

INTRODUCTION

IT GIVES me great pleasure and satisfaction to welcome the appearance of *Chain of Error*, by the veteran journalist, V. V. McNitt. Having studied the subject widely and intensively for more than half a century, I have followed with keen interest the evolution of this work through its various phases.

On his numerous visits to Chapel Hill to examine the Mecklenburg Papers and other documents in the Southern Historical Collection, Mr. McNitt never failed to call upon me at my home. We would sit on my porch and talk for hours about the evidence supporting the integrity of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence of May 20, 1775. I pointed out to him many things in my own writings we both thought would be useful to him.

Mr. McNitt has made exhaustive researches into this fascinating moot question, and now brings to public attention not a little hitherto unpublished material. To be singled out for special notice are: selections from letters written by Dr. Charles Phillips to Dr. Lyman C. Draper when the latter was preparing a history of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, still consulted in manuscript; personal appraisal in contemporary letters of John McKnitt Alexander, and descriptions of his appearance, character, and accuracy; and minute analysis of the garbled reproduction of the "Davie Copy" in an article in the *North Carolina University Magazine* of May, 1853, entitled "May 1775." This article, unsigned like all others in the magazine, but later acknowledged by Dr. Phillips as his own, gave rise to the "chain of error."

While Mr. McNitt has not unearthed any previously unknown primary documents contemporary with the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, he has discovered new points of significance in the old ones, and has made the most exhaustive study of the subject yet attempted. It is a ringing challenge to historians to disprove, if they can, the evidence he has accumulated. I wish to thank Mr. McNitt for his meticulous acknowledgment of indebtedness to my crucial discoveries.

ARCHIBALD HENDERSON

Chapel Hill, N. C., July 4, 1960

FOREWORD

AN IMPRESSIVE thing about Charlotte, N. C., is a special kind of patriotic pride. The city and Mecklenburg County owe a great deal of what they have become to a sense of having earned a place in American history.

Within eleven days in the month of May, 1775, Mecklenburg County adopted not one but two Declarations of Independence. The spirit, form, and scope of these greatly differing sets of resolutions, charged with emotions of resentment against Great Britain, precipitated an emotional storm of controversy that began in 1819 and that still continues.

The first of these Declarations, dated May 20, attracted later the notice of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Praised by one as the actual forerunner of the National Declaration of July 4, 1776, it was challenged by the other as spurious.

Partisans of Jefferson from 1819 until this day, stung by Adams' praise and by the groundless assertion of a few that Jefferson had plagiarized from the May 20 resolves, have insisted that the first Charlotte Declaration was forged, fraudulent, and an insult to intelligence.

They have denied that a convention of twenty-six Mecklenburg leaders was held in Charlotte on the night of May 19-20, 1775 as recorded by its secretary, John McKnitt Alexander. When retiring from this position they have maintained that even if a convention took place, it did not adopt the resolutions since held in Charlotte to be genuine.

They assert that Alexander invented his recorded text in September, 1800, after his minute book had been burned in April of that year. That is, they say he borrowed expressions from the National Declaration when he wrote a false paper for General William Richardson Davie in September. Actually, he transcribed from a working copy that had escaped the fire that destroyed his house.

When some yield a little further and concede resolutions of independence may have been adopted on May 20, they insist Alexander doctored them to include phrases he fancied in the July 4, 1776 Declaration.

A piquant aspect of this storm over plagiarism is that the writer of the single paragraph in the National Declaration at issue was not Jefferson, but Richard Henry Lee. Jefferson ought never to have been involved in the controversy, except for his interest in his immortal document.

It requires imagination to believe Alexander, in keeping and handing along his record, could have attempted plagiarism that certainly would have been detected and denounced by his neighbors. He was a man of some local distinction who maintained a blameless position in his community throughout his life.

A study of the phrases common to the May 20 and July 4 Declarations shows that they were not new coinages in either instance. Some were ancient and time-honored, familiar to well-read men.

So much for the moment for the First Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, except to point out that it was couched in terms so boldly defiant that cooler heads anticipated it would invite charges of treason that might result in hangings.

This conviction prompted the adoption by a Committee of Safety on May 31, 1775 of the Second Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. Its preamble sought to establish a basis of legality by proclaiming the British Parliament had itself made the Colonies free in an address to George III declaring them to be in a state of rebellion. This thesis had been advanced in debate in the May 19-20 convention.

It is the purpose of this book, not to review old arguments, but to present new findings gained by research and a careful study of primary documents. It is interesting to observe that in a highly emotional controversy there is greater tendency to argue and denounce than to make objective study of documents and the accounts of reliable eye-witnesses.

It has been too easy to scoff at colonial Mecklenburg County and adjacent areas as in "the backwoods of North Carolina." The historians Morison and Commager have declared the region "more democratic than any other section of the American Colonies, excepting possibly Vermont." Critics have generally overlooked the Princeton alumni who were crusading there for independence before 1776.

Many scholars still maintain an attitude of amused tolerance at the faith of those in Mecklenburg County and in other places, who believe in the authenticity of the May 20, 1775 Declaration. They have been led astray by one who, by means of a little garbling of a document, set out more than a century ago to discredit the May 20 Declaration of Independence.

Research for this work began years ago, in the skepticism induced by the conclusions of historians influenced by a magazine article published in May, 1853 by Prof. Charles Phillips of Chapel Hill. This article, based

upon a serious misquotation of Alexander's text in the Davie Copy of 1800, maintained indirectly that Alexander had recreated the record of the First Declaration from a faulty memory. Historians have failed to detect Dr. Phillips' error in restoring two words deleted in Alexander's copy, in making his own copy for the 1853 magazine article.

Discoveries of this abuse of the text of a document, and of Dr. Phillips' busy correspondence with Dr. Lyman C. Draper, and of hitherto overlooked information in the Mecklenburg papers in the Southern Historical Collection at Chapel Hill, have made possible the chief new contributions of this book.

The Mecklenburg Declarations were part of a wave of resolution-making in favor of independence, that appeared before July 4, 1776 in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina. Discontented Ulster Scots were foremost among the everyday men who were the most ardent rebels in the Colonies, but German and Dutch neighbors proved they also loved liberty.

Why has so little attention been paid by historians to these regional resolutions of independence? Expressing the pent-up anger of whole countrysides and the hot desire for liberty, they may have had a far larger part in conditioning the Colonies for revolution than we have supposed.

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CHAIN OF ERROR
and the Mecklenburg
Declarations of Independence

CHRONOLOGICAL SUMMARY

- MAY 19-20, 1775:** Immediately after receipt of news of battle of Lexington, convention in Charlotte adopts resolutions of independence for Mecklenburg County; not published at the time, they live in men's memories and in records.
- MAY 31, 1775:** Committee of Safety in Charlotte adopts twenty resolves based on premise British government made American Colonies free by declaring them outside its protection. Resolves embody a code of temporary local laws and stipulate conditions for regime of independence and its possible termination. Captain James Jack carries all resolutions and new laws to Philadelphia; they are declared premature by members of Congress. Though immediately published in newspapers, twenty resolves are quickly forgotten.
- JUNE 1, 1775:** Judge Alexander Martin in charging Grand Jury at Salisbury warns against "treasons and traitorous conspiracies."
- JULY 7, 1775:** Captain Jack stops in Salem, N. C., on return from Philadelphia, and gives Traugott Bagge, a leading merchant, information about adoption of May 20 Declaration that is used, with other knowledge Bagge has, in historical fragment corroborating the Charlotte account preserved by McKnitt Alexander.
- APRIL 12, 1776:** Provincial Congress of North Carolina authorizes its delegates in Congress to vote for independence, thus leading the way for all the other Colonies.
- MAY 15, 1776:** Convention in Virginia adopts similar resolutions and directs its representatives in Philadelphia to vote for independence.
- JUNE 7, 1776:** As instructed by Virginia convention, Richard Henry Lee introduces in Congress his resolutions of independence, containing memorable phrases.
- JUNE 10, 1776:** Congress votes to appoint a committee "to prepare a declaration to the effect of the said first resolution" by Lee. One of five committee members, Thomas Jefferson is asked to draft the declaration.
- JULY 2, 1776:** Congress adopts the Lee resolution of independence and votes to incorporate it in Jefferson's draft.
- JULY 4, 1776:** National Declaration of Independence adopted by Congress in Philadelphia.
- IN YEAR 1787:** John McKnitt Alexander, secretary of Mecklenburg convention of May 19-20, 1775, supplies a copy of his record and text of May 20 Declaration to Dr. Hugh Williamson, historian.

APRIL 6, 1800: Fire destroys a house owned by John McKnitt Alexander; minute book with May 19-20, 1775 convention records, and papers and records of a Court of Inquiry are burned; copies of records in Alexander's office at his home, unharmed, are preserved for future use and still exist.

SEPT. 3, 1800: John McKnitt Alexander makes new copy of convention record and Mecklenburg Declaration for William R. Davie, using old copy kept at his home.

APRIL 30, 1819: Dr. Joseph McKnitt Alexander publishes in *Raleigh Register* the convention record and May 20 Declaration text used by his father in making the Davie Copy; this record is known as "the copy in unidentified handwriting."

JUNE 5, 1819: *Essex Register* in Salem, Mass., reprints the Mecklenburg Declaration story from the *Raleigh Register*.

JUNE 22, 1819: John Adams sends disturbing letter to Jefferson, enclosing *Essex Register* article with high praise for Mecklenburg Declaration.

JULY 9, 1819: Jefferson replies to Adams, saying he never has heard of Mecklenburg Declaration and believes it spurious. Adams recants. Jefferson's letter appears in many newspapers and is included in his published *Works* in 1829.

IN YEAR 1831: North Carolina upholds authenticity of Mecklenburg Declaration by publishing State pamphlet containing texts of documents and statements of eye-witnesses.

DEC. 17, 1838: Peter Force, researcher, publishes in Washington, D. C., *National Intelligencer* the news he has recently discovered the preamble and first four of the twenty Mecklenburg resolves of May 31, 1775. In 1847, Dr. Joseph Johnson discovers full text of May 31 resolves in old copy of *South Carolina Gazette* of June 13, 1775. These discoveries encourage assertions that only May 31 resolves are genuine; that May 20 resolves are false.

MAY 1853: Article in *North Carolina University Magazine* obscures true significance of Mecklenburg Declaration by misquoting key sentence in the Davie Copy; erroneous version permeates subsequent writing against validity of May 20 Declaration; Davie Copy with true version disappears for years, as if hidden, until discovered by J. G. deRoulhac Hamilton in 1917.

TEXTS IN CONTROVERSY

THREE OF THE FIVE RESOLUTIONS OF INDEPENDENCE ADOPTED IN CHARLOTTE MAY 20, 1775, AS RECORDED BY JOHN MCKNITT ALEXANDER.

It was unanimously ordained

1. *That whosoever directly or indirectly abetted or in any way, form or manner countenanced the unchartered and dangerous invasion of our rights as claimed by Great Britain is an enemy to this County — to America and to the inherent and inalienable rights of man.*

2. *We the Citizens of Mecklenburg County do hereby dissolve the political bands which have connected us to the Mother Country and hereby absolve ourselves from all allegiance to the British crown and abjure all political connection, contract, or association with that nation who have wantonly trampled on our rights and liberties and inhumanly shed the innocent blood of American patriots at Lexington.*

3. *We do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people — are and of right ought to be a sovereign and self-governing association, under the control of no power other than that of our God and the general government of the Congress, to the maintenance of which independence civil and religious we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual cooperation, our lives, our fortunes, and our most sacred honor.*

FIRST OF THE RESOLUTIONS OF INDEPENDENCE INTRODUCED IN CONGRESS ON JUNE 7, 1776, BY RICHARD HENRY LEE OF VIRGINIA.

Resolved, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.

On June 10, 1776, Congress voted to appoint a committee to "prepare a declaration to the effect of the said first resolution." Jefferson, Franklin, Adams, and two others were placed on the committee, and Jefferson was assigned the task of writing the declaration. The Lee Resolution given above, adopted July 2, 1776, was by vote of Congress incorporated into Jefferson's draft.

The resemblance of the first three resolutions of May 20, 1775, to the Lee Resolution, which reads like a condensation, is one of the bases of the long controversy. The charge has been made that John McKnitt Alexander used in 1800 Lee's chief phrases in writing "from a faulty memory" and without benefit of any record, "a false Declaration of Independence, which was only a forged version of the genuine Mecklenburg Resolves of May 31, 1775."