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LIVES AND TIMES

*of the
27 Signers
of the*

*Mecklenburg Declaration
of Independence of
May 20, 1775*

PIONEERS EXTRAORDINARY

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PIONEER EXTRAORDINARY

CHAPTER VII

Hezekiah James Balch

Educated men, men of high moral character, when they move into a mere wilderness to establish their home, often with the Bible in their hands, are truly not "backwoodsmen" as the appellation is generally understood.

The 27 signers of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence of May 20, 1775, were men of this type; were it not true, they could not have conceived and composed that famous document—the world's first written declaration of human freedom by any people.

Hezekiah James Balch was such a man, minister, teacher, orator, graduate of Nassau Hall—known today as Princeton University.

When he signed the Declaration he was only 30 years of age. He was nevertheless already a seasoned thinker and imbued with the spirit of independence in human affairs it has been recorded he spoke fervently in favor of separation from the Mother Country.

History does not record whether or not he had been summonsed to the convention as a delegate. Or was he a

chance visitor? He may have been invited to serve as chaplain. In any event the convention delegates elected him as one of a committee of three to prepare the resolutions which were designed to eventually free Mecklenburg at least from the royal yoke.

The eastern part of the province had lived under royal rule 150 years or more and was more reluctant to break away from the Mother Country, but influenced by the boldness of the Mecklenburgians they soon took a positive stand against royal misrule.

Other members of the resolutions committee were: Dr. Ephraim Brevard and William Kennon, attorney—both fellow graduates of the young minister from Nassau Hall.

(This institution had been established a few years previously primarily as a theological seminary or training school for young Presbyterian ministers and to it had gone several other young Mecklenburgians.)

Hezekiah's family tree—its roots buried deep in old England and watered by royal blood, shows he was born in Hartford, County, Md., in the year 1745.

(This writer is indebted for the major portion of the information concerning the ancestors of this signer of the Declaration to Dr. Galusha B. Balch of Yonkers, N. Y., who in 1897 compiled a genealogical history of the Balch family in America. The fact is, though, it was transmitted to the writer by Miss Ruth Hall, librarian of the Beverly Historical Society of Beverly, Mass.—headquarters of the Balch Genealogical Society.

Dr. Balch stated the Balch family in America originated through two brothers of that name; one settled in Beverly, Mass., while the other took up his abode on the eastern shore of Maryland.

The name "Balch" is said to be of Welch origin. History first records the name early in the 1500s in England in the Bridgewater area. From that place about 1675 one John

Balch emigrated to America and settled in Maryland. He either brought his wife with him or he married Ann Bloomer after he reached Maryland. The facts on this phase of his life are not clear. But among his children was James Balch who married Ann Goodwin in Maryland.

About this period in their life (1743) they purchased a farm on Deer River in Maryland, called "Bond's Hope," and there it was Hezekiah James Balch was born in 1745.

The profession or trade of Hezekiah's father is not known, but it has been recorded he had been well educated and was a poet and had written several poems of considerable worth.

Certain chroniclers of early Mecklenburg have stated James Balch came to this area with his family about the year 1766 and that he sent his gifted son back to Nassau Hall to be trained for the ministry—further evidence of his high moral character. Young Hezekiah's name, however, does not appear in any manner in the annals of the period until his graduation from Nassau Hall in 1768. He was then ordained and appointed by the Donegal Presbytery (named after the original in Ireland) of Pennsylvania as pastor of Poplar Tent and Rocky River Presbyterian churches—then in Mecklenburg, but when Cabarrus was sliced off Mecklenburg in 1792 both churches fell within the bounds of Cabarrus county.

The history of the parents have been overshadowed by their illustrious son who in addition to his pastoral duties is said to have conducted a small school for the children of the congregations.

James and Ann Balch had several other children. Little is known of them here, but it has been stated two were educated for the Presbyterian ministry—Rev. James Balch who settled in Kentucky and established a noted family there; the other was Rev. Stephen Balch of Georgetown, S. C., while William settled as a planter in Georgia.

The Balch family tree also lists the following brothers and sisters of Hezekiah: Elizabeth, Margaret Ann, Amos, Rhoda, Rachel, John, Jane, in addition to Rev. Stephen and Rev. James Balch.

While Hezekiah was not the youngest signer of the Mecklenburg Declaration he was the first to fall before the scythe of the Grim Reaper; he died in April, 1776, less than one year after he subscribed to that immortal document.

Dr. Galusha Balch, in her history of the clan, was frank to declare that the laurels so long bestowed upon Thomas Jefferson should be accorded Hezekiah James Balch for his work on the Mecklenburg Declaration.

The cause of the death of the young patriot is not known. One can well imagine that in a wilderness where medical science was almost unknown many diseases, ordinarily curable, could easily become fatal.

Dr. J. B. Alexander, historian of the early 1900s wrote of him:

“It must be conceded that during his brief period of service on this earth, about seven years, he performed good pioneer work for the church and state . . . for the cause of liberty and education.”

Because of his early death and the absence or loss of church and courthouse records here but little is known of Hezekiah's personal life; the Balch family tree indicates he was not married. Early Mecklenburg histories, however, state he was married and had two children, but all record of his wife and children had been lost well over 150 years.

This writer nevertheless checked the land deed records in the Charlotte courthouse and discovered Hezekiah in 1773 purchased an 84-acre farm on the tongue of land formed by Coddle and Buffalo creeks—now in Cabarrus county.

Why, one might ask, would a young minister purchase a home if he were not married?

Checking this land deed further, it was discovered that Hezekiah sold the farm in January, 1776, and that in the transfer the deed was not only signed by himself, but his wife, "Martha Balch"—both in a firm, elegant handwriting.

Here, then, was indisputable proof of his marriage.

The witnesses to the deed had of course long passed away. Who was Martha Balch? Therein lay our next riddle. Discussing the problem one day with Prof. Chalmers Davidson of Davidson College, he stated Mr. Davis McWhorter of Bethel, N. C., had some data on the Balch family; so upon communicating with him I was informed Martha Balch married George Marlin McWhorter about the year 1782 in Mecklenburg county, but the marriage was not recorded here.

"He was a cousin of my great grandfather," Mr. McWhorter wrote, "and had been a pupil in the school Rev. Balch conducted at his home. Upon Hezekiah's death, his widow continued the school and young McWhorter assisted her as a teacher. They were later married and moved to Tennessee about 1785.

"George Marlin McWhorter's father, William McWhorter, had already sold his property (1779) in the Poplar Tent community and had settled near Nashville, Tenn. Upon going to Tennessee, George Marlin McWhorter was a teacher at a school first called Spring Hill Academy under the mastership of Rev. Thomas Brown Craighead, son of the celebrated Rev. Alexander Craighead, near Lebanon, Tenn."

Mr. McWhorter also wrote:

"Rev. Balch died intestate. His estate, however, was probated in Raleigh by his wife, Martha, and his brother, William. Martha's maiden name was Martha McCandless and it is believed Hezekiah married her in Pennsylvania. The two Balch children—Hezekiah, Jr., and daughter, Anne, never returned to Mecklenburg. Anne married Samuel Cald-

well, clerk of the court at Logan, Ky., and later a major-general in the War of 1812. They had nine children."

This bit of research cleared up the riddle of 150 years concerning Rev. Balch's marital status and confirmed the observation of Edgar Allen Poe 100 years ago: "That no man can concoct a riddle another man cannot solve."

Another riddle in connection with Rev. Hezekiah James Balch was the fact he had a cousin also named Hezekiah. He however never lived in Mecklenburg. Also a Presbyterian minister, he was ordained by the Orange Presbytery in Virginia. He preached for the major portion of his life in that State. He was married in Abingdon, Va.—whether to a member of the Established Church is not known, but since he was married by a minister of the Established Church and as a consequence Rev. Balch was called before the Presbytery and censured for his disloyalty.

Some time later he was again called before the Session of his church and charged with uttering remarks in the pulpit affecting the doctrines of the faith.

Because of the inconstancy of his cousin, Hezekiah James is said to have early in his career adopted the name "James" to distinguish himself from his erratic kin who however lived and preached throughout western Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee until his death in 1798.

Upon the death of Hezekiah James Balch in April, 1776, he was laid away in an unmarked grave in the cemetery of the Poplar Tent Presbyterian Church.

Some years later the grave was located and a 4x7 foot granite block was placed over the grave and on top of it was laid a thick marble slab on which was carved his name and date of death and that he was a signer of the Mecklenburg Declaration.

His memory was further perpetuated more recently by the Daughters of the American Revolution who inscribed

his name among the six signers (members of that community) to the bronze plaque placed in the wall of the church.

Hezekiah James Balch's services to his church, school and county, was further ornamented when he participated in the "Mecklenburg Resolves" convention of May 31, 1775, at which times the citizens of the county, realizing they had by their Declaration, erased all governmental authority in the community, established a temporary form of government or until the newly created commonwealth of North Carolina could adopt a constitutional form of government and thereby a permanent government for the province.

Had it not been for the early visit of the Grim Reaper, Hezekiah James Balch would no doubt have attained even greater honors and rendered his adopted county greater service in his profession and other fields of human endeavor.

REFERENCES:

Aside from the courthouse records, land deeds, etc., and the information furnished the author by Davis McWhorter of Bethel, N. C., the major portion of the genealogical history of this Signer was obtained from the Balch Family History by Dr. Galusha B. Balch, pub. 1897, through the courtesy of Miss Ruth Hall, Librarian, Beverly, Mass., the Poplar Tent church history and the Collected Colonial Records of North Carolina.