

## 2. News from Massachusetts



JOHN MCKNITT ALEXANDER was forty-two in 1775. He was described in letters of contemporaries as dignified in bearing and "scrupulously accurate" in remembering and recording events. He probably was an intense, conscientious man who took life seriously: a typical Presbyterian elder of his day. He lived ten miles north of Charlotte in Hopewell parish, on a large plantation he had earned as a surveyor. His estate was called Alexandriana.

A Southern Presbyterian elder was not invariably austere with no taste for the enjoyments of life. According to LeGette Blythe in his novel *Alexandriana*, a work showing industrious research in the mores of old Mecklenburg, Alexander was a hospitable man who liked to have his friends about him, and to serve them with such potent drinks as corn liquor and apple brandy, distilled on his own premises. The corn juice was hot enough to strangle an unwarned guest.

Near his house and heavily shaded in warm weather was a spring, where Alexander welcomed fellow conspirators who wished to talk about British oppressions. Likely enough, if a session lasted long, wife Jeanie would send out refreshments by a Negro maid.

"Freedom's Shrine Fading Into Time" declared a headline over a feature article by Kays Gary in the *Charlotte Observer* of May 17, 1954. The story related that the cool spot where Alexander gathered his patriot friends to discuss stirring events in and around Boston in 1775 was becoming inaccessible in 1954 because of the growth of brush.

"Freedom Spring" is the name of the spot. It is near the boundary between the properties of the S. W. Davis and H. H. Cashion families. The Cashions have been recent owners of the Alexander plantation, or part of it.

According to traditions gathered into the *Observer's* feature story, John McKnitt Alexander and men of his kin, Dr. Ephraim Brevard, Waightstill Avery, the Rev. Hezekiah James Balch, the Rev. Thomas Reese, and others living nearer, were apt to gather at the spring on warm days and consider the alarming state of affairs. They worried over reports that Boston was short of food in consequence of English occupation, and talked of plans to

send a hundred beef cattle. They hadn't liked the Boston Massacre, or the closing of the port. The story of the Tea Party had interested them. Mostly they talked of independence. We'd imagine there would be logs near the spring, for seats.

Missing from the later Freedom Spring conferences was the aging Rev. Alexander Craighead of Sugaw Creek parish, early spiritual leader in the Mecklenburg independence movement, who did not live to witness the events of 1775. Mr. Craighead was one of the militant Presbyterian ministers of the colonial period: men still revered for their leadership in religion, education, and the crusade for liberty.

Eventually it was decided at one of the gatherings to hold a county convention, and to ask Colonel Polk to have two delegates selected from each of the Mecklenburg militia companies. These men and a few others, bringing a total of twenty-six, were to convene in the log courthouse.

Skeptics have tended to regard Alexander and his associates in the independence movement as impetuous and irresponsible backwoodsmen. It improves understanding to recall that of the twenty-six delegates known to have attended the Charlotte convention, nine were ruling elders of Presbyterian churches, and one was a minister — a graduate of Princeton with Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees — who served on the resolutions committee. (*Sketches of North Carolina*, Chapter I, by the Rev. William H. Foote, published in New York in 1846.)

One of the ideas which readers may come to entertain is that the Mecklenburg Declaration was partly the work of two young graduates of Princeton. The College of New Jersey, as it was called when founded by Presbyterian ministers and elders, was not known as Princeton University in Revolutionary times, but it will serve our purpose to refer to it here as Princeton. Information about the two, and a third who was active with them, has been supplied by Anne G. Vandewater, writing from the office of the secretary of the University:

"Waightstill Avery, Class of 1766, the son of Humphrey and Jerusha (Morgan) Avery [of Norwich, Connecticut], was prepared for Princeton by the Rev. Samuel Seabury in Connecticut. At Princeton he took first honors and was the Latin Salutatorian. He roomed with Oliver Ellsworth, afterwards Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

"Hezekiah James Balch, also of the Class of 1766, was one of the founders of the Cliosophic Society, one of the two debating societies in Princeton. He received an A.M. degree from Princeton in 1774.

"Ephraim Brevard graduated from Princeton in 1768, but we have no record of his undergraduate activities." Thomas Reese, a fourth in the group, also was graduated in 1768.

Ephraim, one of the eight sons of John, Jr., and Jane McWhorter Brevard, was born in Maryland in 1744. His father's parents were John and Katherine McKnitt Brevard. Katherine was a sister of Margaret McKnitt, who married James Alexander and became the mother of John McKnitt Alexander. The father of Katherine and Margaret was John McKnitt, who arrived on the Eastern Shore from the Laggan in Ulster in 1684. Ephraim's parents removed to North Carolina in 1746 or 1748, and when the boy was old enough they sent him to study in small private schools in Virginia in preparation for Princeton. After his graduation from college in 1768 he taught school for a while in the old home neighborhood in Maryland while he studied medicine with Dr. Ramsey. Next he removed to Charlotte, North Carolina, to begin practice as a physician. He married Colonel Thomas Polk's daughter Margaret, who died early. The Alexanders and McKnits in Ulster had welcomed as friends the Brevard family, Huguenot refugees from France. Adlai Stevenson of Illinois is a descendant of Ephraim's brother Hugh.

Thomas Reese, fourth in the group of Princeton alumni in the Mecklenburg independence movement, was a son of David Reese, one of the delegates to the Charlotte convention of May 19-20, 1775, and Susan Ruth Polk Reese. Mrs. Natalie S. Adams of the secretary's office at Princeton University has supplied this further information:

"Thomas Reese, born in Pennsylvania in 1742, was prepared for Princeton by Joseph Alexander and Mr. Benedict at an academy in Mecklenburg, North Carolina. After graduation from Princeton in 1768, he taught in an academy at Back Creek, Somerset County, Maryland (about 1770). Following this, he studied theology in South Carolina. In 1773 he was licensed and ordained by the Orange Presbytery." Except for a few years in Mecklenburg County during the early period of the Revolution, where his family lived, and where in 1773 he married Jane Harris, daughter of Robert Harris, he spent most of the rest of his years as pastor of the Salem Presbyterian church in South Carolina. He was awarded the degree of Doctor of Divinity, *honoris causa*, by Princeton in 1794.

This classmate and close friend of Ephraim Brevard was active in indignation meetings in Mecklenburg County before May 1775, and wrote papers so influential in rousing public opinion that they were remembered as late as 1830.

Waightstill Avery, who began practicing law in Charlotte in 1769, and Hezekiah James Balch, who became a Presbyterian minister in the neighborhood, were earnest advocates of the causes of the mainly Ulster-Scottish community. Mecklenburgers had various grievances against the Crown government.

ONE SUCH GRIEVANCE was the set of laws which imposed fines of £5 upon Presbyterian ministers if they performed marriage ceremonies, and required every taxpayer regardless of religious affiliation to pay ten shillings a year to support the Establishment regardless of whether there was an Anglican church in the county or not. Another grievance was the general corruption in the administration of laws and the collection of fees in the province. The well-to-do English planters of the Tidewater region had all the advantages, and the men on the frontiers had most of the discontents.

The basis for the dissatisfaction with royal rule in North Carolina is set forth by Morison and Commager in their *Growth of the American Republic*. In reading the quotation from their work that follows, attention should be given the hangings after the 1770 uprising, that not only created resentment but also foreshadowed the kind of treatment that might await any further rebellious acts:

"In the decade of the 1760s the grievances of the frontiersmen became intolerable; and repeated petitions to the government for redress proved futile. One from Anson County enumerated particular causes for discontent, including disproportionate taxes, venal lawyers and judges, lack of paper money, quit-rents, abuse of land laws, and religious intolerance. . . . The discontent culminated in the organization of the so-called Regulator associations in 1768. Two years later, violence broke out all along the frontier, and Governor Tryon called out the militia and marched into the back country. . . . The result was the total defeat of the Regulators at the battle of Alamance in May, 1771. Some of the leaders were hanged for rebellion." The men who died by strangulation numbered six.

Thus Morison and Commager point out some of the circumstances that eventually impelled the adoption of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, and the reader may infer the risks of hanging taken by its authors.

Waightstill Avery wrote for the Mecklenburgers in 1769 or soon afterward a petition to Governor William Tryon, the Governor's Council, and the House of Burgesses, asking for the repeal of the Vestry and Marriage Acts. (*North Carolina University Magazine*, August 1855.) After the preamble the petition continues with spirit:

"We would inform that there are about one thousand freemen of us, who hold to the established church of Scotland able to bear arms, within the county of Mecklenburg." After declarations of loyalty to government and courts the petition goes on:

"We think it as reasonable that those who hold to the Episcopal church should pay their clergy without our assistance as that we, who hold to the church of Scotland, should pay our clergy without their assistance. We

now support two settled Presbyterian ministers in this Parish; we, therefore, think it a grievance, that the present law makes us liable to be still further burthened with taxes to support an Episcopal clergyman: especially as not one-twentieth part of the inhabitants are of that profession. We think that were there an Episcopal clergyman in this Parish, his labours would be useless. . . .

"We conceive ourselves highly injured and agrieved by the marriage act, the preamble whereof scandalizes the Presbyterian clergy, and wrongfully charges them with celebrating the rites of marriage without license or publication of banns. We think it a grievance, that this act imposes heavy penalties on our clergy, for marrying after publication of banns by them made, in their own religious assemblies, where the parties are best known.

"We declare that the marriage act obstructs the natural and inalienable right of marriage and tends to introduce immorality. We declare it subjects many to various inconveniences, one whereof is going into South Carolina to have the ceremony performed. . . ."

Mark the words "natural and inalienable right."

Evidently in answer to the above or similar Presbyterian complaints, the Rev. Theodorus Swaine Drage of St. Luke's parish, Salisbury, wrote a letter dated February 22, 1771, to the secretary of the Provincial Assembly. (*Colonial Records of North Carolina*, Volume eight, pages 502-06). Mr. Drage had troubles enough: besides his home field he worked a territory 120 by 180 miles for the Establishment; among 7,000 souls he had set up forty congregations.

He had vestry troubles. Vestrymen had to be elected by freeholders, and since the "Irish Dissenters" made up the majority of property owners, they nominated and elected men of their own kind, who refused to qualify. This did not seem funny to Mr. Drage.

The minister pointed out in his letter that he would be within his legal rights in having the Dissenting (Presbyterian) ministers fined £5 for each marriage service they performed, but he feared that would subject him to "a peculiar insult."

ON THE DAY set for the Mecklenburg convention in Charlotte — May 19, 1775 — an express rider brought the first news of the engagements at Lexington and Concord exactly one month before. Dr. Henderson produced conclusive evidence of this in his 1916 pamphlet, *The Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence: Revolution in North Carolina in 1775*. The air was full of excitement as the convention opened in the evening, with Abraham Alexander as chairman and John McKnitt Alexander as clerk. A resolutions committee of three men was appointed. It is accepted that the three were

Dr. Ephraim Brevard, then aged thirty-one, the Rev. Hezekiah James Balch, a tall, handsome young man of twenty-seven, and William Kennon, a lawyer from Salisbury, forty miles distant: county seat of Rowan County. A native of Virginia, Kennon had been a distinguished lawyer there before coming to Salisbury.

The resolutions offered by the committee and adopted by the convention, that came to be known as the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, presently will appear in the record of the secretary, now to be examined.

The minute book kept by John McKnitt Alexander, containing the record of the convention of May 19-20, 1775, was burned in April, 1800. Many who dispute the authenticity of the Declaration always have insisted that when the minute book was burned, every paper and record was destroyed with it. This happens to be untrue. Other papers bearing on the subject, including a good copy of the May 20 Declaration, escaped the fire and now may be seen among the papers of the Southern Historical Collection in the library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The late Dr. James R. Alexander told many, including Kenneth W. Whitsett of Charlotte, collector of historical data, that McKnitt Alexander kept the minute book in his house at Alexandriana; that he had an office in a nearby building where he kept various important papers.

The house was wholly or partly burned in April, 1800, and the minute book was destroyed. Two important papers were not burned; they survive at Chapel Hill, and are reproduced in this book. We are not wholly sure where the papers were at the time of the fire, whether in the outside office or in an undamaged room in the mansion house. What matters is that we have them available for examination now.