

The Mecklenburg Resolves

Overview

Students will examine the Mecklenburg Resolves and work in small groups to teach their classmates about the key ideas posed in the document. Students will then demonstrate their understanding of this document by creating innovative infomercials on the important elements of the Resolves. Students will also explore the limitations of the society that created the Mecklenburg Resolves, given that over 500,000 people were enslaved at the time.

Grades

4-8

Materials

- Image of the NC State Flag, attached
- Excerpt from The Mecklenburg Resolves, attached
- Dictionaries or Internet access

Essential Questions:

- What was the purpose of the Mecklenburg Resolves?
- What effect did the Mecklenburg Resolves, the Halifax Resolves, and the Declaration of Independence have on colonists in regards to the Revolutionary War?
- How could the authors of the Mecklenburg Resolves as well as the Declaration of Independence write these words and profess these ideals while supporting slavery?

Duration

1-2 class periods

Student Preparation

Students should have a basic understanding of pre-Revolutionary tensions between the British and colonists, as well as the causes of the battles of Lexington and Concord.

Procedure

The North Carolina State Flag

1. As a warm-up, project an image of the North Carolina state flag (attached). Ask students to share what they know about the flag. Particularly, ask students if they can explain the significance of the two dates on the flag. (*May 20, 1775 notes the date of the **Mecklenburg Resolves** and April 12, 1776 notes the date of the **Halifax Resolves**.*)
2. Ask students to raise their hand if they have ever heard of the Mecklenburg Resolves. Then ask students who has heard of Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. Chances are, more students have heard of our national declaration over Mecklenburg's. Ask students why they think this is. Further discuss:
 - If you have heard of the Mecklenburg Resolves, what do you already know about it?
 - Why do you think the date of the Mecklenburg Resolves is included on our state's flag? (May 20, 1775)
 - If you know nothing about the Mecklenburg Resolves, think about the date – May 20, 1775. What else was taking place during this time? (The Battle of Lexington and Concord took place on April 19, 1775.)

The Mecklenburg Resolves

3. Explain to students:

- The news of Lexington and Concord arrived in Charlotte Town (present-day Charlotte) sometime in May 1775. On May 31, the Mecklenburg County Committee of Safety adopted these “resolves,” or resolutions, which declared all royal authority to be suspended. All acts of king and Parliament had no force in the colonies, and the only legitimate governments in America were the Continental Congress and the provincial congresses. Royal officials were to be arrested. The resolves then laid out a plan for a local government that could keep order.

Why Mecklenburg? You might wonder why residents of Mecklenburg County were the first to claim their independence from Britain. It may be in part because of religion: Until 1800, all churches established in Mecklenburg County were Presbyterian, and the county’s residents were mostly Scotch-Irish. But only ministers of the Church of England could legally perform marriages, which created problems for people of other faiths. Mecklenburgers may have been as eager to declare themselves independent of the English church as they were to get rid of its government. (Source: <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/mecklenburg-resolves>)

4. Place students in small groups (at least 6 groups, if possible) and hand out the attached abridged copy of the Mecklenburg Resolves, as printed in the *Raleigh Register*. (The entire document can be accessed at <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/mecklenburg-resolves>.) First, read the document out loud as a class, calling for a student volunteer to read each paragraph. Tell students to highlight words that they do not know as the document is read.
5. After completing the reading, draw a six-column chart on the board, or post 6 pieces of chart paper in front of the class. Title the columns or papers as Preamble, Resolve 1, Resolve 2, Resolve 3, Resolve 4, and Resolve 5. Paragraph by paragraph, ask students to call out the words that they are unfamiliar with, and write them in the appropriate list. (Place a check beside words that are repeated.)
6. Next, assign each group one of the six paragraphs of the Mecklenburg Resolves to focus on (if you have more than six groups, assign more than one group the same paragraph). Give students the following instructions:
 - You have the prestigious job of working for “All About the Documents,” a firm of top-notch historians who specialize in teaching citizens about America’s founding documents. Your group has been hired to present at a conference on the Mecklenburg Resolves, since many North Carolinian’s do not know about this important document. To prepare for presenting at the conference, you must:
 - Carefully reread the excerpt assigned to your group.
 - Figure out the meaning to each of the words in your section that confused your classmates (refer students to the list created up front).
 - Summarize the meaning of the paragraph. What is being stated by the colonists? Why do you think they are noting this? Why is this excerpt important?
 - Be prepared to teach conference attendees (your classmates) the answers to these questions, as well answer any questions posed regarding your excerpt.
7. Teachers should review their expectations for group work then allow students to get started. The amount of time required for students to prepare their presentation will vary class to class, but teachers should plan for at least 10-15 minutes. (If possible, provide access to dictionaries or computers for defining unknown words.)
8. Once students have finalized their presentation, review class expectations for being a respectful audience member, and have each group teach classmates about their excerpt. Instruct students to take interpretive

notes on their copy of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence as they listen to one another's presentations. Also, allow students to pose questions of the presenters.

Create an Infomercial

9. Next, tell the groups that you have good news for them and project/explain the following:
- WUNC-TV has hired your group to create an infomercial with the purpose of educating North Carolinians on the Mecklenburg Resolves. As a group, discuss what you feel are the key ideas and themes posed in the Resolves and create an infomercial that will educate the public about this seldom discussed document.
 - As a group, discuss what you feel is most important about the document. What are the key ideas and themes? Why are these ideas and themes important?
 - Brainstorm an infomercial that will educate North Carolinians about the Mecklenburg Resolves, convince them it is an important piece of history, and grab their attention.
 - Your final infomercial...
 - Must be at least 2 minutes in length when aired on television
 - Should contain accurate facts regarding the Resolves
 - Must discuss the key ideas and themes of the Resolves, and why the document is important to our state's history
 - Should be creative! (your infomercial can contain music, props, costumes, etc.)
 - Will be performed in front of the class, with all group members taking active, committed roles in the presentation.

**Additional preparation time and/or presentations may need to take place the following day of class, depending on student progress.*

10. Once students are ready to present, again review performance and respectful audience expectations. After each infomercial, encourage students to clap loudly and offer feedback:
- What did you like and/or learn from that infomercial?
 - What key ideas and themes did this group point out?
 - Do you have any questions for this group?

Ideals of Freedom During a Time of American Slavery

11. Remind students that at the time of the writing of these words in 1775, the population of enslaved people in the colonies is nearly 500,000. (In Virginia, the ratio of free colonists to slaves is nearly 1:1. In South Carolina it is approximately 1:2.) Source: <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/timeline/1773.html>
Discuss with students:
- How could the authors of the Mecklenburg Resolves as well as the Declaration of Independence write these words and profess these ideals while supporting slavery? Or, as Dr. Hassan Jeffries wrote: "How can we fully comprehend the original intent of the Bill of Rights without acknowledging that its author, James Madison, enslaved other people? How can we understand that foundational document without understanding that its author was well versed not only in the writings of Greek philosophers and Enlightenment thinkers, but also in Virginia's slave code? How can we ignore the influence of that code, that "bill of rights denied," which withheld from African Americans the very same civil liberties Madison sought to safeguard for white people?" (Source)
 - What message is Dr. Jeffries conveying when he says that "The Founding Fathers were visionaries, but their vision was limited. Slavery blinded them, preventing them from seeing black people as equals. We the people have the opportunity to broaden the founders' vision, to make racial equality real. But we can no longer avoid the most troubling aspects of our past." (Source)
 - How do you think enslaved people would have viewed the call for freedom and justice from colonists to the British?

- How were enslaved people resisting their unjust circumstances both during, before and after the Revolutionary period?
 - Discuss how through all the history of enslavement, enslaved people have resisted in both overt but also subtle ways, based on their own individual circumstances and needs. “Many slaves took the freedom ideology of the prerevolutionary period and applied it to their own situation in order to obtain their own freedom. They began to petition for freedom, run away, rebel, and many joined the American or, more often, the British Army which promised freedom after the war. The Revolution period saw an increase in such forms of self-emancipation. Historians estimate that, between 55,000 and 100,000 (17% of all enslaved people), emancipated themselves by running away during these years, including larger numbers of women than in prerevolutionary times. The war years brought more opportunities to men and women to run away successfully and they took advantage of them in order to make personal statements about the institution of slavery. While many ran off to join family members and friends in various cities, others ran to the British line in hopes that they would be set free. Some even ran off to form maroon communities where they could live freely among themselves. ([Source](#))
 - To further explore these concepts in more depth, see Carolina K-12’s [African Americans in Revolutionary Times](#)
 - Also, it is worth mentioning that during this time, Phillis Wheatley becomes the first published African-American poet in 1773 when a London publishing company releases a collection of her verse, and in **1775** the first abolition society is founded in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
 - For a lesson plan dealing with Phillis Whatley, see Carolina K-12’s [Youth During the American Revolution](#)
 - Again, share with students the words of Dr. Hassan Jeffries: “Finding the promise and possibility within this history requires us to consider the lives of the enslaved on their own terms. Trapped in an unimaginable hell, enslaved people forged unbreakable bonds with one another. Indeed, no one knew better the meaning and importance of family and community than the enslaved. They fought back too, in the field and in the house, pushing back against enslavers in ways that ranged from feigned ignorance to flight and armed rebellion. There is no greater hope to be found in American history than in African Americans’ resistance to slavery.” ([Source](#))

Controversy and the Resolves

12. You might also want to share with students that like most everything in history, there is some controversy related to the Mecklenburg Resolves:

- In 1819, a document called the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence was published, with the claim that it had been written on May 20, 1775. It included the statement that “we do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people, are, and of right ought to be, a sovereign and self-governing Association, under the control of no power other than that of our God and the General Government of the Congress.” In celebration, the date of May 20, 1775, appears on North Carolina’s state flag.

But no earlier reference to that document has ever been found, and most historians doubt that it ever existed. Most likely, the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence was what someone remembered the Mecklenburg Resolves to have been, borrowing phrases from the Declaration of 1776. The Mecklenburg Resolves, after all, did set up a government “independent of Great-Britain.” In any case, citizens of Mecklenburg County were deliberately beginning to govern themselves more than a year before the Continental Congress finally severed ties with Britain. ([Source](#):

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/4263>)

Discuss:

- Why is history often controversial, with people arguing what actually happened and didn’t happen and the details of events (such as time, place, people involved, etc.)?

- How do you think it is decided what is “legitimate history,” and what is printed in textbooks and other records?
- What role does perspective play in interpreting and documenting history?
- In the case with the Mecklenburg Declaration, it is believed people likely remembered things wrong years later. What role does memory play in history?

The Halifax Resolves

13. Let students know that not only did North Carolina produce the Mecklenburg Resolves before the more popular national Declaration of Independence, but our state also produced the **Halifax Resolves**. Ask students if any of them know anything about the Halifax Resolves, and share information regarding this document, such as:

- The first battle of the American Revolution that took place in North Carolina was the Battle of Moores Creek Bridge on February 27, 1776. Six weeks after the Patriot victory there, a committee of Patriots met in Halifax, NC and on April 12, 1776 adopted the Halifax Resolves. The resolves (formal statements of purpose) called for independence from Britain. The Resolves not only recommended that North Carolina declare independence, but urged all of the colonies to do so as well. Virginia followed with its own recommendations soon after the adoption of the Halifax Resolution, and eventually the final draft of the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776. William Hooper, Joseph Hewes, and John Penn were the delegates from North Carolina who signed the Declaration of Independence.

Discuss:

- Why do you think the Declaration of Independence is so widely known, whereas the Mecklenburg and Halifax Resolves are lesser known in our state?
- Imagine you have been tasked with teaching at least one person or group about the Mecklenburg Resolves and the Halifax Resolves. Who would you teach and why? Who needs to know about this piece of North Carolina history?
- How would you characterize the citizens that drafted the Mecklenburg Resolves and the Halifax Resolves?
- How do you think citizen involvement in politics and government today compares to citizen involvement during colonial times? Explain.
- How do you imagine these documents affected the Revolutionary War in North Carolina? How do you imagine the Declaration of Independence affected the Revolutionary War across all colonies?
- How do you think these documents and the War impacted enslaved people and their own desires for freedom?

Additional Activities

- Assume the role of an active colonial citizen living in either Charlotte Town or Halifax and write a letter to the editor of *The Colonial Times* in which you express your personal feelings about independence. You may choose whether to have Loyalist, Patriot or abolitionist attitudes.

North Carolina State Flag



The Mecklenburg Resolves

WHEREAS, By an Address presented to His Majesty by both Houses of Parliament, in February last, the American colonies are declared to be in a state of actual rebellion, we conceive, that all laws and commissions confirmed by, or derived from the authority of the King or Parliament, are annulled and vacated, and the former civil constitution of these colonies, for the present, wholly suspended. To provide, in some degree, for the exigencies of these colonies, in the present alarming period, we deem it proper and necessary to pass the following Resolves,

1. Resolved, That whosoever directly or indirectly abetted, or in any way, form, or manner, countenanced the unchartered and dangerous invasion of our rights, as claimed by Great Britain, is an enemy to this County, to America, and to the inherent and inalienable rights of man.
2. Resolved, That we the citizens of Mecklenburg County, do hereby dissolve the political bands which have connected us to the Mother Country, and hereby absolve ourselves from all allegiance to the British Crown, and abjure all political connection, contract, or association, with that Nation, who have wantonly trampled on our rights and liberties and inhumanly shed the innocent blood of American patriots at Lexington.
3. Resolved, That we do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people, are, and of right ought to be, a sovereign and self-governing Association, under the control of no power other than that of our God and the General Government of the Congress; to the maintenance of which independence, we solemnly pledge to each other, our mutual cooperation, our lives, our fortunes, and our most sacred honor.
4. Resolved, That as we now acknowledge the existence and control of no law or legal officer, civil or military, within this County, we do hereby ordain and adopt, as a rule of life, all, each and every of our former laws - where, nevertheless, the Crown of Great Britain never can be considered as holding rights, privileges, immunities, or authority therein.
5. Resolved, That it is also further decreed, that all, each and every military officer in this County, is hereby reinstated to his former command and authority, he acting conformably to these regulations, and that every member present of this delegation shall henceforth be a civil officer, viz. a Justice of the Peace, in the character of a 'Committee-man,' to issue process, hear and determine all matters of controversy, according to said adopted laws, and to preserve peace, and union, and harmony, in said County, and to use every exertion to spread the love of country and fire of freedom throughout America, until a more general and organized government be established in this province.