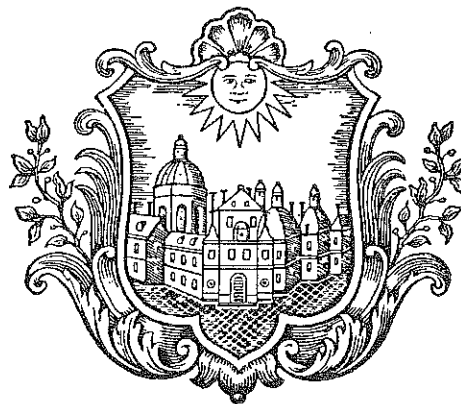


The
WILLIAM AND MARY
QUARTERLY

A MAGAZINE OF EARLY AMERICAN HISTORY
Charles Grier Sellers, Jr., "Colonel Ezekiel
Polk: Pioneer and Patriarch," pp. 80-98.



JANUARY, 1953

THIRD SERIES

VOL. X

NUMBER 1

*Published by the Institute of Early American
History and Culture*

WILLIAMSBURG

Colonel Ezekiel Polk: Pioneer and Patriarch

Charles Grier Sellers, Jr.*

HISTORY knows Colonel Ezekiel Polk only dimly, as grandfather of a President. Yet the diverse careers of this obscure but remarkable man may tell us something that biographies of the great cannot about many of the average characteristics of his generation. Impulsive, avaricious, and grandiloquent, this farmer, Indian fighter, land speculator, politician, filibusterer, Revolutionary soldier, and pioneer on six frontiers, was a unique embodiment of much of the spirit of the Old West in the early days of the republic. His most substantial contribution to his country was a numerous progeny of land-hungry Americans, including a grandson who did not rest until the vast expanse from the Rio Grande to Puget Sound had discovered its Manifest Destiny.

Ezekiel Polk's early years were spent following the advancing frontier. His Scotch-Irish father had settled in Maryland in the 1720's, and, some time before 1740, had followed the lure of land to the Cumberland valley of Pennsylvania. It was here, on December 7, 1747, that Ezekiel was born, the next youngest of five boys and three girls. By the time he was six, the Cumberland country was filling up so rapidly that good lands for the older children were scarce and expensive. Consequently, the entire family packed up its belongings and joined the thousands who were pouring southwestward through the Valley of Virginia.

The Polks did not stop until they reached the very limits of settlement, on the southern boundary of North Carolina in what was to be Mecklenburg County. Here land was to be had for the taking. The older brothers and sisters were soon all married and busy clearing farms and raising families of their own, along the creeks which flowed west into the Catawba River. Ezekiel's father seems to have died soon after reaching North Carolina, and his mother not many years later. The boy was probably left to be brought up by Thomas, the most prosperous of the brothers.¹

* Mr. Sellers teaches History at Princeton University.

¹ The most reliable account of the early years of the Polk family in America is to be found in the autobiographical sketch written by Colonel William Polk in the 1820's and published in William H. Hoyt, ed., *The Papers of Archibald D. Murphey* (Raleigh, 1914), II, 400 ff. For birth dates, see "Polk Births & Deaths," undated

the
Th
wa
cor
peo
wou
Iris
allia
ran
I
bro
Poll
burg
final
dele
from
P
in fr
more
front
form
Polk
the
of th
coun

manu
best g
Franci
cal So
and T
133-14
21
from i
moven
in Am
31
Diction
Meckle

Pioneer and Patriarch

Sellers, Jr.*

Ezekiel Polk only dimly, as grand-diverse careers of this obscure but something that biographies of the characteristics of his generation. This farmer, Indian fighter, land stationary soldier, and pioneer on of much of the spirit of the Old His most substantial contribution of land-hungry Americans, until the vast expanse from the red its Manifest Destiny.

following the advancing frontier. Maryland in the 1720's, and, some of land to the Cumberland valley on 7, 1747, that Ezekiel was born, e girls. By the time he was six, o rapidly that good lands for the . Consequently, the entire family e thousands who were pouring Virginia.

reached the very limits of settle- rth Carolina in what was to be be had for the taking. The older ed and busy clearing farms and reeks which flowed west into the o have died soon after reaching y years later. The boy was prob- most prosperous of the brothers.¹

iversity:
ears of the Polk family in America is ten by Colonel William Polk in the *The Papers of Archibald D. Murphey* ee "Polk Births & Deaths," undated

Life in the Catawba country was far from tranquil. Indian warfare in the late 1750's was followed closely by rioting over land titles and taxes. The latter troubles were no sooner settled, in 1765, than the upcountry was threatened with full-scale civil war. The long-continued exactions of corrupt courthouse rings and tidewater politicians were goading the people of large sections of the interior into a course of resistance that would end only in pitched battle at Alamance Creek in 1771. The Scotch-Irish along the Catawba, however, entered into an advantageous political alliance with Governor William Tryon and the tidewater leaders who ran the province, and helped put down the insurgent Regulators.²

Ezekiel Polk grew up in the very midst of the turbulence, for his brother Thomas was becoming the leading man of the settlement. Thomas Polk was one of the principal promoters of the new county of Mecklenburg, formed in 1762, one of its original magistrates, and a captain and finally colonel in the militia. He was a member of the county's first delegation to the provincial assembly and served there every year save one from 1766 to 1774.³

Presumably, young Ezekiel Polk did not fail to profit from the lessons in frontier leadership thus afforded. But the captain was able to do even more for his youngest brother. By 1769, when Ezekiel was twenty, the frontier had moved so far toward the mountains that a new county was formed across the Catawba and named for the governor with whom the Polks had recently allied themselves. Captain Polk's counterpart across the river was his brother-in-law, Captain Thomas Neal, and the two of them together seem to have controlled the patronage of the new county. So it was that Ezekiel appeared at the first court of Tryon County

manuscript in Polk Papers, N. C. Department of Archives and History, Raleigh. The best genealogies are Wilmot P. Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk and His Descendants" (San Francisco, 1939), typed copies in the Library of Congress and the Tennessee Historical Society, Nashville; and Mrs. Frank M. Angellotti, "The Polks of North Carolina and Tennessee," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, LXXVII (1923), 133-145, 213-227, 250-270; LXXVIII (1924), 33-53, 159-177, 312-330.

² D. A. Tompkins, *History of Mecklenburg County and the City of Charlotte from 1740 to 1901* (Charlotte, 1903), I, 1-30. The standard account of the Regulator movement is John Spencer Bassett, "The Regulators of North Carolina (1765-1771)," in American Historical Association, *Annual Report* (1894), 141-212.

³ A. R. Newsome, "Thomas Polk," in Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1937), XV, 42; D. A. Tompkins, *Mecklenburg*, I, 31-34.

and produced a commission from Governor Tryon naming him clerk of court, a lucrative and politically important post in eighteenth-century local government.⁴

About the same time, Ezekiel took a wife, Maria (or Nanny) Wilson, daughter of one of the wealthiest men in Mecklenburg. He and his bride established themselves on a two hundred acre farm, some thirty miles west of the Catawba and just south of Kings Mountain, on the main road leading through the new county and down to Charlestown.⁵

The early years of Tryon County were no more peaceful than those of Mecklenburg. The provincial boundary still had not been surveyed, the four or five hundred families in the area refused to pay taxes or to buy their lands, civil officers were treated with contempt, and the country had become a haven for the horse thieves and other desperate characters of both Carolinas. The establishment of the new county, however, improved the situation, and its officials were soon exercising their authority over large parts of the adjoining province.⁶

Ezekiel was able to devote most of his time to farming, though four times a year he had to attend the county court at a neighbor's house and occasionally to transact public business at home. The county paid him ten pounds a year, and, more important, he was allowed substantial fees for all his services. Within a few years he must have been accounted wealthy, as such things were judged on the frontier.⁷ But in 1772 Ezekiel's fair prospects for political advancement were blasted. In that year, the provincial boundary was at last surveyed, and both Thomas Neal and Ezekiel found to their dismay that they were living in South Carolina.⁸

⁴ Minute Book, Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, Tryon County, N. C., 1769-1779, July Term, 1769, microfilm, N. C. Department of Archives and History.

⁵ For Maria Wilson Polk's family, see Chalmers G. Davidson, *Major John Davidson of "Rural Hill," Mecklenburg County, N. C.* (Charlotte, 1943), 6-7. The location of Ezekiel's plantation is indicated in Land Book 22, p. 22, Office of the N. C. Secretary of State, Raleigh; also, assignments of road overseers, Tryon Court Minutes, October Term, 1769, and April Term, 1771.

⁶ William L. Saunders, ed., *The Colonial Records of North Carolina* (Raleigh, 1886-1890), VII, 861.

⁷ Clarence W. Griffin, *History of Old Tryon and Rutherford Counties, North Carolina, 1730-1936* (Asheville, 1937), 8; county expenses, Tryon Court Minutes, October Term, 1769. Griffin is mistaken as to the location of Charles McLean's, where the early courts were held; actually he lived south of Kings Mountain, adjacent to Ezekiel Polk. See Land Book 22, p. 22, Office of the N. C. Secretary of State; and assignments of road overseers, Tryon Court Minutes, October Term, 1769.

⁸ Saunders, *N. C. Colonial Records*, IX, 302; Tryon Court Minutes, July and October Terms, 1772.

Tryon naming him clerk of the post in eighteenth-century

the, Maria (or Nanny) Wilson, of Mecklenburg. He and his wife had a 100-acre farm, some thirty miles from Kings Mountain, on the main road to Charlestown.⁵

He was no more peaceful than those who had not been surveyed, the land refused to pay taxes or to buy the land in contempt, and the country was full of other desperate characters. The new county, however, was soon exercising their authority

in the time to farming, though four times a week at a neighbor's house and some. The county paid him ten dollars a month for all the services he was allowed substantial fees for all the services he had been accounted wealthy, as he was.⁷ But in 1772 Ezekiel's fair share was blasted. In that year, the property of both Thomas Neal and Ezekiel was confiscated in South Carolina.⁸

Records of Sessions, Tryon County, N. C., 1769-1771. Department of Archives and History. Chalmers G. Davidson, *Major John Polk, N. C.* (Charlotte, 1943), 6-7. The *Land Book* 22, p. 22, Office of the Surveyors of the lands of road overseers, Tryon Court Minutes, 1771.

Records of North Carolina (Raleigh, 1893), 100. *Tryon and Rutherford Counties, North Carolina*, 1769-1771. Department of Archives and History. Chalmers G. Davidson, *Major John Polk, N. C.* (Charlotte, 1943), 6-7. The *Land Book* 22, p. 22, Office of the Surveyors of the lands of road overseers, Tryon Court Minutes, October Term, 1769-1771; Tryon Court Minutes, July and

It was not long, however, before these aggressive North Carolina politicians were exercising equal sway in the New Acquisition, as South Carolina denominated the district acquired under the boundary settlement. Within a year or two, Thomas Neal was colonel and Ezekiel was lieutenant-colonel of the district militia. Ezekiel's family was, meanwhile, growing along with his local consequence. In 1770, Maria presented him with twins, Thomas and Matilda. A second son, Samuel (who was to be father James K. Polk, the president), was born in 1772, and a third, William, about two years later.⁹

The chaotic conditions that accompanied the American Revolution afforded unusual opportunities for ambitious men to get ahead. Ezekiel was unquestionably ambitious; he was also regarded by some as the most talented of all the Polk brothers.¹⁰ But there was a constitutional defect in his makeup, an instability of conviction and purpose, which was to prevent him from rising as far as his abilities seemed to promise.

Matters went auspiciously enough at first. Ezekiel was a delegate from the New Acquisition to the provincial congress that met in Charlestown in June, 1775, and he was commissioned a captain in the regiment of mounted rangers authorized by this session. The regiment was raised for operations in the interior, where opposition to lowcountry leadership was so strong that it was uncertain whether Whig or Loyalist forces would win control. It was in this ticklish situation that Ezekiel displayed his independence—or his unreliability. He had been in the Whig camp only four days when, enraged by an order to march the regiment to the coast, he announced to the Whig commander that he alone was responsible for his company and that he "would not sacrifice their Healths for no Council of Safety's Parading notions." The rangers were raised, declared Captain Polk, to protect the frontiers and not the plantations of lowcountry nabobs. Whereupon he marched his men home.¹¹

⁹ Edward McCrady, *The History of South Carolina in the Revolution 1775-1780* (New York, 1901), 111n.; Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 15, 24, 59, 66. The New Acquisition corresponds roughly to the present York County.

¹⁰ [Democratic Central Committee,] *Vindication of the Revolutionary Character and Services of the Late Col. Ezekiel Polk, of Mecklenburg, N. C.* (Nashville [1844]), 14.

¹¹ Alexander S. Salley, Jr., ed., "Papers of the First Council of Safety of the Revolutionary Party in South Carolina, June-November, 1775," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, I (1900), 69. Information on Ezekiel's career in South Carolina is drawn from the following sources: Extracts from the Journal of the South Carolina Provincial Congress of June, 1775, copied into a note-

Within a few weeks, however, Ezekiel had thought better of his course and was begging the Whigs to take him back. To prove that his Whiggery was of the strictest variety, he took charge of the dirty business of coercing Loyalists and the wavering to take the Whig side. These activities won the restoration of his commission as captain. In December, 1775, he led his company in the campaign against the Loyalists that ended in the battle at Reedy River. The expedition against the Cherokees the following summer, in which Ezekiel effectively led three hundred militia from the New Acquisition, seems to have been his last military service in South Carolina.

Ezekiel's political gyrations had so undermined his position with the people of the New Acquisition as to cloud his prospects for future advancement. He was left out of the district delegation to the provincial congress that met in November, 1775, and it was only by getting up a second election and appealing to his friends in the congress that he obtained a seat. He had probably never been quite happy in South Carolina, and in 1776 he moved his family back to Mecklenburg, among his old friends and relations. Buying a two hundred and sixty acre farm from his brother Thomas, he settled down on the east side of Sugar Creek, about ten miles below the little county seat town of Charlotte.¹²

book in James K. Polk Papers, Second Series, Library of Congress; McCrady, *South Carolina in the Revolution*, 13-14, 37; "Journal of the Council of Safety for the Province of South Carolina," *South Carolina Historical Society, Collections*, II (1858), 24-26, 37; Salley, "Papers of the First Council of Safety," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, I (1900), 37, 69-71, 192; II (1901), 103, 261-262; III (1902), 3-4, 171; Hoyt, *Murphey Papers*, II, 201, 401-403; John Drayton, ed., [William H. Drayton,] *Memoirs of the American Revolution, from Its Commencement to the Year 1776 . . .* (Charleston, 1821), I, 323; A. S. Salley, Jr., *The History of Orangeburg County, South Carolina, from Its First Settlement to the Close of the Revolutionary War* (Orangeburg, 1898), 389-395, 406-407, 414, 416-419, 424-425, 434; R. W. Gibbes, ed., *Documentary History of the American Revolution . . .* (Columbia and New York, 1853, 1857), I, 133, 137, 147, 151, 227, 240; II, 27; A. S. Salley, Jr., ed., "Historical Notes," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, V (1904), 189-190; VII (1906), 103-107; A. S. Salley, Jr., ed., *Col. William Hill's Memoirs of the Revolution* (Columbia, 1929), 29-30; Peter Force, ed., *American Archives*, (Washington, 1837-1853), Fourth Series, IV, 28, 31, 33, 40-48, V, 578; Fifth Series, I, 458; *Vindication of Ezekiel Polk*, 14.

¹² The prevailing impression that Ezekiel Polk did not move to Mecklenburg until 1778 has been based on the imperfect recollections of several of his old neighbors, recorded in the 1840's. He did not attend the South Carolina general assembly of September-October, 1776, to which he was elected. A. S. Salley, Jr., ed.,

and thought better of his course. To prove that his Whiggery of the dirty business of coercing the big side. These activities won on. In December, 1775, he led Loyalists that ended in the battle of the Cherokees the following year. He took three hundred militia from the last military service in South

Carolina. He confirmed his position with the state by getting up a second election in 1776, among his old friends and neighbors. He bought a 100-acre farm from his brother-in-law at Sugar Creek, about ten miles from Charlotte.¹²

¹²Library of Congress; McCrady, *South Carolina*, I, 323; A. S. Salley, Jr., ed., *South Carolina Historical Society, Collections, II Council of Safety, South Carolina* (1901), 37, 69-71, 192; II (1901), 103, 198-201, 201, 401-403; John Drayton, *American Revolution, from Its Commencement to Its First Settlement to the* (1821), I, 323; A. S. Salley, Jr., ed., *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical* (1929), 29-30; Peter Force, ed., *Fourth Series, IV*, 28, 31, 33, 40-48, *Ezekiel Polk*, 14.

Polk did not move to Mecklenburg until after the election of several of his old neighbors in the South Carolina general assembly was elected. A. S. Salley, Jr., ed.,

The Mecklenburg Polks had been in the very forefront of the Revolutionary movement. Thomas and his son William had received continental commissions as colonel and major, while Ezekiel's other brothers, Charles and John, served as captains in various campaigns. But when Ezekiel returned to North Carolina, the continental commissions had all been allotted, and the theater of war had moved to the northern colonies, leaving Mecklenburg relatively undisturbed. He devoted himself, therefore, to farming, and began to amass a large amount of property. In 1778, he opened a tavern on the courthouse square in Charlotte. His appointment the following year as justice of the peace indicated that for the third time in a decade he was becoming a man of consequence in a new community.¹³

By this time, however, war was again bearing down on the Carolinas. When Charlestown fell, in the summer of 1780, and the British legions of Lord Cornwallis advanced into the interior of South Carolina, the Mecklenburg militia was called out to deal with British foraging parties and with the Loyalists who were organizing west of the Catawba. Ezekiel went on the expedition against the Loyalists, but the battle at Ramsour's Mill was fought before his detachment reached the scene. He seems to have been in the field on several other occasions during the summer, and also assisted the Presbyterian clergy in haranguing the militia and "exhorting them to be true to their country."¹⁴

Horatio Gates' defeat at Camden in August, 1780, opened the way for a British invasion of North Carolina. By September 25, Cornwallis's army was camped within a few miles of Ezekiel's farm, and the next day it

¹³*Journal of the General Assembly of South Carolina, September 17, 1776-October 20, 1776* (Columbia, 1909), 161. A strong family tradition indicates that the birth of Ezekiel's fifth child, William, on September 10, 1776, took place in Mecklenburg. Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 67. The deed from Thomas Polk to Ezekiel Polk, on October 3, 1776, of 260 acres for £300, lists both as being "of Mecklenburg." Record of Deeds, Mecklenburg County, N. C., Second Series, Book 5, p. 232, Office of the Register of Deeds, Charlotte. The family graveyard, where Ezekiel buried his first wife and at least two of his children, may be seen today in the dense woods about two miles northwest of Pineville, just east of Sugar Creek, and fixes the location of his plantation.

¹⁴Mecklenburg Deeds, First Series, Book 36, p. 80; Minute Book, Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, 1774-1785, Mecklenburg County, N. C., October 16, 1778, and October Term, 1779, Office of Clerk of Court, Charlotte.

¹⁵Raleigh *North Carolina Standard*, Sept. 18, 1844. See also *Vindication of Ezekiel Polk*, 14.

moved into Charlotte, where the general set up headquarters in Thomas Polk's "White House," the only painted building in the village. At this point, Ezekiel's nerve failed again. In order to save his substantial property in lands, crops, slaves, and the Charlotte tavern, he went to the British headquarters and "took protection," promising to remain peacefully at home and to co-operate with the invaders.¹⁵

The annihilation of the left wing of the British army at Kings Mountain, early in October, forced Cornwallis to withdraw to South Carolina. With the enemy gone, some of the more zealous Whigs wanted to punish Ezekiel for his latest defection, but most Mecklenburgers were unwilling to condemn him too harshly (he was, after all, a Polk), and moderate counsels prevailed. Ezekiel picked this embarrassing moment to make a trip to Pennsylvania, possibly to attend to business relating to his father's estate, and probably also to allow resentments to cool. He must have been still away when Cornwallis marched through Mecklenburg the following spring, on his way to Guilford Courthouse and Yorktown.¹⁶

Mecklenburg had seen its last of the British, but Mecklenburgers in large numbers engaged in the ensuing struggle to drive the remaining enemy forces out of South Carolina. Ezekiel seems to have restored himself to the good graces of his neighbors by some service in this final stage of the war, but precisely when and where is not known.¹⁷ In 1782, the Mecklenburg magistrates, with only two dissenting, elected him sheriff. But the day after his election he was back in the county court complaining loudly of the condition of the jail, and within three months the unpredictable Ezekiel had resigned.¹⁸

With the war won, it remained only for the victors to reap the spoils. The ambitious politicians who had risen to power in North Carolina

¹⁵ Thomas G. Polk to Bishop Leonidas Polk, June 21 [1852], and Benson J. Lossing to Bishop Leonidas Polk, June 12, 1852, Polk Family of North Carolina Collection, Library of Congress; *Vindication of Ezekiel Polk*, 9, 11-13; Raleigh *North Carolina Standard*, Sept. 18, 1844.

¹⁶ *Vindication of Ezekiel Polk*, 9-10, 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11, 13; Revolutionary Vouchers, Salisbury District, No. 5138, to Ezekiel Polk for militia services, N. C. Department of Archives and History; Revolutionary Accounts, Vol. VI, folio 88, p. 1; Vol. XII, folio 26, p. 4, and folio 31, p. 4, to Ezekiel Polk, N. C. Department of Archives and History.

¹⁸ Mecklenburg Court Minutes, 1774-1785, April 10-11, 1782, and July Term, 1782.

t up headquarters in Thomas
ilding in the village. At this
o save his substantial property
avern, he went to the British
ising to remain peacefully at
15

the British army at Kings
wallis to withdraw to South
e more zealous Whigs wanted
ut most Mecklenburgers were
e was, after all, a Polk), and
ed this embarrassing moment
to attend to business relating
allow resentments to cool. He
is marched through Mecklen-
uilford Courthouse and York-

ritish, but Mecklenburgers in
uggle to drive the remaining
el seems to have restored him-
ome service in this final stage of
is not known.¹⁷ In 1782, the
lissenting, elected him sheriff.
n the county court complaining
in three months the unpredict-

r the victors to reap the spoils.
to power in North Carolina

lk, June 21 [1852], and Benson J.
2, Polk Family of North Carolina
if Ezekiel Polk, 9, 11-13; Raleigh

isbury District, No. 5138, to Ezekiel
rchives and History; Revolutionary
6, p. 4, and folio 31, p. 4, to Ezekiel

April 10-11, 1782, and July Term,

during the Revolution missed few opportunities. They began their opera-
tions with confiscated Loyalist property and unsold lands in the settled
portion of the state, but the real prize was the domain lying beyond the
mountains and stretching to the Mississippi. In 1780 and 1782, provision
was made for soldiers' land bounties in a part of the territory, most of
the bounty rights eventually being purchased by speculator-politicians.
The rest of the vast area was disposed of by an astonishing act of 1783,
under which millions of acres went for a song to a small group of insiders.
The architect of this colossal grab was William Blount, an eastern poli-
tician with an eye to the main chance, but among his prominent associates
was Thomas Polk.¹⁹

Ezekiel did not rank high enough in political circles to participate
directly in the rich loot, but he was Thomas Polk's brother. Accordingly,
he secured from the same legislature that passed the land law an appoint-
ment as one of the surveyors of the boundary of the district set aside
for military grants. He received a generous piece of western land for
his services and, also, an additional tract for locating some choice grants
for Thomas Polk while on the survey. But Indian raids soon put an end
to surveying, and Ezekiel returned home.²⁰

In the meantime, the family on the Sugar Creek plantation was grow-
ing; a fourth daughter, Ezekiel's eighth child, was born in 1790. The
peaceful life of the plantation, however, was not satisfying to a man of his
restless temperament. In 1790, he secured an appointment as deputy sur-
veyor of land grants in the western territory, and in August the family set
out on the arduous journey over the mountains to settle on a military
grant Ezekiel had purchased five years earlier. They established their
new home north of the Cumberland River on Richland Creek, a branch
of the Sulphur Fork of Red River, in the newly created Tennessee
County.²¹

¹⁹ Thomas P. Abernethy, *From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee: A Study in Frontier Democracy* (Chapel Hill, 1932), 35-53. For the grantees, see Card Index to Tennessee Land Grants, Office of the N. C. Secretary of State, and Book of Warrants Issued by John Armstrong's Office, Tennessee Land Office, Nashville.

²⁰ Grant to Ezekiel Polk for services as surveyor, Land Grants, Middle District, File No. 3, Office of the N. C. Secretary of State; Minutes of Circuit Court, 1810-1815, Maury County, Tenn., 141; Minutes of County Court, 1800-1812, Williamson County, Tenn., Oct. 14, 1806. Where Tennessee public documents are cited, the typescript copies in the Tennessee State Library, Nashville, have been used.

²¹ Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 105; Stockley Donelson to Colonel William Polk,

The Blount-controlled North Carolina legislature had recently ceded the entire western county to the United States, with the important reservation that all North Carolina land grants should be recognized, and the cession had just been organized as a federal territory. The Indians, however, still held the larger part of the area, and since most of the land grants could not be surveyed and perfected for many years, it was essential that the speculators control the new territory. This was why Blount got himself appointed territorial governor, and the same consideration caused him to designate Thomas Polk's brother as one of the nine magistrates for Tennessee county.²²

The first settlements in this part of the Southwest Territory had been made two years earlier, but the original pioneers had been driven off by the Indians. Now, with the Indian menace suspended, immigrants were coming in large numbers, grants had to be surveyed, and Ezekiel, once he got his cabin built and his family established, must have had steady employment. But within less than a year the Polks moved back to North Carolina, escaping a new and more terrible period of Indian warfare, in which many of their erstwhile neighbors lost their lives.²³

The main reason for the return was probably the long and painful illness which finally brought the death of Ezekiel's wife, Maria, in the fall of 1791. Maria Polk was a deeply pious woman—she died singing one of Isaac Watts' hymns—and judging from her elaborate tombstone, Ezekiel was devoted to her. His unfortunate proclivity for versification was indulged in Maria's epitaph:

Here unalarm'd at Death's last Stroke
Lies in this tomb MARIA POLK

May 15, 1790, Polk-Yeatman Collection, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Ezekiel Polk's bond as deputy surveyor, Aug. 25, 1790, Polk Family Papers; Colonel William Polk to Colonel Robert Hays, Aug. 16, 1790, Miscellaneous Papers, N. C. Department of Archives and History; Land Grants, Davidson County, Tenn., File No. 220, Office of the N. C. Secretary of State.

²² Abernethy, *Frontier to Plantation*, 55-58, 112-113; Clarence E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, Vol. IV, *The Territory South of the River Ohio, 1790-1796* (Washington, 1936), 441-442.

²³ Albert V. Goodpasture, "Beginnings of Montgomery County," *American Historical Magazine*, VIII (1903), 193-205; "The Correspondence of Gen. James Robertson," *American Historical Magazine*, I (1896), 284-285; deed dated June 28, 1791, listing Ezekiel Polk as a resident of Mecklenburg, Mecklenburg Deeds, Second Series, Book 15, p. 277.

legislature had recently ceded
 tes, with the important reserva-
 should be recognized, and the
 al territory. The Indians, how-
 and since most of the land grants
 any years, it was essential that
 his was why Blount got himself
 ne consideration caused him to
 e of the nine magistrates for

Southwest Territory had been
 pioneers had been driven off by
 ce suspended, immigrants were
 be surveyed, and Ezekiel, once
 ablished, must have had steady
 he Polks moved back to North
 ible period of Indian warfare,
 ors lost their lives.²³

probably the long and painful
 if Ezekiel's wife, Maria, in the
 ious woman—she died singing
 from her elaborate tombstone,
 inate proclivity for versification

's last Stroke
 A POLK

in Historical Collection, University of
 nd as deputy surveyor, Aug. 25, 1790,
 Colonel Robert Hays, Aug. 16, 1790,
 Archives and History; Land Grants,
 the N. C. Secretary of State.
 8, 112-113; Clarence E. Carter, ed.,
 Vol. IV, *The Territory South of the*
 442.
 of Montgomery County," *American*
 The Correspondence of Gen. James
 (1896), 284-285; deed dated June 28,
 lenburg, Mecklenburg Deeds, Second

A tender Mother virtuous Wife
 Resign'd in every Scene of life
 Truly pious without parade
 where want appear'd she lent her Aid.
 To heavenly Courts she did repair
 May those she lov'd all meet her there.²⁴

In less than a year, however, Ezekiel had married again. Not one of the
 several children his new wife bore him survived infancy, as had none of
 her five children by a former marriage.²⁵ The older children were now

²⁴ Gravestone of Maria Polk, Polk Graveyard, near Pineville, N. C. The epitaph
 continues as follows:

Supported by the Hope of a happy Death
 and of a glorious Resurrection to eternal
 Life she bore a tedious and painful Illness with
 a truly Christian Fortitude.—The last Exercise
 of her feeble Voice was employed in singing
 the 33rd Hymn of the 2d. Book of Doctr. Watts
 Composition: in which, anticipating the Joys of
 the blessed Society above, she exchanged the
 earthly for the heavenly Melody.
 Raise thee my Soul fly up and run" &c. xxxiii. B. ii

THIS MONUMENT

The last offering and Token of Respect that
 can be paid by the living to continue her
 Memory on the Minds of her surviving Friends
 and to perpetuate to Posterity the Name and
 Character of such an excellent Woman

IS ERECTED

By the faithful and grateful Partner of her Life &
 Affections—

Her mild and gentle Spirit was dismissed from
 its earthly Mansion on the 29th Day of Novr. 1791,
 in the 45th Year of her Age: and she left an affection-
 ate Family in particular, and all her Acquaintance
 in general to deplore the loss.—

While the dear Dust she leaves behind,
 Sleeps in thy Bosom, sacred Tomb:
 Soft be her Bed, her Slumbers kind,
 And all her Dreams of Joys to come.
 Farewel bright Soul, a short Farewel,
 Till we shall meet again above
 In the sweet Groves where Pleasures dwell,
 And Trees of Life bear Fruits of Love.

²⁵ Gravestones of Eliza Polk and "Still born son of EZEKIEL POLK," Polk
 Graveyard. The epitaph on the latter seems, also, to have been composed by Ezekiel:

growing up. Matilda became the wife of John Campbell in 1792. Two years later, her twin, Tom, and the next brother, Sam, took wives to themselves, and by 1798, Ezekiel was six times a grandfather.²⁶ But all was not peaceful in Mecklenburg. The bitter party conflicts in the capital of the young republic were echoed in the backwoods; Ezekiel was a zealous Jeffersonian, and relations with his Federalist nephew William, who had assumed leadership of the family upon the death of Thomas, in 1794, must have been strained.

The hottest battles of the day, however, raged around Mecklenburg's deeply entrenched Presbyterian churches. Deism, flowing into America on the strong tide of eighteenth-century rationalism and flowering in the postwar years of social and political upheaval, had insinuated itself even into this remote rampart of orthodox Calvinism. The ringleaders of the dissidents were Ezekiel and his neighbor, Ezra Alexander, while the counterattack was led by the pastors of Providence and Sugar Creek churches, James Wallis and Samuel C. Caldwell. The deists organized a debating society, which met up and down Sugar Creek to hold Biblical revelation up to the light of reason, and maintained a circulating library of deistic writers, probably the property of Ezekiel.

Beneath this Slab lies here Interr'd
 An Innocent that never Err'd
 A Mothers Hope in racking pain
 A Sixth time blasted are again
 April the 2d. 1793
 Still born son of
 EZEKIEL POLK

Transient sojourner thou wast
 Born to travel to the sky
 Just the Saviour's cup to taste
 Just to suffer and to die
 Then thy Spirit took its flight
 Soaring to the plains of light.
 O my happy Infant friend
 Shall I thee again behold
 Jesus now this warfare end
 Come and take me to thy fold
 Then shall I matured in love
 Kiss my little friend above.

The name of Ezekiel's second wife is given variously as Bessie Davis and Polly Campbell.

²⁶ Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 15, 24, 59. Samuel Polk married Jane Knox of Iredell County, N. C. The future president, James Knox Polk, born Nov. 2, 1795, was the oldest of their ten children.

John Campbell in 1792. Two brother, Sam, took wives to times a grandfather.²⁶ But all or party conflicts in the capital e backwoods; Ezekiel was a s Federalist nephew William, r upon the death of Thomas,

, raged around Mecklenburg's Deism, flowing into America tionalism and flowering in the val, had insinuated itself even inism. The ringleaders of the ; Ezra Alexander, while the Providence and Sugar Creek ldwell. The deists organized a . Sugar Creek to hold Biblical aintained a circulating library f Ezekiel.

ere Interr'd
Err'd
king pain
e again
33
K
ou wast
sy
o taste
e
s flight
f light.
iend
old
: end
hy fold
in love
bove.
variously, as Bessie Davis and Polly

l Polk married Jane Knox of Iredell
x Polk, born Nov. 2, 1795, was the

That Ezekiel had been orthodox enough in 1791 is indicated by Maria's epitaph, but the removal of her influence, the disappointing deaths of all his children by his second wife, the vagaries of his active but eccentric mind, and, perhaps, clashes with the strong-willed Parson Wallis, probably accounted for the change. This dangerous movement died away quickly, when most of its leaders moved to the West, and any surviving weeds were burned off by the Great Revival of 1802.²⁷ But the decisive blow to infidelity had been dealt by Parson Wallis himself. The matter had fallen out as follows.

In the summer of 1797 a certain John Johnson of Tennessee appeared in Mecklenburg and began trying to stir up interest in a proposed settlement in the great bend of the Tennessee River near Muscle Shoals. The lands were a part of the notorious Yazoo grants made by the Georgia legislature two years before, and the chief promoter of the project was a Georgian, Zachariah Cox. Unfortunately, the grant lay in Indian country, where settlement was forbidden by law. Nevertheless, on the basis of a private agreement with a few of the Indians concerned, Cox had begun to raise a small army and was promising a thousand acres to any man who would outfit himself and stay with the enterprise for one year. A large quantity of arms, including small cannon, had been purchased in Philadelphia, and boats were being built near Knoxville for the descent of the Tennessee. Cox had taken the additional precaution of securing the support of prominent Tennessee politicians by generous grants of land—Senator Andrew Jackson received a thousand acres; Senator Joseph Anderson, fifteen thousand; and Governor John Sevier, fifty thousand.

When Johnson described this grandiose but illegal project in Mecklenburg, the combustible imagination of Ezekiel Polk was fired, and he

²⁷ William H. Foote, *Sketches of North Carolina, Historical and Biographical, Illustrative of the Principles of a Portion of Her Early Settlers* (New York, 1846), 248-249; J. B. Alexander, *The History of Mecklenburg County from 1740 to 1900* (Charlotte, 1902), 78, 281-282. Ezra Alexander died in 1800 and is buried in the Polk Graveyard. Ezekiel Polk's library at the time of his death included works by Gibbon and Hume, plus fifteen "miscellaneous" volumes, untitled in the inventory of his estate; this was probably the deistic library said to have been carried to Tennessee about 1800. Wills and Inventories, Hardeman County, Tenn., Book I, 1823-1835, p. 14. See also James Wallis' pamphlet, *The Bible Defended: Being an Investigation of the Misrepresentations and Falsehoods of Thomas Paine's Age of Reason, Part the Second: Wherein Also, the Evidences of Revealed Religion Are Stated, and the Authenticity and Divine Authority of the Several Books of the Bible Are Vindicated* (Halifax, N. C., 1797).

proceeded to raise a party of twenty-five men to join Cox. About the time Ezekiel and his followers left for Tennessee in July, Parson Wallis saw his chance to strike a blow for religion. Consulting prominent Federalists in the neighborhood, he rushed off to the federal district judge, John Sitgreaves, a deposition hinting darkly that "from the mysterious manner in which the business has been conducted, much more is contemplated by the authors of it than is promulged, or perhaps generally suspected."

The Federalists had been jittery for some time over the intrigues of the Spanish, Indian troubles, the exposure of Blount's alleged conspiracy with the British, and countless other plots in the troubled Southwest; and Wallis's charges filled them with alarm. The judge hurried a copy of the Wallis statement to Philadelphia, at the same time dispatching the federal marshal after Polk and Johnson. Secretary of State Timothy Pickering wrote in haste to President John Adams, at home in Massachusetts, proposing a proclamation to "warn the people of their danger." The same day, he directed the governors of the three southernmost states to try to stop the enterprise, suggesting that it had some ulterior object. He also instructed the federal attorneys in the South to publish warnings against the project in the newspapers. The governor of South Carolina offered a thousand dollar reward for information leading to the conviction of the principals, while in North Carolina, Governor Ashe called an emergency meeting of his council, issued a proclamation for the arrest of Polk and Johnson as the instigators of "such daring and illegal proceedings," and ordered the militia out in pursuit of them. But the adventurers had long since made their escape.²⁸

²⁸ Isaac J. Cox, ed., "Documents Relating to Zachariah Cox," *Quarterly Publication of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio*, VIII (1913), 92-99; Samuel C. Williams, ed., "Executive Journal of Gov. John Sevier," *East Tennessee Historical Society, Publications*, No. 1 (1929), 144-146; No. 2 (1930), 144-148; No. 3 (1931), 159-160; No. 5 (1933), 165-166; *American State Papers, Public Lands*, I, 232, 244; Colonel William Polk to Gen. William R. Davie, Aug. 9, 1797, photostat, and Oliver Wolcott to James McHenry, Sept. 15, 1797, James McHenry Papers, Library of Congress; Timothy Pickering to Judge John Sitgreaves, Aug. 1, 1797, same to President John Adams, Aug. 3, 1797, same to the governors of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, Aug. 3, 1797, copies, Pickering Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; Timothy Pickering to the attorneys for North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, Aug. 3, 1797, same to James McHenry, Sept. 30, 1797, copies, United States Department of State, Domestic Letters, National Archives; proclamation of the governor of South Carolina, Aug. 24, 1797, and

men to join Cox. About the messee in July, Parson Wallis gion. Consulting prominent d off to the federal district ing darkly that "from the has been conducted, much an is promulged, or perhaps

the time over the intrigues of f Blount's alleged conspiracy in the troubled Southwest; n. The judge hurried a copy he same time dispatching the Secretary of State Timothy Adams, at home in Massa- the people of their danger." the three southernmost states it it had some ulterior object. he South to publish warnings : governor of South Carolina nation leading to the convic- ina, Governor Ashe called an proclamation for the arrest of h daring and illegal proceed- : of them. But the adventurers

Zachariah Cox," *Quarterly Publi- ty of Ohio*, VIII (1913), 92-99; Gov. John Sevier," *East Tennessee* 144-146; No. 2 (1930), 144-148; *American State Papers, Public Lands*, um R. Davie, Aug. 9, 1797, photo- . 15, 1797, James McHenry Papers, ge John Sitgreaves, Aug. 1, 1797, same to the governors of North 3, 1797, copies, Pickering Papers, ring to the attorneys for North , 1797, same to James McHenry, f State, Domestic Letters, National th Carolina, Aug. 24, 1797, and

As for dark purposes, Ezekiel's nephew, William, was reassuring:

... it is a mere land speculation without any expectation at least by E. P. of seeing or experiencing any danger. I know his weak nerves too well, to believe he would hazard himself where there would be the most distant idea that blood would be spilt. Mr. Polk is a man charged with impatience, has no fortitude, fickle in the extreme, a lover of home, and never saw blood but from a lancet or his nose in his life; from such a leader I fear nothing.²⁹

Cox did not appear at the appointed rendezvous when Ezekiel's men reached Tennessee, and some of them became discouraged and returned home. Most of the rest probably followed suit soon after, when it was learned that the Secretary of War had ordered the small army detachment near Knoxville to prevent the Cox expedition from descending the Tennessee. Cox then led his remaining followers overland to the mouth of the Cumberland, and the next summer he descended the Mississippi for some unknown purpose. Arrested by the Federalist governor of the Mississippi Territory, Cox escaped, received protection from the Spanish governor at New Orleans, and finally made his way back to Tennessee, where his old friends, the officials of that state, gave him a clean bill of health. Ezekiel's name drops out of the Cox story after the summer of 1797. He may have accompanied the adventurers as far as the mouth of the Cumberland, but it is unlikely that he pursued the chimera further.³⁰

It was six years later, in the fall of 1803, that Ezekiel quit Mecklenburg for good. The Indian menace had almost disappeared in middle Tennessee, immigration was booming, and conditions were favorable for a return to his short-time home on the waters of Red River. Within a few years, all of Ezekiel's sons and daughters but Sam had joined him in what is now Robertson County. Thomas, William, and probably John, now had families of their own, and John Campbell, Matilda's husband, brought his

President John Adams to Timothy Pickering, Aug. 25, 1797, United States Department of State, Miscellaneous Letters, National Archives; Governor Samuel Ashe to Judge John Sitgreaves, Aug. 14, 1797; same to Major General Robert Smith, Aug. 18, 1797, and minutes of the governor's council, Aug. 30, 1797, all in *Governors' Letter Book and Journal of the Council of State, 1795-1855*, N. C. Department of Archives and History; Halifax *North Carolina Journal*, Sept. 18, 25, 1797.

²⁹ Colonel William Polk to General W. R. Davie, Aug. 9, 1797, photostat, McHenry Papers.

³⁰ Cox, "Zachariah Cox," 52-114.

household also. Ezekiel gave them all lands adjacent to his own plantation, and, for the next few years, the growing clan settled down to the cultivation of tobacco and then cotton.³¹

The Polks were not to be content very long. For in 1805 the Indians were persuaded to give up their claims to most of the lower half of middle Tennessee, and a great block of the land grants issued under the North Carolina act of 1783 were opened to settlement. Settlers began pouring in, and with the rest came Ezekiel, establishing himself on the waters of Duck River, at the head of Carter's Creek, then in Williamson County but now in the northeastern part of Maury, on the twenty-five hundred acre tract he had received as locator for Thomas Polk while on the military boundary survey in 1783.³²

Ezekiel's son John had died in Robertson the previous year, and another son, Thomas, apparently turned a deaf ear to his father's urgings to move again. But the rest of the children and their children were soon with him in the new country, including two unmarried daughters at home, Matilda and John Campbell, William and his wife, Clarissa and her new husband, Thomas McNeal, and at least nine grandchildren. Even Sam was persuaded the next year to leave Mecklenburg, bringing with him an eleven-year-old boy, James Knox Polk. They all settled near Ezekiel on farms he provided.³³

The Duck River country was real frontier. In 1807, it was still "in a wilderness State, there were but few inhabitants in the bounds of Maury

³¹ Abernethy, *Frontier to Plantation*, 198-199; Ezekiel Polk was still a resident of Mecklenburg in Sept., 1803, when he disposed of his lands there. Mecklenburg Deeds, Second Series, Book 18, pp. 36, 39, 51, 59. The first record of Ezekiel in Robertson is of Feb. 7, 1804. Minutes of County Court, Robertson County, Tenn., 1796-1807, p. 176. For other references to the Polks in Robertson see *ibid.*, 179, 181, 183, 197, 200, 203, 209, 211, 217, 222, 233, 236, 246; Robertson Court Minutes, 1808-1811, p. 40; General Index to Deeds, Robertson County Tenn., Book O, 1796-1838; Wills, Inventories, Bonds, Etc., Robertson County, Tenn., Vol. I, 1796-1812, pp. 70, 83-85, 98-99, 211, 217, 222; Records of Superior Court of Law and Equity, Mero District, Tenn., Pleas, 1805-1807, Part I, p. 56.

³² Abernethy, *Frontier to Plantation*, 187-188; indenture between Charles Polk and William Polk, Sept. 10, 1806, Polk-Yeatman Collection; Land Grants, Middle District of Tennessee, File No. 91, Office of the N. C. Secretary of State.

³³ Robertson Wills, Etc., 70, 83-85, 98-99; Robertson Court Minutes, 1796-1807, pp. 203, 211, 217, 222; Robertson Court Minutes, 1808-1811, p. 40; General Index to Deeds, Bargainor, Maury County, Tenn., Vol. I, 1807-1843, p. 199; Minutes of County Court, Maury County, Tenn., Vol. I, Book B, 1810-1825, 7; Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 15-98.

adjacent to his own plantation, and settled down to the culti-

ing. For in 1805 the Indians east of the lower half of middle Tennessee issued under the North Carolina Settlers began pouring in, settling himself on the waters of the river then in Williamson County, on the twenty-five hundred acres that had been owned by Samuel Polk while on the military

post at the previous year, and left a leaf ear to his father's urgings. His children and their children were among two unmarried daughters, William and his wife, Clarissa and at least nine grandchildren. Even in Mecklenburg, bringing with them Samuel Polk. They all settled near

the river. In 1807, it was still "in a frontier in the bounds of Maury

County, 1799; Ezekiel Polk was still a resident of his lands there. Mecklenburg County, 1791, 59. The first record of Ezekiel Polk in Robertson County, Tenn., is in Robertson see *ibid.*, 179, 181, 146; Robertson Court Minutes, 1808-1812, County Tenn., Book O, 1796-1838; Robertson County, Tenn., Vol. I, 1796-1812, pp. 1-100; Superior Court of Law and Equity, Mero

188; indenture between Charles Polk and his wife, in the Robertson County Collection; Land Grants, Middle Tennessee, N. C. Secretary of State. Robertson Court Minutes, 1796-1807, pp. 1-100, 1808-1811, p. 40; General Index to Robertson Court Minutes, Vol. I, 1807-1843, p. 199; Minutes of Robertson Court, Book B, 1810-1825, 7; Rogers, "Ezekiel

County, and no Settlement older than one year."³⁴ The river ran from east to west through a hilly terrain, and most of the farms were in the fertile valleys of the creeks that emptied from the north and south into the river. Near two of these, Carter's and Rutherford's, and along the main road from Nashville, settled the Polks.

Ezekiel, virtually a patriarch at sixty, was beginning to be overshadowed by the vigorous younger members of the clan, all of whom were soon moderately wealthy and influential. Sam and William Polk and Thomas McNeal took a prominent part in organizing the new county of Maury in 1807. Sam was a magistrate within two years, and William a few years later. Thomas McNeal and William were militia captains by the end of the War of 1812, and Sam was a major. McNeal, however, had had to enter Jackson's army as a private in 1813, because the prejudices of the members of his company "against men of wealth and talents" prevented his expected election as captain. When John Campbell died, in 1816, he left a substantial estate, including nine slaves, nine horses, thirty cattle, and a hundred and nine hogs. Sam inherited a major share of the Polks' unique talents for land speculation and was eventually the wealthiest of the family.³⁵

But Ezekiel was not the kind of man to be completely overshadowed by even the most energetic sons. It was he who was selected to appeal to his friend Andrew Jackson, when the Maury volunteers for the New Orleans expedition of 1813 suffered the supreme indignity of the frontier soldier—being placed under the command of a captain from another county and in whose choice they had had no voice.³⁶

The old man, however, was fit for more than writing letters. His second wife had died, probably in another unhappy attempt to bear a healthy child, and by 1811, Ezekiel had married for a third time. The

³⁴ Mary W. Highsaw, "A History of Zion Community in Maury County, 1806-1860," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, V (1946), 14.

³⁵ Flournoy Rivers, "The Beginnings of Maury County," *American Historical Magazine*, III (1898), 140-144; Maury Court Minutes, 1808-1809, pp. 28, 46, 70, 76; Maury Wills and Minutes, 1810-1825, 7, 132, 262; Mrs. John Trotwood Moore, ed., "Record of Commissions of Officers in the Tennessee Militia," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, III (1944), 90; V (1946), 279; power of attorney to "Maj. Samuel Polk," Jan. 31, 1815, University of North Carolina Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; Dr. Horace Depriest to General John Coffee, Dec. 20, 1813, Andrew Jackson Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁶ Ezekiel Polk to Major General Andrew Jackson, Sept. 2, 1813, Jackson Papers.

new wife was a "young, handsome & Agreeable" widow, Mrs. Sophia Neely Lennard.³⁷ The irrepressible patriarch now proceeded to have four more children, the last of them when he was seventy-one years of age. In the course of a long life, he had fathered at least fourteen children, who, in turn, by conservative computation, were the progenitors of ninety-two children and three hundred and seven grandchildren.³⁸

Ezekiel's energies were not yet exhausted. In 1818, the last major section of Tennessee to be cleared of Indian claims, including all of the state west of the Tennessee River, was thrown open to settlement, and the old colonel, in his seventy-fourth year, felt one last call to a pioneering venture. In 1821, he went out to the country along the Big Hatchie River, cleared lands and put up cabins, and early in the winter moved his family to the new home.³⁹

This was the first important settlement in that part of western Tennessee, and the pioneering pattern associated with Ezekiel soon repeated itself. Within a few years, he was joined by the families of Thomas McNeal, William, and his most recently acquired son-in-law, Thomas J. Hardeman. The richness of the cotton lands and the navigability of the Big Hatchie caused the community to grow rapidly. In 1823, a new county was laid off and named for Hardeman's father. The first county court of Hardeman was held at Thomas McNeal's and presided over by William Polk. Sam Polk did not move to Hardeman, but he had a plantation there, and he built the first mill in the county. The county seat was moved shortly from the village of Hatchie to a new town established on land given by Sam and another man. It is not wholly fanciful to suppose that Ezekiel dictated the naming of the new town for the most conspicuous revolutionary of the time, Bolivar.⁴⁰

For the last time Ezekiel settled down to watch the frontier pass beyond him, to consolidate the gains of another pioneering venture, and to oversee the affairs of a vigorous clan. He continued to grow more wealthy and began to plan a pretentious, white-pillared house, to be

³⁷ Alice B. Keith, ed., "William Maclean's Travel Journal from Lincolnton, North Carolina, to Nashville, Tennessee, May-June, 1811," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XV (1938), 384.

³⁸ The computation is from Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," and is incomplete.

³⁹ Sam Polk to Colonel William Polk, Sept. 9, 1821, Polk-Yeatman Collection.

⁴⁰ Warner W. Clift, *Early History of Hardeman County, Tennessee* (Master's Thesis, George Peabody College for Teachers, 1930), 9-11, 16; Samuel Cole Williams, *Beginnings of West Tennessee: In the Land of the Chickasaws, 1541-1841* (Johnson City, Tenn., 1930), 147-149.

receable" widow, Mrs. Sophia h now proceeded to have four was seventy-one years of age. red at least fourteen children, were the progenitors of ninety- grandchildren.³⁸ isted. In 1818, the last major an claims, including all of the own open to settlement, and the it one last call to a pioneering ry along the Big Hatchie River, in the winter moved his family

at in that part of western Tented with Ezekiel soon repeated ed by the families of Thomas y acquired son-in-law, Thomas n lands and the navigability of to grow rapidly. In 1823, a new deman's father. The first county ; McNeal's and presided over by e to Hardeman, but he had a mill in the county. The county e of Hatchie to a new town es- other man. It is not wholly fanci- naming of the new town for the : time, Bolivar.⁴⁰ wn to watch the frontier pass be- another pioneering venture, and an. He continued to grow more ous, white-pillared house, to be an's Travel Journal from Lincolnton, 7-June, 1811," *North Carolina Historical*

Ezekiel Polk," and is incomplete. Sept. 9, 1821, Polk-Yeatman Collection. Hardeman County, Tennessee (Master's s, 1930), 9-11, 16; Samuel Cole Williams, *l of the Chickasaws, 1541-1841* (Johnson

called "Mecklen." But Ezekiel did not live to see this monument to his metamorphosis from pioneer to southern gentleman; he died on August 31, 1824, before construction began. He left a large estate, including thousands of acres, twenty-four slaves, nine horses, one hundred and twenty-three hogs, thirty-six cattle, twenty-two sheep, and a library of seventy volumes.⁴¹

Ezekiel was characteristically jealous of his fame. Immediately before leaving Maury, he had tried to insure a just picture of himself for posterity by composing his own epitaph, which he left at his death with specific instructions: "As there is no rock in this country fit for grave stones, let it be done on durable wood, well painted, and placed upright at my head, and a weeping willow planted at my feet." It is only just to the old colonel to give the inscription in full:

Here lies the dust of old E. P.
 One instance of mortality;
 Pennsylvania born, Carolina bred,
 In Tennessee died on his bed.
 His youthful days he spent in pleasure,
 His latter days in gathering treasure;
 From superstition liv'd quite free,
 And practised strict morality.
 To holy cheats was never willing
 To give one solitary shilling,
 He can foresee, (and for foreseeing
 He equals most of men in being,)
 That church and state will join their power,
 And misery on this country shower;
 The Methodists with their camp bawling,
 Will be the cause of this down falling;
 An error not destin'd to see,
 He wails for poor posterity,
 First fruits and tenths are odious things,
 And so are Bishops, Tithes and Kings.⁴²

⁴¹Hardeman Wills and Inventories, 9-14. "Mecklen" was completed after Ezekiel's death and was still standing in 1950, in a greatly dilapidated condition, a short distance west of Bolivar.

⁴²*Jackson Gazette*, Sept. 13, 1824, printed two weeks after Polk's death, from a manuscript in his own hand.

James K. Polk, perhaps unfortunately, inherited none of his doughty grandfather's singular characteristics. Ezekiel did bequeath to his grandson enough kin in Hardeman to make the county the one Polk political stronghold in that part of the state, but the old colonel also left a less auspicious political legacy—his epitaph. Methodists were voters, and in the hard-fought campaign of 1844 a Presidential candidate could ill afford a posthumous indulgence of ancestral foibles. The offending monument was unceremoniously removed from public view, and not until the twentieth century did this final salty distillation of the free-ranging spirit of Ezekiel Polk resume its rightful place among the sedate memorials to his descendants in the Polk Cemetery at Bolivar.⁴³

The colonel would be immensely pleased to know that he is at last attracting some slight attention from posterity, even if we can only exclaim with his prosaic son Sam, "Is he not a strange old man!!!"⁴⁴

⁴³ The stories about the peregrinations of Ezekiel's remains and tombstone rest on local and family tradition and are confused. All agree that he was originally buried in the Polk Cemetery in the town of Bolivar, probably under the wooden slab he requested. In 1831, the family seems to have replaced the wooden marker with a marble one and transferred the epitaph to it. All agree that the tombstone was later removed from the cemetery to "Mecklen," but it is uncertain whether Ezekiel's remains went with it. One account says that the tombstone remained secreted in the family smokehouse until it was dragged out during the Civil War by Union soldiers.

It is certain, however, that in the 1930's the marble slab was lying broken and forgotten on the grounds of the much dilapidated "Mecklen." It is also certain that at some time the lines about the Methodists had been chiselled out. When the writer visited Bolivar in 1950, however, the old stone had been mended, the offensive section had been restored, and Ezekiel's monument was back in the Polk Cemetery.

When inscribing the stone, the family made several attempts to improve Ezekiel's verse. In the third line from the bottom "wails" became "waits," and "Tithes" in the bottom line was changed to "Priests." There are also variations in spelling and punctuation.

See Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 12; Albert V. Goodpasture, "The Boyhood of President Polk," *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, VII (Apr., 1921), 38. Roy W. Black of Bolivar, a student of Hardeman County history, was also a helpful source of information.

Another embarrassment to James K. Polk in 1844 were the charges that his grandfather had been a Tory. The *Vindication of Ezekiel Polk*, published by the Democrats, made out a much better case for the colonel than the facts countenanced. The charges were not, of course, completely silenced, but they seem not to have been an important factor in the campaign.

⁴⁴ Sam Polk to Colonel William Polk, Sept. 9, 1821, Polk-Yeatman Collection.