The Power That Was Bartlett Yancey's

How a great North Carolinian used his political skills to shape the development of this state.

***By* HAROLD J. COUNIHAN**

He spelled it "Yancy."

In modern North Carolina the governor is the most powerful man in state politics. In the early days of North Carolina politics this was not the case. The Constitution of 1776 relegated the governor's office to a mere appendage of the legislature. He was appointed by and responsible to the General Assembly. William Gaston, one of the state's leading politicians and observers of political behavior, wrote that all that is required of a successful governor is that "he should be a gentleman in character and manners, and exercise a liberal hospitality."

Because the Constitution of 1776 put so little power in the hands of the governor the solution of state problems was left to the General Assembly. It was as speaker of the Senate, the legislature's most influential post, that Bartlett Yancey for over a decade exercised unparalleled power. Yancey was admired by both his fellow legislators, who unanimously elected him speaker at every session from 1817 through 1827, and by historians who have been impressed by his progressive views on education, reapportionment, the courts, and internal improvements.

The consensus among scholars is that Yancey's long tenure as speaker was due to a combination of personality and ability. He had a remarkably congenial personality, and he claimed friendship with such diverse personages as Archibald Murphey and Nathaniel Macon; he had the ability to make logical decisions on murky points of parliamentary procedure; and he was adroit at being able to take a firm stand on controversial legislation without unduly irritating the sensibilities of those who opposed the measures which he endorsed.

A Natural Talent

Yancey was a self-made man. He was born into a family of modest means, raised by a widowed mother, and, as his biographers tell it, lived an early life of Lincolnesque proportions. Although from humble origins Yancey soon assembled all the credentials needed for success in North Carolina politics. He attended the University of North Carolina, studied law under Archibald Murphey, became the protege of Nathaniel Macon, and married into one of the first families of Caswell County. From 1813, when he was elected to Congress, until his untimely death at forty-three in 1828, he was a man to be reckoned with in state politics.

Judge Frederick Nash, who had watched Yancey chair the Senate, described him in glowing terms:

> Bartlett Yancey was in his appropriate sphere. Nature had in a peculiar manner fitted him for the station. Dignified in his appearance, he filled the chair with grace; prompt to decide, little time was lost in debating questions referred to the speaker; energetic in enforcing order, the most unruly became obedient; fair, candid, and impartial, all were satisfied—so entirely so that from the period of his first election no effort was once made to disturb his possession of the chair. Even those who in other respects differed from and opposed him admitted that as a speaker he was without reproach.

Judge Nash, however, made a subtle distinction between Yancey performing his function as speaker and Yancey the politician:

> It was not alone as speaker of the Senate that Mr. Yancey as legislator was useful to his native State. He was too sound a politician not to perceive the true policy of the State. Ardently attached to the land of his birth, his constant effort was to elevate her in the moral and political scale. Whenever a measure was brought before the legislature which in his estimation had these objects in view, he fearlessly threw himself into the ranks of its friends, and with as full contempt of consequences he never failed to frown upon and oppose all those wild measures of misrule which have from time to time agitated the legislature of our State.

As Judge Nash rightly perceived, Speaker Yancey was never without his political alter ego.

The speaker's power resided in the fact that he appointed each member of all the select committees. There was no seniority system or recourse to party pressure to challenge his appointments. Within the confines of the committee room, therefore, the speaker's influence was at its peak. In the Education Committee, for example, Yancey's influence was such that the speaker himself authored the famous Literary Fund bill which they introduced in 1825.

Unusual Appointment

An 1818 episode demonstrates the flexibility of the speaker's power in Yancey's hands. Yancey was a strong advocate of creating a state supreme court, and as such he looked forward to appointing only acknowledged supporters of the supreme court plan, which he had introduced in 1817, to the joint committee assigned the task of composing legislation acceptable to both Houses. William Gaston was to have been a key member on the Senate half of the committee consisting of Gaston, James Wellborn, and James Benton. Gaston, however, was not in his seat when the General Assembly convened, nor for several days thereafter. Archi-

bald Murphey wrote to Judge Thomas Ruffin: "Gaston has not arrived. Yancey reserves him for the Judiciary Committee, and this creates delay."

By November 19, Yancey could wait no longer. With still no word from Gaston, Yancey took the unusual step of appointing him to the Judiciary Committee even though he had not yet arrived and presented his credentials. In effect he was appointing a committeeman who was not yet a duly authorized member of the General Assembly.

Gaston finally arrived on November 23, seven days after the call of the Assembly and five days after being named chairman of the Judiciary Committee. No Senate rules actually prohibited Yancey's action, and so Speaker Yancey readily became an innovator on behalf of a good cause.

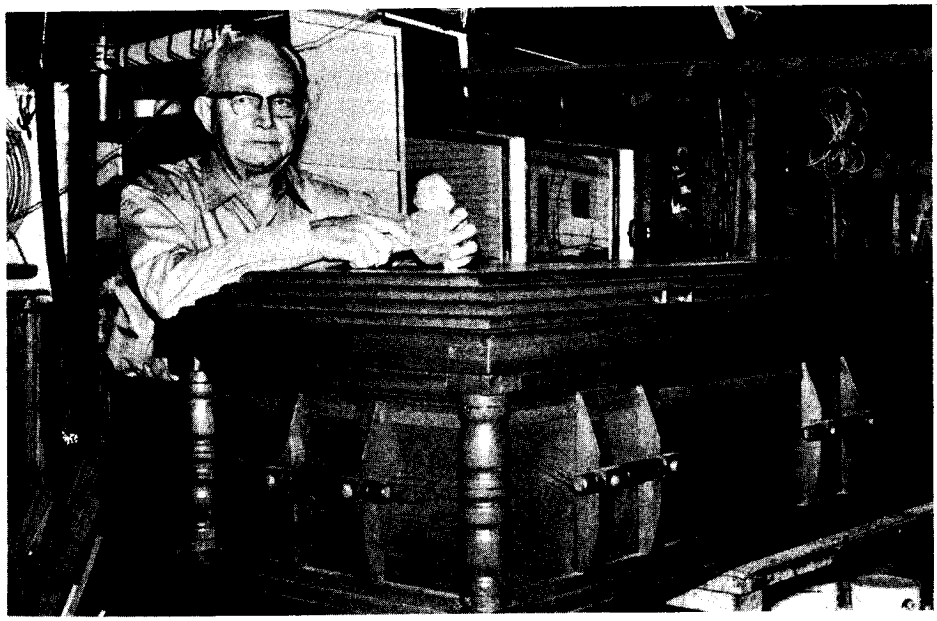
Internal Improvements Advocate

Although Speaker Yancey was occasionally able to innovate, it was in the routine business of running the legislature on a day by day basis that his influence, through committee appointments, was most heavily felt. An appreciation of the speaker's use of the committee as a political tool can be gained from an examination of his committee appointees. The Internal Improvement Committee offers a good example of Speaker Yancey's influence at work. The Internal Improvement Committee was the single most important committee in the General Assembly. The legislature spent more time debating bills channeled through this committee than those of any other during Yancey's years in office.

Yancey was charged with filling forty-six seats on the Internal Improvement Committee during his terms as speaker. He did this with thirty-four appointees, six of whom served two terms and three who served three terms. Clearly the Internal Improvement Committee was not dominated by a small group of favorites, but it was populated with those who had commitments to the internal improvement cause. Among the Yancey appointees were such outstanding leaders of the movement as Archibald Murphey, John Owen, and Duncan Cameron, as well as several members of the Board of Internal Improvements, and numerous future participants in the internal improvement campaigns of the 1830's. The Committee chairman, appointed by Yancey, was always a strong internal improvements advocate.

Perhaps the modern infatuation with the strong executive has made us unaware of less visible offices and the men who held these offices and used their power wisely. Today only the name of a remote mountain county gives testimony to Bartlett Yancey's foresight in such vital areas as internal improvements and public education, and to the power that was once his. Even this is a mock honor for the common spelling of his name is erroneous. Bartlett Yancey signed his name "Yancy."

Carolina Camera



REV. WALTON'S "SLEEPING BOX"

Nobody is likely to be more aware of the fact that you can't take it with you than is Reverend John Odell Walton, of Churchland. And, yet, he apparently is planning on taking something of his own farther along his way than most folks are in a position to do, nowadays. He has built his own coffin.

Why did he do it? It came about quite naturally, he says. In his younger days he was working in a furniture factory when he answered his call to preach. And during his nearly 50 years as an active minister he never lost his love of woodworking nor the practice of it when time allowed. So, when he was forced into retirement—except for interim pastorates—some 10 years ago, after winning a close bout with angina pectoris, he had the time, the know-how and a good friend who had some cedar boards. A coffin seemed to be a most practical project at the time.

He had to work at it slowly. But in time his "sleeping box," as he calls it, was completed. And, since he had no inclination to put it into use, right away, he stored it in his basement.

The storage arrangement suited him, and his wife learned to live with it. But when his daughter came to visit and came across "that thing" in the basement, her views differed from theirs, tremendously. And it had to go.

His favorite mortician has it now, in storage at his place.

"We'll be more than glad to take care of it for you," he said cheerfully when he came for it. "Just let us know when you need it."

But Reverend Walton figures he'll let somebody else do that.—TRUMAN KING