

The Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence
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On May 19, 1775, several upstanding citizens of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina met in convention as official delegates of the people to determine what actions they would take to oppose the tyrannical oppression being imposed on the American colonies by King George III and the Parliament of Great Britain.

On the morning of that day, they had finally received the news about the battles of Lexington and Concord, and the blood of the highly democratic, rigidly anti-British, Presbyterian Ulster Scots of the community boiled with anger at the plight of their New England brethren. At the convention on the 19th, they formed into committee, developed a series of five resolutions, and at two A.M., voted in favor of what became known as the "Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence."¹

The text of those resolutions read as follows:

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

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

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

"4. As we now acknowledge the existence and controul of no law or legal officers, civil or military, within this County, we do hereby ordain & adopt as a rule of life, all, each & every of our former laws - wherein nevertheless the crown of great Britain never can be considered as holding rights, privileges, immunities, or authority therein."

"5. It is also further decreed that all, each & every military officer in this county is hereby reinstated in his former command & authority, he acting conformably to these regulations. And that every member present of this delegation shall henceforth be a civil officer, viz. a Justice of the peace in the character of a 'Committee-man' to issue process, hear & determine all matters of controversy according to sd. adopted laws - to preserve peace, union & harmony in sd. County & to use every exertion to spread the love of

country & fire of freedom throughout America until a more general & organized government be established in this province. A selection from the members present shall constitute a Committee of public safety for sd. County."

Some simple bylaws were also adopted, leaving the more general task of reforming government to the Committee of Public Safety which would soon meet, and the declaration was read to the people of the county at the courthouse in Charlotte on May 20th.

The Committee of Public Safety met on May 31, 1775, and after having had some time to cool down, decided to modify their position, and instead of carrying forth the intents and purposes of the declaration of the convention of May 19-20, used a different legal approach to present a kinder and gentler case for the necessity of preparing for the defense of the county and to set up alternate forms of government in the event of a conflict. Their legal argument was unique for its time: a year later to be presented to the Continental Congress by John Adams.

Simply put, the Committee of Public Safety of May 31, 1775 declared that the Parliament of Great Britain and King George III, as part of an address made by the King to the Parliament in February of 1775, had both declared that the American Colonies were in a state of rebellion, and were thus outside of the protection of the King and the Parliament of Great Britain. The committee affirmed that by this act, Great Britain had itself absolved all allegiances with the colonies, abolished all standing forms of government, and had essentially declared the colonies free and independent and of their own defense. This argument can possibly be seen as having some applications to the current American crisis, and perhaps there is a lesson to be learned, should reasonable proof be presented that a government (or law enforcement) has declared its citizens out of their protection, or if the executive or legislative power has declared (or legislated) that some of its citizens are in a state of rebellion.

Twenty resolutions were adopted by the committee of the 31st, most of which were provisions for setting up an alternate form of government and for preparing the defense of the county. The resolves of the 19-20th and of the 31st were then packed up and sent to the North Carolina delegation to the Federal Continental Congress, and placed in the hands of Joseph Hewes, but not without some consternation and ridicule along the way. In local Salisbury, North Carolina, at a meeting of the townspeople where the resolves of the 19-20 and the 31st were read, two lawyers ridiculed the resolves and proposed interference with the messenger (the two lawyers were later dealt with by the public). At the time the resolves were received by Hewes in Philadelphia, Congress was in the process of considering conciliatory actions with Great Britain, and John Dickinson's apologetic pleas for reconciliation were soon to follow, so it is possible that Hewes felt that it would be to his better judgment to hold back some or all of the Mecklenburg Resolves. However, it is interesting to note the similarity of the Mecklenburg Resolves of the 19-20th to Richard Henry Lee's critical Virginia Resolution on Independency of June 7, 1776. Lee's resolution read:

". . .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 connexion between them, and the state of Great Britain, is, and ought to be, totally dissolved."2

Did Hewes distribute the Mecklenburg Resolves secretly to the Virginia delegation or some other delegation(s) of the Continental Congress? Did Lee use certain language and terms from the Mecklenburg Resolves in his Virginia Resolution, or perhaps pass the resolves to Jefferson to consult for the national declaration? In 1819, Jefferson, in response to a letter by John Adams, was to dispense with the resolves of the 19-20th as "spurious," and it is true that the original minutes of the convention of the 19-20th no longer exist in original form, while at the same time no doubt exists about the veracity of the resolves of the 31st. If the Mecklenburg Resolves in any form were distributed to other members of the Second Continental Congress, what, then, does this suggest?

It suggests probably nothing other than the fact that the terms and phrases used by the men who eventually constructed the unanimous Declaration of the thirteen United States of America, had been in common use for some time, and that these terms and phrases were used often and well understood within the framework of the ongoing crisis by the freedom loving people of the American Colonies. Some of the phrases had been in use for many years, Popes having included them in their bulls and other such issuance's. That the critical terms and phrases of the revolutionary period appeared first to originate in Mecklenburg County, and showed up later in the Lee Resolution and the National Declaration, has no apparent significance other than to help people understand that the ideals which were eventually engrossed as the foundation of the American Republic were well understood by the people of the colonies, and that the citizens of Mecklenburg County were courageous people who were ready to firmly state their beliefs and take immediate action to help their brethren who were the victims of tyrannical oppression. And that is perhaps the best lesson which can be gleaned from the Mecklenburg Declarations of Independence.

Notes

- 1) Chain of Error and the Mecklenburg Declarations of Independence by V.V. McNitt, Hampden Hills Press, 1960.
- 2) Journals of the Continental Congress, 5:504-507; The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 1:313-314; The Adams Papers; Adams Family Correspondence, 2:27-33.

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