



SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN LEADERS

✓ BY

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CHAPTER XI

ALEXANDER CRAIGHEAD AND THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF MECKLENBURG IN NORTH CAROLINA.

ALEXANDER CRAIGHEAD was a Scot, born in North Ireland. He crossed the Atlantic to the colony of Pennsylvania and was there ordained as a minister by the Presbytery of Donegal, of the Synod of Philadelphia, about the close of the year 1735. Craighead's heart was filled with love for his fellowmen. With warm, eager appeals he sought to persuade them to become Christians. He heard Whitefield preach and was filled with admiration for the man and his ways. Craighead possessed in a large measure the same power to move men's hearts that marked Whitefield. Of course he became a member of the New Side party and tried to promote revivals of religion among his people. Craighead had strong, clear views about the right of the individual man to do as he pleased in the matter of religious worship, and about the rights of the individual man in the government of the community. A pamphlet concerning civil government was circulated in the colony of Pennsylvania. This pamphlet gave great offense to the governor of the colony. He thought that the writer of it claimed too much freedom for each citizen of the province. When the governor was told that Alexander Craighead was the writer of the paper, he laid the pamphlet before the Synod of Philadelphia of which Craighead was a member. The synod expressed its disapproval of the views set forth in the pamphlet. It said, also, that Craighead had not been given the authority to speak for the synod with reference to matters of civil government. It was charged

that Craighead was "tinged with an uncharitable and party spirit." Probably for the reason that he found himself in advance of his brethren in Pennsylvania concerning freedom in church and in state, Craighead left that colony and came to the mountains of Virginia.

In 1749 Craighead made his home on the Cow Pasture River, in Augusta County, Virginia, within the borders of the present Windy Cove congregation. In 1755 he was one of the original members of the Hanover Presbytery. Then came the days of terror that followed the defeat of Braddock in July, 1755. Craighead's people lived in a place of danger on the western border of the Virginia settlements. Many of them, therefore, gathered up their household goods and moved eastward across the Blue Ridge. Then they turned their faces southward, crossed the Dan and Yadkin rivers, and found homes in the beautiful country between the Yadkin and the Catawba, in North and South Carolina. Craighead went with his people. Another reason led him away from the Virginia frontier, in addition to the danger from the Indians. That reason was the injustice shown at that time to dissenting ministers by the colonial government in Virginia. These ministers were not allowed to perform the rite of marriage for their own people. Craighead loved liberty and he wished for himself and brethren privileges as great as those enjoyed by Episcopal ministers. Since these were not granted in Virginia, he sought North Carolina as a place of freedom.

About ten years before Craighead entered North Carolina, that is, about 1746, a stream of Scots began to move across the Yadkin from the northward. These early settlers built homes in that fair region between the Catawba and Yadkin which is sometimes called Mesopotamia. Many of the family names of these

early settlers in North Carolina, and also of the colonists in the upper part of South Carolina, were the names borne by John Hoge's people on the Opecquon and by John Craig's congregation, in the Valley of Virginia. The same homes in the north of Ireland, no doubt, sent forth all of these God-fearing men and women to build homes and churches and schoolhouses in Virginia and the Carolinas. Similar names were given to mountains and streams in the frontier regions of these three colonies. Bethel, Bethesda and Providence, as the names of churches, have been left, moreover, all along the pathway of the Scots as they journeyed from Pennsylvania to Georgia. The place of worship was for them the house of God (Bethel), the house of mercy (Bethesda), and the symbol of Jehovah's protecting care (Providence).

In the year 1758, Alexander Craighead became pastor of the Presbyterian congregation on Rocky River, in North Carolina. He was installed in this office by William Richardson, who was appointed by the Hanover Presbytery to perform this service. Rocky River was, therefore, the name of the oldest church in the western Carolina country. Until the time of his death, in 1766, Craighead was the only pastor in the land between the rivers Yadkin and Catawba.

Within the bounds of the Rocky River congregation there ran a little creek with the Indian name of Sugaw. It is now called Sugar Creek. On the bank of that little stream a log church was built and Craighead preached there regularly to a part of his congregation. For a distance of fifteen or twenty miles on every side, Craighead's people walked or rode to the Sugar Creek Church. As this place of worship stood near the center of the land occupied by the Scots between the Yadkin and Catawba, it soon became the largest of Craighead's congregations.

In the year 1762, the county of Mecklenburg was laid off in this region and named after the wife of King George the Third of England, Queen Charlotte, who was a princess of the German house of Mecklenburg. A town was established within the bounds of Sugar Creek congregation, about three miles from the church, as the county seat of Mecklenburg County. This town was called Charlotte, likewise in honor of the queen.

About 1765 two ministers, Spencer and McWhorter, came to North Carolina, bearing the authority given to them by the Synod of New York and Philadelphia. In accordance with Craighead's desire, these two evangelists divided the territory of Mecklenburg County into a number of separate church congregations. In the usual solemn manner elders were chosen and ordained by the laying on of hands in the following churches: Steel Creek, Providence, Hopewell, Centre, and Poplar Tent.

These congregations, with the Rocky River congregation, formed a circle around the Sugar Creek Church. Craighead was chief shepherd, while he lived, of the entire group of seven churches. These congregations were spread over the territory of the present Mecklenburg and Cabarras counties and a part of the present Iredell County, North Carolina.*

The lives of the people who lived in this region were moulded in large measure by Alexander Craighead. The religious beliefs in which he carefully instructed them were drawn from the Bible in accordance with the Westminster Confession of Faith. He taught them that God must be worshipped every day in the home and every Lord's Day in the church in a solemn and devout manner. The standard of conduct which he set before them by precept and example was that type of simple piety in

*The church of Thyatira in Rowan county was probably organized at the same time by Spencer and McWhorter.

which the warm heart and the generous hand unite together to give expression to the Christian's faith in God.

Craighead taught his people also those principles of individual liberty in the home, in church government and in state government, that now form the basis of our lives as Christians and as citizens of a common country. He came from Virginia to North Carolina to assert his rights and privileges as a minister in the Church of Christ. He continued to claim that the British colonial government had no right nor authority to take away his privileges as an ordained officer in the church. He taught his people that they, as home-builders and as defenders of the Western Carolina country, had the right to manage their home affairs—a right which the governor of the colony could not take from them.

We shall see how Craighead's teaching bore much good fruit in the land of Mecklenburg, not very long after he was laid to rest (1766) in the old church yard at Sugar Creek. Two small sassafras branches were used to carry his body to the place of burial by the side of the old log church, about half a mile west of the present brick house of worship. The two branches were set in the ground to mark the head and foot of Craighead's grave. They took root and grew up as tall, strong trees. In like manner the words and the example of this man of God took root and grew in the lives of the people of that land.

On the third Friday in May, 1768, Joseph Alexander, a relative of John McKnitt Alexander, became Craighead's successor as the pastor of Sugar Creek Church. All of the ministerial work of Craighead was for the time laid upon him. Alexander established an advanced school, known as a classical school, at the Sugar Creek Church. In this work he was aided by a teacher named Benedict. In 1770 this school was re-

moved to the town of Charlotte and called Quéén's Museum, or College. After the Revolution began, the name of the school was changed to Liberty Hall Academy. Alexander himself went to Bullock's Creek in York District, South Carolina, and there for nearly thirty years he was pastor of the church and the principal of a famous Greek and Latin school.