

8. Later Years of McKnitt Alexander



AS FOR McKnitt Alexander's further activities after the excited convention night in the log courthouse, he represented Mecklenburg County in the Provincial Congress of North Carolina in the August and September session of 1775. Then according to Dr. Lyman C. Draper, who took much of his biographical information from Col. John H. Wheeler, he went to Philadelphia, visited Dr. Franklin, and told him about the Mecklenburg Declaration. On April 4, 1776, he was present as a delegate at another session of the Provincial Congress held in Halifax, along with Waightstill Avery, John Phifer, and Robert Irwin. On April 12 a committee brought in a resolution which was adopted unanimously: the first legislative recommendation from any Colony that Congress declare independence. Virginia followed on May 15. The dates May 20, 1775, and April 12, 1776 long have been on the State flag of North Carolina.

When the Revolution came, General Davidson established an encampment near Charlotte and named it Camp McKnitt Alexander. When General Nathaniel Greene was scurrying around in 1781 to head off raids by Lord Cornwallis's soldiers in efforts to recover British prisoners taken at Cowpens, McKnitt Alexander used his knowledge gained as a surveyor to guide parties sent to destroy ferryboats on the Yadkin and Dan Rivers. In addition to these details, Dr. Draper relates that in 1777 Alexander was elected a trustee of Liberty Hall Academy, known as Queen's Museum before the war.

After the Revolution McKnitt Alexander made copies of his accounts of the May 19-20 convention and of activities of a Court of Inquiry for various persons. In 1787 he supplied a copy for Dr. Hugh Williamson, who proposed to use it in writing a history of North Carolina. When the history finally appeared, it oddly stopped short with the year 1774. Governor Stokes of North Carolina testified in 1831 he had seen McKnitt Alexander's copy in Dr. Williamson's possession. Unfortunately this copy was lost.

John McKnitt Alexander died on July 10, 1817 at the age of eighty-four.

He could not have guessed that within two years the integrity of the Declaration would be challenged by Thomas Jefferson.

The real character and reputation of John McKnitt Alexander seem to have missed the attention of his critics. Born in 1733, he was apprenticed to a tailor in youth, and was about twenty-one when his family removed from Maryland to the vicinity of Charlotte. He became a surveyor, was very active in the new county, and was rewarded with large tracts of land north of Charlotte in the Hopewell community, running to 10,000 acres. In 1759 he married Jean Bain of an Ulster-Scottish family from Pennsylvania. He built a large house on his home plantation of about 1500 acres and named the place Alexandriana. He became a man of substantial influence, an elder in the Hopewell Presbyterian Church, and treasurer of the Synod of North and South Carolina.

In politics he was later a Federalist, at a time when the Federalists in North Carolina advocated progress and higher education. The early Democrats of the time feared the educated would get the upper hand. He was described in 1813 in a letter written by a neighbor, D. G. Stinson, as a man of medium stature, dark in coloring, with "a good, intelligent face." He was "dignified, sensible, and neat and tidy in dress." Israel Pickens said of him in a letter to General William Lenoir dated March 23, 1823, that he was "proverbial for his scrupulous accuracy in recollecting and detailing events." (Both letters are among the Mecklenburg papers in Chapel Hill.) He had two sons, William Bain and Joseph McKnitt Alexander. The latter was educated at Princeton. Two daughters married Presbyterian ministers: the Rev. Samuel C. Caldwell, who conducted Sugar Creek Academy, and the Rev. James Wallis, head of a school at Providence settlement. A third daughter married Colonel Francis A. Ramsey. McKnitt Alexander was never doubted in his lifetime by patriot neighbors. Colonel John H. Wheeler wrote of him that he was "enterprising, shrewd, and honorable."