

"I understood afterward that Capt. James Jack, then of Charlotte, undertook upon the request of the Committee to carry a copy of their proceedings to Congress, which then sat in Philadelphia; and on his way at Salisbury, the time of court, Mr. Cannon who was one of the committee who assisted in drawing the declaration, prevailed on Capt. Jack to get his papers and have them read publicly, which was done, and the proceedings met with general approbation. But two of the lawyers, John Dunn and a Mr. Booth, dissented and asserted they were treasonable, and endeavoured to have Capt. Jack detained. He drew his pistols and threatened to kill the first man who would interrupt him, and passed on.

"The news of this reached Charlotte in a short time after and the Executive of the Committee whom they had invested with suitable powers, ordered a party of 10 or 12 armed Horsemen to bring said Lawyers from Salisbury. When they were brought and the case investigated before the Committee, Dunn on giving security and making fair promises was permitted to return, and Booth was sentenced to go to Cambden in South Carolina, out of the sphere of his influence. My brother George Graham and the late Col<sup>o</sup>. John Carruth were of the party that went to Salisbury, and it is distinctly remembered that when in Charlotte they came home at night in order to provide for their trip to Cambden, and that they and two others of the party took Booth to that place. This was the first military Expedition from Mecklenburgh in the Revolutionary War & believed to be the first anywhere to the South.

"Yours respectfully, J. GRAHAM."

THE EXCITEMENT AND TENSION stirred by news of the blood-letting at Lexington and by knowledge of the inflamed feelings of leaders in the independence movement, had swept over the countryside like a prairie fire. "Perhaps half the men in the county" were in Charlotte on the evening of May 19, General Graham narrates.

Sentiment was not unanimous, Kenneth Whitsett of Charlotte has learned from his research. Many in the crowd milling around the courthouse hoped to put brakes on the ardent delegates inside. They feared impetuous action, in advance of decisions to be made by Congress in Philadelphia, in a course that might prove dangerous as well as unwise. There can be no doubt that memories of the Alamance rebellion and its consequences disturbed many good patriots that night.

We must conclude that the men inside the courthouse, with one or two exceptions, didn't know the meaning of the word fear. The night wore on, the excited and anxious throngs diminished, and at two in the morning the decision was taken. By noontime on Saturday the 20th of May, the qualms of the cautious had been swept aside.

## 12. Wheeler Enlightens Force



ONE of the letters in the State pamphlet requires special attention: that of John Simeson to Colonel William Polk, dated at Providence (N. C.), January 20, 1820. After preliminaries, the letter says: "As to the names of those who drew up the Declaration, I am inclined to think Doctor Brevard was the principal, from his known talents in composition. It was, however, in substance and form, like that great national act agreed on thirteen months after. Ours was towards the close of May, 1775. In addition to what I have said, the same committee appointed three men to secure all the military stores for the county's use — Thomas Polk, John Phifer, and Joseph Kennedy. I was under arms near the head of the line, near Col. Polk, and heard him distinctly read a long string of Grievances, the Declaration and Military Order above. I likewise heard Col. Polk have two warm disputes with two men of the county, who said the measures were rash and unnecessary. He was applauded and they silenced. I was then in my 22d year..."

Mr. Simeson quite evidently was recalling what he had heard on May 31, 1775, when on the day of the militia muster the twenty resolutions of the Committee of Safety appear to have been read by Colonel Polk to his men. General Graham remembered the reading of the May 20 Declaration of Independence from the courthouse steps by Colonel Polk. Mr. Simeson called up in memory the reading eleven days later by Colonel Polk of the twenty supplementary resolutions of May 31, at the militia muster. The last of these resolutions named Colonel Polk and Dr. Joseph Kennedy to purchase powder, lead, and flints. Mr. Simeson remembered them and added the name of John Phifer. His obvious references to the May 31 resolutions have led the challengers of the May 20 Declaration to observe that he at least, of all the witnesses, could remember the "true" Declaration of Independence and not the "false" one. Both he and General Graham were good witnesses. Each remembered the set of resolutions he had chanced to hear Colonel Polk read, on occasions eleven days apart.

Samuel Henderson testified for the State pamphlet in a paper dated November 25, 1830, that he had obtained the Davie Copy from Major

William Davie, shortly after the death of his father, General William R. Davie, in 1820, and had turned it over to Dr. Alexander. The top of the first leaf already had been torn off. Dr. Alexander had placed the Davie Copy in the hands of the legislative committee for examination; later it was returned to him. The remaining part of the Davie Copy was not printed in the State pamphlet, as the use of the text published in the *Raleigh Register* was no doubt deemed sufficient. Had the surviving part of the Davie Copy been printed at that time, exactly as McKnitt Alexander wrote it, a great deal of mischief and confusion would have been prevented, and the controversy either abated or checked entirely. The third page of the Davie Copy, which remains entire, provides the solution of the mystery that has been allowed to grow through failure to examine the paper with sufficient care.

ADDITIONAL light is thrown on the preparation of the State pamphlet of 1831 in a letter written in Washington on August 7, 1875 by Colonel J. H. Wheeler to William Q. Force, a son of the archivist Peter Force. This letter is included in the collection of the letters and papers of Peter and William Force, bearing on the Mecklenburg Declaration and formerly known as the Loomis Collection. William Henry Hoyt of New York purchased these papers and presented them to the Southern Historical Collection in August, 1953. Answering queries from the younger Force Colonel Wheeler replied:

“. . . As to the tradition that a jealousy did exist between the Polks and Alexanders, this is true, but I am not aware that it attained such a height as to become a subject of controversy in the papers.

“As to the third inquiry, as ‘to the Legislature of 1830-31, whether there was any underhand work in securing the appointment of the Mecklenburg Committee [to prepare the pamphlet], with Gen. Thomas G. Polk at its head,’ I would state that I was a member of this Legislature. . . . The report of this Committee did not fulfill expectations, nor come up to ‘the height of the great argument.’ It simply gave the [Declaration] copy (J. McKnitt Alexander’s) with some certificates of living witnesses testifying to the circumstances. The recorded despatches of the Royal Governors Martin and Wright, if known, were not even alluded to.

“The impression in the Legislature was that Gen. Polk, the chairman [grandson of Col. Thomas Polk of 1775 fame], was allowed to have his own way on a subject that he was so much interested in.

“It was stated and believed in the Legislature that he wished to substitute the name of Dr. Ephraim Brevard, as Secretary, who had married a daughter of Col. Thomas Polk, in place of John McKnitt Alexander, but was opposed by Evan Alexander and others. . . .

“This, as Dr. Draper states he wants, is ‘truth pure and simple, without which all history is but fiction.’”

WHEN Dr. Joseph McKnitt Alexander submitted to the legislative committee the two old documents found at his father’s place, he attached explanatory notes to them. One of the documents was the full sheet of four pages: the working copy of the Declaration record. The other was the half sheet containing McKnitt Alexander’s rough notes. Since neither the notes nor the primary documents to which they pertained were given any notice in the State pamphlet, useful evidence unfortunately was omitted. Had these papers been published then and there, later critics might have been spared the lamentable errors of unlimited denunciation based upon limited research. The first of Dr. Alexander’s explanatory notes reads as follows:

“North Carolina, Mecklenburg County. The sheet & torn half sheet to which this is attached (the sheet is evidently corrected in two places by John McKnitt Alexander as marked on it [ ] — the half sheet is his own handwriting) were found after the death of Jno. McKnitt Alexander in his old mansion house in the centre of a roll of old pamphlets, viz: ‘an address on public liberty printed Philadelphia 1774’; one ‘on the Disputes with G. Britain printed 1775’; one ‘on State affairs printed at Hillsborough 1788’; one ‘an address on Federal policy to the Citizens of No. Ca. 1788,’ & the ‘Journal of the provincial Congress of No. Ca. held at Halifax the 4 of April 1776’; which papers have been in my possession ever since. Certified Nov. 25th, 1830.

“J. MCKNITT.

“In an address delivered at an academy near Charlotte, published in the *Raleigh Minerva* of 10th Aug<sup>r</sup> 1809, the Mecklenburg Declaration is distinctly. . . .” Here the margin is torn, but the sense of the missing words is supplied in a quotation from the address published in the *Raleigh Minerva*, which Mr. Hoyt used in a footnote on page 172 of his book. The address was delivered on June 1, 1809 at Sugar Creek Academy, conducted by McKnitt Alexander’s son-in-law, the Rev. Samuel C. Caldwell, and the speaker is presumed to have been James Wallis, son of the Rev. James Wallis and a grandson of McKnitt Alexander. The youth recounted the story of the adoption of the May 20 Declaration of Independence, as given in McKnitt Alexander’s copy in unidentified handwriting, and as he undoubtedly had heard it more than once from the lips of his grandfather. The resolutions of independence, the youth stated, “were transmitted to Congress by express, and probably expedited the general Declaration of Independence. May we ever act worthy of such predecessors.”

The second of the notes, attached to the Mecklenburg Declaration record

in handwriting then unidentified, now kept with other papers in the Southern Historical Collection at Chapel Hill, makes these important statements:

“As to the full sheet being in an unknown handwrite — it matters not who may have copied the original record — by comparing the copy deposited with Gen. Davie, they two will be found so perfectly the same, so far as his is preserved, that no imposition is possible. The one from the same original as the other is conclusive. I have therefore always taken from the one which is entire, where the other is lost. The entire sheet is most probably a copy taken long since from the original for some person, corrected by Jno. McKnitt Alexander, & now sent on. The roll of pamphlets with which these two papers were found, I never knew were amongst his old surveying & other old papers until after his death. They may have been unrolled since 1788.

“J. MCKNITT.”

PUBLICATION of the documentary evidence did not end the controversy. In 1838 Peter Force discovered the preamble and the first four of the long-forgotten May 31 resolutions in an old copy of the *Massachusetts Spy*, published at Worcester, and dated July 12, 1775. He revealed his find in the December 17, 1838 issue of the thrice-a-week *National Intelligencer*. The preamble and the four resolves, with some additional details, also were discovered in a copy of the *New York Journal; or, the General Advertiser* dated June 29, 1775. Both papers had gleaned from the *South Carolina Gazette, and County Journal*, which on June 13, 1775, had published in full the preamble and the twenty resolves of May 31, 1775. Dr. Joseph Johnson discovered a copy of this paper in a Charleston library in 1847. The revealed fact that the forgotten May 31 resolves had been published in newspapers while the remembered May 20 Declaration of Independence had not been published, satisfied the critics of McKnitt Alexander that they had evidence of his guilt as a faker and forger.

Mr. Force was casual in method in his revelation of 1838, omitting any mention of the source of his information. In the third and last of three introductory paragraphs in the *National Intelligencer* he wrote: “In the course of my examinations into the popular proceedings of that period of our history, I have met with another set of resolutions adopted by Mecklenburg county in May, 1775, which answer very well to the description given by Governor Martin. They are expressed in somewhat different terms, and are besides of a much wider scope than those heretofore published; being in fact a general Declaration of the Independence of all the Colonies. Believing that these will be interesting to many of your readers, I send you a copy for publication.”

The brief introduction was followed by the preamble and four resolves from the May 31, 1775 document, without any reference to the newspaper in which Mr. Force had found them: the *Massachusetts Spy*. Five years later, on November 29, 1843, Dr. Swain wrote Force: “Will you do me the favor to advise me through the medium of my friend the Hon. D. M. Barringer, as to the source from which you obtained the Resolutions given in the 2d Vol. of the *American Archives*, as having been adopted at Charlotte (Mecklenburg Co.) 31 May 1775; and whether any copy exists of the ten [actually sixteen] resolutions omitted in your publication? . . .”

Then at last it became known where Mr. Force had made his discovery. Dr. Swain's letter, the clipping from the *National Intelligencer*, and many other newspaper articles, letters, and documents may be seen in the budget of Force papers given by Mr. Hoyt to the Southern Historical Collection.

Peter Force was a highly-respected collector of historical documents for a series of volumes of *American Archives*. His discovery in 1838 was important, and quite naturally from 1838 onward he encouraged the growth of opinion that his find determined the issue of authenticity *vs.* falsity. He made the greatest contribution to the Mecklenburg controversy from 1831 until the publication of the famous magazine article of May 1853. In actual fact, if we pause to think a moment, discovery of the May 31 resolves — important as it was — proved *only* that these resolves had been adopted on May 31, 1775. The discovery disproved no part of the record of a convention eleven days earlier that had adopted five resolutions of independence.

Peter Force had a son Samuel who elaborated on his father's discovery in an article on the Mecklenburg Declaration he contributed to the September 1853 issue of the *Nassau Literary Magazine*, published by the senior class at Princeton. “The genuineness [of the May 20 Declaration]” he wrote, “is a point on which the people of North Carolina are extremely sensitive (needlessly, we think, extremely sensitive).” Why, Samuel Force inquired, should North Carolinians worry about the integrity of their prized but “false” Declaration when they could so easily be proud of the genuine May 31 resolves?