

# The Mecklenburg Declaration

*Whether history or hoax, it reflects spirit of Mecklenburg in 1775, when people were ready to fight for freedom*

Mention the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence and listeners split into two camps:

**Believers:** They point to ample evidence - including statements from participants - that 27 freedom-loving men met in Charlotte on May 20, 1775, and reacted to news of battles in Lexington and Concord, Mass., by declaring their independence from King George III.

**Naysayers:** They believe those soon-to-be revolutionaries adopted a set of resolves for self-governance on May 31, but years later confused them with a May 20 declaration that never existed.



Ed Williams

The debate is fierce, ideological and unlikely to end unless someone finds an original copy of the declaration - and in more than two centuries, no one has done so.

But the naysayers, while they offer good arguments, must prove a negative - that despite eyewitnesses who say otherwise, there was no declaration. That's difficult, for while it's easy to imagine some people involved in a self-serving mass delusion, it's harder to imagine when the people are Presbyterian elders.

It is certain that those men wrote the Mecklenburg Resolves, a plan for governing themselves. At issue is whether they also wrote a declaration of independence from the king.

While that matters for the historical record, it doesn't matter as an indicator of the spirit of the people.

In the late 1700s Mecklenburg was fed up with the British, and for good reason. Many of the leading citizens were of Scots-Irish descent and had come here to seek opportunity and escape British oppression. Yet in Mecklenburg, they still were under the king's thumb. Though Presbyterians, they were taxed to support the Anglican church. Presbyterian ministers could be fined if they performed marriages. When leaders of the new Charlotte Town asked to start a college, the king refused, say-

ing it would be merely "a seminary for the education and instruction of youth in the principles of the Presbyterian Church." When the provincial government did authorize a school, it required that the president be Anglican.

The result of such indignities? Col. Banastre Tarleton, an officer under the British Lord Cornwallis, looked back in 1787 and wrote, "the counties of Mecklenburg and Rohan [Rowan] were more hostile to England than any other in America."

But could these men have created a declaration that echoed with some phrases and sentiments also found in the document written by Thomas Jefferson and a committee in 1776?

There's no reason to think they couldn't. They were hardly rustic bumpkins. Presbyterians put a high value on education. Four of the 27 reported signers of the Mecklenburg Declaration had studied at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), a seedbed of the revolution. (Princeton's John Witherspoon was the only clergyman and only college president to sign the Declaration of Independence.)

So was there a Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence? I can't settle that argument. But no matter what historical facts remain unresolved, the spirit of those brave, freedom-loving people was clear, and that's worth remembering today.

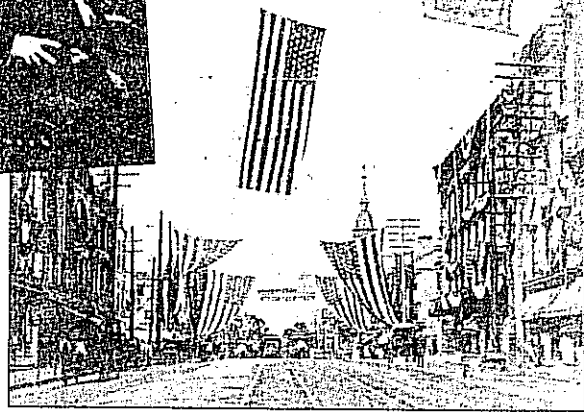
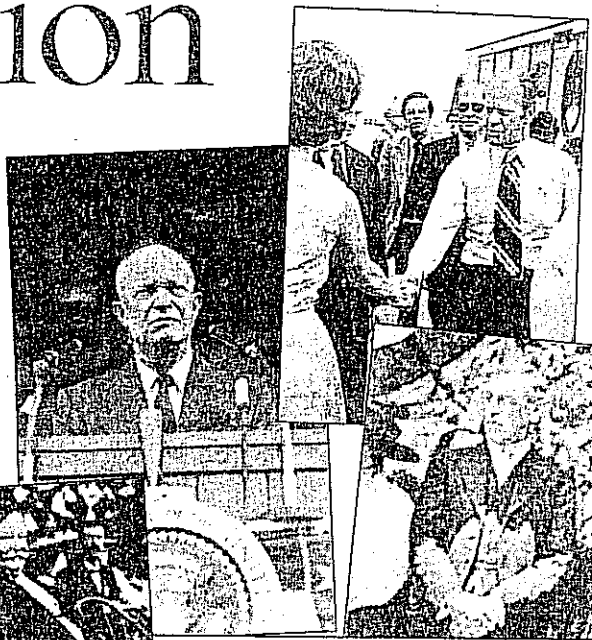
Ed Williams is editor of The Observer's editorial pages. Contact him at P.O. Box 30308, Charlotte, N.C. 28230-0308 or ewilliams@charlotteobserver.com.

Thanks to Jane Johnson and Shelia Bumgarner of the Robinson-Spangler Carolina Room at the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County for their help in assembling information and illustrations for this page, and to the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library at Duke University for the Van Noppen portrait.

### Want to know more?

**The public library:** Visit the Carolina Room of the Main Library, 310 N. Tryon St., or go to [www.cmstory.org/meckdec](http://www.cmstory.org/meckdec) to find information about the declaration, the controversy and earlier celebrations

**The May 20th Society:** This organization sponsors the annual celebration and offers information about the Meck Dec as well as how you can participate. Go to [www.may20thsociety.org](http://www.may20thsociety.org) or write The May 20th Society, P.O. Box 30335, Charlotte, N.C. 28230



OBSERVER FILE PHOTOS AND COURTESY OF PUBLIC LIBRARY OF CHARLOTTE AND MECKLENBURG COUNTY  
Joining the Meck Dec Day festivities here were presidents (clockwise from left) William Howard Taft, Dwight Eisenhower, Gerald Ford and Woodrow Wilson. Turn of the century Charlotteans put flags along Tryon Street to celebrate the anniversary (bottom).

# Did 1775 meeting produce Resolves and Declaration?

## Francis Cummins: We 'abjured allegiance to George III'

In the year 1775, ... the principal characters of Mecklenburg county met on two sundry days, in Queen's Museum in Charlotte, to digest articles for a State constitution, in anticipation that the Province would proceed to do so.... Many young men, (myself one) before magistrates, abjured allegiance to George III....

Capt. James Jack ... was sent with the account of these proceedings to Congress, then in Philadelphia - and brought back to the county, the thanks of Congress for their zeal - and the advice of Congress to be a little more patient, until Congress should take the measures thought to be best.

- Statement in 1819



King George III

## John Davidson: We declared independence from the Crown

When the members met, ... a motion was made to declare ourselves independent of the Crown of Great Britain, which was carried by a large majority. Dr. Ephraim Brevard was then appointed to give us a sketch of the Declaration of Independence, which he did. James Jack was appointed to take it on to the American Congress, sitting in Philadelphia, with particular instructions to deliver it to the North Carolina Delegation... When Jack returned, he stated that the Declaration was presented to Congress, and the reply was, that they highly esteemed the patriotism of the citizens of Mecklenburg, but they thought the measure too premature.

- Statement in 1830



A whiskey bottle depicting Jack's ride

## Only dilettantes and descendants of 'signers' still believe in May 20

While in the earlier days the claims of May 20th received the support of students and scholars of recognized standing, it was before all the documentary facts in the case had been brought out. ... So far as is known, no historical student of the present day who has won for himself a recognized place in the world of historical scholarship would think of sustaining the twentieth of May. Besides a few dilettantes who have never thoroughly examined the literature of the subject this date is supported by the Descendants of the "Signers," who for the sake of their own personal and family glory seek to make this date a test of loyalty to North Carolina and to the Truth.

- Greensboro publisher Charles L. Van Noppen in a 1908 anti-Meck Dec pamphlet



Van Noppen

## Historian: Declaration is 'simply incredible,' Resolves are 'believable'

...[T]he "Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence" supposedly adopted on May 20, 1775, is simply incredible. It makes the reaction of North Carolinians to Lexington and Concord more extreme than that of the Massachusetts people who received the blow. The resolutions of May 31, 1775, of which there is contemporary evidence, were also radical, but remain believable. They responded to an address parliament sent the King of February 1775, which declared the colonies in a state of rebellion, by declaring "null and void" all American civil and military commissions granted to the Crown and initiating a temporary county government "independent of the Crown of Great Britain."

- Historian Pauline Maier in "American Scripture" (Knopf, 1997)



Maier

## Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence timeline

