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Elkanah Watson

Memoirs of Disturbance in Lemuel Burkitt's Church Hertford County, N.C., 27–28 March 1788

During this period of my residence in North Carolina, the State was strongly convulsed by the agitation of the question of adopting the Federal Constitution. I embarked, with great zeal and ardor, in advocating its adoption, personally and by numerous contributions to the press, in Virginia and North Carolina. A Baptist preacher, Mr. B.,¹ was a candidate for the State Convention, which was to decide, in that State, the great question of acceding to or rejecting the proposed Constitution. B. was a prominent leader of the opposition; and I had been engaged with him in many warm personal discussions, and in a public correspondence.

The week previous to the election, I was riding in company with Major [Hardy] Murfree, who has already been introduced to the reader, and with Dr. [Patrick] Garvey, a warm-hearted and energetic Irishman, several miles in the interior from Winton, where we noticed a paper pasted against a tree, which read as follows: "Notice!—On Wednesday next, at three o'clock, all persons desirous of hearing the new Constitution explained, by Elder B—t, are requested to attend his church in the Woodlands, 27th March, 1788." The time appointed was only two days previous to the election. We felt indignant, at what we deemed an insidious attempt to deceive the community; and we determined to be present, in order to counteract his movement. On our arrival, we found a horse hitched to every tree about the church, and the interior of the building crowded. We pressed our way to seats, a little distance from the pulpit. B—t had been some time at his nefarious work, explaining the Constitution to suit his unhallowed purposes. He frequently cast a suspicious and disconcerted eye at our pew. He then began to explain the object of the ten miles square, as the contemplated seat of the Government. "This, my friends," said the preacher, "will be walled in or fortified. Here an army of fifty thousand, or, perhaps, a hundred thousand men, will be finally embodied, and will sally forth, and enslave the people, who will be gradually disarmed." This absurd assumption set our blood in fermentation, strongly excited already by party feeling. We consulted a moment, and agreed to possess ourselves of the seat directly under the pulpit, and make an effort to discuss the subject, or break up the meeting. We arose together, Garvey with the Constitution in his hand, supported by Murfree on his right, and myself on his left. Garvey turned towards B—t, and said, in a loud voice:—"Sir, as to the ten miles square, you are"—here he was interrupted by a general movement and buzz, which instantly swelled into a perfect uproar. At this crisis, we were in a most critical situation, and only saved from violence, by the personal popularity of Murfree, who was universally beloved. We

were glad to pass out with the torrent, get to our horses, and be off. We attained our object, however,—the meeting was dissolved.



A caricature of Baptist minister Lemuel Burkitt, a member of the Hillsborough Convention, by Elkanah Watson and Patrick Garvey, from the Collections of the New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections, Albany, New York.

The next day, Garvey and myself planned and executed a caricature; and, as it was a new exhibition among the people, we hoped it would have a good effect at the polls. A clergyman was represented in a pulpit, dressed in his bands, with a label proceeding from his mouth, having this inscription:—“And lo, he brayeth!” This we committed to some resolute fellows, with instructions to post it up at the door of the court-house, at the opening of the polls; they engaging to defend and protect it. Some of B—t’s friends, stung to the quick by the sarcasm, attempted to pull it down. Our gallant band defended it. A general battle ensued. This obstructed, as we desired, the voting. Candles were lighted in the court-house; these were extinguished in the melée, and both parties, in great confusion, were left in the dark, literally as well as politically. I embraced the opportunity of taking *French leave*.² B—t gained the election, to our great annoyance; and the Constitution was rejected for that year, by North Carolina.

1. Lemuel Burkitt of Hertford.
2. “Taking French leave” means an unauthorized or unannounced departure.

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