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# OLD MECKLENBURG AND THE MEANING OF THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

BY CHARLES SELLERS\*

This occasion, commemorating the two-hundredth anniversary of Charlotte, county seat of Mecklenburg, has a special meaning for me. As every historian sooner or later recognizes, his personal history enters greatly into the history he writes; and this has been true with peculiar directness in my case. My own early history was Mecklenburg, the first chapter of my first book was entitled "Old Mecklenburg," and my efforts over the years to understand the American experience at large have been focused on the relationships between Old Mecklenburg and all the rest. Thus this seems an appropriate occasion to confront directly what I realize to have been my persistent preoccupation as a historian: my effort to understand who I am as an American deriving from Mecklenburg—to understand, that is, the significance of Old Mecklenburg in the American experience.

The Old Mecklenburg to which I refer is, of course, a metaphor. The settlements along Sugar Creek were merely the quintessence of that society of isolated pioneer farmers that bulked largest in American life during the last half of the eighteenth century. Note particularly that this was an isolated society. Earlier pioneers along the seaboard had quickly established towns and a thriving commerce which kept them in close touch with each other and with the European culture of the North Atlantic world; while later pioneers were quickly overtaken by the great revolution in transportation and economic growth that knit the whole country together in the first half of the nineteenth century.

But about the middle of the eighteenth century the fecundity of American mothers combined with a renewed wave of poor immigrants from Europe—now including many Germans and Protestant Irish of Scottish ancestry—to push thousands of families into the interior of the seaboard colonies, far ahead of the primitive transportation and communication facilities of the day. For several generations the isolation of this populous backcountry persisted, permitting a distinctive culture, with distinctive values, to take shape.

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\*Dr. Sellers, a native of Charlotte, is professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley. This paper was read at the evening meeting of the Literary and Historical Association, December 6, 1968.

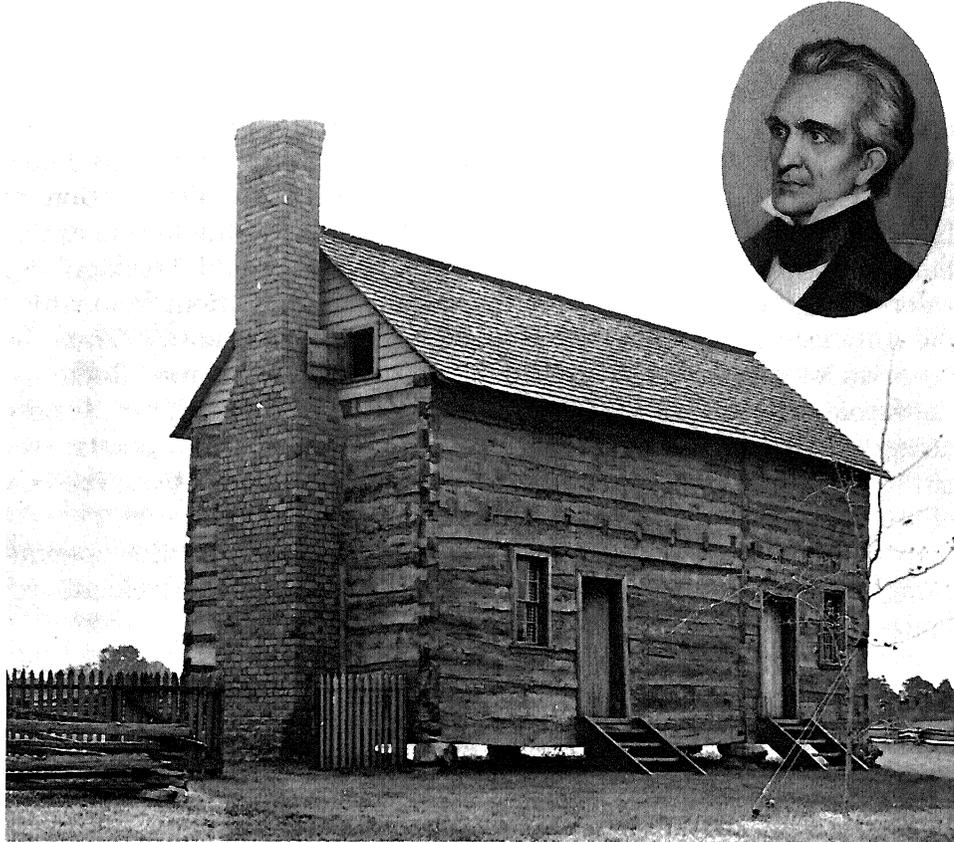
These were the very years when the American people were defining their independent nationality through the Revolution and the Constitution, the years when democratic political institutions were being given their definitive form, the years when the national credo was being distilled into those nobly enduring phrases of the Declaration of Independence. Old Mecklenburg, then, belonged to the heroic age of the early republic, and the culture and values of Old Mecklenburg entered largely into crystallizing the values and institutions from which the American people have ever since derived their identity. Thus the historian who looks back to Old Mecklenburg—even from Berkeley, California, in 1968—in search of his and his society's identity, is only doing what sons of Mecklenburg have been doing, from points ever farther west and ever more bizarre, in every generation since the end of the eighteenth century.

In this connection I can do no better than to quote the opening paragraphs of my biography of one of these sons of Old Mecklenburg, James K. Polk:

One autumn day in 1821 a seventy-three-year-old patriarch, with several stalwart sons and a band of slaves at his back, came marching along a trail through the wild Chickasaw country of West Tennessee. Years of toil and exposure had left their mark on this old man, but had not quenched the determination that drove him on to one last pioneering venture. Colonel Ezekiel Polk embodied all those qualities—restlessness, avarice, adventuresomeness, perhaps even idealism—that were impelling Americans in their rapacious conquest of a virgin continent. Ezekiel's latest destination lay on the banks of the Hatchie River, and here he cleared fields, built rude cabins, and settled his family.

Yet Ezekiel and his kind looked east as much as west, backward as often as forward. Only their faith in the verities of the snug worlds they had left behind made possible their headlong pursuit of the limitless possibilities lying always a little to the west and a little in the future; and ever again on successive frontiers they sought to recreate their points of origin. No sooner had a semblance of civilization come to Ezekiel's settlement on the Hatchie than he began planning a great eight-room house to stand symbolically as the destination of his lifelong westward striving. Ezekiel was dead before the facade rose in the forest, but he had lived long enough to name his mansion. "Mecklen" he called it, turning back in thought at the end of life to upcountry North Carolina and the county of Mecklenburg where he had begun his pilgrimage so many years before. For Ezekiel Polk, Mecklenburg had been both an end and a beginning; in a sense he had never left it.

So it was with many another pioneer. In Tennessee one was forever encountering the sons—sons in a more than physical sense—of what they always called "Old Mecklenburg," or if not Mecklenburg, then some other half remembered, half imagined Arcadia. Tennessee's most famous citizen, Andrew Jackson, never forgot that he had grown up on Mecklenburg's borders; and nearby another Tennessean destined for a large public role, Ezekiel's grandson James K. Polk, had spent his early years. The younger Polk was not a man to expound on his spiritual origins, yet his whole career would attest to the power of nostalgia in the life of his westering, enterprising generation.



James K. Polk, the eleventh president of the United States, and his birthplace at Pineville, which was restored by the State Department of Archives and History and dedicated on May 20, 1968, by Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson. Photographs from the files of the State Department of Archives and History.

If James K. Polk never put this mood in words himself, he found satisfaction in the company of those who did, especially his friend Doctor J. G. M. Ramsey, the historian of Tennessee's pioneer period. Ramsey had not been near North Carolina until he was half grown, but his mother [a Mecklenburg Alexander] had imprinted the image of Old Mecklenburg indelibly on his consciousness; and he devoted the best energies of a lifetime to historical writing that conveyed his vision of this older America. When Ramsey came to erect his own mansion among the hills of East Tennessee, where the Holston and French Broad join to form the Tennessee River, he christened it, by an internal necessity, "Mecklenburg." Here Polk came whenever he found himself in this part of the state.

What Old Mecklenburg meant to Polk and Ramsey, as they sat looking out over the westbound river and reminiscing of the bygone days back east, they could not have said with any precision. Only years later, after Polk had long departed the world and a catastrophic civil war had swept away the last reminders of the old way of life, did Ramsey attempt what had not before seemed necessary. Retreating in broken spirits to a farm in Mecklenburg County itself in 1866, and finding even here that change had done its work, Ramsey labored with a

passion born of despair to make explicit the *mystique* of Old Mecklenburg. "The primitive simplicity of the pastoral stage of society," as he finally put it in the pages of General D. H. Hill's magazine, *The Land We Love*, "with its calm, quiet and security, its freedom from care, from avarice and the rivalries of older communities, stamped the infant settlements with the impress of another Arcadia, pure, contented, free, enlightened, enterprising, virtuous and independent." More than description, more than history, this was an invocation of the moral order that had given meaning to the lives of Ramsey, the Polks, and most of their contemporaries.<sup>1</sup>

This utopian view of Old Mecklenburg was not just nostalgic fantasy, but corresponded closely to the view held by the men and women who actually lived in the backcountry Arcadias of the Atlantic seaboard during the last half of the eighteenth century. The terms that Doctor Ramsey used to describe Old Mecklenburg were echoes from Hector St. John Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, describing his life in backcountry Pennsylvania and New York just before the American Revolution.

Where Doctor Ramsey speaks of Old Mecklenburg's "security, its freedom from care," the American Farmer helps us understand how the simple subsistence afforded by pioneer farming, the abundance of cheap land afforded by the American backcountry, appeared to poor immigrants from Europe, where land, the key to security and status, was monopolized by the few. "In this great American asylum," says Crèvecoeur, "the poor of Europe have by some means met together, and in consequence of various causes; to what purpose should they ask one another what countrymen they are? Alas, two thirds of them had no country. Can a wretch who wanders about, who works and starves, whose life is a continual scene of sore affliction or pinching penury; can that man call England or any other kingdom his country? A country that has no bread for him, whose fields procured him no harvest, who met with nothing but the frowns of the rich, the severity of the laws, with jails and punishments, who owned not a single foot of the extensive surface of this planet? No! urged by a variety of motives, here they come. . . . The laws, the indulgent laws, protect them as they arrive, stamping on them the symbol of their adoption; they receive ample rewards for their labours; these accumulated rewards procure them lands; those lands confer on them the title of freemen, and to that title every benefit is affixed which men can possibly require."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Charles Grier Sellers, Jr., *James K. Polk, Jacksonian, 1795-1843* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 3-4, hereinafter cited as Sellers, *Polk*.

<sup>2</sup>J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1957), 37-38, hereinafter cited as Crèvecoeur, *American Farmer*.

Only against this European background can we understand how our forebears felt about the land and the ease with which it could be possessed in Old Mecklenburg. "Whenever I go abroad," Crèvecoeur writes, "it is always involuntary. I never return home without feeling some pleasing emotion. . . . The instant I enter on my own land, the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence exalt my mind. Precious soil, I say to myself, by what singular custom of law is it that thou wast made to constitute the riches of the freeholder? What should we American farmers be without the distinct possession of that soil? It feeds, it clothes us, from it we draw even a great exuberancy, our best meat, our richest drink, the very honey of our bees comes from this privileged spot. No wonder we should thus cherish its possession, no wonder that so many Europeans who have never been able to say that such portion of land was theirs, cross the Atlantic to realize that happiness. This formerly rude soil has been converted by my father into a pleasant farm, and in return it has established all our rights, on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens, our importance as inhabitants of a district."<sup>3</sup>

But as the American Farmer's comments suggest, economic security was not the only utopian consequence of easy land ownership. Doctor Ramsey's remark that Old Mecklenburg was free "from avarice and the rivalries of older communities" is clarified by Crèvecoeur's statement that the riches of the Americans are not in gold and silver. "We have but little of these metals," he explains; "I mean a better sort of wealth, cleared lands, cattle, good houses, good clothes, and an increase of people to enjoy them." In short, Old Mecklenburg does not yield extremes of wealth. "Here are no aristocratical families . . . ; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury. A pleasing uniformity of decent competence appears throughout our habitations. . . . Lawyer or merchant are the fairest titles our towns afford; that of a farmer is the only appellation of the rural inhabitants of our country." A European visitor, Crèvecoeur explains, would be struck by the absence from the American dictionary of "words of dignity, and names of honour. There, on a Sunday, he sees a congregation of respectable farmers and their wives, all clad in neat homespun, well mounted, or riding in their own humble waggons. There is not among them an esquire, saving the unlettered magistrate. There he sees a parson as simple as his flock, a farmer who does not riot on the labour of others. We have no princes, for whom we toil, starve, and bleed, we are the most perfect society now existing in the world."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Crèvecoeur, *American Farmer*, 20-21.

<sup>4</sup>Crèvecoeur, *American Farmer*, 52, 35-36.

When Doctor Ramsey spoke of Old Mecklenburg as being "free," he was referring not only to this broad social equality but also to the democratic political institutions that flowed from it. Thus we find the farmers of Mecklenburg County assembling at the little log courthouse in the fall of 1776 to elect their delegates to a provincial congress that was about to draw up the constitution for the newly independent state of North Carolina. An anonymous poem by a participant tells us that the election pitted a popular faction led by Hezekiah and John McKnitt Alexander against the wealthy Thomas Polk, "a home-bred lord" who "has been much employed in public services, in all of which he was ever mindful of his own private emolument." The Alexanders won, and the issue on which they won may be seen in the instructions given to the Mecklenburg delegates. They must try, they were told, to make the new state government "a simple Democracy or as near it as possible," opposing "everything that leans to aristocracy or power in the hands of the rich and chief men exercised to the oppression of the poor." No one acquainted with the Alexanders will be surprised to learn that the delegates were also instructed to insist on strict religious qualifications for holding office. In the other states, too, the strongest pressure for making the new governments as democratic as possible came from similar backcountry areas.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, to summarize, the utopianism of Old Mecklenburg arose from its ease of land ownership yielding security and a comfortable standard of living, from its broad social equality, and from its democratic political institutions.

But this catalog of felicities still does not comprehend some of the most important terms Doctor Ramsey uses in describing the American Arcadia, particularly the words "pure" and "virtuous" and "independent." For Old Mecklenburg was also, and perhaps most importantly in the minds of its inhabitants and sons, a moral utopia, an environment peculiarly suited to the nurture of virtuous men and women. Thomas Jefferson perhaps stated this dimension of the American Arcadia most eloquently: "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. . . . Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark, set on those, who, not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the

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<sup>5</sup>"The Mecklenburg Censor," as reproduced in James H. Moore, *Defence of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence* (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton Printing Company, 1908), 147-157; Elisha P. Douglass, *Rebels and Democrats* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, c. 1955), 115-117, 125-129.

husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and veniality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. . . . Generally speaking the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any State to that of the husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts, and is a good enough barometer whereby to measure its degree of corruption."<sup>6</sup>

Old Mecklenburg's landowning farmer is virtuous, Jefferson is saying, because he is independent of other men, because he does not have to cringe and flatter and connive to get his bread. Even more fundamentally he is virtuous because he depends for his bread only upon his own labor on the God-given and God-favored land, because he is free from any temptation to enrich himself at the expense of his fellowmen. This is the deepest meaning of the repeated insistence that virtuous Americans live comfortably but do not accumulate inordinate wealth. "More noble riches flow," insisted the Jeffersonian poet Philip Freneau,

From agriculture, and the industrious swain,  
Who tills the fertile vale, or mountain's brow  
Content to lead a safe, a humble life,  
Among his native hills.

Honest labor, it is assumed, can produce a comfortable competence but not great wealth, and the wealthy are therefore morally suspect.<sup>7</sup>

It is in this connection that Crèvecoeur draws some significant distinctions between America and England, and between the seaboard and the backcountry settlements in America. "These Englishmen are strange people," he says. "Because they can live upon what they call bank notes, without working, they think that all the world can do the same. This goodly country never would have been tilled and cleared with these notes." Even in America the people along the seaboard suffer from something of the same moral infirmity. Their contact with the sea "renders them more bold and enterprising, this leads them to neglect the confined occupations of the land. They see and converse with a variety of people, their intercourse with mankind becomes extensive. The sea inspires them with a love of traffic, a desire of transporting produce from one place to another; and leads them to a variety of resources which supply the place of labour." But the far more

<sup>6</sup>Albert E. Bergh and Andrew A. Lipscomb (eds.), *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 20 volumes, 1903-1904), II, 229-230.

<sup>7</sup>"The Rising Glory of America," in Harry Hayden Clark (ed.), *Poems of Freneau* (New York: Hafner Library Reprints, 1960), 213-225.

numerous inhabitants of the backcountry are "very different; the simple cultivation of the earth purifies them."<sup>8</sup>

As the eighteenth century drew to a close, these two elements—the trading, enterprising impulse of the seaboard and the industrious but unambitious agrarian virtue of Old Mecklenburg—were in contention for possession of America's destiny. At first the seaboard, with its advantages in wealth, in communication, and in political experience and leadership, won the political ascendancy in the new federal government. But Alexander Hamilton's enterprising and elitist Federalism was so alien to the democratic and Arcadian genius of a majority of American farmers that it provoked the gradual mobilization of an overwhelming Republican opposition. Thomas Jefferson's election to the presidency in 1800 seemed a final triumph of the spirit of Old Mecklenburg; and Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase seemed to guarantee the indefinite expansion and perpetuation of the agrarian "empire for liberty."

Yet history will not let societies, much less utopias, alone. To understand Old Mecklenburg's fate we must attempt a more detached analysis than the perceptions of the participants afford. The key element in the American uniqueness that Crèvecoeur celebrated was the favorable man-land ratio: the abundance and cheapness of land and the relative scarcity and lucrativeness of human labor, as contrasted with the reverse situation in Europe. The social process translated the favorable man-land ratio into an exhilarating atmosphere of opportunity.

But opportunity meant very different things along the seaboard and in the backcountry Arcadia. Along the seaboard, soils, fisheries, navigable rivers, and ocean harbors enabled men to produce great supplies of tobacco, rice, naval stores, flour, rum, cod, and ships for the markets of the world; to carry the world's goods from continent to continent; and, as merchants, lawyers, insurers, and financiers, to perform the lucrative services that lubricated the great engine of North Atlantic commerce. Here opportunity meant opportunity for great wealth, and attitudes of fierce and unlimited entrepreneurial ambition flourished.

In the backcountry, on the other hand, only a tiny fraction of the bulky agricultural production could stand the cost of wagoning over bad roads to the distant tidewater markets. Production was mainly for home use or barter in the neighborhood, and wealth beyond the comforts that could be achieved by such production was necessarily

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<sup>8</sup>Crèvecoeur, *American Farmer*, 14, 41.

rare. Virtually the only avenue to substantial wealth was speculation in the great commodity land, which was, then as now, closely tied to political influence. This was how Thomas Polk had become Mecklenburg's "home-bred lord." Charlotte was the result of one of his speculations; his "White House" was the only painted building in the ragged village; after the Revolution he allied himself with the politically powerful Blount family of eastern North Carolina in a fantastic land grab that brought them title to virtually the whole state of Tennessee; and his son and heir William Polk emerged naturally in the 1790's as an isolated but still potent Federalist in overwhelmingly Republican Mecklenburg. Thomas Polk's brother Ezekiel, the grandfather of James K. Polk, showed less entrepreneurial talent, and—can one say therefore?—his branch of the family came down on the Republican side.<sup>9</sup>

Jefferson's victory notwithstanding, it is all too clear today that the future lay with Thomas and William Polk and the enterprising spirit of the seaboard, rather than with Ezekiel and James K. Polk and the agrarian virtue of Old Mecklenburg. Jefferson himself witnessed the early stages of the vast economic transformation that during the first half of the nineteenth century brought every part of the country into profitable production for national and international markets and spread the spirit of fervent entrepreneurship throughout the land. The economic transformation of the United States began with the phenomenal expansion of cotton production that Eli Whitney's gin made possible, and Mecklenburg County itself was among the first areas to feel the effects of the cotton revolution.

The development of spinning and weaving machinery had created in Europe an insatiable demand for cotton that the long-staple fiber of lowcountry South Carolina could not begin to supply. Thus when Whitney's gin made it possible to utilize the backcountry's short-staple cotton, the fabulous prices offset the high costs of transportation. Exploding into the backcountry, commercial cotton production quickly reached as far north as the southern Piedmont counties of North Carolina surrounding Mecklenburg. By 1802 cotton was already established as far north and west as Mecklenburg's neighboring Lincoln County, where a traveler found that many of the inhabitants had "made their fortunes by it." By 1809 Mecklenburg was estimated to be producing a third of North Carolina's cotton. Though cotton production later spread to the east central counties, Mecklenburg ranked third in the state as late as 1850.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Sellers, *Polk*, 7-19.

<sup>10</sup>F. A. Michaux, *Travels to the West of the Alleghany Mountains*, in R. G. Thwaites (ed.), *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846* (Cleveland: A. H. Clark Company, 32 volumes, 1904-1907), III, 298; Beverly Daniel, "Report of Manufactures Within the State of North Carolina," *Star* (Raleigh), February 21, 1811; United States Censuses, 1790-1850.

Meanwhile the rest of the country was being similarly transformed. As canals, turnpikes, steamboats, and railroads spread into every nook and cranny of the United States with the advancing nineteenth century—as new ways were found for converting into profits wheat and pigs, sugarcane and the clip of sheep, iron ore and cotton thread; as banks multiplied, thrusting loans upon every man who proposed a promising speculation or investment; as, in short, the economic revolution advanced—almost everywhere men were seduced from the Arcadian virtue of which Jefferson had spoken by the allurements of profit.

Even on the very edge of the advancing frontier, social simplicity was quickly overtaken and engulfed by the on-rushing market. Within less than a generation, Governor Thomas Ford of Illinois noted, the pioneer plainness of the earliest settlements had been obliterated. The men had turned from the coonskin cap, buckskin breeches, and moccasins to cloth coats and pantaloons, wool hats, boots and shoes; the women from homespun frocks, bare feet, and cotton kerchiefs to gowns of silk and calico, bonnets of straw, silk, or leghorn, and slippers of kid or calf. The old folks futilely denounced “these new trappings”; they preferred to live in the old cabins and eat hog and hominy, while prophesying ruin in the silence of the loom, in the waste of good scarce money on such wanton finery. But the young were more interested in impressing each other with fine clothing and fine horses at church on Sunday. This induced them to work harder, said Governor Ford, “and taught them new notions of economy and ingenuity in business, to get the means of gratifying their pride in this particular.”<sup>11</sup>

By the 1830's a foreign traveler was observing that “a large house, fine furniture, and costly dresses for the female portion of the family . . . seem the first objects of every man's ambition.” “The mercantile genius of the country,” said another, “pervades all classes of society.” “Nearly all Americans trade and speculate,” noted still another. “They are ready to swap horses, swap watches, swap farms; and to buy and sell anything. . . . Money is the habitual measure of all things.”<sup>12</sup>

Particularly noticeable—in view of Crèvecoeur's earlier contempt for the Englishman's reliance on bank notes instead of labor—was the new enthusiasm among Americans for the untrustworthy paper money issued by the myriads of new banks. “Why, sir,” said a Chicago hotel-keeper in the 1840's when apologetically offered some especially suspect bank paper, “this hotel was built with that kind of stuff. . . . I will take ‘wild cats’ for your bill, my butcher takes them of me, and the

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<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 131-132, hereinafter cited as Meyers, *Jacksonian Persuasion*.

<sup>12</sup>Meyers, *Jacksonian Persuasion*, 130, 136.

farmer from him, and so we go, making it pleasant all around. I only take care . . . to invest what I may have at the end of a given time in corner lots. . . . On this kind of worthless currency, based on Mr. Smith's [the banker's] supposed wealth and our wants, we are creating a great city, building up all kind of industrial establishments, and covering the lake with vessels—so that suffer who may when the inevitable hour of reckoning arrives, the country will be the gainer."<sup>13</sup>

Of course there were old folks everywhere who decried this passion for wealth and progress, this backsliding from the virtue of Old Mecklenburg. In these "times of commerce and of lust for wealth," lamented Supreme Court Justice William Johnson, a South Carolinian, in 1821, the rapid acquisition of fortunes had rendered the "most valuable classes of a community dissatisfied with seeking competence by the slow progress of useful labor." Similarly the grand old man of North Carolina politics, Nathaniel Macon, cautioned a younger colleague to beware of supporting grandiose schemes for transportation improvements by the federal government. "Be not led astray by grand notions, or magnificent opinions," he warned; "remember you belong to a meek state and just people, who want nothing but to enjoy the fruits of their labor honestly and to lay out their profits in their own way." In fact, despite the Mecklenburg area's early involvement in the cotton boom, North Carolina's landlocked seaboard and hilly backcountry kept the state so far behind other states in the rush of enterprise that she was known as the Rip Van Winkle of the Union. Thus the spirit of Old Mecklenburg survived more strongly here than elsewhere—strongly enough, in fact, for a twentieth-century historian to catch its echoes from his farming kin—and gave North Carolinians a basis for acknowledging with genuine pride that they were a valley of humility between two mountains of conceit.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed the country as a whole had reason to regret its headlong embrace of enterprise when in 1819 the dizzy pyramiding of bank credits suddenly collapsed in the first severe and nationwide economic depression. The shock of the crash and the suffering and bankruptcies of the 1820's produced a widespread mood of national repentance, which was a major factor in carrying Old Mecklenburg's foster son Andrew Jackson into the White House in 1828. There, in the name of planters and farmers, mechanics and laborers, "the bone and sinew of the country," the men whose "success depends upon their own industry

<sup>13</sup>Meyers, *Jacksonian Persuasion*, 137-138.

<sup>14</sup>Donald G. Morgan, *Justice William Johnson, the First Dissenter* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1954), 191; Edwin Mood Wilson, *The Congressional Career of Nathaniel Macon* (Chapel Hill: University [of North Carolina] Press, [Volume 2 of *James Sprunt Historical Monographs*], 1900), 59.

and economy," who know "that they must not expect to become suddenly rich by the fruits of their toil"—in the name, in short, of what he called the "real people" as distinguished from bankers and speculators—Jackson launched his startling attack on the banking system and the associated get-rich-quick psychology. The banks, he argued, "engender a spirit of speculation injurious to the habits and character of the people"; they inspire "this eager desire to amass wealth without labor," and turn even good men from "the sober pursuits of honest industry." They must be brought under control in order to "preserve the morals of the people" and "to revive and perpetuate those habits of economy and simplicity which are so congenial to the character of republicans."<sup>15</sup>

With Old Mecklenburg's James K. Polk marshaling the Jacksonian forces in Congress, Old Hickory's assault on the spirit and instruments of enterprise evoked remarkably wide public support and achieved a remarkable short-run success in the destruction of the powerful national bank. But while Jackson, Polk, and Old Mecklenburg may have won the battle, they lost the war. Attacking the national bank, they inadvertently loosed the restraints on the horde of more speculative state-chartered banks, and just at a moment when a new surge of economic expansion was reviving the entrepreneurial spirit. More fundamentally the Jacksonians erred in assuming that the excesses of speculation arose entirely from the special privileges that government conferred on the banking business.

During Polk's presidency the Jacksonian program of negative government was finally and fully enacted—the government got out of the business of aiding in the development of transportation facilities, it severed all its ties with banks and all its pretensions to regulate the monetary system, and it withdrew its aid to industrial development by reducing the tariff to a revenue level. The result was that enterprise roared away without let or restraint, and Old Mecklenburg faded into nostalgia.

Perhaps for the first time since Jacksonian days we are in a position to assess the results. In one respect at least, it appears that American society has not only fulfilled but far surpassed the utopian specifications of Old Mecklenburg. If economic security was the foundation for Arcadia along Sugar Creek in the eighteenth century, then the unexampled multiplication of economic goods since that time should have provided a prodigal material base for an even more satisfying utopia.

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<sup>15</sup>Meyers, *Jacksonian Persuasion*, 21-22, 26-28.

But from the perspective of Berkeley the angry voices of the young make any such notion ludicrous. Though Berkeley is not the United States, California has a way of showing the rest of the country what is in store for it; and the evidences of youthful disaffection are multiplying everywhere. Rude and incomprehensible as our offspring often are, they may be trying to say something important to us. Could they be groping for ways to say that, in our intoxication with material progress, caught up in the entrepreneurial way of life, we have been inexorably eroding the nonmaterial dimensions of Old Mecklenburg's utopianism—its equality, its democracy, its virtue?

Knowing Old Mecklenburg only through our society's formal *devoir* to national values that were crystallized in that far-off Arcadia, our young people ask us how men have become so unequal. The historical answer is not pretty. Though black men were few, even Old Mecklenburg's egalitarianism was for white men only. To cite one illustration, we find the county court in 1793 ordering the arrest not just of slaves but of all Negroes "ranging at large during public meetings in the town of Charlotte," on the ground that "sundry injuries have arisen to the owners of slaves by the promiscuous mingling of the negro population with the whites on public occasions."<sup>16</sup>

Actually, in the first decades after the Revolution, the egalitarian idealism stemming from the Declaration of Independence caused white men in the Jeffersonian South to question slavery and the racist assumptions upon which it was based—until the cotton boom intervened. It was the spirit of enterprise, awakened by the high profits that could be wrung from slave labor in the cotton fields, that reversed the egalitarian drift and riveted human bondage on Old Mecklenburg. The number of slaves per thousand whites in the county rose from 165 in 1790 to 661 in 1850; and in the period between 1790 and 1820 Mecklenburg ranked near the top of North Carolina counties in the rate of increase of its slave population. Throughout the South the exploitation of black labor became the main road to riches for white men. From this marriage between racism and the spirit of enterprise issued not only slavery but its post-Civil War progeny, the segregation and degradation that continue to disfigure our society.<sup>17</sup>

But the spirit of enterprise promoted inequality not just between white men and black men. In upcountry North Carolina the cotton boom so widened the gulf between the more successful white men and the less successful white men that by 1833 an observer in Rowan County

<sup>16</sup>D. A. Tompkins, *History of Mecklenburg County and the City of Charlotte, from 1740 to 1903* (Charlotte: Observer Printing Company, 2 volumes, 1903), I, 86.

<sup>17</sup>United States Censuses, 1790-1850.

could write, "The poor *whites* at the South are not as well off in their physical condition as the slaves and hardly as respectable." Benjamin S. Hedrick, who was born in Davidson County in 1827, later recalled: "Of my neighbors, friends, and kindred, nearly one half have left the State since I was old enough to remember. Many is the time I have stood by the loaded emigrant wagon and given the parting hand to those whose faces I was never to look upon again. They were going to seek homes in the free west, knowing, as they did, that free and slave labor could not both exist and prosper in the same community."<sup>18</sup>

Even in the free states by the end of the Jacksonian period the march of enterprise was for the first time producing those extremes of lavish wealth and miserable poverty that were to grow starker as manufacturing expanded and as the slums of the great cities grew during the later nineteenth century. Meanwhile the slaves and poor whites of the Old South were being converted into the tenant farmers and cotton mill hands of the New South, until finally the desperate migrations of these hopeless people began transforming our cities into the seething caldrons of resentment that they are today.

It is these long continued and all too visible inequalities and injustices that cause our young people to denounce the hypocrisy of our professed commitment to equality. And what about democracy? Where the men of Old Mecklenburg assembled at the courthouse to insure for themselves "a simple Democracy," our children see vast corporate, governmental, military, and even educational bureaucracies that seem to grow steadily larger and steadily more insensitive to those whose lives they increasingly dominate. Lately we have all witnessed a presidential election in which the overwhelming public opposition to a barbarous war was flouted by both major parties.

Finally, the very self-righteousness with which the young denounce our wholehearted commitment to enterprise, to material progress, to the cult of business success—the moral arrogance with which they reject the world we have made for the sake of a world they can only vaguely define or imagine—seems to me to represent a yearning for the final and critical utopian quality of Old Mecklenburg. Implicit in all their querulous complaints is a muffled recognition that the truly good society must have a moral dimension, a social definition of virtue, and institutional arrangements that are conducive to virtue.

Of course, the Arcadian utopia of Old Mecklenburg is gone beyond recovery. But our young people's disaffection should serve to remind

<sup>18</sup>Bernard C. Steiner (ed.), "The South Atlantic States in 1833, As Seen by a New Englander," by Henry Barnard, *Maryland Historical Magazine*, XIII (December, 1918), 338; John Spencer Bassett, *Anti-Slavery Leaders of North Carolina* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press [*Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, Series XVI, No. 6], 1898), 30; Denison Olmsted, *Report on the Geology of North Carolina*, I (1824), 51.

us that the utopian values deriving from Old Mecklenburg have persisted. Does it also suggest the possibility that a renewal of utopia itself could be at hand? Before dismissing this possibility, remember that the disaffection of the young is often discounted on the ground that they are the children of affluence, that they can afford to ignore the hard economic realities so familiar to the depression generation, that they can cheaply afford the luxury of rebellion. But can this very affluence serve the same function for our urban-industrial society that the abundance of cheap land served for our forebears in that isolated agrarian society along Sugar Creek?

For men and women coming out of the peasant or quasi-peasant societies of post-medieval Europe, a farm of one's own provided nearly everything in the way of material goods and security that could be desired or imagined. Professing themselves content with a rude and simple sufficiency, the people of Old Mecklenburg were left free to savor and value other qualities of life and society. Is it inconceivable that our hundred-year orgy of enterprise and expanding productivity has at length brought us to the point where the oncoming generation of affluent middle-class Americans is beginning to say, as their ancestors once said, "We have enough, we are satisfied with this modest competence"—modest, that is, by the inflated material standards of an advanced urban-industrial society? Is the disaffection of the young a mere phase of adolescent rebellion, or does it portend a widening recognition of the destructive effects of enterprise, a turning to a new style of life oriented around more humane goals for individuals and society?

In any event, for this historian, looking from Berkeley back to Old Mecklenburg, the following meanings are clear. It is our overriding commitment to enterprise that has carried us away from the humane social ideals of our ancestors, while at the same time carrying us to unprecedented heights of material abundance. It is this erosion of our social ideals that leaves us today so wealthy, so powerful, yet so bitterly divided, so painfully confused and dissatisfied. Perhaps the anger of our children, the flames of our cities, and the example of our ancestors may yet persuade us while there is still time that the wealth we have accumulated may be put to utopian ends; that by turning away from Mammon we may build in an urban-industrial setting a society as equal, as democratic, and as virtuous as the one our ancestors built on these hills and along these creeks two centuries ago—that the meaning and the power of America lie not in its fleets and armies, its napalm and fragmentation bombs, its executive suites and two-car garages, but in the strength of its utopian commitment to humanity.