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MECKLENBURG DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE
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The Symbol of a
Declaration for Freedom

Mayor Belk, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I am proud to be a native of the Sharon community of Charlotte, and especially on this day to be a native of Mecklenburg County on this occasion when we observe one of the most memorable events in the long and proud history of Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

I am pleased and humbled to have been asked to deliver these remarks on this Bicentennial observance of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence.

I am reminded of a story a good friend of mine told me some time ago.

A father asked his fourth-grade son how Sunday School had been that morning, and the little boy replied, "Gee, dad, it was great. It was all about a war between the Israelites and the Egyptians. The Israelites were trying to get away and they came to this Red Sea, so they built pontoon bridges and got across, but the Egyptians started to come across after them. So Moses grabbed his walkie-talkie and called for an air-attack, and the planes bombed the bridge and wiped out Pharoah's troops."

"Just a minute," said the father. "Is that what the teacher said?"

"No, dad. But if I told it the way she did, you'd never believe me."

The history of Mecklenburg County needs no distortion to make it sound better than it actually was. The story of the Mecklenburg Declaration is a high-water mark in American history. No less an authority than John Adams--speaking years later of the Mecklenburg Declaration in a letter to Thomas Jefferson--said "The genuine sense of America at that moment was never so well-expressed before or since."

The fact that several presidents have participated in these celebrations, and that President Ford is here today, is indicative that America has always taken seriously the symbol of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, whether it was fact or fiction.

When I was a boy we were taught about this Declaration to such an extent that I must have been in about the fifth grade before I heard that a Declaration of Independence had been signed in Philadelphia in 1776! Such has been the loyalty of the people of this community to Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.

As I began to think and to study in later years the character and the motives of those men who supposedly signed that Declaration, I had a clear definition of what kind of men they were.

They were, first of all, a tough-minded and independent people.

They migrated south from Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia.

They were Scotch-Irish for the most part, and down to the very marrow of their bones they believed in personal freedom.

The great Scottish preacher and reformer, John Knox, had declared years earlier that "If princes exceed their bounds, they may be resisted by force" -- thus asserting for all time the rights of the people over the so-called "Divine right of Kings."

Other early settlers moved north and west -- from Charleston and Georgetown, South Carolina. These were of English and Scottish descent, with a blend of Germans, Swiss and Huguenots mixed in. But Scotch-Irish was the predominant nationality, and Presbyterianism the most prominent denomination--till the Baptists came.

These people were not to be trifled with. As early as twenty years before the Revolution, a fiery Presbyterian preacher named Alexander Craighead traveled the countryside proclaiming that men should not live under tyranny.

So, years before the War officially began, the fever of revolution had gripped the Mecklenburg colony. On May 2, 1771, a group of local citizens stole into the British camp one night and set fire to the ammunition. When six were later caught, and

one hanged, opposition to English tyranny solidified -- setting the stage for open and official defiance four years later.

As all of us are aware, debate continues to wax hot among scholars as to whether the Mecklenburg Declaration really was signed almost fourteen months in advance of the U.S. Declaration. And respected scholars on both sides of the controversy can present rumors, facts and fiction to bolster their own opinions.

However, whether there was a genuine Mecklenburg Declaration is of comparative unimportance. Certainly it has been a historic symbol to all America of American independence. Dr. Chalmers Davidson, the famous Davidson College historian, said, "This day is still worthy of commemoration as the earliest overt act of independence in the thirteen colonies by a legally-constituted body."

President Eisenhower, who was here on this date twenty years ago, said "The important thing is that (the Declaration) was an immortal step in our development."

It is interesting that whereas a few scholars disagree on the authenticity of the Declaration, a transplanted Yankee has no doubts. In their book entitled Hornet's Nest, Legette Blythe and Charles Brockman quote a newcomer to Charlotte as saying:

"One needs no further proof of the authenticity of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence than to live a few years in this county.

Probably most of us agree with the Yankee who believes in its authenticity! It is the kind of thing this rugged, courageous, self-reliant community of 5,000 would have done, for the roots of independence dug deep, caused in part by a belief in God of these freedom-loving Mecklenburgers.

The people produced everything they needed. Author D.A. Tompkins wrote: "Mecklenburg could have existed comfortably cut off from the rest of the world. That makes a people feel mighty independent."

But even during those hard times, there was room for play. The favorite sport was a game called "Long Bullets." It was played with a large iron ball. The idea was to maneuver that round chunk of iron across an opponent's goal without letting him cross your goal.

It must have taken a powerfully strong-toed man to play this kind of soccer.

What history shows us, then is a hardy band of people who played hard and worked hard. They tolerated no foolishness. And they cherished their religious faith and their independence above all earthly things.

But what of their leaders, those twenty-seven men who most citizens believed signed a Declaration of Independence on a muggy May morning 200 years ago today?

What kind of men were those who dared defy the power and the majesty of the greatest nation on earth?

Was it sheer arrogance that prompted these men--living in a remote frontier village scarcely the size of Pineville--to go on record as cutting all ties with their mother country?

Was it mere bluff and bluster that possessed a bunch of unknowns to declare boldly that "Great Britain cannot be considered hereafter as holding any rights, privileges or immunities among us"?

Obviously, it was neither arrogance nor bluff nor bluster that motivated the signers. A simple study of the composition of this group proves this.

First of all, these were mature men.

- Men not given to hasty judgments or rash acts.
- Men of poise and presence.
- Men of conscience and conviction.
- Men of purpose and high resolve.
- Men of integrity.

These also were well-educated men--five of whom were graduates of what is now Princeton University.

And they represented a broad cross-section of their community. Among them were:

- doctors,
- surveyors,
- tailors,
- ministers,
- lawyers,

- constables,
- military officers,
- legislators,
- magistrates
- and farmers
- men of the soil.

These were family men, men who fathered many children. One of them, William Graham by name who was born in Ulster, Ireland, and who was one of the founders of Hopewell Presbyterian Church, fathered nine sons.

I feel a very real kinship with this man and with all the signers of the Mecklenburg Declaration.

-- Perhaps this is because they were courageous, and I admire courage.

-- Perhaps it is because they placed such a premium on freedom and independence

conditions which I also feel are the natural condition of man

-- at a time in history when peoples all over the world are losing their freedom.

-- Perhaps it was because they were resourceful and self-reliant, traits which I, too, believe are essential to an individual and a nation.

~~But most of all, my affinity with these men stems from the fact that they were--almost without exception--deeply religious.~~

It is significant, I think, that both the signers of the Mecklenburg Declaration and the signers of the U.S. Declaration boldly proclaimed their belief in--and their dependence upon--God.

Their faith was the inner resource that directed their actions and gave meaning and purpose to their lives. It was the most important thing in their lives.

The records show that no fewer than fourteen of the signers of the Mecklenburg Declaration were elders in their churches, and two were clergy. In their Declaration, they proclaimed their intentions of becoming "a sovereign and self-governing people under the power of God"

-- The Bible was their blueprint of freedom, their charter of liberty. They were evangelicals. They had not heard of the radical theology that a hundred years later was to emanate from Germany. They believed in the Bible as the Word of God.

-- They believed in salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

-- They believed that God answered prayer.

-- They believed wholeheartedly in the worth and dignity of the individual.

-- And they were willing to lay down their lives

-- and did

-- for their faith, their honor and their principles.

-- They believed in honor and integrity.

-- They believed there was something worth dying for.

When they fought, they fought to win--as Cornwallis later found out when he characterized Charlotte "A Hornet's Nest."

Our nation must rediscover--and it must pass down to each new generation--that performance is the price of reward, that discipline is the price of personal growth, that tolerance is the price of understanding, that commitment is the price of success, that vigilance is the price of freedom, and that true faith in God is the price of true happiness and salvation.

Our nation is in trouble. For the first time in a hundred years our citizens are doubting whether we can survive as a free people. Thus the real significance of the event we commemorate this morning is not to be found in a recital of the history of our Mecklenburg forebears. The real significance is to be found in the extent to which we here today rededicate ourselves to these principles and religious faith--for which our forefathers lived--for which they fought--and for which so many of them died.

Thank you.