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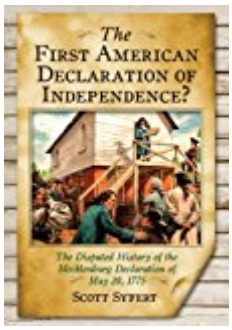
Scott Syfert. *The First American Declaration of Independence?: The Disputed History of the Mecklenburg Declaration of May 20, 1775.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2013. 260 pp. $35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-7559-9.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

On May 20, 2016, citizens of Charlotte, North Carolina, will gather at the intersection of Trade and Tryon streets in the city's uptown for their annual commemoration of one of the American Revolution's most enduring puzzles. Two hundred and forty-one years earlier, in what was then the colonial backcountry, a group of Mecklenburg County militia leaders had convened a two-day meeting in response to the mid-April 1775 skirmish between British forces and Massachusetts Minute Men at Lexington and Concord. Charlotte was then a young town when twenty-seven participants, many of them Scots-Irish Presbyterians, gathered there in the county's log count house to consider the alarming turn of events in the British-American imperial crisis.

Following a heated debate the members adopted series of resolutions condemning Britain's latest assault on American liberty. It is the third of those measures that supplies the reason for the modern celebration and the subject of Scott Syfert's work. The delegates, on behalf of the citizens of Mecklenburg County, declared "ourselves a free and independent people," over one year before the Continental Congress offered a similar statement on behalf of all rebelling Americans.

The momentous step having been taken, the Mecklenburg delegates transmitted what they had done to their colony's three congressmen then in Philadelphia, who promptly laid it aside. They considered it too rash. Most Americans in this moment hoped for reconciliation with the mother country, not permanent separation. Consequently, the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, or "MecDeck" as its supports call it, faded into the long shadows cast by the events of the summer of 1776, until it became the subject of controversy in the early nineteenth century.

Syfert has placed a question mark in his interesting book's title with good reason. The Mecklenburg Declaration and its history, as his subtitle rightly claims, are much disputed. The evidence for the meeting and the resolutions it produced is quite circumstantial. The original documents, in-

cluding the minutes of the Mecklenburg convention and the resolutions, were destroyed in an 1800 house fire that consumed the dwelling of the meeting's secretary, John McNitt Alexander. Alexander (who went by "McNitt") made rough notes of the proceedings from memory, yet it is unclear when those notes were made. A copy of the resolutions was allegedly sent to Hugh Williamson in New York, only to meet a fiery end as well.

North Carolina's congressional delegates never mentioned it in their correspondence either. The source of their reaction to it came from the man who carried the declaration to them, Captain James Jack. In 1775, Royal Governor Josiah Martin enclosed a copy of the ***Cape Fear Mercury*** containing the "treasonable resolves" in a letter to his superiors in London, yet in 1837 that enclosure went missing. The newspaper was taken out of Martin's correspondence at the request of Andrew Stevenson, the American ambassador to Great Britain, and a friend of the late Thomas Jefferson. It was never seen again. Late in Jefferson's life, when the Mecklenburg Declaration's purported existence became a topic of national conversation, some Americans suggested that Jefferson had plagiarized portions of the earlier declaration for inclusion in nation's pronouncement of independence. Ambassador Stevenson, so the conspiracy theory goes, "disappeared" the copy of the ***Cape Fear Mercury*** in a bid to protect Jefferson's legacy.

The author Syfert is a corporate attorney and one of the co-founders of the May 20th Society. It is one of two organizations working admirably to preserve the history of "MecDeck," and advancing the study of the North Carolina backcountry's role in the American Revolution.[1] Syfert believes that the Mecklenburg delegates did indeed declare independence on May 20, 1775, although he readily acknowledges that the existing evidence does not easily lead to a conclusion one way or another. The inconclusive documentation, his legal training, and his desire to engage with a popular audience inform the structure of his book. Unlike a prosecutor tasked with proving a crime beyond a reasonable doubt, Syfert adopts the posture of a defense lawyer seeking to cast suspicion on the declaration's doubters, a group that includes academic historians. The author presents evidence from both sides of the argument. We, the readers, are the jury, and it is up to us to decide who is right.

Syfert tries to accomplish two goals with his chosen method in a book divided into five sections of twenty-two chapters. The first is to convince his audience that MeckDec probably did happen. This theme dominates parts 1 and 2. Syfert traces the formation of the North Carolina backcountry from the era of the Lords Proprietors in the seventeenth century through the opening moments of the American War for Independence. Almost from the beginning of settlement, he argues, what became North Carolina was largely ungovernable and chaotic as colonists resisted the authority of the Lords Proprietors and later the British government over issues relating to property rights.

Into this volatile mix came the Scots-Irishmen who settled in Mecklenburg County in the early eighteenth century. They formed a close-knit, self-reliant community informed by an ultraconservative form of Presbyterianism, espoused by clerics like Alexander Craighead. Syfert's Scots-Irish are a perpetually angry people, and were therefore predisposed to rebellion and resistance to authority. They possessed a kind of David versus Goliath mentality in conflicts with the political elite in the east over land rights and political power. Men like Thomas Polk, the militia colonel who called the Mecklenburg meeting, are presented as self-made, "rugged" men of the frontier (p. 40) in opposition to eastern elite "English blood-suckers" (p. 38) like Henry Eustace McCulloch, son of the Charlestown, South Carolina, merchant. Syfert employs these adjectives as a means of highlighting the different

cultural and political worlds these two men inhabited, and also to reinforce a sense of exceptionalism surrounding the colonists in the backcountry. We are therefore led to conclude that we should be little surprised that a group of men would declare independence in the spring of 1775 the moment that an imperial civil war broke out.

It is here that Syfert's chosen methodology is less successful than it might have been otherwise. Indeed, these first two parts almost function as a separate book. Instead of a clear, authoritative voice using existing evidence in advancing a sound argument in favor of the May 20, 1775, events, these sections passively and telescopically suggest that the Mecklenburg delegates probably did act because these backcountry settlers were more or less preprogrammed to take that step. It eliminates contingency from the narrative. Mecklenburg independence seems almost inevitable, a forgone conclusion from the moment in the 1660s when John Locke drafted the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina.

Where Syfert is more successful and on very engaging ground is in pursuing his book's second goal. Parts 3 through 5 explore the contested history of the Mecklenburg Declaration from the late eighteenth century into the modern era. What the author shows in these chapters is that questions over the document's authenticity became a proxy for the ways in which a local community and state far from Philadelphia, Boston, or Williamsburg laid claim to the legacy of the American Revolution. This is the book's most valuable contribution. Like the early nineteenth-century debate between Virginians and the nation over whether or not George Washington's mortal remains should slumber at Mount Vernon or in the United States Capitol building, citizens of Charlotte and North Carolinians more broadly envisioned the declaration as their great contribution to the revolutionary movement.[2] In fact, Virginians touting their central role in the revolution led to the 1819 publication of a copy of the alleged declaration in the *Raleigh Register and North Carolina Gazette.* McNitt's son had transcribed it from his father's suspect notes.

Questions arose almost immediately. John Adams thought that some of the declaration's phrases, including the passage "our lives, our fortunes, and our most sacred honor" looked suspiciously Jeffersonian (p. 106). He and others of the Federalist persuasion entertained the idea that Jefferson might have seen it before offering the Continental Congress his draft declaration. Jefferson questioned the document's veracity, calling it "spurious" (p. 120). In 1829, the state government commissioned an investigation into the matter, assembling witnesses and evidence that resulted in a report three years later attesting to the truth of the document. North Carolina, the state government wanted Americans to know, was every bit as revolutionary—if not more so—than their countrymen to the north. In 1838, Peter Force compounded the mystery when he discovered evidence of the "Mecklenburg Resolves" issued on May 31, 1775, statements that differed materially from the alleged declaration, thus producing speculation that these were what Governor Martin had referenced in his letter to London officials. Perhaps, as Force believed, the Mecklenburg Declaration was a figment of false memories.

Historians from the middle of the nineteenth through the early twentieth century offered little relief. Most concluded that either there was no declaration, or was, as Force thought, a case of mistaken identity. One, Charles Phillips of the University of North Carolina, apparently deliberately ignored evidence in writing an 1853 article to fit his claim refuting the declaration's existence. More recently, in her study of the creation of the American Declaration of Independence, the late Pauline Maier argued that Mecklenburg's version was the product of confused memories, ones that mapped the language of the national document back onto the Mecklenburg Resolves of May 31, 1775.[3] Nevertheless, its supporters endured. The

subject of grand celebrations, including presidential visits, in the early twentieth century, enthusiasm did, however, wane by midcentury. The civil rights movement directed citizens' attention to more important and pressing matters.

In recent years Charlotte has seen a resurgence of interest in the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, led by the two historical organizations, which have done much to engage the public in the history of colonial and revolutionary America. The jury is still out on whether or not a group of men from Mecklenburg County did declare independence from Great Britain in May 1775. The truth, as a beloved television program reminds us, is still out there.[4] That does not really matter. As Syfert shows, in the end what is important is the way that it generated a larger and long-lasting conversation about a local community's place in revolutionary history and memory. It is a reminder that historians ought to be attentive to how places on the colonial margins were drawn into the broader revolutionary movement, and how those participants remembered it.

Notes

[1]. The May 20th Society, http://may20thsociety.org, accessed January 28, 2016; Mecklenburg Historical Association, http://www.meckdec.org/, accessed January 27, 2016.

[2]. Matt Costello, "Blood, Bones, and Soil: Virginian Identity and the Attempted Desecration of George Washington," *Essays in History* (2012), http://www.essaysinhistory.com/articles/2012/157, accessed January 29, 2016.

[3]. Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 172-175.

[4]. Chris Carter, "Pilot," *The X-Files,* dir. Robert Mandel (20th Century Fox Television, September 10, 1993).

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