Death of Thomas Jefferson Rusk

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After the death of Mrs. Rusk from tuberculosis in 1856, Thomas Jefferson Rusk returned to Washington with one of his sons and a daughter. He seemed to be unable to recover from the loss of his wife. Also, he worried about the dissipation of his sons and the thought of rearing his only daughter Helena without the guidance of a mother. After a few months in the national capital, the United States Senator returned to Nacogdoches to find solace. Dr. James H. Starr wrote that Rusk drank heavily on several occasions to drown his sorrow. For two or three weeks before his death, Rusk was in very poor health. He was very nervous and was unable to sleep regularly. Several days before his death, Rusk rode home with Dr. Starr and shed tears while talking about his troubles. His physician, Dr. Robert A. Irion, had encouraged Rusk to get out in a buggy to get fresh air and to exercise to help his feelings. On Tuesday, the day before his death, Rusk, after walking across the street to the drug store, stopped at Dr. Starr's office to transact some business. Dr. Starr invited him to go home with him for lunch but Rusk declined the invitation. Rusk said that he had better go back to his own house but that he would come back the next day.

On Wednesday morning his family and Dr. Irion thought that Rusk was better and more cheerful. For some time he had been eating in his own room, but at this noon meal, he came and sat with his family and ate heartily. The Negro woman who attended his room saw Rusk examining his gun that morning. He remarked that he would try to shoot some squirrels, but the servant presumed that Rusk would wait until the cool of the evening before going out. After the noon meal, Rusk sent nearly all of the servants away. He then remarked that he would go to a cornfield nearby to kill some squirrels. His family did not say anything to him, as they felt that he was not able to go out to hunt on foot. He stepped to the north end of his gallery, and in a few moments the report of his rifle was heard. He fell on the ground outside the gallery. The muzzle of the gun must have rested on or near the lower part of the center of his forehead. A string had been attached to the trigger, passing below the guard and then up and lay near one of his hands. There was no cry, groan, or struggle; because his head was badly mutilated, death must have been instantaneous.

The body was left for a time where it fell. When Dr. Starr and other friends were called, they came to see their dead friend. Judge William B. Ochiltree on his arrival at the scene cried aloud, "O, Rusk! Rusk! Rusk!" All the business houses of Nacogdoches were closed and nearly all the residences were draped in black. The flags, which carried wide stripes of black above and below, were lowered to half mast.

Rusk left no will or other papers to throw any light on his suicide. A few days before his death on July 29, 1857, Rusk had asked Dr. Starr if
Emos Smith still attended to his business in New Orleans. Starr told Rusk that he still did and gave him his address. After Rusk's death, a letter was found on a table dated July 29, containing an order for a tombstone for his wife's grave. ¹

Many people wondered why Rusk took his life. One man even consulted a clairvoyant, who insisted that he could talk with the dead. The mystic maintained that he had gotten in touch with Rusk and asked him why he had committed suicide. Rusk told him that if he explained it that a person of this world could not understand and asked his friends to wait until they joined him and then a satisfactory explanation would be given. ²

FOOTNOTES

¹Jas. H. Starr to Thomas J. Rusk, December 13, 1856, T. J. Rusk Papers, Archives of the University of Texas, Austin.
²Jas. H. Starr to James Reily, August 25, 1857, J. H. Starr Papers, Archives of the University of Texas, Austin.
³Ibid.
⁵Ibid.
⁶Starr Papers.