

# 1. Hotbed of Hostility



**O**CCASIONAL study of regional history is good for us. We learn of the origins of colorful men and the genesis of important movements. We study from the roots upward; not in the treetops alone.

The Mecklenburg rebels of 1775 were mostly Ulster Scots from Pennsylvania and Maryland whose families had begun moving down into the Piedmont region of North Carolina after 1730. They belonged to a clannish minority group sometimes described by historians as having contentious independence of spirit, industry, energy, and a kind of obstinate integrity.

They had not been over-popular among the Quakers of Pennsylvania partly because of their aggressiveness in seeking land and resisting the Indians, and partly because their energy in setting up schools and small colleges and establishing Presbyterian congregations rubbed their neighbors the wrong way. It was in Pennsylvania that the term "Scotch-Irish" was first applied to these people, derisively.

Their ancestors had removed from Southwestern Scotland to Ulster — the six northern counties of Ireland — in the first half of the seventeenth century and thereafter, in search of religious freedom and better economic opportunities. They had been disappointed. The Anglican Establishment was oppressive in its attitude toward non-conformists as well as toward Catholics in Ireland, and opportunities for economic betterment were limited to what tenant farmers could get from an English government determined to suppress manufactures.

Migration of the Ulster-Scottish Presbyterians from Northern Ireland to America began about 1684, with the first wave reaching Maryland. A number of these Maryland families, including the Alexanders, were represented later among the Mecklenburg settlers. Migration to New England, Pennsylvania, and New York became heavy after 1718.

In approaching the subject of Mecklenburg rebelliousness it is helpful to remember that these Ulster Scots were born mad. That is, angry at the English who had mistreated them in Ulster and had pushed them off to the frontiers when they reached the colonies. Scots usually pride themselves on



their reasonableness, but they were notable for their low boiling point when they encountered oppression in America. They were thus natural rebels, among the first to speak out for independence in New England, Pennsylvania, and the South.

The path of migration from Pennsylvania was down the Cumberland Valley, through the Shenandoah Valley (which gained many new settlers from the movement), and thence into the Piedmont or uplands of western North Carolina. This region, according to Morison and Commager in *The Growth of the American Republic* (Volume one, page 170), "was more democratic than any other section of the American Colonies, excepting possibly Vermont."

The area below Salisbury, where the families in this story took up land, was at first a part of Anson County, almost a province in itself. Its county seat was Wadesboro, inconveniently located about seventy-five miles to the eastward of the present city of Charlotte.

Mecklenburg, set up as a county in 1762, was divided from Anson. The new county was so large that in later times six other counties were carved from it: Cabarrus, Union, Gaston, Lincoln, Rutherford, and Cleveland. In establishing their county the Ulster Scots thought they might gain a little hard-to-win favor by giving it the name of the home region in Germany of the bride of George III: Princess Charlotte of the Duchy of Mecklenburg.

It is believed they decided at the same time, eventually to give the name Charlotte to their county seat, for which the site had not yet been picked. Not until 1768 was it possible to bestow the Queen's name upon the dusty little new community selected for the honor.

Two of the outstanding men of the county were Thomas Polk and Martin Phifer, both members of the Provincial Congress and very active in local affairs. Polk had a saw and grist mill two miles from his residence, which stood in what became later the center of Charlotte at the intersection of Trade and Tryon Streets. He wished the courthouse to be erected next door. Phifer, a Swiss, lived in the Rocky River settlement several miles away, at the time larger and more important than any of the other communities in the county.

During the six years that elapsed after Mecklenburg County was set up and before the rivals could secure the designation of a county seat, meetings of commissioners and sessions of the county court were held in the residence of James Spratt (or Sprote). Spratt, a surveyor from Pennsylvania, first white resident of Mecklenburg County and father-in-law of Thomas Polk, lived only a short distance from Polk's house at the center of the sprouting community. The daughter's name was Susanna. A grand-nephew of Thomas and Susanna was James K. Polk, a President of the United States.

Referring to James A. Stenhouse's MS. history, *Exploring Old Mecklenburg*, published in mimeographed form in 1952, we discover how the tenacious Polk outsmarted the Rocky River people headed by Martin Phifer in getting the county seat established where he wanted it. He was helped by the favoring terms of a land deal executed with Henry McCullough, agent for Lord Selwyn, holder of extensive North Carolina lands under royal grant:

"Polk was a good friend of Lord Selwyn's agent, McCullough, who, seeing the advantages of having the county seat on Selwyn's lands, generously donated a plot of 360 acres on which Polk, Abraham Alexander, and John Frohock as commissioners were to build a town with a courthouse. This tract, nearly a mile square, centered on Polk's house, where there already was, apparently, a small settlement. This was in 1767.

"Since the proposed town was near the center of the county, circumstances were favorable to Polk's plans, but objections were raised by the people of Rocky River. . . . Accordingly he and his friends hurriedly built a courthouse at the crossroads beside his house. He was able to attach to the bill [authorizing the establishment of a county seat] an amendment providing that the courts be held in his log courthouse for a period of seven years. He had no trouble now in having a bill passed which incorporated his town and officially named it Charlotte. Later, when the seven years were up, Polk sponsored another bill [in the Provincial Congress] which made Charlotte the permanent county seat. . . ."

The grant of 360 acres was stretched in surveying to include 475 acres. Land was cheap in those days. "Only a hundred acres were laid out at first," Mr. Stenhouse continues, "and the town remained this size for many years." Charlotte was a long time in starting to grow; it didn't really gain momentum until after 1900. Resuming with Mr. Stenhouse:

"Thomas Polk, the founder of Charlotte, was the most prominent man in town. Besides being a first representative of Mecklenburg in the Provincial Assembly, he was the first public official of Charlotte. Lord Cornwallis took over Polk's house for his headquarters [when he captured the town in 1780], and Washington stopped there too on his later visit to Charlotte."

We shall read in time that Colonel Thomas Polk called the convention that adopted resolutions of independence in May 1775; that he read aloud on May 20 a first set of resolves before a mass gathering outside the courthouse; that a few days later he read out a second and longer set of resolutions to his militiamen on Muster Day: May 31. Quite a man in regional history!

One of the early moves of the people in the newly founded town of Charlotte was to set up an academy which they proposed to call Queen's College.



When they sought a charter George III was graciously pleased to object because, "as reported to him by the Board of Trade, the College under such auspices would prove to be merely 'a seminary for the education and instruction of youth in the principles of the Presbyterian Church.'" Dr. Archibald Henderson of Chapel Hill related these details in a Phi Beta Kappa address — "The Undying Flame" — given at Chapel Hill on May 17, 1950.

The Mecklenburgers may have been surprised to find the royal provincial government was willing, however, to authorize establishing and endowing Queen's College by adoption of an Act of Assembly. The Act was ratified January 15, 1771, and signed by Governor Tryon, we learn from *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, Volume eight, pages 486-90. Trustees and Fellows were required to meet the following March 1 to organize and to elect "some learned, pious, and discreet person to be President of the said College." Then this:

"And provided further that no person shall be admitted to be President of the said college but who is of the Established [Anglican] Church . . .," to be licensed "for the time being" by the Governor or Commander-in-Chief.

Readers who know early North Carolina history will find special interest in examining the list of Trustees and Fellows named in the Act: Edmund Fanning, Thomas Polk, Robert Harris, Jr., Abraham Alexander, Hezekiah Alexander, John McKnitt Alexander, Ezekiel Polk, Thomas Neal, William Richardson, Hezekiah James Balch, Joseph Alexander, Waitsell (*sic*) Avery, Henry Patilla, and Abner Nash.

Edmund Fanning, first named and evidently intended by the Governor to be chairman, was a notorious political crook and grafter, Tryon's hatchet-man in scrounging various extortions from the people, and the man most despised by the rebellious-minded Regulators, of whom more will be told later.

Fanning earlier had sought to influence the aspirations of the Rev. Joseph Alexander (Mr. Craighead's successor in Sugaw Creek parish), by proposing that a university be founded in Charlotte, not a mere college or academy. The teacher-minister was to be "first professor," and the modest Fanning was to be chancellor.

Tryon may have thought of appointing the Rev. Theodorus Swaine Drage of Salisbury president of Queen's College. He was the nearest of the seven Anglican ministers then located in North Carolina. Fanning would have needed some inducement to serve as chairman of the Trustees and Fellows. He perhaps would have liked to be treasurer, to collect the duties of six pence a gallon on all rum and other spirituous liquors brought into and

sold in Mecklenburg County, for the support of the college, as levied in the Act of 1771.

The Mecklenburgers weren't taking any of Tryon's men or plans for management, so they ignored the Act of Assembly, changed the name of their school to Queen's Museum, and went ahead. Joseph Alexander was one of the teachers. Instruction was to begin just above the grammar grades. Tryon's bill if implemented would have permitted conferring A.B. and A.M. degrees.

The town limits of Charlotte in 1775 included eighty lots, and as our main story begins the population numbered perhaps fewer than one hundred persons. Only one house in the town was painted; most of the rest were of logs. The courthouse was also of logs and stood on pillars or stilts twelve feet above an open marketplace. A porch at the front entrance was approached by a flight of steps from either side.

Nobody knows today the direction in which the courthouse faced, but Kenneth Whitsett, who proposes painting a mural from imagination, suspects it ran southward the long way with Tryon Street at the intersection with Trade; that the porch at the south end looked out toward the adjacent academy building.

Among the amenities of Charlotte in 1775 were two taverns, well-stocked and sociably busy: Nicholson's and Pat Jack's.

On May 24, 1772 William Moultrie wrote in his diary while a Commissioner on the North and South Carolina Boundary Survey:

"Sunday halted from business; some of us took a ride to Charlotte Town in Mecklenburgh County. The town has a tolerable Court-House of wood about 80 by 40 feet, and a Goal [jail], a store, a tavern, and several other houses say 5 or 6, but very ordinary built of logs. From here we went to Cap [Thomas] Polk's about a mile, spent the day agreeable and returned to Camp about 12 miles off."

Mecklenburg County in those days had seven Presbyterian congregations in the scattered communities of Sugaw Creek, Hopewell, Poplar Tent, Rocky River, Providence, Center Church, and Steele Creek. The Sugaw Creek church was in the far outskirts of Charlotte and served the Presbyterians of the county seat. The population of the county in Revolutionary days was about seven thousand, living mostly on plantations.

How FEW they were, but how determined! Young Colonel Banastre Tarleton of His Majesty's British Legion, one of the ablest cavalry raiders in the invading forces, had opportunities to study their manner of resistance while with Lord Cornwallis at the time of the invasion of the Charlotte

"hornets' nest" in September 1780. In 1787 he wrote of the Mecklenburgers in his *History of Campaigns in the Southern Provinces*. (pp. 162-64), as quoted in *The Spirit of "Seventy-Six"* by Commager and Morris (pp. 1138-39). He testified thus:

*"It was evident, and it has been frequently mentioned to the King's officers, that the counties of Mecklenburg and Rohan [Rowan, adjoining] were more hostile to England than any other in America."*

Colonel Tarleton had more to say about the combativeness of the Mecklenburgers. Since there will be no suitable place in any later chapter for his story, and since it is so enlightening in its candor, we'll have it here:

"The town [Charlotte] and environs abounded with inveterate enemies. The plantations in the neighborhood were small and uncultivated, the roads narrow and crossed in every direction, and the whole face of the country covered with close and thick woods. In addition to these disadvantages, no estimation could be made of the sentiments of half the inhabitants of North Carolina, whilst the royal army remained in Charlotte town. . . .

"The vigilance and animosity of these surrounding districts checked the exertions of the well-affected, and totally destroyed all communication between the King's troops and the Loyalists in other parts of the province.

"No British commander could obtain any information in that position which would facilitate his designs or guide his future conduct. Every report concerning the measures of the governor and assembly would undoubtedly be ambiguous; accounts of the preparations of the [Mecklenburg] militia could only be vague and uncertain; and in all intelligence of the real forces and movements of the Continentals must be totally unobtainable.

"The foraging parties were every day harassed by the inhabitants, who did not remain at home to receive payment for the produce of their plantations, but generally fired from covert places to annoy the British detachments. Ineffectual attempts were made upon convoys coming from Camden, and the intermediate post at Blair's mill, but individuals with expresses were frequently murdered.

"An attack was directed at the picket at [Thomas] Polk's mill, two miles from the town. The Americans were gladly received by Lieut. Guyon, of the 23rd Regiment; and the fire of his party from a loop-holed building adjoining the mill repulsed the assailants.

"Notwithstanding the different checks and losses sustained by the militia of the district, they continued their hostilities with unwearied perseverance; and the British troops were so effectively blockaded in their present position that very few, out of a great number of messengers, could reach Charlotte town in the beginning of October, to give intelligence of Ferguson's situation."

Colonel Ferguson's situation was very grave and Cornwallis as we observe was unable to help him. Colonels Isaac Shelby, Charles McDowell, John Sevier, Benjamin Cleveland, and William Campbell, sometimes referred to as Presbyterian elders, surrounded and stormed his position on King's Mountain, southwest of Charlotte on the South Carolina line, on October 7, 1780. Colonel Ferguson was killed on the rocky ridge, after declaring his defiance of "God Almighty and all the rebels out of Hell" to overcome him. His Tories lost four hundred killed and wounded; seven hundred others were captured. Patriot casualties numbered eighty-eight. Lord Cornwallis left Charlotte very soon, in a hurry.

Such were the men of Mecklenburg and their neighbors, the story of whose independence movement we are about to pick up in the next chapter.