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A GLIMPSE AT EARLY AMERICAN FREEMASONRY

Preliminary and Introductory Remarks

It is my hope to convey to you some impressions of the magnitude of the contributions which I believe have been made by Freemasonry to the evolution and development of our Nation.

When the first Freemason came to America cannot be determined. The first known Mason in America was one John Skene who settled in New Jersey in 1682. The Mother Grand Lodge of England was not organized until 1717.

There is more than tradition but less than documentary proof that a Lodge of Masons, working without charter or other Grand Lodge authority, was working in King's Chapel in Boston as early as 1720. There is conclusive documentary evidence that a Lodge was working at Tun Tavern in Philadelphia in 1730 but without charter or other Grand Lodge authority. It was in this Lodge that Benjamin Franklin was made a Mason.

In 1733 Henry Price, a Boston Merchant, returned from a trip to England with a Commission from Lord Montague, The Grand Master of the Mother Grand Lodge in England, authorizing him as Provincial Grand Master for New England, to establish regular and duly constituted Lodges in the New World under Grand Lodge authority. The following year his authority was extended over all North America. Pursuant to this authority on July 30, 1733, Henry Price convened the Masons residing in Boston, read his commission and proceeded to organize his Provincial Grand Lodge. He

appointed Andrew Belcher the Governor's son, as his Deputy Grand Master, and then proceeded to constitute these Boston Masons into the first regular and duly constituted Lodge in the Western World, under Grand Lodge Authority, That Lodge, originally called The First Lodge, subsequently changed its name to St. John's Lodge and has been in continuous existence to this very day.

Henry Price and his successors proceeded to Charter Lodges all up and down the Atlantic Seaboard as far north as Nova Scotia, and as far south as the West Indies. Thus he and his successors became veritable Masonic Missionaries in spreading the new philosophy of brotherhood in the New World.

Certainly in Colonial times the number of Freemasons in America was insignificant in proportion to the total male population, yet I hope to show you that a great preponderance of those who played leading roles in the building of our Republic were Freemasons. It is, of course, impossible to demonstrate the fact, but the inference is obvious that there is something inherent in the nature of our Craft which at least partially, accounts for this astounding fact. I will merely try to indicate the leading roles that were played by Freemasons in this crucial period of our National life and let each of you draw your own inferences.

First of all it must be clearly understood that freemasonry's impact is not the result of any official position or any direct action taken by a Lodge or by a Grand Lodge. Its impact always has been, is now, and always will be the contributions which are made by individual Masons who have been so inspired and so imbued with the Masonic principals of brotherhood, charity, truth and justice that the day to day conduct of the normal affairs of their

lives is motivated by these ^{le}principals. But what is of even greater significance is the fact that members of our Craft tend to act as "leaven" in a community, because the practice of the Masonic way of life establishes a high standard of conduct for others to emulate.

Secondly, we must understand something of the nature of our Craft as it existed during this period. The origin of our Craft antedates the period of authentic documentary evidence. We know that the oldest Masonic document extant was written about 1390. At that time, and for many years thereafter, the Craft consisted of various independent groups of stone masons who were primarily engaged in the erection of cathedrals and other such important buildings. Each member of the craft had his own particular part of the work to perform and whether the work was assigned to him was humble or spectacular, it was necessary for him to coordinate his work with that of each of his co-workers to effect a final result of perfection and beauty. The perfection with which each individual craftsman performed his part of the work was the keynote of the perfection of the completed edifice. Time was of little consequence. In fact, the erection of many of the great cathedrals took hundreds of years and many a craftsman would devote his entire working life to the construction of a particular edifice in the full knowledge that he would never live to see the completed structure. It was enough for him to know that there was a plan, that the plan was clear in the mind of the Master Builder and that the skill and fidelity with which he performed his work would one day be reflected in the beauty and grandeur of the completed edifice

While these craftsmen were learning to work together to create an edifice of strength, harmony and beauty to which they were devoting perhaps their entire lives, it was not strange that they should be giving thought to the problem of creating a social structure which would enable them to work and live together in peace, harmony and brotherhood. Somewhere along the pathway of our Masonic history these operative craftsmen learned the basic fundamental truths of man's relationship to his fellow men. There was nothing new about these fundamental truths of life. They were as old as time itself. It was only the way that our Masonic forefathers adapted these truths to their particular needs and the manner by which they transmitted these truths from generation to generation that was unique.

When the Mayflower anchored in Plymouth Harbor in 1620, our Craft was still predominantly a craft of operating stonemasons who, as a collateral philosophical objective, were interested in establishing a social structure in which they could work and live together harmoniously. But during the next 100 years the Craft went through an interesting transformation. The operative aspects of the Craft gradually disappeared and the philosophical aspects became more predominant, until finally the completion of this transformation was signified by the organization of the Mother Grand Lodge in London 1717.

As I have said, Henry Price as our first Provincial Grand Master transplanted Freemasonry on our shores in 1733. It quickly took root in the American Colonies and the American Freemasons soon became active in their traditional task of building a social structure based on the principles taught by our Craft.

As early as 1754, Benjamin Franklin, Pennsylvania's most illustrious Freemason, proposed a plan for the mutual protection of the Colonies against the French and the Indians. This has been characterized as the first coherent scheme ever proposed for securing a permanent federal union of the thirteen original Colonies.

Seven years later in 1761 when George III ascended the English throne Masonic Lodges had been established in all of the thirteen original colonies except two, and 4 years later there were Lodges in all thirteen colonies. Among the membership of these Lodges were many of the outstanding soldiers and statesmen of that period.

According to our official records of our Grand Lodge alone, had established Lodges in eleven of the thirteen original colonies. From this fact it can be readily understood how Masonic intercourse had been established during this period between freemasons in Massachusetts and Freemasons in the other colonies. Furthermore our official Grand Lodge records show that Henry Price, our Provincial Grand Master, was personally acquainted with Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia as early as 1734.

The significance of this network of Masonic friendships throughout the colonies can not be over emphasized.

Much emphasis has been placed by secular historians upon the prejudices and jealousies which pulled the colonies apart because of the diversity of their economic interests and their religious and cultural traditions. It

.therefore behooves Masonic historians to stress the fact that Freemasonry was the one common factor which bound a few men in each Colony to a few men in each of the other Colonies in mutual respect, confidence and fraternal brotherhood.

Early in the reign of King George III came the first outbreak of discontent among the colonists. King George decided that the Colonies should pay the heavy costs of the French and Indian War and to implement this policy the Mother country placed restrictions on their exports to England and levied oppressive taxes on their imports. These were the so-called Navigation Acts. The Crown Courts issued the infamous Writs of Assistance which authorized the King's revenue officers to search homes as well as places of business in an effort to enforce these oppressive measures.

This procedure was repugnant to the sense of justice of the colonists. James Otis, a Boston Freemason, resigned his lucrative position as Advocate General to the Crown so that he could represent another Boston Freemason, John Hancock, and other Boston merchants in a legal battle to contest the legality of these writs. Otis won immortal fame by taking the now familiar position that taxation without representation is tyranny. Then and there the gauntlet was thrown at the feet of the English King by a Boston Freemason in the first outspoken expression of the Masonic spirit of liberty and justice.

Instead of giving relief to the Colonies, insult was added to injury by the passage of the Stamp Act, which required special stamps or stamped paper, for legal and commercial documents and even for newspapers. Leaders in the other Colonies, particularly in Virginia, rose up in protest when they were informed of the state of affairs in Boston.

Benjamin Franklin, a Provincial Grand Master in Pennsylvania, was sent to England to protest this treatment of the American Colonies. He found forceful support for the repeal of the Stamp Act and friendly consideration for the plight of the Colonies in two staunch English Statesman and Masons, William Pitt and Edmund Burke. The Stamp Act was repealed by Parliament, thanks to the efforts of Franklin, assisted by Pitt and Burke, but the following year a new tax was imposed on tea and a few other items.

The people of Massachusetts responded by giving the most famous tea party known in history, staged by such prominent Massachusetts Masons as Joseph Warren, Provincial Grand Master in Massachusetts, John Hancock, Paul Revere, and other members of that famous Massachusetts Lodge of St. Andrew.

Committees of Correspondence were organized in the various colonies for the purpose of keeping each other advised of developments and of promoting the cause of Colonies. The fact that these Committees were composed largely of Freemasons who had fraternal ties with their Masonic brethren in other Colonies was a vital factor in the success achieved by

these Committees. At a time when to be betrayed would have resulted in conviction for treason, the fact that a Boston Freemason, Paul Revere, should have frequently carried confidential messages between the Committee in Boston and the Committees in Portsmouth, New York City and Philadelphia, gives some idea of how the Masonic tie of mutual confidence contributed to the success of this important phase of the drama which was now developing.

When the First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in September 1774, Peyton Randolph, Provincial Grand Master in Virginia, was elected its first presiding officer. The delegations from the Colonies included many Master Masons. This Congress adopted Articles of Association and pledged its support to Massachusetts if any attempt were made to execute these oppressive measures by force.

On the night of April 18th in the following year of 1775, Paul Revere, already a trusted and experienced courier, left a meeting of the Lodge of St. Andrew, and by direction of Grand Master Warren made his famous midnight ride to warn the countryside that the British Soldiers were marching on Lexington and Concord the following morning. Whether the signal lanterns were hung in the belfrey of the Old North Church by Robert Newman, by John Pulling, or by both, a matter on which there is some dispute, they were in any event hung by the hands of a member of the Craft, because both of these men were Freemasons.

The following day the hostilities opened with bloodshed at Lexington and at Concord Bridge.

Less than a month later, on May 10, 1775, the Second Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia. John Hancock, one of Boston's most distinguished Masons, was elected its presiding officer, and the pledge which was given to Massachusetts by the First Continental Congress the preceeding year was promptly redeemed. On June 15th George Washington, America's most distinguished Freemason, was appointed Commander-in-Chief of an army of some 14,000 men.

On June 17th, - the very day that Washington accepted the appointment - came the Battle of Bunker Hill, at which Grand Master Joseph Warren lost his life. To commemorate his memory King Solomon's Lodge then meeting in Charlestown, acquired title to the land and erected the first Bunker Hill Monument at the brow of the hill where the battle was fought, and where the body of our Grand Master Warren was first buried the morning after the battle. Later this land was donated by the Lodge as a site for the erection of the presently existing Bunker Hill Monument.

In March of the following year, 1776, Washington fortified Dorchester Heights with artillery which Major General Henry Knox, a Massachusetts Mason, captured at Fort Ticonderoga and transported to Dorchester on ox sleds across the snow blocked mountain roads. Confronted with this artillery on Dorchester Heights, the British evacuated Boston on St. Patrick's Day, March 17th rather than face the artillery fire.

Events moved fast. On April 12th North Carolina joined the other Colonies in declaring its independence.

On May 6th, the Virginia Convention meeting in Williamsburg authorized its delegates to propose that the Colonies declare themselves to be free and independent states and authorized a Committee to draft a Declaration of Rights. This Declaration was prepared by George Mason, whose membership in the Craft has been asserted but not established.

Accordingly on June 7th, Richard Henry Lee, a Virginia Mason, presented to the Second Continental Congress a resolution calling for a Declaration of Independence. Hancock appointed a Committee of five, of whom at least three were Freemasons, to prepare a Declaration of Independence. Of the signers of this historic document, at least eight are known to have been Masons, and there is some evidence that twenty-four others may have been.

Thirty-three of the Generals serving under Washington are known to have been Masons and there is some evidence that fifteen others were. It is of significant importance that so many of Washington's General Officers were members of the Craft and were bound to him by ties of Masonic Brotherhood as well as by ties of Military subordination. That one such General Officer (Benedict Arnold) should have proved faithless to the trust which his Commander-in-Chief reposed in him as a Mason as well as a soldier, merely shows by contrast how well the Masonic ties of fidelity served the cause of liberty in the case of all the rest.

To name a few, there was General Ethan Allen of Vermont, who secured the surrender of Fort Ticonderoga; Major General Henry Knox of Massachusetts, whose artillery captured at Fort Ticonderoga compelled the evacuation of the Port of Boston by the British; General Anthony Wayne, whose capture of Stony Point saved Connecticut from invasion; General Nathaniel Greene of Rhode Island, who has been credited with being the savior of the South; and General John Sullivan later first Grand Master of New Hampshire who took Fort William and Mary at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and captured the gunpowder which was used at Bunker Hill.

After eight years of bitter suffering and impoverishment brought about by the struggle for liberty, the American Colonies were at long last recognized by George III as free, sovereign and independent states.

Independence had been achieved, but when the common enemy was driven from our shores the necessity of putting up a united front was removed. The weaknesses of the Union soon became apparent. The old prejudices and jealousies among the newly created sovereign States threatened to destroy the Union in its infancy. The newly achieved freedom offered no solution for bankruptcy. Disintegration threatened and the Masonic bond upon which the leaders of the struggling Colonies had previously depended on to weld them together in mutual confidence was once again destined to offer a solution.

In response to an invitation from Virginia, Commissioners from five States assembled at Annapolis in September 1786, to discuss how

to bring order out of chaos. Alexander Hamilton, whose Masonic membership has been generally assumed, although his Lodge has never been identified, presented a plan for a Constitutional Convention to be held at Philadelphia the following year.

When the Constitutional Convention assembled, George Washington was elected its presiding officer. Edmund Randolph, Grand Master of Virginia, introduced the so-called Virginia Plan for a Constitution which formed the basis of the document which eventually was evolved.

It is difficult to assert with absolute finality just how many of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention were members of our Craft. Evidence is conclusive in the case of a large number and convincing in the case of many others. But more important than mere numbers is the fact that among the delegates were the outstanding Masonic leaders in the States from which they came. There was of course George Washington who had been proposed as General Grand Master over all the Colonies. Pennsylvania sent Benjamin Franklin, its pre-eminent Mason and a former Provincial Grand Master. Virginia sent John Blair, its first Grand Master, and Edmund Randolph, its then presiding Grand Master. New Jersey sent David Brearley, its presiding Grand Master. Delaware sent Gunning Bedford, a Mason who later became Delaware's first Grand Master. North Carolina sent William Richardson Davie, Jr., who although not then a Mason, became Grand Master of North Carolina six years later. North Carolina also sent its then presiding Grand Master, Samuel Johnson, as an unofficial

advisor to aid its delegates. Thus in five of the delegations there were two Past Grand Masters, three presiding Grand Masters, and two who subsequently became Grand Masters.

After the Constitution had been ratified, George Washington, America's most distinguished Freemason, and the presiding Master of Alexandria Lodge No. 22, Alexandria, Virginia, was elected our first President. George Washington was the only President who was Master of his Lodge and President of the United States at the same time.

He was inaugurated in New York on April 30, 1789. His oath of office was taken on the Bible brought from St. John's Lodge No. 2 by its Master, General Jacob Morton, who was also the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of New York, and who three years later became Grand Master of New York.

The oath of office was administered by Chancellor Robert Livingston, then Grand Master of New York. The only other participants in the inaugural ceremony were Vice President John Adams, General Roger Sherman, General Alexander Hamilton, Major General Henry Knox, and General and Baron von Steuben, all of whom except Vice President Adams, were members of our Craft.

After his inauguration President Washington again called upon his Masonic brethren to fill the important appointive offices of his new government. At least three of the original five Cabinet posts were filled by members of the Craft, namely, Alexander Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Knox as Secretary of War, and Edmund Randolph as Attorney General. Thomas Jefferson, whose Masonic

membership is doubtful, was appointed Secretary of State.

John Blair, the first Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, was appointed by Washington as an original member of the Supreme Court and in 1801, John Marshall, also a Virginia Grand Master, was appointed Chief Justice.

Thus did our forefathers launch a new Nation, conceived in the Masonic tradition of liberty and justice, and dedicated to the Masonic principle that all men are created equal, and thus into the hand of a group of distinguished Masons did they entrust the important task of guiding its destinies.