

### 3. Two Important Documents



CLOSE attention is now invited to two of the Mecklenburg documents that have generally failed in the past to command adequate attention. These two papers were found in or before 1819 by Dr. Joseph McKnitt Alexander in his father's old home at Alexandriana. The son had been asked to produce proof of the adoption of the Mecklenburg Declaration on May 20, 1775, and to provide the text of it, after the publication of William Wirt's biography of Patrick Henry had started an inquiry as to which of three original States was most entitled to credit for setting the Revolution in motion: Virginia, Massachusetts, or North Carolina.

Dr. Joseph McKnitt Alexander found the two documents among his father's old surveying papers and some pamphlets of the Revolutionary period. Details of collateral evidence indicate the two papers had been written before 1800. They were stitched together.

We shall refer to them as Document A, containing rough notes made by John McKnitt Alexander between 1775 and 1800, and Document B, which was an undated copy of Alexander's historical narrative of the independence movement and the text of the five resolutions of the May 20 Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence.

Document B will be described first because of its greater significance and interest. Alexander obviously used Document B when he wrote a new certified copy for William Richardson Davie dated September 3, 1800, several months after a fire in his house had destroyed his old minute book. The Davie Copy we shall call Document C.

Disbelievers in the original Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence have based their skepticism on the fact that the minute book was burned in April, 1800, and their unwillingness to recognize any value in Document B as the paper from which the Davie Copy was transcribed.

Disregarding the genuineness of Document B, they have accepted a conclusion reached by Professor Charles Phillips in 1853 that the Davie Copy (Document C) was made up from the memory of John McKnitt Alexander, and therefore have regarded it as fraudulent.

Document B, quite clearly the working copy kept and used for years by

John McKnitt Alexander, and after the burning of the minute book in 1800 his master copy, has since 1830 been known as "the copy in unknown handwriting." A great deal of time has been given by this writer to efforts to determine the identity of the man who made it, with inconclusive results.

Document B possibly may have been written by William Polk, son of Colonel Thomas Polk, who organized the election of delegates to the convention of May 19-20, 1775. The assertion of possibility is based upon a minute study of William's known handwriting in 1819, compared with the handwriting in the working copy made about 1794.

Determination of the authenticity of the First Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence of May 20, 1775, does not require identification of the man who transcribed the working copy from the minute book, later burned. It would be edifying, however, to know that William Polk was the man, for he alone had a motive for making copies of the old record, in order that he might correct what he regarded as an error at his father's expense.

William Polk made several copies of the old record, at different times. No other man except McKnitt Alexander and his son is known to have made even one copy.

WILLIAM POLK WAS PRESENT when the Mecklenburg Declaration was adopted on the night of May 19-20, 1775, and he also was on hand when his father read the paper aloud to a throng around the courthouse at noon on the twentieth. Born July 9, 1758, he was not quite seventeen at the time.

Boys became men early in those days. Colonel John H. Wheeler, a most useful and untiring researcher in biography, relates in his *Reminiscences and Memoirs of North Carolina* (Columbus, O., 1884) that William Polk in applying many years later for a pension, stated that he entered service in April, 1775, as Second Lieutenant of a company commanded by his uncle, Captain Ezekiel Polk. This company was in the Third Regiment of South Carolina Mounted Infantry.

William therefore was a commissioned officer when a few weeks later he attended the Charlotte convention of May 19-20, 1775, as an onlooker. He gave up his uncle's company soon after to enter service with his father, Colonel Thomas Polk, "in an expedition against the Scovilite Tories in the autumn of 1775"; "he was with Nash at Germantown in 1777, and with [General William Lee] Davidson when he fell at the Catawba in February, 1781, and with General Greene at Eutaw in September, 1781. He was severely wounded at the latter place, the effects of which he carried to his grave. He held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the army when the Revolution closed."

Subsequently he returned to Charlotte, and represented Mecklenburg County in the North Carolina Assembly in 1787, 1790, and 1791. At some

later time he removed to Raleigh, where he lived for a number of years and became president of a bank. One of Polk's letters in the Emmet Collection indicates he was living in Raleigh in 1819. He died in 1834.

Document B, the copy of John McKnitt Alexander's record of the adoption of the May 20, 1775 Declaration of Independence, was written after Cabarrus County was formed from Mecklenburg in 1792. We are saying tentatively that it was written in 1794. McKnitt Alexander evidently liked to keep his historical narrative up to date, as shown by his reference in it to the new county of Cabarrus.

The Polks were energetic, able, and responsible men. Robert Polk removed from Northern Ireland to Somerset County, Maryland, in 1735; in 1750 he came to what was later named Mecklenburg County. Two of his sons were Thomas, who became a surveyor, merchant, mill-owner, Colonel of the Mecklenburg Militia regiment, and one of the heroes of the region, and Ezekiel Polk, a good soldier and grandfather of James K. Polk.

When in 1831 Governor Stokes and the Legislature of North Carolina issued a State pamphlet offering evidence of the genuineness of the Mecklenburg Declaration of May 20, 1775, one of the chief affirmative witnesses was William Polk. In his Preface Governor Stokes said of his contributions and his reliability:

"Colonel William Polk is a resident of this city [Raleigh], a venerable remnant of the Revolutionary stock, has passed the common boundary of human life, and in a green old age [seventy-three], is in full possession of his faculties. His compatriots, Caswell, and Hooper, and Hewes are dead, but he lives, was present, heard his father proclaim the Declaration to the assembled multitude; and need it be inquired, in any portion of this Union, if *he* will be believed?"

William Polk's intent interest in Alexander's historical narrative is shown by what Alexander was to write of him in the final paragraph of the Davie Copy in 1800: ". . . A full copy of said records, at the request of Dr. Hugh Williamson, then of New York: but formerly a representative in Congress from this State, was forwarded to him by Colo. William Polk. . . ."

The year in which William sent this copy to the historian Williamson is believed to have been 1787; he may have done the copying himself by agreement with McKnitt Alexander. He made other copies later: two in 1819, one for William Davidson, and one which he sent in August of that year to Judge A. D. Murphey of Haw River. William was interested in making sure that his father, Colonel Thomas Polk, received credit for summoning the convention of May 19-20, 1775.

Dr. Joseph Alexander, son of John McKnitt Alexander, obtained and prepared in 1830 a number of letters and documents supporting the integrity

of the May 20 Declaration of Independence, for publication in the State pamphlet of 1831. He referred to the old working copy as in "an unknown handwrite." Since he knew William Polk, how could he have been in doubt had the handwriting been William's?

The readiest answer is that by 1830 William Polk had been living for years in Raleigh, and no specimen of his contemporary script may then have been available to Dr. Alexander.

The reader may do his own examining and comparing of William's handwriting in 1819, with copies from the Emmet Collection in the New York Public Library to study, beside reproductions of Document B in the colotype section. These similarities may be pointed out:

1. The same distinctive slant of the script in both the 1794 and 1819 examples, and the height and depth of ascending and descending letters like p, f, l, and t.
2. Continued liking for a capital C with a little interior curl at the bottom.
3. Persisting similarities in writing various capitals: M, H, A, T, B, and especially P, as in Polk.
4. An individualistic way of crossing the letter t with a long light stroke.

The most striking single illustration of lasting style is found in the middle of the first page of Document B: the bold manner of writing "Thos. Polk" over the name of Adam Alexander. William stuck to his way of writing his own family name, as may be seen in the 1819 specimens showing the capital P.

Any man's handwriting will change a little in twenty-five years. In 1819 William Polk's handwriting was slightly florid as to some of his capital letters. He had alternate ways of writing capital C. His writing style was looser, not so compact and careful as the script in the 1794 working copy. He was sixty-one in 1819, and thirty-six in 1794.

Whether or not William Polk wrote the working copy (Document B) in or about 1794, we know that he at least saw it, and didn't like it because he found on the first of the four pages the name of Adam Alexander where he thought the name Thomas Polk belonged. A correction was made in William's handwriting: his father's name was written over that of Adam Alexander. The reader may find the place very easily.

Close examination of the corresponding passage in the Davie Copy of 1800 shows Adam Alexander was again given credit, and again Adam's name was scratched out and replaced by the name of Thomas Polk. The confusion in McKnitt Alexander's mind may have been due to the fact that Adam, in 1775 Lieutenant Colonel under Thomas Polk, the full Colonel and commander of the regiment, may have been proposed by his own kin and friends as the appropriate man to summon the convention.

At any rate, Colonel Thomas Polk got the job, perhaps by some means McKnitt Alexander didn't like, as Adam Alexander's name was kept in the permanent record until William Polk substituted his father's name. The Alexanders were more numerous, but Tom Polk was popular and accustomed to having his way. Such incidents show we are dealing with real men, with blemishes, and not with picture-book saints. Susan Polk no doubt was as proud of her husband and son as McKnitt Alexander's great-great-granddaughters are proud of *him* today.

Introduction of General Davie brings still another Princeton man into the story. Reared in the home of his mother's brother, William Richardson, a Presbyterian minister, he took first honors in graduating from Princeton with the class of 1776. He was a brilliant officer in the Revolution and afterward was conspicuous in public life. Chief among the founders of the University of North Carolina, he was the first to be awarded an honorary degree. Dispatched in 1799 on a mission to France for the national government, he returned in 1800 and received the copy of the Mecklenburg Declaration record that has helped to perpetuate his name and fame.

THE SECOND OF THE DOCUMENTS the son found among McKnitt Alexander's old papers, was a leaf, or half of a foolscap sheet, torn at the margins, containing rough notes the senior Alexander had written for his own use at some time in the past. These rough notes contained only a brief summary of the May 20 Declaration, sufficient to show the purport, but lacking the text more carefully preserved in complete copies. We have come to Document A.

The rough notes are dealt with severely in a book written by William Henry Hoyt and published by Putnams in 1907, entitled *The Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence*. The author, a recent graduate of Fordham College, was a young man of about twenty-two or twenty-three when he wrote his treatise as part of his work as a candidate for a Master of Arts degree at the University of Vermont.

Reference is made to his youth that mention may be made of the scholarly quality of his workmanship: equal in merit to that of a much older historian. In a very shrewd analysis, Mr. Hoyt declared in his monograph that the brief summary of the five resolutions of independence found in the rough notes comprised *all* of the Mecklenburg Declaration of which McKnitt Alexander had made a record at the time; that Alexander subsequently padded out the bald summary with what he could recall of the May 31 resolves, furnished with bright gleanings from Jefferson's Declaration.

This assumption seems based upon the 1853 magazine article, later to be given our close attention — an article that impressed Mr. Hoyt deeply.

The theory is in conflict with the evidence supplied by documents. In order to permit examination of Mr. Hoyt's charge, it is advisable to examine the five numbered paragraphs appearing in the rough notes, which are not at all in the form of resolutions, but rather in the manner of condensed narrative. McKnitt Alexander was indifferent to spelling and grammar when at some time before 1800 he wrote the following summary of the May 20 resolves:

"1<sup>st</sup>. We (the County) by a *solemn* and *awfull* vote, Dissolved (abjured) our allegiance to King George and the British Nation.

"2<sup>d</sup>. Declared ourselves a free & independent people, having a *right* and *capable* to govern ourselves (as a part of North Carolina).

"3<sup>d</sup>. In order to have laws as a rule of life for our future Government we formed a Code of laws; by adopting our former wholesome laws.

"4<sup>th</sup>. And as there was then no officers Civil or Military in our County we Decreed that every Millitia officer in s<sup>d</sup>. County should hold and occupy his former commission and grade. And that every member present of this Committee shall henceforth [act] as a Justice of the peace, in the character of a Committee Man [to] hear and determine all controversies agreeable to s<sup>d</sup>. laws [margin torn] peace, union & harmony in s<sup>d</sup>. County — and to use every [margin torn] spread the Electrial fire of freedom among ourselves & [margin torn, words missing].

"5<sup>th</sup>. &c &c Many other laws and ordinances were then ma[de]."

What obviously happened in the long session of the convention that lasted until 2 a.m. of Saturday, May 20, judging from various written accounts, was a debate that continued while Dr. Brevard's resolutions committee finished its work in nearby Queen's Museum; then the brief Declaration of Independence was unanimously adopted, a scheme of temporary government for the county was blocked out, and a Committee of Safety was chosen from those present. The Declaration was read from the courthouse steps at noon Saturday by Colonel Thomas Polk, and the Committee of Safety was given a few days to put into writing the plan of government decided upon in the convention. The committee of which Dr. Brevard was clerk adopted on May 31 the twenty resolutions of the supplemental Second Declaration of Independence.

McKnitt Alexander's recital of Revolutionary events in the rough notes ends thus: "... & foregoing extracted from the old minutes &c." Then his signature: "By J. McK. Alexander." Below this he drew two parallel lines across the page, and wrote — at the same or some later time — an account of the state of public feeling in Mecklenburg County prior to the convention

of May 19-20. It appears that the occupation of Boston by British troops had stirred the feelings of the county, and that the indignant Ulster Scots were intent upon helping out their friends in Massachusetts as they could.

In the closing paragraph from the rough notes that follows, it is apparent that McKnitt Alexander was still indignant, and his indignation tends to prove the sincerity of the like-minded men whose meetings and resolutions he recorded:

“Such were [the] sympathetick sensations of the Mecklenburgers, when they knew their brethren of Boston were besieged by General Gage & in a state of *Starvation*, that in each Capt<sup>n</sup>. Militia company a subscription was signed for their relief — many subscribed one Bullock — other 2 joined for one Bullock — and none was suffered to sign but what the officers and leading men admitted, for whom they were responsible &c. And had there then been a plan of government for their driving to Boston, 100 would [have] been given in the county in one week — the next news we heard — Boston had got relief — We were thanked for our *goodwill*. And soon afterward We *smelt* and *felt the Blood* & carnage of Lexington, which raised all the passions into *fury* and *revenge*, which was the immediate cause of abjuring Great Britain on May 19, 1775 as before related.”

Beneath this there appears the line: “April 19, 1775, was the battle of Lexington.” The lower left-hand corner of the page is torn off at this point, and with it may have been a date: perhaps the date when the final paragraph was written. Inside a bracket at the right of the torn edge appears the complete figure 9, with part of what may have been an 8 or a 9 before it. It may be conjectured that McKnitt Alexander made his last entry in the rough notes in 1789 or in 1799. If this conjecture were to be entertained, it might follow that the early record ending with the signature had been written several years before.

WHEN in 1819 Dr. Joseph McKnitt Alexander set about preparing a full text of the Declaration record for publication in the *Raleigh Register* of April 30, he used his father's working copy (Document B).

Why didn't he use the Davie Copy? Because the paper, held in the Davie home in South Carolina, did not become available until more than a year later, following the death of General Davie in 1820. Then it was found that the top of the first leaf had been unwittingly torn off by one of the General's daughters. Dr. Alexander observed on comparing that the copy in unidentified handwriting was virtually identical, to the end of the Declaration record, with the undamaged part of the Davie Copy. It must be remembered that the copy published in 1819 did not contain McKnitt Alexander's final paragraph in the Davie Copy in which he stated that his account of the

activities of the Court of Inquiry might not be literally correct, simply because it did not appear in the older copy that was published.

To have made simpler the work of investigators of this century, McKnitt Alexander should have left fair, clean copies, and placed them where children could not get at them to tear them. Hostile critics have had much sport with his revised and interlined copies.

SINCE DOCUMENT B is likely the most nearly accurate *complete* account of the proceedings in Charlotte on May 19-20, 1775 now remaining, it is worth very close study. From this record Dr. Joseph McKnitt Alexander prepared his draft for publication in the *Raleigh Register* of April 30, 1819. Comparison shows he made a few changes in copying, introduced the word *Resolved* at the beginning of each of the five resolutions, followed by the word *That* when needed, and omitted two sentences. None of these things changed the sense of the document.

While scanning the text of the convention record presently to follow, the reader is to remember that the *Register* article appeared with these changes. Since the text as printed in the *Register* came into standard use and reference thereafter, one must turn to Document B. to discover the record as it presumptively appeared in the original form. The newspaper article is the same textually as the original record to be found in the next chapter, except that Dr. Alexander made the following changes while editing:

1. In the first resolution of the Declaration, he made Great Britain appear as an enemy to this *country*, instead of this *county*.
2. In the second resolution, the word “innocent” is omitted from the sentence ending: “and inhumanly shed the innocent blood of patriots at Lexington.” (William Polk's copy of this article published in the *Register*, made for Judge Murphey, contains the word “innocent,” which indicates the word was lost in the *Register's* composing room; that Dr. Joseph Alexander apparently didn't delete it. Perhaps the printers accidentally did some of the other editing.)
3. In the third resolution, he omitted the words “civil and religious” from this passage: “to the maintainence of which independence, *civil & religious*, we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual co-operation, our lives, our fortunes, & our most sacred honor.” The overlooked words never got back into any later copies or reprintings of the Mecklenburg Declaration.
4. In the fifth resolution, each military officer is reinstated *to* his former command, instead of *in* his former command, as originally written.
5. The last sentence in the fifth resolution is omitted in the newspaper article: “A selection from the members present shall constitute a Committee of public safety for said county.”

6. In the paragraph following the fifth and last resolution, the word "up" is omitted from the second sentence, beginning: "After sitting *up* in the Court house all night. . . ." Also, the letters "A. M." are inserted to mark the time when the convention adopted its resolutions: "about 2 o'clock *A. M.*, May 20."

7. The final sentence of the document is omitted in the newspaper article: "Booth & Dunn (lawyers) were brot from Salisbury, tryed, convicted, proscribed & banished &c. &c." (This sentence *does* appear in William Polk's copy made for Judge Murphey, which indicates another omission in the composing room, or by design in proof-reading, after the text left Dr. Joseph Alexander's hands.)

ANTICIPATING INQUIRIES as to the propriety of changes in Document B made by Dr. Joseph Alexander in editing the copy for publication in the *Raleigh Register* of April 30, 1819, it may be said that it would have been proper to present the document exactly as originally found. Dr. Alexander's changes may have been due partly to oversight in copying and partly to an unjustified desire to make the copy shipshape. Also the printers made their own errors.

His mistake (if any) cannot possibly be compared with the acts of critics who later offered purported copies of McKnitt Alexander's record that totally reversed his meaning. Dr. Alexander sought to clarify rather than to deceive. The alterations did not change the sense of the document. The original text is restored in the Declaration record to appear in the next chapter.

## 4. Alexander's Story of Declarations



INFORMED now of the general background, the quality of the earnest young alumni from Princeton who animated the independence movement in Charlotte, and the primary documents that provide our foundations of fact, we come finally to the heart of the matter: John McKnitt Alexander's record of the flaring of spirit after the arrival of news of the "attact at Lexington." This is the basic material upon which the controversy has been built.

The text of the record of the May 19-20 convention and of the First Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, as preserved in the working copy, follows:

"No. CAROLINA, Mecklenburg County. Declaration of Independence May 20, 1775.

"In the spring of 1775 the leading characters in Mecklenburg County, stimulated by that enthusiastic patriotism which elevates the mind above considerations of individual agrandisement & scorning to shelter themselves from the impending storm by submission to lawless power, &c, &c. held several detached meetings in each of which the individual sentiments were 'that the cause of Boston was the cause of all; that their destinies were indissolubly connected with those of their Eastern fellow-citizens — & that they must either submit to all the impositions which an unprincipled & to them unrepresented parliament might impose — or support their brethren who were doomed to sustain the first shock of that power, which if successful there — would ultimately overwhelm all in the common calamity.'

"Conformably to these principles Col. Thos. Polk thro solicitation issued an order to each Captain's company in the County of Mecklenburgh (then comprising the present County of Cabarrus) directing each militia company to elect 2 persons & delegate to them ample powers to devise ways & means to aid & assist their suffering brethren in Boston, & also generally to adopt measures to extricate themselves from the impending storm & to secure unimpaired their inalienable rights, privileges, & liberties from the dominant grasp of British imposition & tyranny.