

THE EARLY HISTORY OF NORTH CAROLINA

AND THE MECKLENBURG DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE.

A LECTURE BY REV. FRANCIS W. HAWES, D. D.

Before the New-York Historical Society, at Metropolitan Hall, Thursday Evening, Dec. 16, 1852.

[CONTINUED.]

If the two facts are established that there was a meeting on the 19th and 20th, and that a paper was read, it puts an end to the claim of the document of the 20th, to be the declaration of independence for its own date. It disproves it. The first paper, if any, would be prepared in answer to the cry of the people then made, "Let us declare our independence." It would be made while the people were then and there assembled, and would be read to them, and not concocted afterward by the County Committee at one of their meetings; and by them set forth to the people at their homes; it would say something boldly and unequivocally about independence, about refusing further allegiance to the British Crown; it would not set forth a document, in which the word independence does not once occur—it would not be content with a delicate intimation that as protection and allegiance are reciprocal, therefore, the King having a few temporary pretensions for themselves, all the Provincial Congress should act. That is not the fashion of speech of any countrymen in that region. They are not afraid to speak out in good plain, wholesome English, just exactly what they mean; and I am apt to think they know as well what independence means as any set of people in any country. But the instrument of the 20th furnishes other evidence that it was not meant as a Declaration of Independence; for it is avowedly to be of force but for a time; until the Provincial Congress should direct otherwise in any emergency of the province. This showing, first, that they must have wished a temporary independence, if this be their declaration; and, secondly, that the true intent of the document was "to regulate the jurisdiction of the province" merely.

But there is an incidentally mentioned in the story of the 19th and 20th of May, which, with a knowledge of the localities, becomes very strong confirmatory testimony. You remember that on the day of meeting, the express arrived with the news of Lexington and Concord. Now, if any one will take the trouble to turn to the 58th page of the Mecklenburg Declaration, an interesting, useful and patriotic field book of the Revolution, he will find there a letter from Richard Caswell, one of the North Carolina delegates to the Continental Congress; an attentive examination of which will show that Governor Caswell, on Sunday, the 17th inst., 1775, met at Petersburgh in Virginia, the delegates from Massachusetts, bringing the news of the battle of Lexington. We may well believe that the brave men of New-England lost no time in communicating to the sister colonies that war had begun. The battle near Boston occurred on the 19th of April, 1775; we will suppose that they set off on their journey on the 20th; they must bear in mind that those were not the days of railroads, steamboats, or public conveyances; so you will not be surprised to find that a horseback traveller, making all the speed he could, had occupied ten or eleven days in reaching Petersburgh. His journey southward would next take him to Halifax, by the way of the Roanoke, or the only mail route. This would occupy him, on horseback, probably six days, which would bring him to the 7th of May. He had then to diverge westward from Halifax to Charlotte, a distance of some hundreds of miles, over a country, at that time, almost entirely untravelled. It would take him in the then state of that country, about twelve days diligent riding to reach Charlotte, and this would bring him to the 19th of May. He could not at any rate, without criminal loitering—and that, too, when he carried the news of the battle of Lexington, his journey from Halifax to Charlotte, 23 days, never reaching it until the 30th of May; and yet the testimony shows that he arrived on the day of independence was declared, and that his arrival quickened the declaration. It must then have been made on the 20th; and this is to my mind at least, a very strong confirmation of the document of that day, does distinctly refer in express terms to the slaughter of our Northern brethren near Boston, on the 19th of April, (a fact which roused the Carolinians almost to frenzy,) while that of the 30th is perfectly silent concerning any such event. If the resolves of this most exciting event, if the resolves of the 30th were the Mecklenburg declaration, and if the Carolinians were quickened in making it, by the news of the murder of their brethren at the East, is it not most marvellous that not the slightest allusion should be made to the bloody deed? It might as well be further and show the mistake arose of confounding the proceedings of the 30th with the true declaration of the 20th; for I discovered among the Revolutionary papers of an ancestor of my own, the document on which the whole error has been founded. It was the proclamation of the Royal Governor, dated after he fled, on board one of the armed vessels of the Crown, setting forth among other matters that he had seen published in one of the only two papers in the Colony, certain "resolves of a set of people styling themselves a Committee for the County of Mecklenburg, most traitorously declaring the dissolution of the laws, Government and Constitution of this country, and setting up a system of rule and regulation repugnant to the laws and subservive of His Majesty's Government." This document, from the description of it, applied exactly to the resolves of the 20th of May, (setting up a system, &c.) which were printed, and re-printed in Massachusetts, New York and North Carolina; but had no reference to the short declaration of the 20th, which set up no rules or regulations whatever, and was not printed. It was not printed, because everywhere out of Mecklenburg, and in North Carolina herself—it was thought to be too strong to permit any hope of reconciliation, and it was therefore deemed injudicious to print it. The resolves were printed, because their chief object was to establish a temporary government, and they were viewed as forming a model for other counties in the State, which, in point of fact, those counties very soon followed. After the national declaration of the end was gained, and there was no need of printing it beside which, the men of Mecklenburg were too busy fighting for what had been declared on the 4th of July, to trouble themselves with printing, when they were some 300 miles from any printing press. It was no time to be discussing the point who first made a declaration of independence; there it was, made, and it was their business just to maintain it by hard fighting; but they never forgot in Mecklenburg what they had done, and the whole story, showing the entire popular belief of the country, is told in the homely but expressive answer of a grey-haired old Scotchman, who was present a youth at Charlotte on the 19th and 20th when the declaration was made, did fought through the whole of the Revolution. When asked if he knew anything of the affair, he answered: "Och, ay; Tam Polk declared independence lang before anybody else."

I pray you, pardon me for having so long expatiated on your indulgent patience. I am lecturing out of my province; and you are not here to hasten to the moral of my story. Ye are my countrymen, gathered from all parts of our broad land. Probably the blood of some brave soldier from each one of the glorious Old Thirteen, that, with WASHINGTON, to lead, went through fire to baptize a nation in their blood, and to name it FREE, is represented here tonight. There is circling here through our veins the blood of New-England and New York, of Jersey and Pennsylvania, brave little Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia; and a common pool of more than one hard fought field. No sound was then heard of sectional feeling.

saying I fight for Massachusetts, and I for Virginia, and I for Connecticut; and I for Carolina, I for Jersey, and I for Georgia. No, no, the cry was—we fight for the freedom of all—we will have no freedom but for all—and we will have it all, with God's good help we will, or leave our bones to bleach on the fields of our country. Oh, it is glorious, to sit down and turn over the pages of those stirring times, until the heart throbs and the eye waters, and we rise to the full appreciation of the sublimity of that purest, most unselfish revolution, recorded in the world's history. Ah! that is the process by which to bring out the true feeling—intensely American. Look back, look back, my countrymen! Ob, how our brave old fathers clung together! Boston was in trouble in 1774. North Carolina expressed her resentment, and at a cost of \$2000 sailing, sent for a vessel loaded with provisions. The town from which it went had 600 inhabitants, and the whole colony but 150,000. Again hear them after the acts of Parliament leveled against Boston. They speak in their Provincial Congress, and in the Convention of the Massachusetts Province have distinguished themselves in a manly support of the rights of America in general, and that the cause in which they now suffer is the cause of every honest American who deserves the blessings which the constitution holds forth to him. That the grievances were not the full appreciation levelled at them, for having stood foremost in an opposition to measures which must eventually have involved all British America in a state of abject dependence and servitude. These are the words of the Convention of the Massachusetts Province, at the meetings of 1775: "The cause of Boston is the cause of all; our destinies are indissolubly connected with those of our Eastern fellow-citizens, and we must either submit to all the impositions which an unprincipled Parliament may impose, or support our brethren with our blood and treasure, and we will ultimately overwhelm all in the common calamity."—These were brotherly tones, and think you? Boston men of that day did not appreciate them? Why Massachusetts had her sons down in Carolina, and the whole independence of the continent. Let Josiah Quincy, the young patriot of Boston, tell the story, for he was the man who could tell it. He was at the house of Cornelius Harnett, the man who drew the resolution in the Provincial Congress, calling on the Continental body for a Declaration of Independence; and Quincy told the story of the 19th and 20th of May, which, with a knowledge of the localities, becomes very strong confirmatory testimony. You remember that on the day of meeting, the express arrived with the news of Lexington and Concord. Now, if any one will take the trouble to turn to the 58th page of the Mecklenburg Declaration, an interesting, useful and patriotic field book of the Revolution, he will find there a letter from Richard Caswell, one of the North Carolina delegates to the Continental Congress; an attentive examination of which will show that Governor Caswell, on Sunday, the 17th inst., 1775, met at Petersburgh in Virginia, the delegates from Massachusetts, bringing the news of the battle of Lexington. 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Two hundred and ninety-one thousand—nearly three hundred thousand—of railroad iron were imported into this country during the last year; and only eighteen thousand tons, during the same time, were manufactured in Pennsylvania.

ADJOURNMENT OF THE LEGISLATURE.

The action of the Legislature in rejecting the wishes of the people, has its course been such as to secure their confidence and respect. Would that we could answer these questions in the affirmative; or that we could join in a public plaudit of "well done." But we cannot—we know that no such plaudit goes forth. We know that in many things, the Legislature has not reflected the wishes of the people—nor its course secured their confidence and respect. And we know, too, that the Democratic party has been betrayed, divided, thwarted by self-seeking aspirants, and reckless organizers in its own ranks, whom it would be a gross scandal and injustice to name. One agent betrayed by the same men, it will have only itself to blame.

In matters of this kind, and upon occasions like the present, it is not our rule to come out plainly and unmistakably in all cases. When we have seen our party strength supported, our energies paralyzed by the hard-won victory, we are entitled to the action of a few rule-or-ruin politicians, duty to ourselves, to our principles, and to our position, have alike imperatively called upon us to cry aloud and spare not—to throw our influence, however feeble, into the scale of Democratic organization and Democratic faith. We have not done this. We have sustained in such a course, but had the reverse been the case, we had none other to pursue—we have none other now.

When the Legislature met, it was felt by all that until United States Senator should be elected, little efficient progress would be made with other business. Then, if ever, it was necessary to call Democratic party into action. With parties so closely balanced, it was folly to expect success without a perfect union of the party as one man. With two majorities, there was not a vote to spare. An immense majority of the party, in caucus, centred upon James C. Dobbin, a Democrat, who had been elected by his own party and received with respect and confidence even by his opponents. As the party candidate, he should have received the vote of every Democrat in both Houses. But he did not. Mr. Sumner, the Whig, was elected. He himself threw away his vote for Mr. Craig. Mr. James B. Shepard cast a vote for himself—the Whigs scattering upon these gentlemen for the purpose of disorganizing the regular Democratic party. Why did Mr. Cotton, Mr. Watson, Mr. Byrd, Mr. Loring, and Mr. Saunders, all friends of Dobbin, Saunders and Shepard, refuse to vote for the regular choice of the party? and why did Mr. Saunders refuse to do so? Simply for the purpose of thwarting the wishes of nineteenth-century Democrats in the hope of regaining the support of the Whig party, or of eventually forcing the seventy-six Democrats, who steadily and consistently voted for the nominee, to surrender to the five or six disorganizers who were acting against him, and playing into the hands of his party opponents. At last, away from the party, Mr. Sumner, the Whig, was elected. He himself threw away his vote for Mr. Craig. Mr. James B. Shepard cast a vote for himself—the Whigs scattering upon these gentlemen for the purpose of disorganizing the regular Democratic party. 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