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May 2025

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KICKING THE HORNET'S NEST

Celebrating Charlotte's 250-year-old spirit

by **Gayvin Powers**





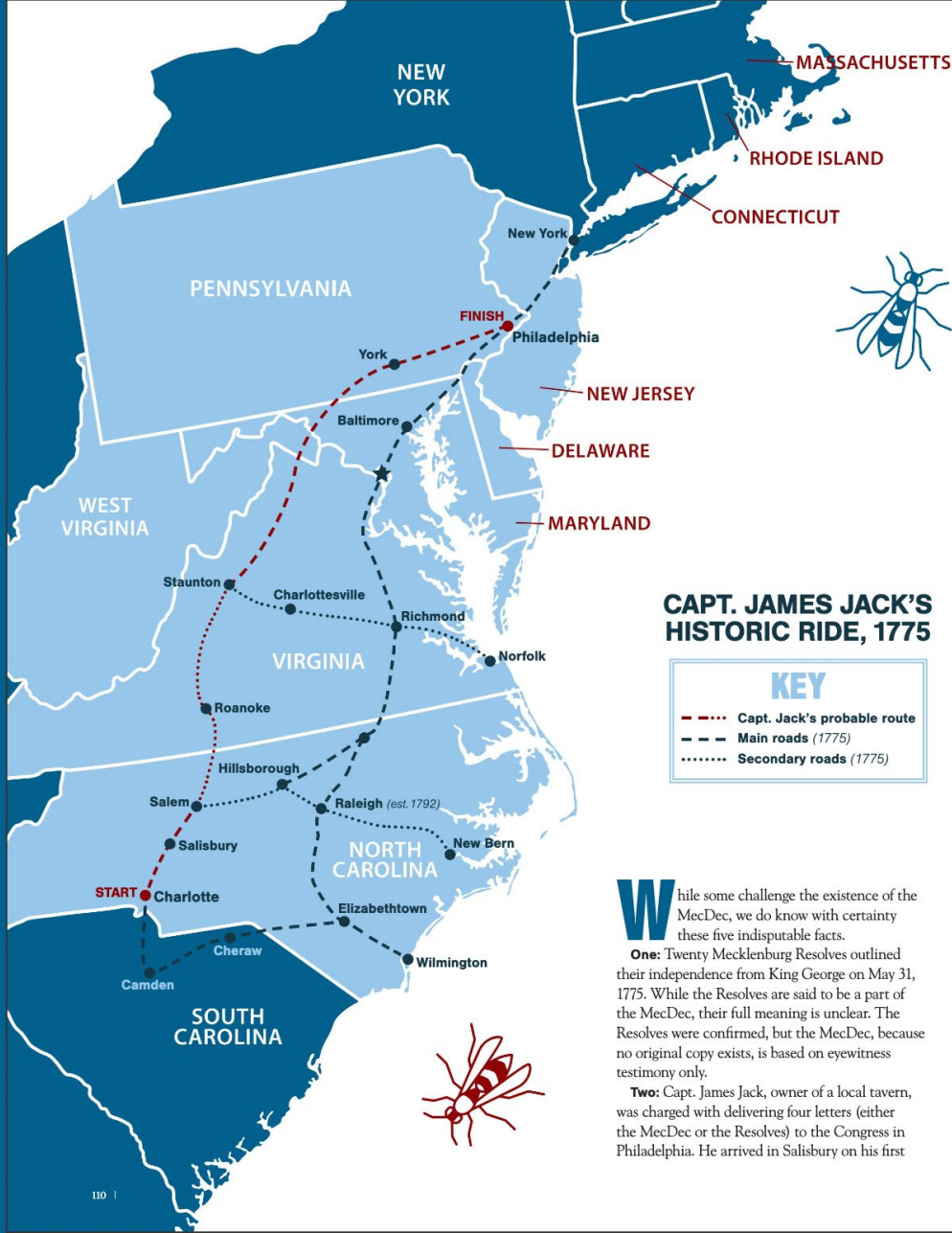
This May, the phrase “MecDec” will be popping up all over town. It isn’t the latest app, or a trending dance on TikTok. It’s the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, written by some of Charlotte’s most respected leaders and signed on May 20, 1775. That’s right, local rebels declared themselves “free and independent” a whole 15 months before the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. The MecDec — aka “MeckDec” or “Meck Dec” — is Charlotte’s story.

MecDec lore is full of treasonous letters, political intrigue and bare-knuckled brawlers. The local Scots-Irish militia developed a fierce reputation given to them by Gen. Cornwallis in the Revolution, who’d burned Charlotte, dubbing it a “hornet’s nest.” That was long after 1775, when local settlers had reached a breaking point from unjust taxation, a double-cross from King

George III that denied their children an education, and the heavy loss of life at the Battle of Lexington. This is the story that put backcountry Charlotte into the forefront of the Continental Congress and the king.

If you’re unfamiliar with the MecDec story, here’s a quick recap: On May 19, 1775, locals had gathered at the Mecklenburg County Courthouse when the brutal news of the Battle of Lexington was announced. They debated until 2 a.m., ending with a response that was life-altering: They’d created their own Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. At noon on May 20, Col. Thomas Polk read the MecDec by the courthouse door. This simple, passionate act set in motion a series of accusations, denials and betrayals that has haunted the United States for 250 years, making the MecDec the first U.S. conspiracy theory.





While some challenge the existence of the MecDec, we do know with certainty these five indisputable facts.

One: Twenty Mecklenburg Resolves outlined their independence from King George on May 31, 1775. While the Resolves are said to be a part of the MecDec, their full meaning is unclear. The Resolves were confirmed, but the MecDec, because no original copy exists, is based on eyewitness testimony only.

Two: Capt. James Jack, owner of a local tavern, was charged with delivering four letters (either the MecDec or the Resolves) to the Congress in Philadelphia. He arrived in Salisbury on his first



"The Spirit of Mecklenburg" by Charlotte sculptor Chas Fagan depicts Capt. James M. Smith's historic ride. The statue was unveiled in May 2010 near uptown.



day of riding. At the General court, Col. Kennon read the MecDec (or Resolves) into record.

Three: Jack's ride is confirmed by Royal Gov. Josiah Martin, who referenced the Resolves in a letter to the Earl of Dartmouth on June 30, 1775.

Four: Captain Jack rode 550 miles with the British Army and loyalist militia patrolling land. If he were caught, he would've been hanged in the gallows. Every person listed on the documents he carried, including his family, would have been killed and their lands confiscated. A perilous journey indeed, considering that Paul Revere was caught after 12 miles, and Captain Jack rode 50 times Revere's distance in hostile territory.

Five: While in Philadelphia, Jack delivered two copies of the letters to William Hooper and Richard Caswell, North Carolina delegates. Two more copies were left — one for Joseph Hughes, the third N.C. delegate, as well as one perhaps for the house speaker.

Meanwhile back in Mecklenburg, the countrymen hadn't known the Congress had extended an olive branch to King George, hoping for reconciliation following the battles of Lexington and Concord. Following Congress' actions with the king, Captain Jack received a letter that claimed Mecklenburg's declaration was "premature."

Dissension traveled fast. Mecklenburg was the first, but not the last town, to draw up Resolves in 1775, including Wilmington and others. The political climate in North Carolina, known for being almost impossible to govern, had reached a boiling point, with Gov. Martin fleeing New Bern. On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of

Independence was signed.

Years after Captain Jack's harrowing ride, attempts to uncover precisely what documents he presented to Congress (the MecDec or the Resolves) have taken writers, historians and other curiosity-seekers down a million and one rabbit holes, involving espionage, slander and various presidents.

If Cornwallis thought Charlotte was a "hornet's nest," a swarm awakened in 1819 when John Adams, the second U.S. president, read a reprinted article about the MecDec in the *Essex Register*. He quickly rattled off a letter poking at his frenemy, Thomas Jefferson, the third U.S. president and author of the Declaration of Independence. The implication was that Jefferson had plagiarized parts of the MecDec in writing the Declaration of Independence. "Had I known about it, I would have commented upon it from the day you entered Congress till the fourth of July, 1776," Adams wrote.

In his response on July 9, Jefferson stated that he believed the document was "spurious." But, it was too late — Adams had already sent another letter on July 15 to Rev. William Bentley, stating that Jefferson "has copied the spirit, the sense, and the expressions of [the MecDec] verbatim, into his Declaration of the 4th of July, 1776."

The confrontation between Adams and Jefferson fueled a juicy debate between the two emotionally charged men, with their integrity at stake. Although overwhelming personal testimony and oral history were in favor of the MecDec, it was also a moot point since the original document was destroyed in a house fire on April 6, 1800.

But the MecDec's story doesn't end with a fire and two bickering

If Stevenson found information that absolved Jefferson of plagiarism, why wasn't it published? Why did the MecDec article in Dispatch 34 disappear?

Six: If the MecDec was a "hoax," as some have said, why did four presidents and a first lady visit MecDec celebrations? Those dignitaries include William H. Taft in 1909, Woodrow Wilson in 1916, Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1954, Lady Bird Johnson in 1968 and Gerald Ford in 1975. Why was the MecDec date placed on the state flag? Or the Great Seal of North Carolina?

Seven: If North Carolina's commission in 1831 confirmed that Mecklenburg first declared independence, why isn't it well-known or widely celebrated in the 21st century?

Perhaps in time, those unresolved points will be answered. What is certain is that Charlotte carved out her identity during a fragile time in history. Its leaders unified to protect their families, becoming a legendary hornet's nest. They risked everything by adding their names to a declaration that could've signed their death warrants. They signed anyway.

Today, many are still unaware of Charlotte's rich history and sacrifices that turned a backcountry village into a modern city. Syfert says it best: The history "gives you a sense of grounding about Charlotte that you wouldn't have otherwise. It's the authentic story of Charlotte."

May is the perfect time to rediscover the rebels who declared themselves "free and independent" 250 years ago — before it was popular. Take a walk through Charlotte's legendary past. Grab a pint of Captain Jack pilsner at Olde Mecklenburg Brewery, stroll down Little Sugar Creek Greenway to see his statue by Charlotte artist Chas Fagan, or listen to a reading of the MecDec at Independence Square on May 20. **SP**

AUTHOR'S NOTE: A special "thank you" to Scott Syfert, who helped this new-to-Charlotte author navigate the MecDec's multilayered web. The MecDec has so many tendrils, it's easy to get lost, spending countless hours digging through the archives. The topic questions the fabric of what is known about history and a once beloved president whose character is called into question. It's also a great reminder about how ordinary people do extraordinary acts that make history.

REBEL READING

Read more of Charlotte's fascinating history by local authors.

The First American Declaration of Independence? The Disputed History of the Mecklenburg Declaration of May 20, 1775
by Scott Syfert

Who's Your Founding Father? One Man's Epic Quest to Uncover the First, True Declaration of Independence by David Fleming

Mecklenburg, First and Forever Free, a children's book by Julie Lentz Fogg and illustrated by Jolenna Mapes

REVOLUTIONARY THINGS TO DO AROUND CHARLOTTE IN MAY

The MecDec Trek, May 4, 1-4 p.m.

Take an urban hike with a MecDec theme, highlighting 14 important local landmarks.

jessebrown.com/event/urban-hike-in-charlotte/

Charlotte Liberty Walk

A self-guided audio tour of uptown Charlotte
551 S Tryon St., charlottelibrarywalk.com

Meck Dec 250 exhibit opening, May 22

Explore an interactive diorama of Charlotte in 1775, documents and artifacts from the Revolutionary era, and memorabilia from past MecDec celebrations.

Charlotte Museum of History, 3500 Shamrock Drive,
charlottemuseum.org

For more details on the following events (and others), visit
may20thsociety.org/events

MecDec Express, May 10, 3-5 p.m.

Author David Fleming leads a brew-infused guided bus tour of historical sites, with a stop at the Charlotte Museum of History. Meet at Lost Worlds Brewing Charlotte, 1100 Metropolitan Ave.

Captain Jack Bike Tour, May 18, 3-6 p.m.

BYOB (Bring your own bike) for this annual historic bike ride. Olde Mecklenburg Brewery, 4150 Yancey Road

Moot Court Debate, May 19

High school students debate the authenticity of the MecDec. Charles Jonas Federal Court House, 401 West Trade St.

20th Anniversary of Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence: Commemoration Ceremony, May 20

Celebrate the 1775 declaration at this annual event. Independence Square, at the intersection of Trade and Tryon streets

5th Annual Captain Jack Dinner, May 20, 5-8 p.m.

This year's dinner features an appearance by writer Andrew Waters.



Olde Mecklenburg Brewery

