

James Jack dared to take the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence to Philadelphia May 20, 1775, almost a year before the rest of the country was ready to split from Great Britain.



# James Jack Returns

Young professionals remember the real rebels

“Who will take this declaration to Philadelphia for us?” cries the man on the steps. Thundering down Tryon Street on horseback comes James Jack. To the crowd’s amazement, he rides up to the courthouse steps, shouting, “I will!” Jumping from his horse, he runs up the stairs and takes the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. Amid cheers from the crowd, the firing of muskets, and the blasting of eardrum-busting eight-pound cannons, he remounts and gallops away, starting his perilous thousand-mile ride to Philadelphia. If caught by the British, he will be shot.

On May 20 at noon, this scene will be reenacted at Trade and Tryon streets, the very spot where it originally took place in 1775. Streets will be closed, a replica of the original courthouse will be placed in the middle of the intersection, and rustic colonials in backwoods clothing will defiantly cheer for liberty. A full year before the nation reached its historic agreement in Philadelphia on the Fourth of July, Mecklenburg’s tough-minded leaders were the first in the Colonies to declare their independence.

Five years ago, Charles Jonas heard that Charlotte once celebrated the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence with such fan-

fare that businesses closed, presidents came, and crowds peaked at more than 100,000. “I was dumbfounded,” the thirty-six-year-old Charlotte native recounts. “I thought they were lying and, like most people my age, I looked it up on the Internet.” What he discovered prompted him to relate the story to friends. Within months, the young professionals had formed the May 20th Society, convinced that a new generation needed to hear and be inspired by the tale.

Ken Burns, producer of some of the most important documentaries on American history, is this year’s guest speaker at the evening program to be held in the McGlohon Theater Atrium.

“There is a feeling in Charlotte that it was manufactured out of thin air in the 1960s,” Jonas says. “Yet we have a fantastic history that we used to celebrate.” A timeline at [www.may20thsociety.org](http://www.may20thsociety.org) recounts celebrations dating back to 1822. —Laurie Prince



Documentary producer Ken Burns will help Charlotte celebrate this year’s Mecklenburg Independence Day.