

The Grand Lodge of Virginia-An Early History

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At the beginning of the American Revolution, there were twelve Masonic lodges active in Virginia. Several of these lodges had begun as "time immemorial" or "self governing" lodges, but by 1776 all twelve had received charters from a higher body.

Of the twelve, three held charters from the Grand Lodge of Scotland; two from Lodge Mother Kilwinning in the town of Kilwinning, Ayrshire, Scotland; five from the Moderns Grand Lodge of England; two had been chartered through Provincial Grand Lodges. But, all were ultimately holden under bodies located far across the sea. See List in handout.

Despite the fact that Provincial Grand Lodges were organized in many other colonies, Virginia had none. The sparse records available seem to indicate that the Grand Lodges of England and Scotland made little effort to maintain contact with their Virginia lodges and were lax in requiring returns from them.

Following the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, access to far-away Grand Lodges was essentially impossible. Some members of the Craft in Virginia began to question whether these ties were appropriate. Williamsburg Lodge, after much discussion, called for a Convention to consider steps to bring about Masonic independence from Great Britain. Early in 1777 letters were sent to all known Virginia lodges,

"recommending, that the Worshipful Masters and Wardens of the different Lodges or their `deputys' should meet in Williamsburg on Tuesday, May 6 for the purpose of choosing a Grand Master for the State of Virginia."

Over the next eighteen months, five conventions were held at Williamsburg Lodge. The delegates who attended followed a very deliberate process toward selecting a Grand Master and forming the Grand Lodge of Virginia. Minutes of each of these conventions are reprinted in the front of your Methodical Digest.

The First Convention

The May 6 Convention opened with eight delegates. Five different lodges were represented: Norfolk, Port Royal Kilwinning Crosse, Blandford, Williamsburg and Cabin Point Royal Arch. Since five Lodges were present and the "time immemorial" criterion for such purposes was three Lodges, the delegates proceeded with the stated business. Matthew Phripp, a Past Master of Norfolk Lodge, was elected President of the Convention and James Kemp from Port Royal Kilwinning Crosse was elected Clerk.

Although not represented, Fredericksburgh and Botetourt Lodges had sent letters. Botetourt Lodge expressed doubts about the need to elect a Grand Master and to sever ties with the parent Grand Lodges. No record remains of the contents of the letter from Fredericksburgh Lodge. Botetourt Lodge's protest was apparently outvoted, as the minutes of the First Convention state:

A motion being made, and it being the unanimous opinion of this Convention that a Grand Master ought to be chosen to preside over the Craft in this Commonwealth-

Resolved, That a Committee be appointed for drawing up reasons why a Grand Master should be chosen, consisting of Duncan Rose, William Waddill, James Kemp and John Crawford, and that their proceedings be laid before this Convention on Tuesday, the 13th day of May next, at 6 o'clock, P. M.

The Second Convention

The minutes of the May 13 Convention, held as scheduled, do not state who was present. Brother Phripp was "absent upon business" and in his place Duncan Rose from Blandford Lodge was elected President; James Kemp from Port Royal Kilwinning Crosse Lodge continued as Clerk, although the minutes show his title as "Secretary." By deduction, we believe that Cabin Point Royal Arch Lodge and Williamsburg Lodge were also represented at this Convention since members of the Committee named by the previous Convention, John Crawford and William Waddill were, respectively, from those Lodges.

The Committee enumerated four reasons for choosing a Grand Master. After deliberation, the Convention adopted what might be described as a "Declaration of Masonic Independence." It has the same tenor as Richard Henry Lee's June 7, 1776

resolution to the Continental Congress, when he said, "These United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States!"

"We find upon record that the Grand Lodges of England, Scotland and Ireland founded their original right of election upon their sole authority, by mutual consent, distinct and separate from all foreign power whatever. We therefore conclude that we have and ought to hold the same rights and privileges that Masons in all time heretofore have confessedly enjoyed. "

A letter was then sent to all the Lodges, setting forth this resolution and the reasons for it. The Lodges were invited to send "deputations" to Williamsburg for the purpose of electing a Grand Master. The time and date were set at 10 o'clock A. M., June 23, 1777.

The Third Convention

At the June 23, 1777 Convention, eight deputies representing five different Lodges were present. Fredericksburgh Lodge was represented for the first time, and its Master, James Mercer, was elected President. James Kemp continued as Secretary. The outcome of this Convention was an agreement to:

"form a general convention of the Craft to elect a Grand Master and proper officers of a Grand Lodge"

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and to recommend:

"His Excellency General George Washington as a proper person to fill the office of Grand Master." [however] "in the event that appointment of a "nominal Grand Master" is not made by June 1, 1778, the President of the Convention . . . should issue a call for a final meeting to select a Grand Master."

Copies of the proceedings of this Convention were to be transmitted to "the several Lodges in the State."

The Fourth Convention

In the summer of 1778, James Mercer issued a call to the Virginia Lodges for a Convention for October 13 of that year. In attendance were ten deputies from four Lodges, Blandford, Williamsburg, Botetourt and Cabin Point Royal Arch. The Rev. Robert Andrews, Past Master of Williamsburg Lodge was elected Master of the Convention.

The minutes of the Fourth Convention speak for themselves and in the handout you have verbatim copies.

Now, let's look in on a dramatization of that crucial Convention.

(Three minute film clip is shown at this point)

The Fourth Convention was adjourned with a decision that the Grand Master and his officers be installed on October 30, 1778. All Lodges in the State were invited to send delegations and all brethren from regular Lodges were urged to attend.

The Fifth Convention

The Fifth Convention brought together probably the largest number of the Craft ever assembled in Virginia up to that time. Eight lodges were represented. The minutes list the attendance as 49 but the true figure was probably greater. Brown notes that individuals were installed in the Grand Lodge and the related "Stewards Lodge" whose names are not in the attendance list.

Rt. Wor. the Rev. Robert Andrews of Williamsburg Lodge in the East announced that the Convention had been called "for the purpose of installing the Right Worshipful John Blair, Past Master of the Williamsburg Lodge, into the office of Grand Master of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Virginia."

Brother Andrews then proceeded to open the Lodge in due form and to install John Blair as Grand Master of Masons in Virginia. The Grand Master then announced his appointments to all other Grand Lodge offices. (Note: Until several years later, all the Grand Lodge officers but the Grand Master, were appointed.)

This meeting, which opened as a Convention of Virginia Lodges, closed as The Grand Lodge of Virginia.

Growing Pains

Although The Grand Lodge of Virginia was established in 1778, events of the Revolutionary War greatly affected Virginia and hampered the operation of the Grand Lodge over the next several years. The Grand Lodge met in Williamsburg several times in 1779 and 1780. In 1780 the capital was relocated to Richmond. In December of 1780 John Blair was reelected Grand Master and the Grand Lodge voted to move to Richmond. The next Grand Lodge meeting, to be held in Richmond, was set for April 10, 1781.

This was not to be. Events of the War precluded holding Grand Lodge in 1781, 1782 or 1783. The next meeting actually was held on November 4, 1784. James Mercer was elected Grand Master and the Grand Lodge voted to limit the Grand Master's term to two years. After 1784, the Grand Lodge met on a more regular schedule.

At the 1786 Grand Lodge, a Resolution was adopted that set forth the numerical precedence of the nineteen Lodges then comprising the Grand Lodge. In 1790, the era of "self governing" or "time immemorial" lodges ended in Virginia. The Grand Lodge proceedings of October 29, 1790 declared, "All particular Lodges derive their authority for congregating and working . . . from a Grand Lodge. "

Grand Masters who served in the eighteenth century were:

Gov. John Blair	1778 - 1784	Thomas Mathews	1791 - 1793
James Mercer	1785 - 1786	John Marshall	1794 - 1795
Edmund Randolph	1787 - 1789	Robert Brooke	1796 - 1797
Alex Montgomery	1790	Benjamin Day	1798 - 1800

The Most Worshipful Grand Lodge Ancient Free & Accepted Masons of the Commonwealth of Virginia, is now in its 223~d year. We hope that is still in its "Early History." **God willing, it will prosper until time shall be no more.**

The Twelve Original Virginia Lodges

Lodge	Charter Date	Chartering Body
* Norfolk Lodge	June 1, 1741	Grand Lodge of England (Moderns)
* Port Royal Kilwinning Crosse Lodge	Dec 1, 1755	Grand Lodge of Scotland
* Blandford Lodge	Sept 9, 1757	Grand Lodge of Scotland
* Fredericksburgh Lodge	July 21, 1758	Grand Lodge of Scotland
Hampton St. Tammany's Lodge	1757 Feb 26, 1759	Grand Lodge of Scotland Grand Lodge of England (Modems)
* Williamsburg Lodge	Nov 6, 1773	Grand Lodge of England (Moderns)
Botetourt Lodge (a "daughter" of Fredericksburgh Lodge)	Nov 6, 1773	Grand Lodge of England (Moderns)
Cabin Point Royal Arch Lodge	Apr 13, 1775	Provincial. Grand Lodge of and for America (Under Grand Lodge of England) (Modems)
Tappahannock Lodge	June 3, 1758	Mother Kilwinning Lodge No. 0
York Lodge	Aug 1, 1755	Grand Lodge of England (Modems)
Falmouth Kilwinning Lodge (a "daughter" of Fredericksburgh Lodge)	Dec 20, 1775	Mother Kilwinning Lodge No. 0
Winchester Lodge	Oct 4, 1768	Provincial Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania (Under Antient Grand Lodge of England)

* indicates that the lodge is believed to have originally congregated as a "time immemorial" or self governing lodge

What Happened to the Twelve Original Virginia Lodges

Norfolk Lodge	Assigned No. 1 by the 1786 Resolution. Remains active.
Port Royal Kilwinning Crosse Lodge	Assigned No. 2 by the 1786 Resolution; it went dormant several times and its original number was assigned to Atlantic Lodge. It was rechartered in 1881 as Kilwinning Crosse Lodge No. 237 and in 1902 was numbered 2-237.
Blandford Lodge	Assigned No. 3 by the 1786 Resolution. Remains active.
Fredericksburgh Lodge	Assigned No. 4 by the 1786 Resolution. Remains active.
Hampton St. Tammany's Lodge	Assigned No. 5 by the 1786 Resolution; it has been dormant several times. It has remained active since 1857.
Williamsburg Lodge	Assigned No. 6 by the 1786 Resolution. Remains active.
Botetourt Lodge	Assigned No. 7 by the 1786 Resolution; was dormant between 1848 and 1857. It has remained active since.
Cabin Point Royal Arch Lodge	Assigned No. 8 by the 1786 Resolution. Declared extinct in 1848.
Tappahannock Lodge	Although it sent a deputy to the Fifth Convention that installed the Grand Master and officially formed the Grand Lodge, this Lodge never applied to the Grand Lodge for a charter. Apparently it continued to work under its Mother Kilwinning charter for a while and then disappeared
York Lodge	Assigned No. 9 by the 1786 Resolution. It did not take part in the Conventions, but was chartered by the Grand Lodge in 1780. It went dormant several times and was rechartered in 1925 as Yorktown Lodge No. 205.
Falmouth Kilwinning Lodge	It did not take part in the Conventions and by the end of the Revolutionary War had disappeared.
Winchester Lodge	It did not take part in the Conventions, and continued to Work under its original charter and then under the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. In 1807, it was chartered by the Grand Lodge of Virginia as Winchester Hiram Lodge No. 21.

Minutes of the Fourth Convention:

At a Convention of the Craft agreeable to an advertisement of the Right Worshipful James Mercer, held on the thirteenth day of October, A. L. 5778:

PRESENT

- Robert Andrews Master
- James M. Fontaine Senior Warden
- James Willison Junior Warden
- Duncan Rose Treasurer
- William Waddill Secretary

Duncan Rose, deputy from Blandford Lodge.

Robert Andrews, William Waddill, James McClurg and John Minson Galt, Deputys, Williamsburg Lodge.

James M. Fontaine and Christ'r Pryor, deputys, Botetourt Lodge.

James Willison, James Bolsher and John Crawford, deputys, Cabin Point Royal A. Lodge

On the question being put, this Convention are unanimously of the opinion that there is a sufficient number of Lodges present to proceed to business.

It is the opinion of this Convention, that the power and authority of Cornelius Harriet, Esq., as Deputy Grand Master of America does not now exist.

It is the opinion of this Convention, that it is agreeable to the constitution of Masonry, that all regular chartered Lodges within this State should be subject to the Grand Master of the said State.

The Right Worshipful Warner Lewis, Past master of the Botetourt Lodge, being nominated to the office of Grand Master, declined the acceptance thereof, and then the Right Worshipful John Blair, Past Master of the Williamsburg Lodge, was nominated and unanimously elected, who was pleased to accept the office.

(Signed) ROBERT ANDREWS, Master

Attest:

W. WADDILL, Sec'y.

As of October 30, 1778, Officers of the Grand Lodge of Virginia were:

Governor John Blair (Williamsburg Lodge)	Grand Master
Rev. Robert Andrews (Williamsburg Lodge)	Deputy Grand Master
Dr. James Taylor (Norfolk Lodge)	Senior Grand Warden
Rev. James M. Fontaine (Botetourt Lodge)	Junior Grand Warden
Dr. John Minson Galt (Williamsburg Lodge)	Grand Treasurer
Duncan Rose (Blandford Lodge)	Grand Secretary
Rev. James Madison (Williamsburg Lodge)	Grand Chaplain
Matthew Anderson (Williamsburg Lodge)	Grand Sword Bearer
William Urie (Williamsburg Lodge)	Grand Tiler
Peter Pelham (Williamsburg Lodge)	Grand Organist
Matthew Woody (Williamsburg Lodge)	Grand Clerk

Grand Masters of Masons in Virginia who served in the eighteenth century were:

Gov. John Blair	1778 - 1784.
James Mercer	1785 - 1786
Edmund Randolph	1787 - 1789
Alex Montgomery	1790
Thomas Mathews	1791 - 1793
John Marshall	1794 - 1795
Robert Brooke	1796 - 1797
Benjamin Day	1798 - 1800

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