

## 9. John Adams Begins the Controversy



EARLIER we have observed that Dr. Joseph McKnitt Alexander discovered at his late father's place a copy of the Mecklenburg Declaration record in unidentified handwriting, and made a draft for publication in the *Raleigh Register* of April 30, 1819. To this he added a brief statement, certifying that the text was a true copy; that a copy had been supplied to Hugh Williamson (in 1787), and that another copy had been sent to General William R. Davie (in 1800). He signed the statement "J. McKnitt," which was the form of signature he commonly used. He had dropped the surname Alexander because so many of the name lived in the vicinity of Charlotte that it seemed convenient to avoid confusion by using his middle name: that of his great-grandfather John McKnitt of Maryland.

All of the text provided by Dr. Alexander was reprinted in many newspapers, among them the *Essex Register* of Salem, Massachusetts. John Adams saw the text of the First Mecklenburg Declaration, and sent a copy of the paper to Jefferson with a letter not calculated to give pleasure. This letter may be found in Volume X of Adams' *Works*:

"Quincy, 22 June, 1819.

"May I inclose you one of the greatest curiosities and one of the deepest mysteries that ever occurred to me? It is in the *Essex Register* of June 5, 1819. It is entitled the *Raleigh Register Declaration of Independence*. How is it possible that this paper should have been concealed from me to this day? Had it been communicated to me in the time of it, I know, if you do not know, that it would have been printed in every whig newspaper upon this continent. You know, that if I had possessed it, I would have made the hall of Congress echo and reëcho with it fifteen months before your Declaration of Independence. What a poor, ignorant, malicious, short-sighted, crapulous mass is Tom Paine's 'Common Sense,' in comparison with this paper! Had I known it, I would have commented upon it, from the day you entered Congress till the fourth of July, 1776. The genuine sense of America at that moment was never expressed so well before, nor since. Richard Caswell,

William Hooper, and Joseph Hewes, the then representatives of North Carolina in Congress, you knew as well as I, and you know that the unanimity of the States finally depended on the vote of Joseph Hewes, and was finally determined by him. And yet history is to ascribe the American Revolution to Thomas Paine! *Sat verbum sapienti.*"

Without waiting for Jefferson's reply, Adams wrote on July 15 to the Rev. William Bentley of Salem, Massachusetts: ". . . I was struck with so much astonishment on reading this document, that I could not help inclosing it immediately to Mr. Jefferson, who must have seen it, in the time of it, for he has copied the spirit, the sense, and the expressions of it *verbatim*, into his Declaration of the 4th of July, 1776. . . ."

These firebrand letters were sufficient to cause big trouble, and it is not remarkable that the heat generated by them has kept warm ever since the controversy they started. Jefferson was ill in the summer of 1819, and the receipt of Adams' excited letter no doubt made him feel worse. His reply may be seen in various editions of his *Works*:

"Monticello, July 9, 1819.

"Dear Sir, — I am in debt to you for your letters of May the 21st, 27th, and June the 22d. . . .

"But what has attracted my peculiar notice, is the paper from Mecklenburg county, of North Carolina, published in the *Essex Register*, which you were so kind as to enclose in your last, of June the 22d. And you seem to think it genuine. I believe it spurious. I deem it to be a very unjustifiable quiz, like that of the volcano, so minutely related to us as having broken out in North Carolina, some half dozen years ago, in that part of the country, and perhaps in that very county of Mecklenburg, for I do not remember its precise locality.

"If this paper be really taken from the *Raleigh Register*, as quoted, I wonder it should have escaped Richie [an editor in Richmond], who culls what is good from every paper, as the bee from every flower; and the *National Intelligencer*, too, which is edited by a North Carolinian: and that the fire should blaze out all at once in Essex, one thousand miles from where the spark is said to have fallen. But if really taken from the *Raleigh Register*, who is the narrator, and is the name subscribed real, or is it as fictitious as the paper itself?

"It appeals, too, to an original book, which is burnt, to Mr. [John McKnitt] Alexander, who is dead, to a joint letter from Caswell, Hughes, and Hooper, all dead, to a copy sent to the dead Caswell [error for General Davie, then still living and possessing a copy of the Mecklenburg Declaration], and another sent to Doctor Williamson, now probably dead, whose



memory did not recollect, in the history he has written of North Carolina, this gigantic step of its county of Mecklenburg.

"Horry, too, is silent in his history of Marion, whose scene of action was the country bordering on Mecklenburg. Ramsay, Marshall, Jones, Girardin, Wirt, historians of the adjacent States, all silent. When Mr. Henry's resolutions, far short of independence, flew like lightning through every paper, and kindled both sides of the Atlantic, this flaming declaration of the same date, of the independence of Mecklenburg county, of North Carolina, absolving it from the British allegiance, and abjuring all political connection with that nation, although sent to Congress, too, is never heard of. It is not known even a twelvemonth after, when a similar proposition is first made in that body.

"Armed with this bold example, would not you have addressed our timid brethren in peals of thunder, on their tardy fears? Would not every advocate of independence have rung the glories of Mecklenburg county, in North Carolina, in the ears of the doubting Dickinson and others, who hung so heavily on us? Yet the example of independent Mecklenburg county, in North Carolina, was never once quoted.

"The paper speaks, too, of the continued exertions of their delegation (Caswell, Hooper, Hughes) 'in the cause of liberty and independence.' Now, you remember as well as I do, that we had not a greater tory in Congress than Hooper; that Hughes was very wavering, sometimes firm, sometimes feeble, according as the day was clear or cloudy; that Caswell, indeed was a good whig, and kept these gentlemen to the notch, while he was present; but that he left us soon, and their line of conduct became then uncertain until Penn came, who fixed Hughes, and the vote of the State.

"I must not be understood as suggesting any doubtfulness in the State of North Carolina. No State was more fixed or forward. Nor do I affirm, positively, that this paper is a fabrication: because the proof of a negative can only be presumptive. But I shall believe it such until positive and solemn proof of its authenticity shall be produced.

"And if the name McKnitt be real, and not a part of the fabrication, it needs a vindication by the production of such proof. For the present, I must be an unbeliever in the apocryphal gospel. . . .

"I am and shall always be, affectionately and respectfully yours,

"TH: JEFFERSON."

But for his sense of annoyance Jefferson might not have impugned the integrity of Hooper and Hewes, well regarded in North Carolina. As McKnitt Alexander had done, Jefferson incorrectly spelled the name Hewes

as Hughes. The Jefferson letter was given to the press and was at once published in many newspapers.

Governor Stokes pointed out in the State pamphlet of 1831 that the letter to Adams was written hastily on no other information than that supplied by the reprinting from the *Raleigh Register*, which Jefferson did not clearly understand. He confused Richard Caswell with General Davie as the person for whom McKnitt Alexander wrote the careful copy of the Declaration record on September 3, 1800. He doubted whether the *Raleigh Register* had printed the story at all, perhaps thinking the *Essex Register* publication had been a hoax intended by his Federalist enemies in eastern Massachusetts to hurt him. There is no evidence that Jefferson investigated the Mecklenburg Declaration after writing Adams; nothing further on the subject from his pen is known to have been printed. Without doubt Adams had wounded him painfully.

On receiving Jefferson's letter, Adams retracted what he had said, in replying on July 21, 1819. Or rather, he asserted he had meant something quite different from what he had said. This letter does not appear in Adams' *Works*, but it reposes with the Jefferson MSS. in the Library of Congress. Referring to Jefferson's letter, Adams wrote:

"It has entirely convinced me that the Mecklenburg Resolutions are a fiction. . . . It appeared to me utterly incredible that they should be genuine . . . as they are unknown to you, they must have been unknown to all mankind. . . ." All this represents a very remarkable change of tune. Adams, turning from admiration of the Mecklenburg Declaration to horror, asked:

"Who can be the Demon to invent such a machine after five and forty years, and what could be his motive — was it to bring a Charge of Plagiarism against the Congress of 76, or against you, the undoubted acknowledged draughtsman of the Declaration of Independence. . . .?"

It was Adams himself who had first cried plagiarism. He wrote again on August 21 to William Bentley, but did not refer to the charge in his former letter that Jefferson had "copied the spirit, the sense, and the expressions" of the Mecklenburg Declaration. Instead, he said of the May 20, 1775 resolves: "I cannot believe that they were known to one member of Congress on the fourth of July, 1776." "The Declaration of Independence made by Congress on the fourth of July, 1776," he wrote, "is a document, an instrument, a record that ought not to be disgraced or trifled with. . . . That this fiction [the Mecklenburg Declaration] is ancient and not modern, seems to be ascertained. It [the fiction] is of so much more importance that it should be thoroughly investigated."

So it must appear that John Adams, who actually knew nothing at all on

the subject, annoyed Jefferson, angered all his friends, and made himself look absurd, by writing hasty judgments that he precipitately took back. Adams is entitled to a bit of compassion, however. He wished above all to preserve his friendship with Jefferson, healed by reconciliation in 1812 after a long break. His memory still smarted when he thought of Tom Paine, whose views of government Jefferson had in 1791 preferred to his own. (See Dumas Malone's *Jefferson and the Rights of Man*, pp. 354-59.)

Jefferson's friends almost immediately began accusing John McKnitt Alexander of forging the May 20 Declaration, and some in North Carolina were unwise enough to suggest Jefferson had borrowed expressions from Dr. Ephraim Brevard and the other members of the resolutions committee in Charlotte who drafted the May 20 resolves. Various disciples of Jefferson have been resenting the aspersion ever since.

## 10. The Declaration Revamped



WE COME now to a piquant episode in the Mecklenburg story: the production of a shiny new version of the Declaration of Independence that inevitably was to add to puzzlement and mystery.

When Dr. Joseph McKnitt Alexander made a copy of the May 1775 record for publication in the *Raleigh Register* of April 30, 1819, he permitted William Polk to make another for William Davidson, then a member of Congress. Still another copy was made by Colonel Polk, for use in carrying out a project of historical writing of his own.

Colonel William Polk was one of many friends of Judge Archibald DeBow Murphey of Haw River, North Carolina, who proposed to write a history of the State, and who then was gathering manuscripts and historical papers, with the recollections of Revolutionary veterans. Judge Murphey did not live to write his history, but his manuscript collection was in time to prove very valuable. Many years later it was of absorbing interest to his great-great-grandson, William Henry Hoyt.

Colonel Polk was not satisfied with McKnitt Alexander's record of the independence movement, because he believed it did not do justice to his father, Colonel Thomas Polk. The numerous Alexanders had in his opinion made the May 19-20 convention too much their own, with six of them present as delegates, with Abraham Alexander in the chair, and McKnitt Alexander acting as secretary.

He suspected with reason they wished to give credit to Adam Alexander for getting the delegates selected, when in fact Colonel Thomas Polk had, "through solicitation," called upon the militia captains to arrange the election of two delegates from each company. McKnitt Alexander would have been wise to include in his record an account of the reading of the Declaration from the courthouse steps by the Colonel. It would have added another