

# Hearts Of Edenton

Love and Marriage in Historic Edenton

James Cathcart Johnston:

The Rejected Marriage and the  
Empty Carriage



In the words of Washington Irving, "Love is never lost. If not reciprocated, it will flow back and soften and purify the heart."

The year is 1821, and James Cathcart Johnston is a busy man. He had just finished rebuilding the house at Hayes just a few years prior, and is now consumed with managing the vast Johnston holdings and keeping up with the tumultuous politics of the nation formed by his father's generation. On top of all of this, he's on the verge of turning forty, and is still feeling the sting of his eldest sister's passing. It comes as no surprise, then, that he needs to de-stress, and he decides to accomplish this aim in a time-honored manner-by visiting a spa!

And he doesn't choose just any spa-he travels to the famous Sweet Springs Resort in what is now West Virginia!



There, enjoying the intoxicating warmth of the mineral springs and getting to know other members of the United States' wealthy elite society, he once again is reminded of the one thing he does not have—a spouse. James Cathcart Johnston is, after all, a member of the Johnston family, and comes from a long tradition of enduring love stories (see our previous features!). As one of the wealthiest men in North Carolina, he certainly is a catch, and in the heady romance of taking an extended holiday, he falls head over heels for another visitor at Sweet Springs—Miss Jones.

While we do not definitively know the identity of this “Miss Jones”, details from James Cathcart Johnston's correspondence point to Mary McKinlay Jones, granddaughter of Revolutionary War hero John Daves of New Bern. After her mother passes away when she is only six weeks old, Mary is raised by her Pugh relatives near Halifax.



Of course there's an Edenton connection as well- Mary McKinlay Jones is the niece of none other than Ann Rebecca Collins, wife of Josiah Collins II of Somerset Place State Historic Site.

Completely enamored and with the prospect of a "good match", the usually reserved James Cathcart Johnston begins to make extravagant plans for his life as a married man! In early 1822, he writes to his friends and agents to order a secretary desk, dressing-glass, and other pieces of furniture for his prospective wife. He also commissions an elegant suit of clothes for himself, including "gilt buttons" and "one pair delicate drab pantaloons", and two sets of light green livery for his "servants". He also starts dreaming of a proper vacation to Europe and, to top it all off, he prepares to ride off into the sunset in style, for he also commissions a highly customized two-seat carriage known as a Phaeton!



There's only one problem-the lady still has not given him an answer!

James Cathcart Johnston believes that she will make her decision by May of 1822, but in March she is unexpectedly called to New Bern to attend to her grandmother in her final days. There she remains for almost two months, apparently without writing to James Cathcart Johnston.

Alas, on May 20, 1822, he writes the following letter to his friend Joseph Blount:

"I have just this moment reached home from a trip up the river. My business there has terminated differently from what both of us expected. You know my character very well but you may suppose that I was too presumptuous, perhaps I was...In the mean time, attach no blame to the other party, everything was perfectly correct on both sides.



You are to understand by this there is no alteration in my situation and I am perfectly content be assured. I bear it as I ought and much better than expected—I have no doubt you have shipt the carriage & secretary before this. Let them come on I can face them..”

Miss Jones has turned down one of the wealthiest men in North Carolina! A few years later, in 1825, Mary McKinlay Jones marries Congressman Andrew Govan of South Carolina. The Govans eventually settle in Mississippi, where they establish Snowdown Plantation.

As for James Cathcart Johnston, while there may have been other fleeting romances at other resorts (and dodging fortune hunters), he never marries.

While his demeanor by accounts turns melancholic and somewhat austere, he remains a generous benefactor of friends and family members.



But as he grows older he begins to struggle with the injustice and inhumanity of slavery, and starts to research the process of emancipation and the financial prospects for freedmen. When he makes his final will in 1863, he does something so surprising and groundbreaking that it resulted in one of the most famous cases ever argued in the 1767 Chowan County Courthouse—instead of leaving his properties to be divided amongst his family members, he splits it between his most trusted business partners and subsequent estate executors. He does this primarily to prevent the separation of the enslaved families of his estate, which would occur if each of his many relatives made a claim. In separate letters to each of his business partners he also details his legacies for each enslaved family, emancipating some and providing for the comfort of the elderly. He also details his wishes regarding various financial bequests, to be fulfilled to the best of each executor's ability in light of the economic fallout from the Civil War.



After James Cathcart Johnston passes away in 1865, the will is challenged by some of his relatives, and in the subsequent court case, which goes all the way to the State Supreme Court, letters surface from lawyers representing a Mrs. Annie Edith Webb of Philadelphia, who claims to be the only surviving daughter of James Cathcart Johnston and Edith Wood, an enslaved woman emancipated by Johnston. In these letters are details concerning the good relationship between Annie and her father, as well as the excellent education that he procured for her. While we do not know for sure whether Annie is indeed James Cathcart Johnston's daughter, some details do suggest that she has an Edenton connection, as the 1860 census places the Webb family in the same household as Jeffrey Iredell, Jr., son of the Jeffrey Iredell emancipated by James Cathcart Johnston's cousin, James Iredell, Jr.



In any case, the State Supreme Court ultimately decides to uphold the original will, thus beginning a new chapter in the history of Hayes, which becomes the home of Edward Wood and his family.

And the ill-fated carriage remains, which never hosted the former Miss Jones, nor the woman that James Cathcart Johnston may have loved but couldn't publicly acknowledge because of the color of her skin.