

SCENE VII

NARRATOR

The convention sits late, and it is past midnight when the report of the committee, composed of Rev. Hezekiah J. Balch of Poplar Tent, Dr. Ephraim Brevard of Centre Church, and Lawyer Will Kennon of Salisbury, is offered to the delegates.

Perhaps the electrifying news brought by the express messenger from Boston has speeded action. At any rate, the report of the committee calls for absolute independence from England. It is adopted, and as the candles in the little log courthouse burn low, Secretary John McKnitt Alexander solemnly -- for they all realize that with the scratch of their quills they may be signing their death warrant -- begins calling the roll of the delegates.

(The light fades from the Narrator as the voice of the convention secretary is heard, and the audience continues to sit in darkness while the names are called and the delegates respond.)

VOICE OF JOHN MCKNITT ALEXANDER

Abraham Alexander, Chairman, aye. Ephraim Brevard, aye.  
Hezekiah J. Balch, aye. John Phifer, aye. James Harris, aye.  
William Kennon, aye. John Foard, aye. Richard Barry, aye.  
Henry Downes, aye. Ezra Alexander, aye. William Graham, aye.  
John Query, aye. Hezekiah Alexander, aye. Adam Alexander, aye.  
Charles Alexander, aye. Zaccheus Wilson, aye. Waightstill Avery,  
aye. Benjamin Patton, aye. Matthew McClure, aye. Neill Morrison,  
aye. Robert Irwin, aye. John Flennikin, aye. David Reese, aye.  
John Davidson, aye. Richard Harris, aye. Thomas Polk, aye.  
John McKnitt Alexander, Secretary, aye.

NARRATOR

The day is May 20, 1775. The men have signed themselves into immortality, though on this May morning as the candles sputter and die out they know nothing and care less of the fame their brave action will bring them in the long years ahead.

The final details are completed. On the morrow Colonel Polk will read the declaration from the courthouse steps to all the citizens who will assemble to hear the news. Weary now in limb and brain and knowing that the battle line irrevocably has been drawn, the delegates seek their beds.

So the night passes and in the forenoon of May 20 Colonel Polk faces the people.

(The light fades from the Narrator and comes up on the center stage. On the courthouse balcony Colonel Thomas Polk stands, a long paper in his hands. On the tavern steps and in the street in front of the courthouse, on the steps, and the balcony itself, and even on roof of the tavern porch, the people--men in hunting shirts and knee breeches, women in their working clothes and their finest, children of all ages--are waiting for Colonel Polk to speak.)

COLONEL POLK

Friends of Mecklenburg:

I was instructed by the delegates to the convention that adjourned after midnight last night to read to you the document passed by that body and signed by the delegates. It is a solemn paper, and it was adopted only after long and careful consideration. I am sure that after you have heard it you will realize that it is a most important paper that will have far-reaching results. The men who wrote this document and promulgated it represented you, and I am confident they represented you correctly. It is our solemn desire that now that we have taken such action, you will give this paper your support, even to the death if that be



necessary.

(As he talks, there is absolute quiet. He begins reading from the paper.)

"Resolved, first, that whoever directly, or indirectly, or in any way, form or manner, countenances the unchartered and dangerous invasion of our rights, as claimed by Great Britain, is an enemy to this country, to America, and to the inherent and inalienable rights of man.

"Resolved, second, that we the citizens of Mecklenburg County do hereby dissolve the political bands which have connected us to the mother country, and hereby absolve ourselves from all allegiance to the British Crown and abjure all political connection, contract, or association, with that nation, who have wantonly trampled on our rights and liberties and inhumanly shed the blood of American patriots at Lexington.

"Resolved, third, that we do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people---

(His reading is interrupted by a man in homespun on the tavern porch who claps his hands together and shouts "Amen! That's right. We're through with England and old George!" And out in the street another man, yelling, throws his coonskin cap into the air, catches it as it comes sailing down, the tail streaming behind. Colonel Polk, smiling, begins again.)

"Resolved, third, that we do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people; are, and of right ought to be a sovereign and self-governing association, under the control of no power other than that of God and the general government of the Congress; to the maintenance of which independence we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual co-operation, our lives, our fortunes, and our most sacred honor.

(He clears his throat, proceeds.)

"Resolved, fourth, that as we acknowledge the existence

and control of no law, or legal officer, civil or military, within this county, we do hereby ordain and adopt, as a rule of life, all, each, and everyone of our former laws; wherein, nevertheless the crown of Great Britain can never be considered as holding rights, privileges, immunities, or authority therein.

(He hesitates, clears his throat again. It is evident that he is fatigued after the long strain of the convention.)

"Resolved, fifth, that it is also further decreed that all, each, and every military officer in this county is hereby retained in his former command and authority, he acting conformably to these regulations. And that every member present of this delegation shall henceforth be a civil officer, viz., a justice of the peace, in the character of a committeeman, to issue process, hear and determine all matters of controversy, according to the said adopted laws; and to preserve peace, union and harmony in said county; and to use every exertion to spread the love of country, and fire of freedom throughout America, until a more general and organized government be established in this province."

That, my friends, is the end of the declaration.

(He rolls up the paper, and immediately the crowd begins shouting its approval. Caps are thrown into the air, and one lodges on the courthouse roof. A man hoists a boy up to the window and he scrambles up to get the cap. During the shouting a man on the tavern porch discovers Pastor Balch in the crowd near the bottom of the courthouse steps. He yells.)

#### MAN ON PORCH

Let's have a speech from Pastor Balch. His name's on that paper. Let's hear from him.

(The crowd approves; a man catches the young preacher's arm and leads him toward the steps. Balch, smiling, climbs up beside Colonel Polk.)

Thank you, my friends. My name, indeed, is on that paper,



and I may say that I am proud it is there. I know not what it may mean. Perhaps death at the end of the hangman's rope. But I have no regrets, and I shall have none. That paper--

(He points to the declaration in Colonel Polk's hand.)

is a blow for liberty, and a powerful blow, my friends. We know not what effect that paper and the action of your delegates may have. Friends--

(He pauses, and those nearest him see that his eyes are moist.)

you see tears in my eyes. They are not tears of fear, let me assure you, though we have just done a fearful thing; they are not tears of sorrow, though our action last night may bring us and all our loved ones into the deepest shadows of the valley of sorrow. No, they are tears of joy. Though I live a hundred years, my friends, I shall never experience a more thrilling moment than I experienced a few hours ago, by the light of the candles in our little courthouse--

(He points with natural gesture behind him.)

when we took this momentous step. I wonder if we all realize what we have done this morning, this great moment in our destiny. Do we realize, my friends, that here in this little backwoods courthouse in this far away settlement, under the ministration of rough, knotted hands, the hands, if you please, of pioneer men beneath whose coarse hunting shirts beat warm, kind hearts, has just been born a new nation? Do you realize that here in this small room in the beginning hours of this twentieth day of May you have delivered an infant whose life, God grant, may extend long past our going into the dim remote days of the unheralded future? Mark you well this day, my friends. It shall be a bright day on the

calendar of the ages.

(The minister pauses, takes out his handkerchief and mops his forehead. His face is flushed. In the audience before him not a person stirs. Then he begins again:)

Perhaps I am a sentimentalist, my friends. Perhaps I am given to seeing visions. Perhaps it is vanity upon my part in having helped prepare this document we have so recently signed and given to America. But this day I have been profoundly stirred. Yes, I have seen visions. Two visions. The first is sunk in the deep wells of doubt, despair, death. Slowly to the beat of muffled drums--

(Almost imperceptibly, as if in the far distance, funereal music begins, with the slow, muffled beat of drums.)

we mount the steep steps of the scaffold--

(The minister points to the steps of the courthouse, and as he speaks, indicates with measured gestures, the slow mounting of the doomed man.)

the noose is adjusted, the black cap blots out our last view of earth, the trap is sprung, and strangling in the choking noose, we pay the price of our folly and our lack of faith. We die the death of the revolutionist who ventured one step, but having ventured lost his courage.

(He pauses and the intent audience makes not a sound.)

But, my friends, I see another vision. It is a vision whose utter magnitude may startle you. Perhaps it is but the vain foolish dreaming --

(Now the young preacher's face is transfigured, and the fire in his eyes flashes out intense and blazing.)

of youth. But I think not, people of Mecklenburg. I see this new nation, this infant nation born here in the darkness of early day



but a few hours ago, I see this nation moving with faltering steps through the dark woods toward the doom that seems to await. But it moves, and as it moves it grows stronger, its steps attain purpose and direction and vigor. It turns aside from the doom ahead, and walks steadfastly and erect to meet its glorious destiny.

My friends, I see the enemies of freedom, the strong mad foes of democracy and the rights of the individual man, I see them maddened to a new fury by the action we have taken here today. I see a new assault upon America--an assault upon our ideals, our beliefs, our very shores. And for a time these enemies may be successful. Despair may seize upon us, but we must overthrow despair. We shall have to fight for our liberties, I doubt not. And we shall see our brothers slain, our homes desolated. But we must fight on. We must fight, and fight yet again.

(The face of the speaker is grim. He pauses, and then he smiles.)

But I see a new day, my dear friends, and a new world. Out from this little courthouse will go the message of freedom. Today, Mecklenburgers, we are free. We have thrown off the yoke. We are the first in all this broad America to be free. And we shall fight and die ere we take that yoke again and enter upon servitude. Yes, and our action shall inspire our brothers. Along this seaboard and back into the far and remote settlements will penetrate this message of freedom. Up and down this land, this scattered, divided, punished and suffering land we shall see--and shortly see--a fusing of ideas and ideals, a fusing, if need be, of the good red blood of many brothers in New York and Pennsylvania and Boston and Virginia and Georgia and Carolina.

(He pauses, lowers his voice.)

But in the end, my friends, if we keep the faith, if we

keep our courage, if in humility and patience and much prayer we keep steadfast our claim upon the Father's care--in the end, we shall conquer, and out from those log walls will have come a mighty nation whose course will shape gloriously the destiny of our earth.

(He stops, stands a moment looking at the quiet, deeply affected crowd, and then precipitately turns his back and steps inside the courthouse.)

(During the minister's dramatic speech Jethro, with David beside him, has been standing on the tavern porch, listening intently. Now, as Pastor Balch goes inside, David turns, notices Jethro.)

DAVID

Why, Jethro, you're crying.

JETHRO

(Wiping his eyes with his sleeve.)

Dad-blame yore skin, Davy, you ought to be cryin' yore ownself. That's the dad-gummedest, finest, most sensiblest speech I ever heard a dad-blamed preacher make in my life. That there boy was talkin' out of his heart.

(The crowd now is beginning to relax and stir about; Colonel Polk steps to the edge of the courthouse porch, raises his hand. The crowd gets still.)

COLONEL POLK

I just wanted to say that the convention has decided to have another meeting at which we'll make plans for setting up a government in Mecklenburg. Now that we're no longer under the King and the royal government, it will be necessary to set up a government of our own. The meeting has been set for the last day of this month, and Lawyer Avery has been named chairman of the committee to draw up the plan.



VOICE FROM CROWD

How come we can't get some action now out of that there bunch that's meetin' in Philadelphia, Colonel? Looks like what we've just done ought to spur them up, don't it?

COLONEL POLK

That's our idea. When we get the papers all drawn up and everything in order, we're figuring on sending a messenger to the Continental Congress to report our action and urge that the colonies unite in taking similar action. Our man will report to our North Carolina delegation, and maybe they will be able to spur the Congress into acting. But anyway, as far as we in Mecklenburg are concerned we're free of the British government.

VOICE FROM CROWD

Yes, sir, we're shet of old George.

(The crowd, now freed of the spell of Pastor Balch, begins moving about, talking, laughing.)

Well, what we waitin' on? 's time to celebrate. Go fetch Elam and let's have a dance.

(The suggestion draws a cheer and Elam, wiping his one hand on his apron, is brought out from the tavern, takes his seat on the perch, and the man who went for him hands him his banjo. He begins thumping, and the orchestra joins in, as a man emerges from the crowd, starts lining up the dancers -- men, women, boys, girls, even small children -- in a large circle in front of the tavern. Then he starts calling figures, the dance begins, and the music builds up volume. After a few minutes the light goes down, and lights come up on the audience.)

END OF ACT I

INTERMISSION

(Ten minutes)