

Hearts Of Edenton

Love and Marriage in Historic Edenton

The Lost Love of Joseph Hewes

Fate can be cruel, and one disaster can change everything. How did this future Founding Father go on in the wake of such a tragedy?

Between 1755-1763, a young merchant transferred most of his business interests from the Philadelphia area into North Carolina and adopted Edenton as his new home. The son of a Quaker family from what is now Princeton, New Jersey, this young man would soon shake up the bustling colonial port town by serving in multiple public offices and by taking the local mercantile industry by storm.

This young merchant was named Joseph Hewes, and by 1763, long before the fame of his later accomplishments, he already had the ladies of Edenton swooning. But only one lady mattered:

Isabella.

Isabella Johnston, sister to Samuel Johnston, lived at Hayes with her family, including her younger sister Hannah, who would have quite the romance of her own, but that's another story (see "The Love Triangle: Hannah and James Iredell").

As a Johnston, Isabella was from one of the most prestigious families in North Carolina and was therefore a "good match" for the prosperous merchant, but her reportedly "amiable" nature must have made an impression on Joseph Hewes, because the man was SMITTEN.

Isabella agreed to marry the merchant, and they made preparations for the ceremony. Yet in 1765, just a few days before the wedding, a disaster struck that would change Joseph Hewes forever:

Isabella passed away.

We do not know for sure if she suffered an illness or had an accident, but sources agree on two things: first, that her death was sudden and tragic, and second, that Joseph Hewes was utterly heartbroken. And remained so.

A few years later, another young man would enter the Johnston family's circle-the immigrant Comptroller of Customs for the Port of Roanoke, James Iredell. In a letter to his father dated July 20, 1772, he discusses the Johnston family members and their close friends, including Joseph Hewes:

"...I must say there is a gentleman in this town who is a very particular favorite of mine, as indeed he is of every body, for he is one of the best and most agreeable men in the world. His name is Hewes. He is a merchant here, and our member for the town: the patron and greatest honor of it..."

"...About six or seven years ago, he was within a very few days of being married to one of Mr. Johnston's sisters...who died rather suddenly; and this unhappy circumstance for a long time embittered every satisfaction in life to him. He has continued ever since unmarried, which I believe he will always do..."

How did Joseph Hewes keep going after losing his beloved Isabella? By throwing himself into his work—in his mercantile firm and his eventual shipyard, but especially in his public service. Among his many, many local accomplishments, he served on the committee to erect a "new" courthouse in town, which still stands today as the 1767 Chowan County Courthouse.

At the provincial and, later, national level, he served in the General Assembly and eventually joined the Patriot cause, serving on the Committee of Correspondence and as one of North Carolina's delegates to the Continental Congresses.

After North Carolina's Fourth Provincial Congress authorized their representatives to vote for independence from Great Britain at the next Continental Congress (written as the "Halifax Resolves", April 12, 1776), Joseph Hewes, William Hooper, and John Penn and signed the Declaration of Independence on behalf of North Carolina.

Joseph Hewes passed away in 1779 just shy of his fiftieth birthday, after pouring all of his remaining energy into his business ventures and into the development of the Continental Navy. He succumbed to a protracted illness in Philadelphia, and while we know that he is buried somewhere in the Christ's Church cemetery, the exact location is unknown. Since he passed while the Continental Congress was in session, his fellow members attended his funeral, and the Congress declared a period of mourning that lasted for an entire month.

Ultimately, James Iredell's prediction back in 1772 came true-although Joseph Hewes had wealth, prestige, and many friends, he never married, and passed away bereft of his one true love, and without children to inherit his legacy.