

THE PUZZLE OF "THE DECLARATION"

Originality of the Famous Document Assailed by a Defender of the Mecklenburg Resolutions.



IT IS almost safe to say that the controversy over the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence never will end. North Carolinians contend that

May 20, 1775, a number of the leading citizens of the County of Mecklenburg, in their State, who had been assembled as delegates to a convention called to consider the relations of the American colonies to their mother country, adopted resolutions in which the County of Mecklenburg was declared to be absolutely independent of England. Those who dispute this contention are willing enough to admit that the Mecklenburgers did issue a declaration of independence in 1775, more than a year before the great Declaration of Independence was framed at Philadelphia, but this declaration, it is insisted, was made on May 31 and not on May 20.

It is undisputed that the Mecklenburgers did adopt a series of resolutions May 31, 1775, which were regarded at the time, in the several parts of the country where they were published, as practically a declaration of independence. But the North Carolinians say the resolutions of May 31 were adopted simply for the purpose of carrying into effect certain resolutions adopted May 20, and that the real Declaration of Independence was made on the earlier date.

The essence of the controversy, however, does not lie in the question of time involved in it; the issue relates to the form in which the ardent patriots of Mecklenburg County gave expression to their views. Once we assent to the Constitution of the North Carolinians, we must acknowledge that the glorious Declaration made at Philadelphia is miserably tainted with plagiarism.

"Either these resolutions are a plagiarism from Mr. Jefferson's Declaration of Independence," wrote John Adams in a letter to William Bentley, dated Aug. 21, 1819, "or Mr. Jefferson's Declaration is a plagiarism from those resolutions. I could as soon believe that the dozen flowers of hydrangea, now before my eyes, were the work of chance, as that the Mecklenburg resolutions and Mr. Jefferson's Declaration were not derived the one from the other."

The justice of this opinion is apparent if we read over the first three of the resolutions which it is alleged were adopted by the Mecklenburgers on May 20, 1775:

Resolved, That whosoever directly or indirectly abetted, or in any way, form, or manner countenanced the unchartered and dangerous invasion of our rights, as claimed by Great Britain, is an enemy to the country—to America—and to the inherent and inalienable rights of man.

Resolved, That we, the citizens of Mecklenburg County, do hereby dissolve the political bonds which have connected us to the Mother Country, and hereby absolve ourselves from an allegiance to the British Crown and abjure all political connection, contract, or association with that nation, who have wantonly trampled on our rights and liberties and inhumanly shed the innocent blood of American patriots at Lexington.

Resolved, That we do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people, are and of right ought to be, a sovereign and self-governing association, under the control of no power other than that of our God and the General Government of the Congress; to the maintenance of which independence we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual co-operation, our lives, our fortunes, and our most sacred honor.

Mr. James H. Moore, who has come to the defense of the North Carolina contention in a book* which has just been published at Raleigh, says that the similarity in phraseology between these resolutions and the Declaration made at Philadelphia is not due to plagiarism, but to the fact that in each instrument use was made of words and

phrases that were in the mouths of the people all over the country.

We do not believe that this view will commend itself to intelligent men. It must be admitted either that the man who wrote these resolutions had seen the Philadelphia Declaration or that somebody who was concerned in the drafting of the Philadelphia Declaration had seen these resolutions, which it is alleged were adopted by the Mecklenburgers May 20, 1775. The probability, it seems to us, is that the Mecklenburg resolutions were not in existence at the time our Declaration of Independence was made, and in saying this we mean to express doubt that the resolutions which we have quoted were adopted at Charlotte or anywhere else on May 20, 1775, or at any other time.

These resolutions were first published April 30, 1819, in The Raleigh Register and North Carolina Gazette. They appeared in The Essex Register of June 5, 1819, and soon after came under the eye of John Adams. Writing to Bentley, Adams said:

I was struck with so much astonishment on reading this document that I could not help inclosing it immediately to Mr. Jefferson, who must have seen it, in the time of it, for he has copied the spirit, the sense, and the expressions of it verbatim into his Declaration of the 4th of July, 1776.

"And you seem to think it genuine?" Jefferson wrote Adams. "I believe it spurious. I deem it to be a very unjustifiable quiz, like that of the volcano, so minutely related to us as having broken out in North Carolina half a dozen years ago. I must not be understood as suggesting any doubtfulness in the State of North Carolina. No State was more fixed or forward. Nor do I affirm positively that this paper is a fabrication, because the proof of a negation can only be presumptive. But I shall believe it such until positive and solemn proof of its authenticity shall be produced."

Referring to Jefferson's letter Mr. Adams said: "It has entirely convinced me that the Mecklenburg resolutions are a fiction," and in this judgment the best American historians fully concur.

Precisely how the resolutions originated nobody knows. It is possible Mr. Jefferson made a very good guess when he suggested that they were a "quiz," or, as we would put it to-day, a hoax; it is morally certain they were a fabrication of some sort. We say this after reading with great care the able work in which Mr. Moore argues in support of the authenticity of the resolutions. Even Mr. Moore does not undertake to say that the manuscript containing the resolutions was written in 1775; he does not urge that it contained a record of the meeting he contends was held May 20, 1775—made at the time of the meeting. He does not profess to know who wrote the manuscript, nor does he hazard even a guess as to when it was

written. Probably it was not written until at least a quarter of a century later than 1775.

Whatever records existed of meetings of the authorities of Mecklenburg County in the Revolutionary period were in possession of one John McKnitt Alexander until April 6, 1800, when they were all destroyed in a fire that consumed his dwelling. Mr. Alexander, as soon as he had leisure, reduced to writing his recollection of these records. His manuscript was found in a mutilated condition after his death, in 1817, and along with it there was found, it is alleged, a manuscript, in an unknown handwriting, with two or three corrections in Mr. Alexander's hand, which contained the resolutions published in 1819.

Mr. Alexander, in setting down his recollection of the meeting at which the Mecklenburgers declared their independence, fixed the date of the meeting as of May 20, 1775; but his notes of what took place at the meeting, according to his recollection, tell what should be regarded, we think, as an imperfect story of what took place May 31. The probability is that, betrayed by a poor memory, he made a mistake of eleven days in the date of the meeting.

It has been suggested that some time after he had written out his recollection of the meeting he showed his manuscript to some friend, possibly to his own son, and that this person persuaded him that the important action taken by the Mecklenburgers in 1775 deserved to be set forth with swing and elegance. At any rate, it seems that somebody did concoct a story based on the Alexander manuscript, and it is safe to assume that this somebody had read the Declaration of Independence emitted at Philadelphia July 4, 1776.

But nothing really definite is known about this manuscript in an unknown hand further than that it contained the resolutions the publication of which in 1819 caused a claim to be set up that was tantamount to a distinct charge of plagiarism against the men who drafted the Philadelphia Declaration of Independence. Mr. Moore in his book makes no suggestion as to the authorship of this manuscript. He argues with great cleverness for the authenticity of the resolutions, but he does not furnish the "positive and solemn proof" of their genuineness, for which Mr. Jefferson called.

Mr. Moore's work was designed to be a reply to the monograph of William Henry Hoyt published recently by G. P. Putnam's Sons, but it is difficult to see where he has made any impression on Mr. Hoyt's position, which is practically that taken by Adams and Jefferson.

*DEFENSE OF THE MECKLENBURG DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE. An Exhaustive Review Of and Answer To All Attacks on the Declaration. By James H. Moore. 16mo. Pp. 157. Raleigh: The Edwards & Broughton Printing Company. \$1.50.