

17. Four Presidents in Charlotte



WHEN President Washington made his southern tour in 1791 he visited Charlotte on his homeward journey and heard all about the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. Just how this came about is related in the autobiography of Charles Caldwell, M.D., published posthumously in Philadelphia in 1855 by Lippincott, Grambo & Co. Dr. Caldwell, in mature life an able figure, was in 1791 an ambitious youth of nineteen, head of a troop of thirteen cadets selected from a company of fifty-five at Salisbury, that went to the South Carolina line to meet Washington and escort him northward.

Young Caldwell had memorized a speech of welcome, but when he met the great man, riding on a white horse presented to him by the King of Prussia, he found himself tongue-tied. Observing the youth's embarrassment, Washington invited him to ride beside him at his left, and suggested that the other gaily-uniformed cadets fall in behind them. Washington seemed never to smile, Caldwell related in his autobiography. When amused, the tension of his face relaxed a little. How the President broke the ice is indicated in this conversation, recorded on page ninety-three of Dr. Caldwell's story:

"'Pray sir,' said he, 'have you lived long in this part of the country?'"

"'Ever since my childhood, sir. . . .'"

"'During the late war, if my information is correct, the inhabitants were true to the cause of the country, and brave in its defense.'"

"'Your information is correct, sir. . . . In Mecklenburg County, where we now are, and in Rowan, which lies before us, a Tory did not dare show his face — if he were known to be a Tory. . . .' [Then the cadet referred to a town of special interest just ahead.]"

"'Pray, what is the name of that town?'"

"'Charlotte, sir, the county town of Mecklenburg, and the place where independence was declared about a year before its declaration by Congress. . . .'"

"He at length inquired of me whether he might expect to meet in Charlotte any of the leading members of the convention which prepared and passed the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. . . ."

"I replied that . . . Dr. Brevard, the author of the Declaration, was dead; that of the members of the convention still living I knew personally but two — Adam Alexander, and John McKnitt Alexander, his brother, who had been its secretary."

When the party reached Charlotte, young Caldwell and his cadets escorted Washington to a reception committee and then withdrew, discharged from further attendance by the President. Washington was put up at the home of Thomas Polk, where Lord Cornwallis had made his headquarters in 1780. Our old friend the militia Colonel, who had read the Declaration aloud to the people on May 20, 1775, still highly respected and reputed rich as the owner of mills and a general store, was at this time addressed as General Polk.

Washington's *Diary*, edited by John C. Fitzpatrick and published by Houghton Mifflin in 1925, relates the experiences of his Southern tour. He was proceeding northward at the time by forced marches, rising as early as three or four in the morning, and taking just a bit more sleep before setting out on Sundays. Entries in the *Diary* indicate acute interest in two subjects: visits to battlefields, and the appearance of the soil — quite natural interests for a soldier-planter. Here is what Washington wrote about his visit to Charlotte:

"Sat. 28th [May 1791]. Sett off from [Major] Crawford's by 4 o'clock and breakfasting at one Harrison's 18 miles from it got into Charlotte 13 miles further, before 3 o'clock. Dined with Genl. Polk and a small party invited by him, at a Table prepared for the purpose."

"It was not, until I had got near Barr's that I had quit the Piney and Sandy lands [in South Carolina]; nor until I had got to Crawford's before the lands took a very different complexion; here they began to assume a very rich look."

"Charlotte is a trifling place, though the Court of Mecklenburg is held in it. There is a school (called a College) in it at which, at times there has been 50 or 60 boys."

"Sunday, 29th. Left Charlotte about 7 o'clock, dined at Colo. Smith's 15 miles off, and lodged at Majr. [Martin] Fifers 7 miles farther."

Not given to recording table talk, Washington did not mention what was said about the Mecklenburg Declaration at General Polk's dinner, though he did remember the courthouse and Liberty Hall Academy. Stories of Lord Cornwallis in the "hornets' nest" of Charlotte may have interested him more.

OTHER Presidents since Washington's day have visited Charlotte to give addresses, and such is Dr. Phillips' spell, and the fixed convictions of scholars that disappointment has resulted. William Howard Taft had no comfort-

ing words of vindication, and even Woodrow Wilson, a descendant of Ulster-Scottish Presbyterians, brought no indorsement of the May 20 Declaration. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, briefed in advance by local people, came on May 18, 1954 (two days in advance of the anniversary) to give his version to a great audience of 30,000 in Freedom Park. This is what he said, as reported in the *New York Times*:

"And we have met, in addition, for the purpose, the additional purpose of honoring those men of long ago, who, patriots in their time, signed the Mecklenburg Declaration. Now if the storybook record of that particular moment in history 179 years ago has been disputed by some, particularly those who acclaim that they are the descendants of the true authors of all early historical documents of that kind, I believe that is not important. The important thing is that here, this great segment of America wants to be known as originators of our historical documents of freedom. . . . And so it matters not exactly how many men were gathered in that cabin [log courthouse] to sign a document. It matters not that part of the document had to be reconstructed from memories of those who were present. The fact is that it was an important step in our development because today people venerate the occurrence."

This was a pretty good effort from a President who wished to give a lift to local pride without being definite enough to get himself involved in controversy. He hedged, of course, in his reference to reconstruction of resolutions from memory.

18. Antiquity of Noble Phrases



Now it may be pointed out that nothing already disclosed has tended to clear up the question raised by similarities of expressions in the May 20 Declaration to certain ringing phrases in the National Declaration of July 4, 1776. What of the charge that McKnitt Alexander plagiarized Jefferson's Declaration in writing later an entirely false one?

The dynamic phrases in the July 4, 1776 Declaration that McKnitt Alexander has been accused of cribbing were not written by Jefferson — with one or two exceptions — but by Lee. Jefferson closed his draft with the sonorous pledge of "our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor." The Charlotte Declaration of May 20, 1775 had these words: "we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual coöperation, our lives, our fortunes, and our most sacred honor." How came the similarities?

Dr. Carl Becker and others who have written of the National Declaration have said candidly that Jefferson used ideas and expressions that were not original with him, and Jefferson himself said he made no claim to complete originality. What makes Jefferson's Declaration a great document is the loftiness of its ideas, the felicity of its expression, and the force and logic of its indictment of the British Crown. It is worth while to trace the real origins of expressions common to the Charlotte and Philadelphia Declarations.

Let us begin with "are and of right ought to be," which is one of the most impressive. The acute reader is referred to Vol. 1 of the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* for 1902, in which appears a short article by Professor William A. Dunning of Columbia University entitled "An Historic Phrase." (Pp. 82-85.) The author points to a passage in the Drapier's Letters of Dean Swift, in which it is said the people of Ireland "are and ought to be as free a people as their brethren in England." But Dean Swift was not the first to use the words. Professor Dunning reminds us that thirty-odd years before Swift wrote, the English Bill of Rights of 1689 declared that William and Mary "did become, were, are, and of right