



Mecklenburg: First in Freedom

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

In remembering the past, is it important to separate the truth from legend?

Standards

Social Studies

I.1.1, I.1.2, I.1.3, I.1.4, I.1.5, I.1.6, I.1.7, I.1.8, I.1.9, I.1.10

3-5.B.1, 3-4.B.1.2,

4.C&G.1

3-5.G.1.1

3-5.H.1, 3.H.1.2, 3.H.1.3, 4-5.H.1.4, 4-5.H.1.5, 4.H.1.6

English Language Arts

RI.3-5.1, RI.3-5.2, RI.3-5.3, RI.3-5.4, RI.3-5.5, RI.3-5.6, RI.3-5.7, RI.4-5.9, RI.3-5.10

RF.3-5.4, RF.3-5.5

W.3-5.1, W.3-5.2

SL.3-5.1, SL.3-5.2

L.3-5.1, L.3-5.2, L.3-5.3, L.3-5.4, L.3-5.6

Objectives

- Evaluate primary source evidence related to the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence and Resolves.
- Assess the credibility of various accounts and perspectives.
- Take part in a classroom trial to evaluate whether the date of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence should remain on the state flag.

Lesson Contents

The citizens of Mecklenburg were intent on defending their rights from perceived injustices from Parliament. Local leaders met in Charlotte on May 19, 1775, when they heard about the Battle of

Lexington and Concord. They wrote and published resolutions in the newspaper and sent Captain James Jack to Philadelphia to deliver the document to the three North Carolina delegates at the Continental Congress. Later accounts of the resolves called it a “Declaration of Independence,” but the published Mecklenburg Resolves still offered a sliver of hope for reconciliation with Great Britain. The only copy of what was later termed “the Mecklenburg Declaration” burned in the clerk of that convention’s house in 1800. The clerk, John McKnitt Alexander, later created several copies from memory and sent at least two to colleagues and passed another down to his son, J.M. Alexander, Jr. Detractors of the “MeckDec” say that witnesses later in life remembered announcements of the May 31 Resolves, rather than a declaration of independence on May 20. Unless an original Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence surfaces, historians will remain skeptical. The date of the alleged MeckDec (May 20, 1775) is part of North Carolina’s claim to be “First in Freedom.” Despite the controversy, the state flag promotes both the dates of the MeckDec and the Halifax Resolves.

Primary Sources

“Charlotte Town May 31, 1775...Resolves,” *North-Carolina Gazette*, June 16, 1775, p. 3, State Archives of N.C., newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn84026629/1775-06-16/ed-1/seq-3/.

Mecklenburg “Declaration of Independence,” *Raleigh Register*, April 30, 1819, p. 1, UNC collection, newspapers.com/article/weekly-raleigh-register-mecklenburg-decl/5825409/.

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, June 22, 1819; Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 9 July 1819; John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 21, 1819, *Founders Online*, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-14-02-0409-0001. Original source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Retirement Series, vol. 14, *1 February to 31 August 1819*, ed. J. Jefferson Looney. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, pp. 447–448, 523–525, 545–546.

“Declaration of Independence by the Citizens of Mecklenburg County on the Twentieth Day of May, 1775 with Accompanying Documents and the Proceedings of the Cumberland Association,” Raleigh: Lawrence & Lemay, printers to the State, 1831, pp. 15–19 for Depositions, Y154 2:M4 1831, State Library of N.C. and loc.gov/item/02003677/.

Sketch of Proposed North Carolina State Flag, General Assembly Session Records, 1885, HB427, State Archives of N.C.

Laws and Resolutions of the State of North Carolina, *Passed by the General Assembly at Its Session* [1885], p. 539, State Publications collection, State Library of N.C., digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/laws-and-resolutions-of-the-state-of-north-carolina-passed-by-the-general-assembly-at-its-session-1885/3889552?item=3915544.

Assignment Options

(files on thumb drive)

- **Glossary**
- **Background: Charlotte Patriots**
- **Mock Trial: Teacher's Notes**
- **Mock Trial: Lawyer**
- **Mock Trial: Judge and Jury**
- **Evidence Tracker**
- **EXHIBIT A: Mecklenburg Resolves**
- **EXHIBIT B: Declaration of Independence**
- **EXHIBIT C: Adams-Jefferson Correspondence**
- **EXHIBIT D: Jack, Cummins, and Graham Depositions**
- **Activity: Design a New State Flag**
- **Exit Tickets**

Supplies

- Black robe (optional)
- Gavel (optional)

Lesson Preparation

Please read the lesson plan and review the materials to choose the options that are best suited for you and your students.

- Plan to project images and discuss or print double-sided copies of **Background: Charlotte Patriots** for each student or group. Note: slides and discussion may be more appropriate for upper levels.
- **Activity: Document Analysis** may be used to evaluate any or all of the documents. Decide whether to use and how many to print.
- Print a copy of the **Glossary** for each student or group to use as a reference as they work through the lesson. Consider selecting relevant words to create vocabulary exercises.
- Prepare for your students to examine the 4 groups of evidence, **EXHIBITS A-D**, in order to consider arguments for and against keeping the MeckDec date on the state flag. Print the number of copies you will need for the judge and 3 groups to study and prepare for their roles (prosecution, defense, and jury). Print **EXHIBITS A & B** single sided so that students can compare them side by side.

- Make enough single-sided copies of the **Evidence Tracker** for each student or group to use with each piece of evidence (8 pieces in EXHIBITS A-D). Each print will include 2 trackers. If this option for notes is useful, print the appropriate number and cut in half. As an option, tracker questions may be used without the prints. Consider having students keep a notebook or folder or display questions in your room for reference during class discussions of the evidence.
- Plan to divide students into 3 groups—a prosecution team, a defense team, and a jury (an additional student can play the judge role).
- Preview the short video, “Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence,” by the Charlotte Liberty Walk to decide if it will clarify the lesson for students or be too redundant:
[youtube.com/watch?v=SI0g5YcpZtc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SI0g5YcpZtc).
- Review **Mock Trial: Teacher’s Notes** and print 1 copy if desired.
 - Decide how much time you will allow your students to prepare for and to hold the trial.
 - Choose your teams, how you will decide who is on which team, and how to break down your class into the necessary components (prosecution, defense, and jury).
 - Print instruction sheets single-sided:
 - **Mock Trial: Lawyers**
 - **Mock Trial: Judge and Jury**
- Plan to print or project images and discuss **Activity: Design a New State Flag**.
- If using **Exit Tickets**, choose which to use and print a page for every 4 students single-sided. Cut the pages into 4. Four ticket options are included in this lesson.

Connecting to Background Knowledge

(5 minutes)

- Ask: *When historians study documents and artifacts, how do they determine what is true?*
Student answers will vary but could include that they connect the piece to known events at the time, they study the credibility of the author, they compare one account to other accounts, they infer meaning from internal clues, etc.

Procedure

Introduction

(20 minutes)

- Distribute **Background: Charlotte Patriots** or lead a brief discussion with slides. Review “Quick Fact Check” answers.
- **1770 “Compleat” map**: have students point out Mecklenburg County, the courthouse, Alexander’s property, and additional points of interest.
- Project an image of the North Carolina state flag or pull your classroom flag to the center. Briefly discuss the flag with the class, including color symbolism and the seal image. The two gold scrolls contain the dates of North Carolina’s early steps towards independence: the alleged

Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, May 20, 1775, and the Halifax Resolves, April 12, 1776. Consider projecting the Halifax Resolves to discuss with the class, digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/provincial-congress-halifax-april-1776-journal/439628?item=439665.

- Explain that North Carolina's slogan, "First in Freedom," is related to these two dates that represent bold strides toward independence from England during the year prior to the U.S. Declaration of Independence. The Halifax Resolves were passed by the Provincial Congress, but the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, or "MeckDec," is questionable. Because of this uncertainty, some people want to change the state flag. *Was North Carolina truly first in freedom? Is the story that the flag represents true?*

Activity 1: Examine the Evidence, Part 1

(30 minutes)

- If desired, watch the 3-minute video, "Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence," youtube.com/watch?v=SI0g5YcpZtc. Facilitate a brief discussion about what the video shared as fact and what remains unknown.
- Distribute **EXHIBITS A & B** to individuals or pairs to examine closely. Discuss as a class or divide into teams (prosecution, defense, and judge and jury) to compare and contrast the sections of the 2 newspaper articles that come closest to proclaiming independence. Remind the class to look at the years each was written and explain that the author of the 1819 "Declaration of Independence" was the son of the clerk or secretary of the group of local leaders who wrote the statements in 1775 and based his article off notes his father wrote after 1800.
- Distribute **Activity: Document Analysis**, and/or **Evidence Tracker** sheets, if desired. Another option for students to think critically about each and record their thoughts is to add notes to 2 lists they create in their journals: "Evidence for" and "Evidence against."
- Facilitate discussion to compare and contrast these two pieces of evidence. Have students refrain from sharing their opinions or arguments outside of their role-playing teams.

Activity 2: Examine the Evidence, Part 2

(30 minutes)

- Divide students into their teams (prosecution, defense, and judge & jury). Distribute **EXHIBITS C & D** for close examination (possibly with **Activity: Document Analysis** and/or **Evidence Trackers**).
- Each of these **EXHIBITS** has 3 parts. Encourage a jigsawing activity within each team to divide up the parts of each and summarize for the rest of the group.
- Distribute **Mock Trial: Lawyer** and **Mock Trial: Judge & Jury** instruction sheets to the appropriate groups. Allow time for groups to discuss, take notes, and the prosecution and defense teams to begin building their cases.

Activity 3: The MeckDec on Trial

(30-45 minutes)

- *After examining the evidence, it's now time to judge whether the May 20, 1775 date should remain on the state flag.*
- When students have finished their preparations, review the order of the trial. If desired, rearrange the classroom to resemble a courtroom.
- Hold the mock trial. Work your way through the trial proceedings as described in the **Teacher's Notes** and **Mock Trial: Lawyer**.
- When the trial is complete, give the jury time to deliberate. Meanwhile, the prosecution and defense can meet as teams to reflect on their statements and strength of the case they made. When the jury has reached a verdict, allow the foreman to proclaim it to the class.

Exit Tickets: 3 options are available for student choice or in case the lesson extends multiple days.

(5 minutes)

- *Did you agree with the mock trial verdict? Why or why not?*
- *Do you think state symbols like the flag should ever change? Why or Why not?*
- *Does it matter if the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence was real? Why or why not?*

Modifications

- Student pages could be shared with students needing to take notes individually, with vision issues, or who have issues focusing.
- Students could be paired with a higher-achieving or differently behaving student for extra support.
- Consider the specific talents of your students. Who is a quick thinker and always has a snappy retort? That student would excel at the rebuttal portion of a trial. Who has excellent stage presence and isn't afraid to stand or speak in front of others? Those students would make excellent lawyers for either team. Who excels at being able to see both sides of an issue? Those students would make great jurors. Who is great at putting words together forcefully or creatively? Those students will make excellent speech writers.

Extension Activities

- Research specific people connected with the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, like Joseph Graham and Captain James Jack. NCPedia is a great place to go for information about Graham and Jack. Find information about each signer, cmstory.org/exhibits/mecklenburg-declaration-independence-all-about-declaration/all-about-declaration.

- Imagine that an original copy of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence is found. Where has it been hiding? How did it get there? Who found it? Write the story.
- In light of findings in the trial, is there enough evidence for North Carolina to claim to be **“First in Freedom?”** Write a position paper to send to a legislator, newspaper, or post on social media.

Field Trip Connections

James K. Polk Birthplace State Historic Site in Pineville, jameskpolk.net/.

Liberty Walk in Downtown Charlotte, charlottelibertywalk.com/.

Hezekiah Alexander Rock House, part of the Charlotte Museum of History, charlottemuseum.org/visit/exhibits-grounds/1774-alexander-homesite/.

Recommended Resources

“The Mecklenburg Declaration,” *NCPedia*, ncpedia.org/anchor/mecklenburg-declaration.

May 20th Society, **“History of MeckDec,”** may20thsociety.org/history/.

The History Channel, **“Jefferson & Adams: Founding Frenemies,”** history.com/articles/jefferson-adams-founding-frenemies.