



# The Herald

## Presbyterian Heritage Center at Montreat

Vol. 17, No. 1

Spring 2025

### Helene in Montreat, The Exhibit

On the afternoon of September 26, 2024, the National Weather Service posted an urgent message alerting people in western North Carolina of an incoming hurricane. It read, in part:

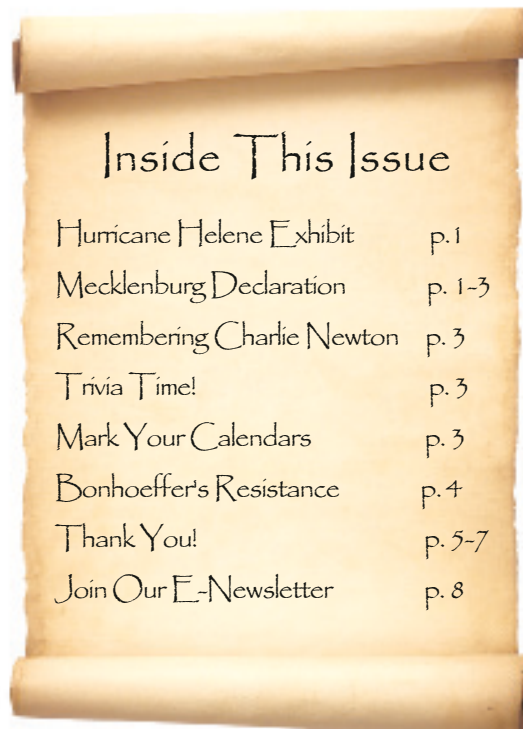
*“This will be one of the most significant weather events to happen [in WNC] in the modern era. Record flooding is forecasted and has been compared to the floods of 1916 in the Asheville area.... We cannot stress the significance of this event enough.”*

For western North Carolina, the 1916 flood had been the standard by which all other floods were measured – and for which flood mitigation policies were written.

In 1916, the Swannanoa River crested at 20.7 feet. In 2024, it crested at 27.33 feet. The level of flooding was nearly seven feet higher than anything WNC had ever experienced or planned for.

Six months later, cooperation among town, college, and retreat center employees, residents, and aid organizations has led to recovery in Montreat. A new exhibit documenting the damage and recovery will open at the Presbyterian Heritage Center this summer.

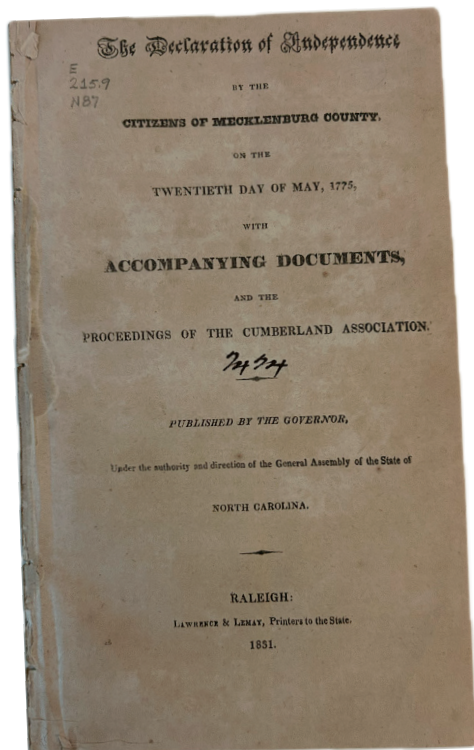
Numerous survivors have shaped the exhibit by sharing images, videos, and quotes. We are still accepting exhibit materials.



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### 250 Years: Mecklenburg Declaration



On April 30, 1819, the front page of the *Raleigh Register and North-Carolina Gazette* featured a manuscript titled “Declaration of Independence.”

The text of the article was not that of the well-known United States Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776. Instead, it appeared to be a declaration made by the citizens of Mecklenburg County, NC, “more than a year before Congress made theirs.”

The Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence was said to have been signed 250 years ago on May 20, 1775, by a group of 26 to 28 men who were—with perhaps one or two exceptions—all Presbyterian.

*1831 Report Investigating the Mecklenburg Declaration's Authenticity, PHC Collection*

Mecklenburg’s Presbyterian churches were more than places of worship; they were community hubs where people socialized, educated their children, and engaged in political discourse.

Presbyterianism, which emphasizes self-governance, personal responsibility, and moral clarity, played an important role in influencing revolutionary thought at the time.

In the declaration, the residents of Mecklenburg County wrote that they were: “a free and independent people...under the control of no power other than that of our God and the General Government of Congress.” If this was the first declaration of independence in the colonies, the Mecklenburg Declaration was revolutionary—and also extremely risky.

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# Mecklenburg Declaration, continued

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The men who signed their names to it—committing the capital crime of treason against the crown of England—had essentially signed their own death warrants.

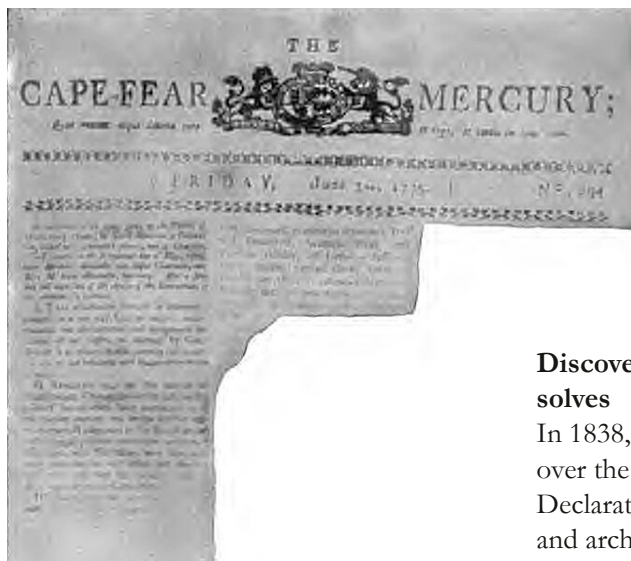
So why was this extraordinary act seemingly forgotten until it was published in 1819, nearly 45 years after it was written?

## Rediscovery of the Declaration

The text printed in the *Raleigh Register* was not the original Mecklenburg Declaration, which was said to have burned in a house fire in April 1800. What appeared in 1819 was reportedly a reconstruction made a few months after the fire by John McKnitt Alexander, the clerk who recorded the original in 1775. This reconstruction resurfaced as interest in the revolution reignited in the years after the War of 1812.

In 1818, during a US Congressional debate over whether the Revolution began in Virginia or Massachusetts, NC's representatives insisted that the people of Mecklenburg had been the first to declare independence. To prove NC's important role, John McKnitt Alexander's son, Dr. Joseph McKnitt Alexander, was asked to look through his father's papers and write an article about the Mecklenburg Declaration.

Dr. Alexander used a document he found in his father's "old mansion house in the centre of a roll of old pamphlets," to write an account of what had occurred. He sent the account to the representatives, who brought it to the *Raleigh Register* for publication. This publication ignited a fierce debate over the authenticity of the Mecklenburg Declaration, a debate that still endures today.



*In 1905, in an attempt to profit off the controversy, Dr. S. Millington Miller produced a fake copy of the June 3, 1775, issue of the Cape Fear Mercury, which had long been thought to contain the original text of the Mecklenburg Declaration. A true copy of the issue has never been located.*

## Thomas Jefferson's Response

When former US President Thomas Jefferson, the primary author of the US Declaration of Independence, received a copy of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence from his former Vice President, John Adams, in June 1819, Jefferson quickly dismissed it as "spurious." He wrote, "Would not every advocate of independence have rung the glories of Mecklenburg County in N. Carolina...? Yet the example of independent Mecklenburg County, in N. Carolina, was never once quoted.... I shall believe it [as a fabrication] until positive and solemn proof of its authenticity be produced."

John Adams, on the other hand, considered it plausible that Jefferson had "copied the spirit, the sense, and the expressions of [the Mecklenburg Declaration] verbatim, into his Declaration of the 4th of July, 1776."

Though Jefferson's dismissal of the Mecklenburg Declaration was published in various newspapers shortly after he learned of it, his concern did not become widely known until 1829, with the release of *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*. This revelation prompted NC's Governor to task a committee with investigating Jefferson's claim. In their 1831 report, the committee concluded that "Mr. Jefferson was mistaken." (See image on page one.)

## Discovery of the Mecklenburg Resolves

In 1838, a discovery reignited the debate over the authenticity of the Mecklenburg Declaration. Peter Force, a historian and archivist, uncovered a printed copy of a document called the Mecklenburg Resolves in the June 3, 1775, edition of the *Massachusetts Spy*.

The Resolves, a series of 20 resolutions adopted by Mecklenburg leaders on May 31, 1775, severed ties with Britain and established local governance.

While this confirmed revolutionary activity in Mecklenburg in May 1775, the Resolves' tone was far more cautious than the bold language of the Declaration, which had purportedly declared independence just 11 days earlier, on May 20, 1775.

This raised the questions: if the Resolves had been published shortly after they were written, why could no contemporaneous copy of the Declaration be found? And, why would Mecklenburg's leaders have written two similar documents within weeks of each other?

Supporters of the Declaration insisted that the two documents served different purposes. They argued that the Declaration, issued on May 20, was a bold proclamation of independence meant to rally local support, while the Resolves, drafted on May 31, were a more measured and structured response intended for public distribution. According to this view, the Resolves did not replace or contradict the Declaration but instead provided a practical framework for self-governance in the absence of British authority.

continued on page 3

## In Memorium: Charlie Newton



*Charles “Charlie” Livingston Newton II, aged 76, passed away on November 16, 2024. As noted in his obituary, in his free time, Charlie enjoyed spending time in Montreat, NC, as an active member of the community and board member of the Presbyterian Heritage Center, worshipping at Peachtree Presbyterian Church, rooting for the Crimson Tide, driving fast cars, and sharing his knowledge and enthusiasm with others. Charlie was a beloved father, grandfather, husband, and friend who will be deeply missed by all who knew him.*

## Mecklenburg Declaration, continued

continued from page 2

Many also pointed to the character of the Declaration’s signers—respected elders and Presbyterian leaders from churches like Sugaw/Sugar Creek, Hopewell, and Poplar Tent—arguing that men of such conviction and integrity would not have falsely claimed to issue a declaration of independence.

Critics, however, saw the Resolves as evidence that the Declaration was a later invention. If Mecklenburg leaders had already outlined a careful rejection of British rule in the Resolves, why would they have issued an earlier, far more radical declaration that was never recorded in contemporary newspapers?

Some suggested that John McKnitt Alexander, who had lost the original document in a fire, may have reconstructed the Declaration decades later from memories of the Resolves, unintentionally blending fact with patriotic embellishment. Others believed that by the time the Declaration surfaced

in 1819, a strong desire to highlight North Carolina’s revolutionary role had led to the creation of a dramatic but unsubstantiated narrative.

As we commemorate the 250th anniversary of independence, perhaps the question isn’t whether the Declaration is authentic—it’s how its legacy continues to shape our understanding of freedom, independence, and equality.

As we reflect on this legacy today, we are reminded that the fight for liberty and equality is ongoing, and that the ideals of independence must be continually examined, redefined, and fought for.

To learn more about the Mecklenburg Declaration, David Fleming, author of *Who’s Your Founding Father?: One Man’s Epic Quest to Uncover the First, True Declaration of Independence*, will be speaking at Montreat Adult Summer Club on Wednesday, July 9.

## Trivia Time!



On Sept. 27, 2024, the Swannanoa River crested at over 27 feet. The only other comparable flood in the historic record occurred one year prior to the founding of Buncombe County (the county in which Montreat is located). During this flood, the Swannanoa River is said to have crested at 23 feet. According to local lore, Davy Crockett referred to this flood as “the 2nd epistle to Noah’s.” What year did Davy Crockett witness this great flood of the Swannanoa?

### Winter 2024 Trivia Answer

**Q. What was the name of the railroad that ran through Montreat property from 1911 - 1919?**

**A. Mt. Mitchell Railroad**

*Congratulations to Ann Lyons for winning last issue's prize.*

For extra credit, what was the name of the woman from Swannanoa, NC, (pictured at left) who married Davy Crockett in 1815?

*Correct answers will be entered into a drawing for a prize! Email your answer to [info@phcmontreat.org](mailto:info@phcmontreat.org).*

## Mark Your Calendar!

Saturday, July 19

**PHC Ice Cream Social**

Thursday & Friday, Sept. 4 & 5

**Mission Gathering**

Friday, October 24 at 7:00pm

**Distinguished Lecture on the Reformation**

with Dr. Crystal Downing  
Upper Anderson

Wednesday, Dec. 3 at 3:00pm

**Christmas Tea at PHC**

## April 9, 2025: Bonhoeffer Executed 80 Years Ago for Nazi Opposition

In the early years of Adolf Hitler's rule, the Nazi regime aimed to consolidate power over all aspects of German life, including religion.

In response, German theologian and Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer—along with theologians Karl Barth and Martin Niemöller, led a movement resisting the Nazi government's efforts to unite various German Protestant denominations under a single state-controlled "Reich Church" (Reichskirche) with Nazi-sympathizer, Ludwig Müller, serving as Bishop.



*Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Church of St. Christopher, Wroclaw, Poland*

### The Confessing Church

In 1934, as part of this resistance, Swiss Reformed theologian, Karl Barth, drafted the Barmen Declaration, which dismissed the Reich Church's attempts to enforce Nazi ideology in the church and distort the gospel for political purposes. Barth personally mailed a copy to Hitler.

The Declaration served as the foundation for the Confessing Church, which asserted that the state could not dictate the content of Christian faith and teachings. Only 20% of German pastors, however, supported the Confessing Church.

The Confessing Church itself did not denounce Nazi totalitarianism or Jewish persecution. However, some leaders of the Church, like Bonhoeffer, personally rejected the idolatry of the Führer cult and noted the duty of the church to speak out against injustice, including the persecution of Jews. Other leaders remained focused on church autonomy.



*Karl Barth*

### Nazi Response

The response of the Nazi regime to the Confessing Church was swift and harsh. Barth was forced out of Germany in 1935 after refusing to sign an Oath of Loyalty to Hitler.

German theologian and Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller was imprisoned from 1938 until 1945 when he was liberated from Dachau concentration camp by the US Army, narrowly avoiding execution.

Bonhoeffer remained a vocal critic of the Nazi government. The Gestapo jailed him in 1943. After being imprisoned for over two years, the SS executed him for high treason at Flossenburg concentration camp just weeks before the camp was liberated.

### Legacy

In October 1945, Martin Niemöller helped initiate the Protestant Church in Germany's issuing of the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, which placed some responsibility on the Church for not adequately opposing the atrocities committed by the Nazi Regime. While there were differing opinions on the level of the Church's culpability, Niemöller insisted that the phrase, "Through us infinite wrong was brought over many peoples and countries..." be included.



*Martin Niemöller, 1952*

Despite its shortcomings, the Confessing Church played a crucial role in preserving the integrity of Christian faith in Germany during one of the darkest periods of recent history. While there were disagreements and divisions within the Church—it remains an important symbol of Christian resistance to totalitarianism.

Today, the Barmen Declaration is still included in the Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Book of Order of the worldwide Moravian Unity, the Unitas Fratrum.

**The year 2024 was the 90th anniversary of the Barmen Declaration and formation of the Confessing Church. April 9, 2025 will mark the 80th anniversary of the execution of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The year 2025 will also mark the 90th anniversary of Barth's expulsion from Germany.**

# PHC Blessed with Successful Year Financially

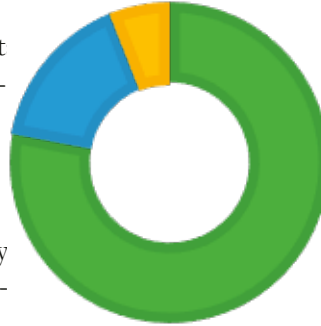
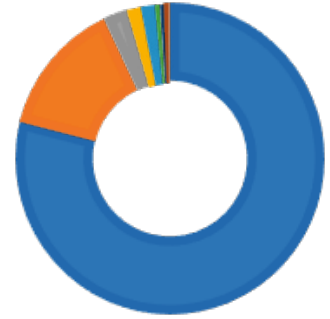
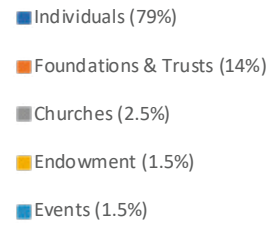
Thanks to the generosity of our donors, 2024 was a very financially positive year for the PHC. The Heritage Fund, the lifeblood of the PHC, funds substantially all of the PHC's operations. The Heritage Fund ended the year receiving a total of \$312,739 from individual donors and organizations, an increase of nearly \$30,000, or 10%, over 2023. All of this \$30,000 increase came from additional giving by individuals. Combined with fiscal restraint during the year by staff, there was a surplus, erasing the operating deficit of the previous year.

Adding to the PHC's financial viability, gifts of \$26,700 were received for the Endowment Fund, which reached a balance of \$285,000 by year end.

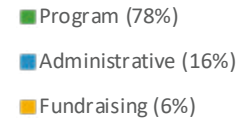
In total, the PHC received contributions of \$378,624, including special gift for donor-designated projects. This is the second largest amount of contributions ever received by the PHC in a single year.

This achievement was not possible without the generosity of our donors. We pledge to be good stewards of your gifts. We will do this by providing unique and innovative opportunities to learn about the heritage and history of the reformed faith, global missions, and Montreat history, enabling individuals to help discern God's will both today and tomorrow.

## INCOME 2024



## EXPENSES 2024



## Thank You for Your Support in 2024!

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Rev James & Letta Jean Taylor

### Calvin Society

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## The Trillium Circle

This year, the Presbyterian Heritage Center will be forming The Trillium Circle to promote and recognize legacy giving to the PHC. Members of The Trillium Circle will be composed of donors who have committed to make a legacy gift (such as a bequest in their will) of \$10,000 or more to the PHC's endowment fund. A solid endowment fund will strengthen the financial future of the PHC in fundamental and very important ways.

## Total Endowment Gifts

### \$100,000+

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Presbyterian Heritage Center  
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- Make a QCD from your IRA
- Donate online at [www.phcmontreat.org/give](http://www.phcmontreat.org/give)

or scan the QR code:



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**We are so grateful for your generous gifts!**

### Calling All Volunteers!

PHC staff are the backbone of work done at the PHC. However, with just 10 part-time staff members and more creativity and projects than could ever be accomplished, the PHC depends on volunteers to help realize its mission. Board members and the Heritage Council are constantly providing needed support such as governance, fund raising, community events, and more. Other friends of the PHC conduct walking tours, organize collections and archives, and even help build exhibits. If you are interested in learning more about the fascinating volunteer opportunities at the PHC, contact PHC Director, Anne Chesky, at [director@phcmontreat.org](mailto:director@phcmontreat.org).