

19. Golden Legend



CHARLOTTE has nearly as many commemorative places and street names and memorial parks and honored old buildings as Boston. Even Pat Jack's tavern, very busy on the night of May 19, 1775 but now long gone, has a curbstone marker on West Trade Street. This stone stands a block and a half from Independence Square: the intersection of Trade and Tryon Streets. The log courthouse that once stood in the center of the crossing is kept in memory now by a circular bronze tablet set into the pavement.

The city has gone on to establish its claim to an immortal memory by erecting (on May 20, 1898) a tall obelisk in front of the courthouse, with bronze plaques on the four sides giving dates and names of principals and with a bas relief representation of a hornets' nest. It has created Independence Park and Freedom Park (among thirty-one parks and playgrounds), and by holding anniversary celebrations.

It has an important thoroughfare eighty-four feet wide, running nearly eight miles through the center of the town, named Independence Boulevard. Another relatively important artery is called Freedom Drive.

It also has the Mecklenburg Historical Association, a very lively organization under young leadership, that studies all sorts of subjects in regional history in addition to its concern for the events of 1775.

Charlotte was a stubborn little place in early days. It grew slowly. In 1850 the population was only 1065; in 1900 it was 18,091. Then in common with other good Southern cities Charlotte began to blossom. By 1950 the population had reached 134,042; in 1959 it was estimated at 164,000; annexations promised to increase the numbers to 200,000 in 1960. Mecklenburg County has about 260,000.

In times of recent rapid growth many new people have come to augment the original stock — families of other racial antecedents. The telephone book is still well supplied with Scottish surnames, and it may be inferred that many of the later comers have been indoctrinated with the prideful spirit of earlier times.

There are larger cities in the South, but none with more ambition to do

things well. Growth has been so recent that great institutions look clean and new. The Mecklenburg County library, for example — a modern building with great expanses of glass — is bright and spacious.

It pleases the conservative in architecture as much as it delights the modern school. All the builders did was to bring out something nearly perfect. The casual visitor to the library who drops in with an hour or two to spare and with nothing particular in mind, almost immediately finds himself in a lounge-like reading room supplied with all kinds of periodicals, and furnished with easy chairs, tables, and ashtrays. The main lobby is a beautiful big trap designed to lure the indifferent and make constant readers of them. The library has nine branches, four of them in the city.

You should see their big, fresh-looking hospitals, their high school located on a campus of seventy-five acres, the old First Presbyterian church built in 1856 with a spire rising two hundred feet, many other extraordinary churches built since, big department stores, tall skyscrapers with banks on the ground floor.

Charlotte in 1959 had four railroads, five airlines with heavy traffic and a big Airport Terminal, five bus lines and about 110 trucking companies maintaining more than sixty terminals. The city is said to have 500 manufacturing establishments, big and little, employing 23,000 persons, but it is perhaps more important as a distributing center than for its manufactures. Located in the heart of the Southern textile region, its truck lines provide shipping facilities for machinery, finished goods, food and supplies of all kinds.

These are Chamber of Commerce figures, significant for the reason that you do not find life rich in educational advantages and cultural opportunities where there is not a strong, flourishing economy, pressing forward with enlightened energy.

On the educational and cultural side, consider these things: Charlotte has forty-three schools with enrollment of approximately 30,000. The school system has been declared by experts to be one of the most forward-looking in the country. Its colleges include Queens College, Charlotte College, and two institutions for Negroes: Johnson C. Smith University and Carver College. Within short distances are Davidson College, Sacred Heart, and Belmont Abbey.

While Charlotte is still conservative on the issue of racial integration, it is not cold toward the aspirations of Negro children. A Massachusetts man who had taken a notion to explore the region said after his return that North Carolina often builds better elementary schools for Negroes than it provides for whites. Two such unusually good schools are pointed out in Charlotte.

The founders of Mecklenburg County placed almost equal emphasis on

schools and churches, with liberality for both. The principle is still observed. In the period of about eight years after 1947, Charlotte people expended something over \$11,000,000 on new schools and a little more than \$10,000,000 on new churches. With nearly four hundred churches in the city and environs, many of them large and with beautiful architecture, Charlotte asserts the possibility of having more churches for relative population than may be found in any other city except Edinburgh, Scotland.

Organizations devoted to cultural activities are surprisingly numerous. They include a wide variety of interests: Guild of Organists, Ballet Society, Chamber Music Society, Community Concert Association, Choral Society, Music Club, Opera Association, Symphony Orchestra of seventy pieces that gives six to eight concerts a season besides offering free concerts for children, Guild of Artists, Children's Theater Council, Little Theater, Oratorio Singers. These organizations all are active in training and production; they give concerts, recitals, operas, plays, exhibitions of paintings and sculpture. The schools hold an annual music festival. A great deal of hard work is required to keep all these enterprises financed and in being, but Charlotte has plenty of energy.

After the Korean war, when steel became available again, Charlotte realized an old ambition by expending something like four and a quarter million dollars provided by a bond issue to erect Ovens Auditorium, seating 2500, and a domed Coliseum for sports events and conventions that accommodates about 13,500 persons. The city is rather proud of the aluminum dome, 332 feet wide, said to be the largest of the kind anywhere. The two buildings stand in a new civic center.

Across the street from the Ovens Auditorium on North Independence Boulevard is the modern new building of the J. N. Pease Company, a firm of architects and engineers. Large new buildings are common in Charlotte. This one is singular for its provision of amenities not yet usual in the most progressive cities. Office workers are entertained by piped-in music all day.

Charlotte has two well-established newspapers of metropolitan appearance and fat with advertising: the morning *Observer* and the evening *News*. They are owned by the Knight chain and published from one building.

A center of tradition as well as a seat of artistic endeavor is the Mint Museum of Art on Hempstead Place. A folder entitled "Fine Arts in Charlotte," says "The membership of the Mint now totals 600. Though it is primarily concerned with the visual arts, it is also a center for all related arts. Its exhibits include sculpture and paintings, by local citizens, and changing monthly exhibitions from the nationally known galleries, and even furniture, kitchenware, and household items in a 'Good Design Show.' Its musical attractions include the Mint Museum Ensemble which presents a

series of concerts from chamber music literature, concerts by the Charlotte Little Symphony, and solo recitals by visiting artists."

The name of the Mint Museum reminds us of an interesting story in Mecklenburg County's history known to relatively few in the outside world. Charlotte had a branch United States Mint from 1838 until the Civil War closed it on May 20, 1861, because the area was a gold-producing center — scene of the first gold discovery in the United States. There is still gold around Charlotte, but it cannot profitably be processed because of high labor costs.

The jocular remark that the city's streets are paved with gold has an element of truth. J. H. Carson in a manuscript article on "Gold Mining in Mecklenburg County" relates that "nearly all of the dump heaps of the Rudisill and St. Catherine mines were used by the city in street work."

The fascinating story of the original discovery of gold shows that Mecklenburgers really have been skeptical people on occasion, not at all willing to believe everything that might seem favorable to their interest. According to a statement made in 1848 by George Barnhart, quoted by Colonel Wheeler, a boy named Conrad Reed found a bright quartz rock near his home in Cabarrus County. He took it to his parents' house, where it was used as a door-stop. In 1802 Conrad's father, John Reed, showed the rock to a jeweler in Fayetteville, who offered to flux it. When John returned later to the jeweler's he was shown a bar of gold six or seven inches long and asked to name his price for it. Wishing not to seem avaricious, Reed asked \$3.50. Sold!

Returning to Mr. Carson's story of the same piece of rock:

"It turned out to be one of the largest gold nuggets ever found in America and weighed twenty-eight pounds. Soon thereafter some nuggets were found near Rozzell's Ferry in Mecklenburg County, and gold was panned from the bottom of the Catawba River by several operators." For twenty years the people refused to believe they had come upon real gold. The dust found in the beds of streams was called branch gold, and was used for lining the powder holes of rifles because it would not rust.

The first serious attempt to follow a vein of gold was made in 1825 by Samuel McComb on his place about a mile west of Charlotte. This operation became known as the St. Catherine mine. Other mines were developed (there were ten in all at one time), and when gold mining became the chief industry of Mecklenburg County, the branch mint was opened in 1838 with Colonel Wheeler as superintendent. Greatest production was in 1849, when bullion value was \$390,731 and coinage \$361,229.

Mining was interrupted by the War Between the States. We already have noted that the mint was closed in 1861: shut down at the close of business on

the anniversary of the First Mecklenburg Declaration. It was opened again as an assay office in 1868 and the bullion produced was sent to Philadelphia to be coined. Operations ceased finally on June 30, 1913. We are indebted to W. H. Brett, Director of the Mint in Washington, for our dates.

At some time after the Charlotte mint building had been taken down, a decision was reached to build a replica of it for use as an art museum. Thus the gold rush has become legend, perpetuated with other historic memories by a warm-hearted people.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THANKS are due James A. Stenhouse, architect, informed antiquarian, and first president of the Mecklenburg Historical Association, who has made available copies of his own writings, photoprints of documents and rare historical records, and brochures relating to the history and economic progress of Mecklenburg County. On one of his visits to Charlotte the author was given by Mr. Stenhouse a comprehensive motor trip that included visits to old buildings and other spots of historic interest, and to the old Presbyterian parishes.

For more than forty years Dr. Archibald Henderson of Chapel Hill has published at intervals his discoveries in research, supporting the integrity of the May 20 Declaration of Independence. He has produced accurate and persuasive evidence, every line of which stands up under investigation. Dr. Henderson has been helpful to this work in consultation and the weighing of evidence. For years Professor of Mathematics at the University of North Carolina and author of works on regional history, he is internationally distinguished as the authorized biographer of George Bernard Shaw.

The Mecklenburg Historical Association of Charlotte published in May, 1955, a collection of thirty articles by Dr. Henderson, somewhat abridged, upholding the integrity of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence of May 20, 1775, that previously had appeared in magazines and newspapers. The book, *Cradle of Liberty*, sold rapidly and is now out of print. The Historical Association presented copies to the President and Vice President, and members of the Cabinet and of Congress.

The late Senator W. Kerr Scott brought to a climax, North Carolina's May anniversary tribute to its venerated scholar-warrior by introducing Dr. Henderson before a joint session of Congress on May 20, 1955. Applause greeted the defender of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, whose written words had silenced some critics and discredited others. Senator Scott then read to the assemblage the five resolutions of independence. An account of the proceedings may be seen in the *Congressional Record* for the first session of 1955.

Thanks are due also to Dr. James W. Patton, director of the Southern Historical Collection at Chapel Hill, and his associate Dr. J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, for making readily available the Mecklenburg papers and supplying information about their history. Much of the new information in this book has been derived from examination of these papers.

Dr. Chalmers Davidson, Professor of History at Davidson College, has been generous with advice and encouragement: help gladly acknowledged.

Miss Josephine L. Harper, in charge of manuscripts for the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, has helped greatly by expediting photoprints of