furthermore he possibly owned a tobacco factory. In the 1860 census, his assets were valued at \$161,000, the largest of any person in the town, and second largest in the county. This included real property of \$40,000 and personal of \$121,000. He listed 84 slaves at his plantation and 32 slaves elsewhere, presumably at his home and places of business.

As far as is known, Mr. Johnston never sought public office, but his name appears on many boards such as trustee of Yanceyville Female Academy in 1836 and in 1839 on a commission to "rebuild the old jail and add kitchen and smoke house".

Twice married, the 1860 census lists his wife as Adeline H. They had 8 children. Following the Civil War, he along with his friends suffered great financial loss. He died March 14, 1883 and is buried at Yanceyville Presbyterian Church. A son, Thomas D. Jr. (1848-1880) is also buried there. Two of his grandsons who remained in Yanceyville are William F. Henderson and the late Thomas J. Henderson.

Bibliography: 1850 and 1860 Census of Caswell Co.; Milton Gazette and Milton Spectator; tombstone records; public laws of N. C. 1833-34; misc. Caswell Co. records on file in Dept. of Archives and History, Raleigh.