

AW22 Lodge Anecdotes
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Washington and Freemasonry

By the end of the eighteenth century, Freemasonry, with its complex combination of esoteric and enlightened thinking, gained a wide acceptance throughout the British Isles, America and continental Europe. This was the period of the Enlightenment--a period of great intellectual movement in the cause of general education as a means to freedom from social inequity.

The Enlightenment qualities of Truth, Wisdom, Nature and Reason expressed throughout the rituals and mystic symbols of the Freemasons attracted social elite searching for truth and a sense of fraternal connection. Consequently, these moral tenets of Freemasonry, together with other Enlightenment concepts, played a significant role in the social and political history of the newly established American colonies to which George Washington played a significant role. Providing a vehicle for the spread of new ideals concerning the equality of man, the power of reason over ideology, and the existence of natural laws, it can be greatly argued that it was these ideals, which eventually formed the basis for the American premise favoring political separation from the authority of Great Britain.

With this understanding, we can realize why colonial Freemasonry appealed to the young George Washington in 1752. Just before reaching his twenty-first birthday, the Masonic lodge at Fredericksburg, Virginia records that "Mr. George Washington was initiated as an Entered Apprentice" and the entrance fee of £2 3s was acknowledged. On March 3, 1753 he received the Fellow Craft degree, and on August 4, of the same year, was raised to the Master Mason's degree all in Fredericksburg.

George Washington's affiliation with Masonry was thus an important part of his role as the country's military and political leader. Washington's later encouragement of military lodges in the Continental Army was also an additional factor in holding the loyalty of his soldiers. As a matter of fact, Masonic ties and patriotism were so closely entwined during this period that they virtually merge in popular usage.

Not much is known of Washington's Masonic life during the quarter century following the degrees at Fredericksburg. Tradition puts him in various military lodges during the time, but because of their traveling nature, there remains no record of his attendance. But Washington must have remained active in Freemasonry because in 1777, a convention of Virginia lodges recommended him to be Grand Master of the newly established grand lodge of that commonwealth. To this honor he declined sighting two reasons: first, his necessity to lead the Continental Army at a critical stage in the struggle for independence, and second, "he did not consider it Masonically legal that one who had never been installed as Master or Warden of a lodge should be elected Grand Master." This in itself has an added significance of its own because it proves him to have had intimate experience with the customs of Freemasonry.

This was the period of the American Revolution, and a time to separate from the supremacy of British rule. It was a period when many provincial grand lodges assumed autonomy from their European grand lodge counterparts. Consequently, an idea of a grand master for all the colonies also became popular and on February 7, 1780, a convention of delegates from various military lodges met at Morristown, New Jersey to suggest that "one Grand Lodge in America" be established. Likewise, the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania held a session, declaring that Freemasonry would benefit by "a Grand Master of Masons throughout the United States," and elected Washington for the position. Pennsylvania sent minutes of the

election to the then different independent grand lodges, but with the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts failing to participate, the question was finally dropped.

In October 1781, Lord Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, and thereby brought the war to an end. It was also during this period a certain number of Washington's Masonic friends and neighbors at Alexandria, Virginia petitioned the Provincial Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania for a warrant to establish a lodge in their community. Accordingly, on February 3, 1783, the lodge was placed on the grand lodge role as Lodge No. 39. Just after the first election of officers was held on December 21, 1783, General Washington returned to Mount Vernon and the members of Lodge No. 39 invited him to "join us in the needful business." Washington later attended Lodge No. 39 being elected to honorary membership.

Three years later, when Lodge No. 39 desired to transfer itself to the newly recognized grand lodge of their own state, we note Washington's most important Masonic commitment: to be named Worshipful Master of the lodge at Alexandria. Therefore, when approached by the membership of Lodge No. 39 to become the first Master under the newly established Grand Lodge of Virginia, Washington accepted the responsibility of the office. On April 28, 1788, Edmund Randolph, "Governor of the Commonwealth aforesaid and Grand Master of the Most Ancient and Honorable Society of Freemasons within the same, by and with the consent of the Grand Lodge of Virginia," issued a charter "by the name title and designation of Alexandria Lodge, No. 22." George Washington was named as the Worshipful Master and was unanimously elected Worshipful Master to succeed himself December 20, 1788, serving in all about twenty months. He was inaugurated as President April 30, 1789, thus becoming the first and so far only brother to be President of the United States and Master of his lodge at the same time.

During the years that followed, Washington visited lodges and grand lodges, received addresses in writing from time to time, walked in public Masonic processions, took part in Masonic funeral ceremonies and had correspondence with lodges and individual Masons. At no time were these activities to push Freemasonry to the forefront, or give the Masonic fraternity any voice in governmental affairs, for quite the contrary was the case. They were partly because in them, Washington was carrying on friendships that had begun in the lodges of the Revolution, and partly because both he and his associates knew that Freemasonry was in its own silent and pervasive spirit helping to united and bind together a national unity.

This unity is no better expressed than when on September 18, 1793, President and then acting Grand Master George Washington, dressed in full Masonic regalia, placed a silver plate upon the cornerstone of the United States Capitol building. This silver plate identified Freemasonry with the Republic; it was laid, "in the thirteenth year of American independence...and in the year of Masonry, 5793." The Masonic fraternity's position at this most important ceremony provided a powerful symbol of Masonry's new place in post-Revolutionary America. Within a generation after the Revolution, American Freemasonry grew from a few scattered groups of brothers to a well organized and pervasive organization gathering in nearly every locality in America led by no other than the father of his country, George Washington.

Washington died December 14, 1799, and it is symbolic of what Masons had felt for him that of the three physicians attending, each was a Mason and one was his Worshipful Master. They and all Freemasons truly do have an unspoken understanding between each other. It can be best summarized by Washington's own words when he described the goal of the Masonic Fraternity as "...the grand object [of Masonry] is to promote the happiness of the human race."

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POSTSCRIPT: A version of this anecdote was printed in the program commemorating the two hundredth anniversary of George Washington's death, Saturday, December 18, 1999.