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Abstract

In the above-titled work in 2006, this writer briefly discussed the possibility that President George Washington traversed present Adams County in October 1794, during his return from Bedford to Philadelphia, a belief long and widely held locally. No credible assertion of the President's presence here in 1794 was possible at that time. Recently however, a forgotten narrative was "rediscovered"; its author, Jacob Eyster, gives some substance to the previous mere speculation. After extensive research, this writer was graciously requested to produce a sequel to his prior speculative writing. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Adams County Historical Society, ACHS, Adams County, Pennsylvania History, George Washington, Philadelphia, Eyster

**MARCH INTO OBLIVION:
A FOOTNOTE**

**Further information on President George Washington's Return
to Philadelphia in late October of 1794**

By Larry C. Bolin

In the above-titled work in 2006, this writer briefly discussed the possibility that President George Washington traversed present Adams County in October 1794, during his return from Bedford to Philadelphia, a belief long and widely held locally. ¹ No credible assertion of the President's presence here in 1794 was possible at that time. Recently however, a forgotten narrative was "rediscovered"; its author, Jacob Eyster, gives some substance to the previous mere speculation. ² After extensive research, this writer was graciously requested to produce a sequel to his prior speculative writing.³

Jacob was the first of thirteen children of George and Mary Magdalene (Slagle) Eyster, born June 8, 1782, and baptized at St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Hanover. ⁴ At that time the family home was near "Blue Spring," as Jacob himself later referred to it, in then Berwick Township.⁵ By 1788, the family had moved to a site near Hunterstown, in Straban Township, where George Eyster opened a tannery. ⁶ The Eyster home there was built near the intersection of what Jacob called "the State road from Harrisburg to Washington City and the old road from York, through Hunterstown and Black Gap to Chambersburg." ⁷ Sometime later, that intersection became known as Schriver's Corner (or Crossroads).⁸

Jacob Eyster was taxed first in Straban Township in 1805; by 1808 he was termed "tanner" and surely was working for his father.⁹ He was also undergoing military training. ¹⁰ At the age of 23 he received his first of eventually five commissions as an officer in the Militia of York and Adams Counties. ¹¹ On November 6, 1810, he married Maria, daughter of Jacob and Julianna Middlekauff ¹²; shortly thereafter, the young couple moved to Gettysburg.¹³ Within a year of his marriage, Jacob Eyster, along with Jacob Middlekauff, purchased a store on Baltimore Street, where they sold groceries, dry goods, and fresh produce.¹⁴ Then in the autumn of 1817 their partnership was dissolved, with Jacob Eyster afterwards continuing to run the store alone.¹⁵

While residing in Gettysburg, Jacob also attempted to win various political offices, both local and state, running as a Democrat. His success was very limited until 1819 – that autumn he was notified by the election return judges of York and Adams Counties: "you are returned highest in votes for Senator for the district composed of the

Counties of York and Adams, for two years, commencing the first Tuesday of December next. Witness [our] hands the twenty-sixth day of October 1819." He was re-elected to the Senate in 1821.¹⁶

Then in the spring of 1824 a newspaper report in Gettysburg told readers that "Gen. Eyster of this place" had been appointed Deputy Surveyor General of Pennsylvania.¹⁷ Jacob himself later wrote that Governor John Andrew Shulze "requested him to accept the appointment," which he did.¹⁸

Jacob lost little time in moving to Harrisburg to begin work at his new post. He wrote that he "left Gettysburg on Friday, the 7th of May, 1824." After making arrangements for living quarters in Harrisburg, he returned to Gettysburg, then again he "left there with his family on the 1st day of June 1824."¹⁹

Clearly, Jacob Eyster's efficiency and integrity were recognized as valuable assets, for he continued as Deputy Surveyor General for about fifteen years, from 1824 to 1839, through the administrations of three successive governors.²⁰ In addition, in 1839 he was asked by newly elected Governor David Rittenhouse Porter, a Democrat, to remain at his post; that offer was withdrawn however, before Porter took office, upon his learning that someone else had already been offered, and had accepted, the job.²¹

Jacob tried several avenues of work after his government service came to an end.²² He wrote at some length on one. He was elected by its directors to be cashier of a bank in Hagerstown, Maryland, but after performing an audit of the bank's financial situation decided against accepting that position.²³

Frequently plagued in his adulthood by financial difficulties, Jacob continued to have a hard time staying afloat.²⁴ Finally, in 1843 and again living in Harrisburg, he opened a store in his home with money provided by his son-in-law Michael Jacobs; that store apparently earned him enough for his maintenance for the rest of his working days.²⁵ He died on March 24, 1859.²⁶

The Eyster memoir likely was written in the 1850s, after Jacob's business career ended. He claimed no pretensions of education or writing ability; rather, he said his primary object was "to record facts without any paint or varnish."²⁷ Close scrutiny appears to uphold very well what he wrote, his words being in close agreement with documented information and therefore eminently believable. Credence is thus also given to his statements for which corroboration has not been found (indeed may not exist),²⁸

Among the things Jacob Eyster included in his memoir was this:

*He [that is, Jacob himself] had the satisfaction once, when yet a boy, to see General Washington pass his father's house on his return to Philadelphia, from what was called the "western expedition" against the "whisky boys."*²⁹

The editors of the President's diaries say that Washington "apparently followed a route from Bedford to Chambersburg, from Chambersburg to York, and then to Lancaster, from which place he proceeded to Philadelphia."³⁰ So it is credible that George Washington traveled through future Adams County in 1794 and it is Jacob Eyster's own testimony that he saw the President pass by his home. By October 26, Washington had reached Wright's ferry on the Susquehanna and from there he wrote to Alexander Hamilton that "thus far I have proceeded without accident to man, horse, or Carriage. I rode yesterday afternoon thro' the rain from York Town to this place."³¹

Certainly, Jacob Eyster's affirmation, added to the first-hand unarguable documentation above, makes George Washington's presence in now Adams County in 1794 believable. It does nothing however to support claims such as those broadcast about supposed incidents at Russell Tavern or Hunterstown, which to date remain without credible evidence.³²

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ENDNOTES

- ¹Larry C. Bolin, "March into Oblivion," in *Adams County History*, vol. 12 (Gettysburg, PA, 2006), endnote 9, 50.
- ²Jacob Eyster, *Memoir (1782-1859)*, 2 vol., typescript and manuscript (n.p., n.d.)
- ³Research was done by Charles Glatfelter, Timothy Smith, Wayne Motts, and Arthur Weaner.
- ⁴Eyster, *Memoir*, I, 13; Frederick S. Weiser, *Records of St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover, Pennsylvania 1741-1831* (Camden, ME, 1994), 58.
- ⁵Eyster, *Memoir*, I, 7. Blue Spring is actually in Mt. Pleasant Township, about midway between today's Mt. Rock (or Centennial) and Conewago Chapel. Therefore, the Eyster home was across the South Branch of the (or Little) Conewago Creek, in then Berwick, now Oxford, Township. *Atlas of Adams Co, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1872). 48.
- ⁶Adams County Historical Society, tax lists: Straban Township, 1786-8.
- ⁷Eyster, *Memoir*, I, 15; York County Deeds LL-532 and LL-533, Conrad Hoke to George Eyster, both dated January 30, 1786 –originals in ACHS deed collection.
- ⁸Arthur Weaner, land draft; *Star and Sentinel*, Gettysburg, February 27, 1943, obituary of D.D. Schriver, 5.
- ⁹ACHS, tax lists: Straban Township, 1805-11.
- ¹⁰Eyster, *Memoir*, I, 34-41.
- ¹¹ACHS, Room 21, oversize files, 130. Four of the commissions are originals. In short order Jacob advanced from Captain to Major to Lieutenant Colonel to Brigadier General.
- ¹²*Centinel*, Gettysburg, November 14, 1810. The Middlekauffs were a prominent family in early Conewago and Franklin Townships.
- ¹³ACHS, tax lists: Straban Township, 1811, and Gettysburg, 1812.
- ¹⁴*Centinel*, Gettysburg, October 22, 1811. It is not clear whether Middlekauff was Eyster's father-in-law or brother-in-law.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, October 20, 1817.
- ¹⁶ACHS, *Published or Compiled Reference Materials*, #204: "Adams County Elections and Appointments, from 1800"; Eyster, *Memoir*, II, 34.

¹⁷*Centinel*, Gettysburg, May 19, 1824. Jonathan Stayer, head of the reference section of the State Archives of Pennsylvania, upon request was unable to verify the appointment, uncovering no information at all on those who held positions as Deputies. Nevertheless, the *Centinel* report was accurate. Mr. Stayer was also unable to find evidence that Jacob Eyster "filled the office of Auditor General for about fifteen years," as was printed in the *Harrisburg Weekly Telegraph* of March 31, 1859. That latter report was not accurate. Letter from Jonathan Stayer to Charles Glatfelter, dated March 31, 2010.

¹⁸Eyster, *Memoir*, II, 286-7. A check of "Executive Minutes of Governor John Andrew Shulze" revealed no mention of Jacob Eyster. *Pennsylvania Archives, Ninth Series, Volume VIII*, May-June 1824, 6110-6136.

¹⁹Eyster, *Memoir*, II, 292 and 294. Tax records of Gettysburg include his name as late as 1826, although a correct reading of them reveals that he was no longer there after 1824. ACHS, tax lists: Gettysburg, 1824-6.

²⁰Eyster, *Memoir*, II, 298, 310, 326. His service time crossed party lines too, his first two stints being under Governors John Andrew Shulze and George Wolf, both Democrats, and his third under Governor Joseph Ritner, an Antimason.

²¹Eyster, *Memoir*, II, 361-5 and 369.

²²*Ibid.*, 373-4.

²³*Ibid.*, 374-436.

²⁴*Ibid.*, passim.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 444-5. The 1850 federal census shows him, aged 68 years, residing in the West Ward of Harrisburg, his occupation grocer, which is the same business he had pursued in Gettysburg and was apparently comfortable with.

²⁶*Sentinel*, Gettysburg, March 28, 1859; *Compiler*, Gettysburg, April 4, 1859; *Pennsylvania Daily Telegraph*, Harrisburg, March 25, 1859; *Patriot and Union*, Harrisburg, March 26, 1859; *Weekly Telegraph*, Harrisburg, March 31, 1859. There is not conformity in his date of death in the newspaper accounts.

²⁷Eyster, *Memoir*, I, 1.

²⁸Evidently the memoir remained in the Eyster family's possession for many years after Jacob's death. By 1875 it was held by Lutheran College and Seminary Professor Henry Eyster Jacobs (1844-1932), grandson of Jacob Eyster. By the courtesy of Professor Jacobs, a lengthy excerpt was published in the September 2, 1875, issue of the *Gettysburg Star and Sentinel*. The article included long lists of early prominent local citizens according to their political party affiliation and stressed Jacob Eyster's own observation of the general "acerbity" of political opponents' views of one another at that time. The memoir

came to ACHS from the Eyster family after being in their hands for about a century.

²⁹Eyster, *Memoir*, I, 39. Another assertion of the President's passage through the county also exists; surely it is a story accepted by its hearer as an actual memory, handed down to Jacob Eyster's grandson who wrote this more than a hundred years after the event: "*My grandfather, Jacob Eyster, as a boy had sat on the railing of a neighboring porch, intently watching every movement of George Washington, as he paced up and down the porch, while waiting the preparation of his dinner.*" Henry Eyster Jacobs, *Memoirs* (n.p., 1906), 25-26. In light of Eyster's own written affirmation, this passed on memory deserves recognition as a likely reflection of Eyster's.

³⁰Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig, eds., *The Diaries of George Washington*, VI (Charlottesville, VA, 1979), 197.

³¹Library of Congress, "Hamilton papers," as quoted in Jackson and Twohig, *The Diaries of George Washington*, VI, 197.

³²Further word of the President's return to Philadelphia is in the offing. The next installment, number 16, of the *Presidential Series*, which itself is part of the publications collectively called *The Papers of George Washington*, is scheduled for publication in 2011 or 2012. Installment 16 covers some months, possibly to the end, of 1794; its appearance could unveil a revelation intimately pertinent to this sequel and to the interest of many local people.