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Capt. Jack rides again

Statue unveiled of Mecklenburg's Revolutionary War hero

By David Perlmutter
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Under a brilliant sun Thursday, Charlotte's most recognizable Revolutionary War figure, Capt. James Jack, rode again - and will ride forever more.

At 12:15 p.m., 235 years - and 15 minutes - after Col. Thomas Polk is believed to have read papers declaring Mecklenburg's independence from England, members of Charlotte's May 20th Society took the wraps off a \$525,000 bronzed statue of Jack and his galloping steed at Kings Drive and East Fourth Street. It portrays his ride to deliver the treasonous documents to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia in summer of 1775.

Watching were about 1,300 people, among them 800 CMS students, politicians, war reenactors, 30 of Jack's descendants and NPR/ABC political commentator and best-selling author Cokie Roberts.

Whether Jack was carrying copies of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence is still debated. Because no copy has been found in 235 years, historians have questioned its existence - saying that Jack was carrying only a set of resolves mapping a new Mecklenburg government on his 560-mile ride north.

Yet the May 20th Society, which raised the statue money from private donors and paid for Thursday's ceremony, fervently believes that 27 Mecklenburg leaders signed a declaration on May 20, 1775, extracting the county from England's rule. It would have been the country's first.



"The Spirit of Mecklenburg" statue unveiled today at Kings Drive and East Fourth Street. TODD SUMLIN-tsumlin@charlotteobserver.com

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The society was created in 2003 to revive interest in what is called "Meck Dec Day," and the county's rebellious history.

"These are men who entrusted Capt. Jack with a piece of paper that could have sent them all to the gallows as he rode from Charlotte to Philadelphia to carry our message of freedom and independence," Charles Jonas, the society's president and a founder, told the cheering crowd. "...They were willing to risk everything - their lives, their families, everything they'd come to enjoy - because freedom was worth it."

The spirit of the man

Each year, the society brings in historians to Charlotte to talk about a piece of history of their choosing.

Cokie Roberts was Thursday's speaker. Before the unveiling ceremony, she spoke to the middle and high school students about the subject of two of her recent books: women who influenced the birth of a new nation and kept the country together during and after the Revolutionary War. Some were well-known, such as Abigail Adams and Martha Washington; some less known, like South Carolina's Eliza Pinckney.

Roberts told the unveiling crowd that it's important to embrace history like Capt. Jack.

"This country is really blessed by the fact that we are not haunted by our history," Roberts said. "We don't go to war with each other like many people do in other countries. We don't go to war over ethnicity, over religion, over language. We once horribly went to war over race and we will never do that again because we finally understood the spirit and freedom that James Jack represents here in this statue - that binds all of our people."

At a reception Wednesday, she told Jack's descendants and statue donors that the most honest history is often that which is passed down through families in diaries or journals.

She said she believes the Meck Dec was real.

'A people's revolution'

Real or not, Thursday was a good day for those who have struggled over the years to get Charlotteans to appreciate the city's colorful and bulldozed past.

"The American Revolution wasn't invented by one set of folks in one place," said Tom Hanchett, historian at the Levine Museum of the New South. "It was a people's revolution and it popped up in many places. That's why it didn't fizzle when the going got tough. James Jack is a powerful part of that story."

It was an even grander day for Jack's relatives.

As Gerald Jack of San Gabriel, Calif., stumbled down a hill to see the statue, a button popped off his blazer.

"I must be bursting with pride," mused Jack, 79, James Jack's cousin six times removed. "Really, I am so proud. I will never forget this day."

Patrick Ray of McCormick, S.C., 70 miles west of Columbia, won't soon forget it either.

"Looking at that statue makes me better understand the sacrifices many, many Americans have made for our freedoms," Ray said. "What James Jack did was hard - there were no interstates."

Gerald Jack's cousin, Brian Jack, 82, of Fort Worth, Texas, retired from the Army after 27 years, serving in occupation forces after World War II, then in Korea and Vietnam.

Despite health issues, little would have kept him from Thursday's celebration.

"Because of my time in the Army, I appreciate people who served their country, especially if

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their last name is Jack," Brian Jack said. "I am very proud that one of our family members performed a job that was so dangerous and so critical when he didn't have to. And he performed it well."

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Replying to stocktrader (05/21/2010 09:19:20 AM):
"Whether or not its fiction is irrelevant but its hypocrisy to claim independence from royalty while worshipping royalty. Remove the ugly bent over Queen statue at the airport & replace it with Capt Jack. Its embarrassing for travelers & worse than the 4 meaningless ones on the square....":

So do we need to change the place name of every city named for British royalty?
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