

13. Enter Dr. Phillips



THE most persistent disbeliever in the Mecklenburg Declaration of May 20 was Charles Phillips, Professor of Mathematics at the University of North Carolina for a number of years. His father James Phillips, son of an Anglican rector, had removed from England to New York when a young man, and had married Judith Vermeule, a young woman of Huguenot and Dutch descent, who adhered to the Presbyterian Church. James Phillips became a member of the faculty at Chapel Hill; others of the family have since been professors; there was intermarriage within the faculty circle. Waggish students sometimes referred to the able but austere Professor James Phillips as "the Pirate," and sometimes as "Old John Bull." The Phillips family has won deserved prestige at the University of North Carolina. The Physics and Mathematics building erected in 1920 is named Phillips Hall.

Charles Phillips, born in Harlem, New York City, on July 30, 1822, enjoyed a successful career as professor and preacher. He was graduated with distinction from the University of North Carolina in 1841. Edna Hatfield, Registrar of Princeton Theological Seminary, has supplied these details of his life story: he attended Princeton Theological Seminary in 1843-44; was a tutor in mathematics at the University of North Carolina from 1844 to 1853 and Professor of Engineering from 1853 to 1860. He was stated supply minister (Presbyterian) at Chapel Hill from 1857 to 1868. He became Professor of Mathematics at the University in 1860 and continued in that post until 1868, when the institution was closed temporarily on account of interference in administration from carpetbaggers. On April 14, 1866, he was ordained an evangelist by the Presbytery of Orange; two years later his University conferred upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity. He became Professor of Mathematics and Engineering at Davidson College in North Carolina in 1869, following the suspension of activities at the University, and served there until the University opened again in 1875. During this time he was stated supply minister for Bethel. After he had returned to Chapel Hill to resume his work as Professor of Mathematics, Davidson College conferred upon him the honorary degree of LL.D. in

1876. His work at Chapel Hill continued until 1879, when at the age of fifty-seven he retired.

For convenience we shall refer to him here as Dr. Phillips. He was a man of very strong convictions and inflexible will, and when he began a crusade he stayed with it. Grandson of an Anglican clergyman in England, he once said in a letter to Dr. Lyman C. Draper he was regarded as a "high-church Presbyterian," whatever that may mean. As late as 1875 he still wrote of "neighbours" and "parlours," and indicated to Dr. Draper he thought "true men" simply couldn't have wished independence from England in 1775.

Elaborating that theme in a letter to Dr. Draper dated May 25, 1875, he wrote: "Presbyterians raised on the Shorter Catechism and the Conf. of Faith in the backwoods of N. C. were not apt in 1775 to blow off steam about *the inherent and inalienable rights of man*. Jefferson brought that stuff from Paris." An independence movement in Mecklenburg County in 1775, he wrote on June 8, "was a cutting off the fingers — not below, but above — the knuckles."

Dr. Phillips set out to disturb faith in the May 20 Declaration by writing an article for the *North Carolina University Magazine* that was published in the issue of May, 1853. He borrowed from the University president, David L. Swain, the Davie Copy transcribed by McKnitt Alexander, that Dr. Swain then had in his possession.

The sources and authorities before him as he wrote apparently numbered three in all: the Davie Copy, Martin's *History of North Carolina*, and the State pamphlet of 1831. The history, as we know, provided him with the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence as revamped and extended to six resolutions by Judge Murphey. His article included the full text of the May 31 resolutions. He mentioned nothing else he had seen or read, but we have ample reason to believe he was familiar with *all* the Mecklenburg papers.

Dr. Phillips' own statements to Dr. Draper about the materials he had for his magazine article and the use he made of them will serve better than any summary could:

"I have always believed that in dealing with (handling) what I had in 1853, I was in possession of the only originals then in existence — all that were ever known at any time." . . . "You will see that I believe that there never has been more than one *original*, viz, that which Dr. Sam Henderson found mutilated." He meant the Davie Copy.

As to the manner in which Dr. Joseph Alexander prepared the transcript of the May 19-20 convention record with text of the Declaration for publication in the *Raleigh Register* on April 30, 1819:

"The impression I have without being able to cite chapter and verse for it is, that Dr. Joseph got and used this Davie copy [before the top of the first leaf was torn off] for his publication of 1819, & then returned it to the Davies; that when a fuss was kicked up by Col. Wm. Polk as to Dr. Jos.' credibility this copy was sent for (either by a Polkite or an Alexanderite) & then found to be mutilated — that this 'copy' was never returned to the Davie family, at least not before 1853. Where that 'copy' — the one I used — is now is altogether uncertain. They say it is not among Govr. Swain's papers."

Dr. Phillips professed to know nothing about the old documents found among the eighteenth century papers and pamphlets of McKnitt Alexander after his death. We know that Dr. Joseph Alexander used the copy of the Declaration record in unidentified handwriting in preparing his transcript for the Raleigh *Register* in 1819, and that he submitted the old copy and the sheet of McKnitt Alexander's rough notes to the legislative committee at work on the State pamphlet. We know that after Dr. Alexander's death in 1841 his family turned over these old papers, with the Davie Copy and other papers and letters, to the State. In a progress report on the conservation of historical documents, in the form of a special message to the Legislature of North Carolina on January 8, 1847, Governor William A. Graham said:

"The various original papers referred to in [the State pamphlet of 1831] were returned by Governor Stokes to Dr. J. McKnitt Alexander, of Mecklenburg, at the request of the latter, by whom they had been collected and furnished to the General Assembly. These were obtained from the family of the only son and executor of Dr. Alexander (both father and son being now dead) in the autumn of 1845, and are now in this office. I respectfully recommend to your consideration, whether it is not expedient to publish a new edition of this pamphlet, with notes containing the additional evidence of the authenticity of the Declaration. . . ." Governor Graham was a son of General Joseph Graham.

Not a great while afterward, perhaps in 1852, Dr. Swain as "historical agent" for the State was able to bring the Mecklenburg papers from Raleigh to Chapel Hill for "critical examination" by the University Historical Society. Dr. Phillips was the very active secretary. Regarding the Mecklenburg papers as public property, to be held carefully in trust for the people of North Carolina, Dr. Swain kept them in his office until his death in 1868. They were transferred, presumably by his executors, to the North Carolina Historical Society when the University reopened in 1875. Some years afterward they were turned over with others to the Southern Historical Collection.

Careful study of the passing of the Mecklenburg papers from hand to

hand has been made for this work, as a history of the transfers is necessary for clear understanding. The papers left Chapel Hill only once after Dr. Swain obtained them from Raleigh. Dr. James W. Patton, director of the Southern Historical Collection, wrote the present author on October 29, 1951:

"During the presidency of Dr. Kemp P. Battle [after 1875] these papers and perhaps others were sent to Raleigh to be used by Colonel W. L. Saunders in the preparation of the *Colonial and State Records*, after which the small parcel that we now have, found its way back to the University." The small parcel still includes all the essential documents, and the more important letters used in the 1831 pamphlet.

"Dr. Swain collected a large body of historical material during his lifetime," Dr. Patton wrote, "a considerable portion of which was sold after his death by his widow and has been dissipated." This dispersal of Swain's papers has led some to infer mistakenly that important Mecklenburg papers were thus lost. The collection as made by Dr. Joseph Alexander may not be fully intact today, but nothing really vital is missing, and other interesting material has been added. However, an inference of careless indifference toward the papers in the period following 1875 may be justified.

DR. PHILLIPS no doubt was glad in 1852 to have the papers at the University, where he could give them critical examination. He knew all about the three primary documents and the other papers Dr. Alexander had gathered, as indicated in a letter he wrote Henry S. Randall in 1858. With the Mecklenburg papers available to him, he could know precisely the relationship between the old Declaration record in unidentified handwriting and the Davie Copy, obviously transcribed from it by McKnitt Alexander on September 3, 1800. He was intensely interested, and he had a keen mind, and a flexible one. If he was not actually confused, his baffling statements at least created great confusion. We must realize he was writing strangely to Dr. Draper in 1875 when he professed belief in the existence of but *one* original paper: the Davie Copy.

Observe now this further communication to Dr. Draper in Wisconsin, telling of a conversation with a neighbor, Mr. Harris, which "turned upon the mystery that no one ever saw the *originals* used by Dr. Joseph Alexander for his publication of April, 1819. If Dr. J. A. had originals to show, why did Dr. [Samuel] Henderson make his trip to S. C. to get the Davie Copy. 'To corroborate Dr. A.'s documents' says Mr. Harris [accurately]. But there is no evidence that Dr. A. had any paper to corroborate. Dr. A. died in 1841 & no one that I can hear of ever saw any originals in his hands. No

one ever saw the record to which he refers, that his father left to him [usually referred to as the copy in unidentified handwriting] in telling of the burning of his father's house."

We must remember that the record in the 1794 working copy could have been known to Dr. Phillips for years, and we may recall also that Dr. Alexander actually had told of finding the important papers in a building on his father's premises that had *not* burned.

14. The Article That Influenced Historians



DR. PHILLIPS opened his article with the mellow phrases of a minister: "... Now seems to be the month of May, wherein what has been sown is promising abundant harvests, and what is yet needed may still find time for development and maturity. There will be a season of repose wherein all trees and plants are steadily growing for the harvest — and then the end shall come — when the great white throne shall be set, the angels be sent forth to separate the tares from the wheat, and all, according to their works, shall receive unerring praise or blame. . . ." And so on, with much more. "So in the moral world, the past should be revived, that the present may be understood, and the future be saved from the errors of vague speculations."

The textual differences between the Alexander and the Martin versions of the Mecklenburg Declaration he made apparent by using both, side by side. Then he wrote of the May 20 Declaration:

"It is a suspicious paper on its very face. Its guardians do not seem to have regarded it as containing the *ipsissima verba* used by the men of Mecklenburg. Who furnished the 'Martin copy'? Who made the diversities between it and the 'Davie Copy'? Many of these diversities are unimportant, but some are very striking. In the aggregate they are, to say the least, very remarkable, and the last [sixth] resolution in the 'Martin copy' is rather modern in its tone. Whoever heard of such various readings in the National Declaration of Independence. . . .?"

The man who furnished the Martin copy and made the diversities in the text was Judge Murphey. His innocent mischief in changing the text led Dr. Phillips into pronouncing the May 20 Declaration "a suspicious paper on its very face" because of the differences.

Dr. Phillips then went on to dismiss the testimony of the witnesses, published in the 1831 State pamphlet, largely because some of them said McKnitt Alexander had been secretary of the May 19-20 convention, while six others named Dr. Brevard. We have seen on an earlier page how Colonel William Polk summoned the witnesses who named Dr. Brevard. We have