

**THE MECKLENBURG DECLARATION OF
INDEPENDENCE; A STUDY OF EVIDENCE
SHOWING THAT THE ALLEGED EARLY
DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE BY
MECKLENBURG COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA,
ON MAY 20TH, 1775, IS SPURIOUS. [1907]**

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WILLIAM HENRY HOYT

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A Study of Evidence Showing that the Alleged Early
Declaration of Independence by Mecklenburg
County, North Carolina, on May 20th,
1775, is Spurious

By

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PREFACE

SINCE it was first brought to the attention of the general public in the year 1819, the declaration of independence which is alleged to have been issued on May 20, 1775, by a convention held in Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, has been the subject of the most mooted question and acrimonious controversy of the history of the American Revolution. Evidences dating from 1775 and onward of a document of this nature, copies of doubtful origin of the document in question, a copy written from memory in 1800, testimony of reliable persons who stated between 1819 and 1830 that they had been spectators and participants at a meeting which adopted it, and traditions are cited to prove the genuineness and authenticity of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. In 1830, after the publication of the trenchant letter of Thomas Jefferson expressing his belief that the paper was a fabrication, the Legislature of North Carolina took up the matter, and affirmed the Mecklenburg Declaration to be genuine and authentic. To-day, in North Carolina, it is engrafted upon the statute books, the date it bears is emblazoned upon the great seal of the State, and the anniversary of its

alleged promulgation is observed by legislative enactment. The consensus of opinion of critical students of American history is opposed to its authenticity; but from the beginning of the controversy there have been two hostile camps, each fortified by what are regarded as unanswerable arguments. If this verdict be reversed, we must conclude, contrary to long-accepted views, and with the older British historians, that before May, 1775, there was a conscious movement in the colonies having independence as its aim, and we must admit that some of the most striking expressions of Jefferson's immortal document of thirteen months later were borrowed from the Mecklenburg manifesto. Herein lies the chief historical importance of the question.

Because of the absence of new evidence of importance there has been comparatively little discussion of the perplexing problem since the centennial celebration of the Mecklenburg Declaration at Charlotte in 1875. Renewed interest was awakened by the publication in July, 1905, of a facsimile of the disputed document as it appeared in what purported to be a long-lost copy of the *Cape-Fear Mercury*, a colonial newspaper in which it is said to have been printed. The paper was soon shown to be a forgery by the advocates as well as by the opponents of the authenticity of the Mecklenburg Declaration. Interest has been accentuated and general acceptance of the declaration rendered seemingly imminent by Dr. George W. Graham's elaborate presentation of the arguments for its authenticity

and by new light of much significance which late researches by those who uphold the claims of Mecklenburg have brought to bear upon the subject.

The purpose of this monograph is to show that all the evidence, new and old, which is cited in support of the genuineness and authenticity of the Mecklenburg Declaration, should be understood as relating to a series of resolves of similar import, which were adopted in Mecklenburg County May 31, 1775, and that the several versions of the supposititious paper of May 20, 1775, trace their origin to rough notes written from memory in 1800 by John McKnitt Alexander, who believed those resolves to be a declaration of independence and attempted to set forth their substance. In preparing the work I have gone to original sources of information wherever it has been possible. Hitherto inaccessible manuscripts are adduced to demonstrate the origin of the famous resolutions of May 20, 1775, and the successive stages of their construction.

Unfortunately for the cause of historic truth, the enthusiasm of local pride and patriotism in North Carolina, where the Mecklenburg Declaration, vouched for, as it is, by the personal testimony of North Carolina patriots of the Revolution, has been regarded with peculiar veneration for close upon a hundred years; the charges of plagiarism against Thomas Jefferson and of forgery against John McKnitt Alexander; the disappearance of the *Cape-Fear Mercury* from the British State Paper Office in 1837 under circumstances which would seem

to indicate that Jefferson's defenders destroyed evidence of the Mecklenburg Declaration; and, finally, the fact that the reputed signers of this declaration were all, or nearly all, members of one religious denomination, have each added fuel to the fires of controversy and contributed to produce an intolerant spirit which has been a bane to sober discussion. As it was in 1853 and in 1873, when Charles Phillips and Daniel R. Goodloe were the first North Carolinians since an unknown gladiator of 1830 who ventured to dispute the authenticity of the paper of May 20, 1775, it is inevitable to-day that a publication which discredits the proudest page in the history of North Carolina should engender in some quarters an unkindly feeling for its author. In discharging my ungrateful office, I write simply as a student of history, inspired with a special love for the history of the "Old North State," and with a profound veneration for the Mecklenburg patriots of 1775. I came to my subject before Dr. George W. Graham's book was announced with the intention of writing a defence of the authenticity of the Mecklenburg Declaration, but the irresistible logic of facts drove me to my present position.

For the first incentive to undertake this work and for advice and encouragement during its preparation, I am under an obligation to Prof. Samuel F. Emerson, of the University of Vermont, which it is a pleasure to acknowledge here. Some of the materials which I have used were unearthed by Mr. A. S. Salley, Jr., Secretary of the Historical Commission

of South Carolina, and published during the past year in a series of articles contributed by him to the *Charleston News and Courier*. For courtesies extended to me while collecting materials my acknowledgments are due to Messrs. B. F. Stevens and Brown, of London, the Earl of Dartmouth, Dr. William C. Lane, Librarian of Harvard University, Dr. Kemp P. Battle, of the University of North Carolina, Dr. Reuben G. Thwaites, of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Dr. Stephen B. Weeks, of San Carlos, Arizona, Mr. Edward P. Moses, of Raleigh, N. C., Mr. Waldo G. Leland, of the Carnegie Institution, Mr. Victor H. Paltsitts, of the New York Public Library, and Mrs. C. S. Coles, of Washington, D. C. I have also to thank Mr. Salley for reading the proofs of the book and for many valuable suggestions.

W. H. H.

BURLINGTON, VT.,
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