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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 I

Ephraim Brevard

May 20, 1775, Mecklenburg rightly celebrate as one of the great days in American history, like Bunker Hill Day in Massachusetts, Constitution Day in California, Alamo Day in Texas, for it was on that date a delegation of pioneers of Mecklenburg county met in Charlotte and adopted their famous Declaration of Independence from England.

Among the most respected of the 27 signers of that immortal document was Dr. Ephraim Brevard, not solely because he was the first to sign that great instrument of human liberty and freedom, but for the additional reason history records the statement he was its author and the clerk of the convention at which it was adopted; also that he was one of Charlotte's first physicians and rather than wholly of Scotch-Irish ancestry (which settled the county) he was the grandson of a French Huguenot emigre.

His life was romantic, tragic, which was true of so many of our pioneers, but honorable, interesting and fateful.

Dr. Ephraim Brevard was not a native Mecklenburgian.

He was born in Cecil county, Md. The year on the best authority, was 1744; his place of birth, however, did not

in any manner temperate his intense belief in the political and religious freedom of his adopted county, but is it not sufficient for us that Ephraim Brevard was born and that circumstances brought him to Mecklenburg county?

The year of this important event was 1747; he was then only three years of age. His brother, Adam Brevard, once wrote their parents first stopped in Orange county; at least, for one year, then moved on to the community now embraced by the county of Iredell (organized 1778).

Mecklenburg was not formed as a county until 1762, so when the Brevards arrived here the surrounding country was a dense wilderness and inhabited only by Indians and various wild animals.

News of the fine lands that lay along the river now known as our own Catawba had some time previously reached Maryland and as a consequence several emigrants from that province made their way into this section.

Among the earliest settlers in what is now Iredell county was Alexander Osborne, founder of the notable Osborne families in Mecklenburg and Rowan counties; he had married Agnes McWhorter whose sister, Jane, became the wife of John Brevard—Ephraim's father—and it was they perhaps who induced the Brevards to cast their fortunes with them in this area.

Thomas Spratt is generally recognized as the first settler in what is now south Mecklenburg; he had come down from Pennsylvania and was soon followed by a young surveyor from Pennsylvania—Thomas Polk, who if not previously so soon met and became enamoured of the Spratt's daughter, Susanna, and in due course they were married.

Their first child was a daughter, called Martha, who became the wife of the subject of this sketch—Dr. Ephraim

Brevard, who had come to Charlotte about the year 1771 to practice his profession.

Dr. Brevard's father, as noted above, was John Brevard, later to become one of Rowan counties most prominent citizens and upon its formation as a county in 1753 he was appointed sheriff.

His wife was a daughter of the noted Dr. Hugh McWhorter of New Castle, Del., which lay across the river from the Brevard's home in Maryland, and traced their ancestry to certain martyred dissenters in England.

Their first child was Ephraim Brevard.

John Brevard also possessed an excellent heritage. His father was a native of France and had found it necessary to leave France because of his Protestantism. He first went to Ulster county in Ireland. "Words in the night" had led him to believe religious liberty could be found there. And at the time that was true, but when he finally reached Ireland the Established Church of England was in power.

Ulster was accordingly in a political and religious turmoil.

Among the friends the French emigre (his first name is not known) made in Ireland was a family by the name of McKnitt who had learned of the religious freedom permitted in Maryland and as it is recorded in history they invited the Brevard emigre to accompany them to America.

Realizing he could not return to France, and perhaps enamoured of the McKnitt's youthful daughter, he promptly accepted their invitation and soon thereafter they were on the high seas bound for America.

The McKnitts settled in Cecil county, Md., where the young couple was soon married.

John Brevard was their first child and when he had reached manhood's estate he married Jane McWhorter, sister of Agnes, already the wife of Alexander Osborne, and if not inspired by reports from the Osbornes upon the cli-

mate and fine soil of the Mecklenburg area, then as a companion for Agnes Osborne, the Brevards moved their growing family to North Carolina.

John and Jane Brevard had eight sons and all attained high prominence in their adopted county and seven of them served in the Revolutionary War.

They were not backwoodsmen in any manner, the Brevards or the Osbornes; but were rather educated, gentle folks, with an excellent background and a determination to make themselves responsible citizens of their adopted county.

Both John Brevard and Alexander Osborne appeared before the Provincial Assembly in the year 1750 and each obtained three grants of land.

The Collected Colonial Records show that John Brevard obtained three grants—one for 360 acres, another for 600 acres and one for 400 acres, for a total of 1,360 acres, all “located in Anson county.”

(Alexander Osborne also obtained three grants.)

These grants, however, while indicated as located in Anson county, actually lay in Iredell county, as known today, but are marked on General Joseph Graham’s map of this area in 1789 as within the bounds of Mecklenburg county.

When Ephraim Brevard was but a mere child he lost one eye while playing in the woods near his home; he nevertheless was later placed under the tutelage of a neighboring classical scholar, Crowfield Academy, and later sent to the grammar school in Prince Edward county, Va. From there he went on to Nassau Hall as the College of New Jersey was then called (now Princeton University.)

He was accompanied to Nassau Hall by his cousin, Adlai Osborne, who later became a prominent citizen in Rowan county (formed 1753).

Other Mecklenburgers who attended Nassau about that time were Waightstill Avery, David Reese and Hezekiah James Balch—all signers of the Mecklenburg Declaration.

Another signer, Waightstill Avery, was then an instructor at Nassau.

Ephraim Brevard later moved up to Philadelphia where he studied medicine under the noted Dr. David Ramsey who a year or two later moved to Somerset county, Md., and young Brevard accompanied him there as his assistant, but about 1771 he returned to Iredell. Soon thereafter he discovered Charlotte was a thriving village of five years of age and accordingly moved to Charlotte to practice his profession.

He had been well trained, educated in the classics, as was true of several Mecklenburgians of the day. He had been reared in the Presbyterian faith. The county had been settled almost exclusively by members of that faith; so he early attained a high place in the annals of his adopted county—politically and in education as in his profession and the church.

Capt. Thomas Polk, who had some years previously married Susannah Spratt, was at that time perhaps the most prominent citizen of the community and his daughter, Martha Polk, was then the village's most popular young lady and in due course she was married to Dr. Brevard.

"She died early in life," wrote Dr. J. B. Alexander in his history of early Mecklenburg, "and was interred in the Old Settlers cemetery on West 5th St."

Their only child was a daughter, called "Margaret" by some chroniclers of the period, but she was no doubt named in honor of her mother; for Dr. Brevard refers to her in his will as "my infant daughter, Martha."

Dr. Brevard's will devised his entire estate to Martha—then a mere child; he also provided his "orphan daughter" be allowed to remain "in the home where she now resides."

(The home was not indicated). His estate consisted for the most part of real estate lots on Tryon and Trade streets in Charlotte. (He was the first owner of the lot where Kress Dept. Store now stands, paying 3 pounds—shillings); he also provided his “worthy father-in-law, Thomas Polk,” should be the guardian of his “infant daughter, Martha,” jointly with his “trusted friend, John McKnitt Alexander, a brother, Alexander Brevard, and Rev. Thos. M. McColl,” all of whom were to act as executors of the estate.

Martha is said to have married Henry Dickerson of Camden, S. C., where following her mother’s death she may have resided with her uncle, Hon. Joseph Brevard—then a prominent lawyer there. Mr. Dickerson was an Englishman; he had entered America from Bermuda, but was naturalized in 1802; Martha, too, died early; they had one child, called Joseph Polk Dickerson, who as a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Mexican War of 1848-49 lost his life in the battle at Churubusco.

(Col. Dickson had married Emma Dyson, but they had no children.)

Another important event in the short life of Dr. Ephraim Brevard was his appointment as a trustee and instructor at the Queen’s Museum Academy.

The citizens of the community had observed the various ministers who had come into the county and established a number (7) of fine Presbyterian congregations had passed over on the western slope of life; that it would soon be necessary to replace them with young men. They accordingly decided to establish in Charlotte a classical school and seminary. In due course a petition was submitted the Provincial Legislature for a charter. The solons approved the petition, but when it was received by the King he ordered it revoked upon the belief it would only breed more dissenters and spread republicanism and the charter was denied.

The citizens ignored the king's order and purchased land at the corner of the present-day streets, Third and South Tryon, and erected a small building for the college they proposed to operate without a charter; Dr. Brevard was authorized to visit his maternal uncle, Dr. Alex McWhorter, in Maryland and offer him the post of headmaster.

Dr. McWhorter declined the offer. Later, the Legislature granted the college a charter, provided it would accept a minister of the Established Church as headmaster. This scheme, of course, would defeat the aim and purpose of the institution; so the offer was declined and the local citizens proceeded with the unchartered school.

Because of his educational advantages he was selected as clerk of the Declaration Convention on May 19th and was also appointed a member of the resolution committee, jointly with Rev. Hezekiah James Balch¹ and William Kennon², a lawyer, and as the world knows today the Declaration as composed by them was adopted.

Hostilities soon broke out in the Cross Creek or the Fayetteville section (February, 1776) when the Tories attempted to suppress the independent movement there; the Safety Committee of Mecklenburg ordered Capt. Thomas Polk to lead a regiment of militiamen to the patriots' assistance; Dr. Brevard had a student body of 21 young men in the college. All of them volunteered and with Dr. Brevard accompanied his father-in-law to Fayetteville.

After a march of 125 miles through the wilderness they arrived too late to participate in the battle — Moore's Creek bridge, near Wilmington, where the enemy was routed. Capt. Polk thereupon returned with his troops to Charlotte and Dr. Brevard again assumed his duties at the college which however was soon forced to close its doors because of the Revolution. With John McKnitt Alexander, he was

¹Ibid. Page 73.

²Ibid. Page 185.

again called upon to prepare a set of resolutions for the delegates Mecklenburg selected to represent the county in the State's organizational or constitutional convention at New Bern in 1777.

With North Carolina organized as a State, the Mecklenburgians again asked the General Assembly for a charter for its college which they called "Liberty Hall" instead of "Queen's College;" but the old name was the one more generally used and while a different organization operates a college in Charlotte it's still the name of the local institution.

Dr. Brevard was again made a trustee, but soon thereafter he entered the American army as a surgeon and was sent to the hospital at Charleston, S. C. The British eventually captured the city and Dr. Brevard was made a prisoner.

All of the prominent citizens were imprisoned in the fort at St. Augustine, Fla.

But Dr. Brevard was retained as a surgeon and treated not only the English, but American prisoners. His health finally failed, due to bad food and unsanitary conditions; he was then discharged and allowed to make his way back to Charlotte. The city was then in the hands of the enemy. He accordingly decided to seek a haven with his aged mother in Iredell county.

The route lay through Alexandrianna, (the community now called Croft), where his friend and compatriot, John McKnitt Alexander, resided; he stopped for a period with the Alexanders, but his disease had so disabled him further travel was beyond his strength. Dr. Wm. Read of the Southern American army was called to attend him, but his services were of no avail and the beloved Dr. Ephraim Brevard passed away in the Alexander home in July, 1781, age 37 years.

Early historians recorded the statement his body was brought back to Charlotte and interred beside his wife, Martha, in the old 5th street cemetery.

Brevard street in Charlotte was named in honor of this noble patriot and signer of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence.

REFERENCES:

This Signer's family line having expired with the death of his only grandson, the genealogical history was obtained for the most part from the Polk and Spratt family history; the sketch of his life by Lyman Draper, Dr. J. B. Alexander and earlier Mecklenburg chroniclers, the Courthouse records, the Signer's will, the Collected Colonial Records of North Carolina, particularly the laws and history of establishment of Queens College; my research covered a period of several months and consultation of all early records of Mecklenburg