

GEORGE WASHINGTON THE MASON

By Thomas Sherrard Roy

"From the oldest soldier in the world to the greatest." That is the inscription on a sword which, at one time at least, hung on the walls of Washington's home at Mt. Vernon. It was presented to him by Frederick the Great. It is not only as the greatest soldier of his day, but as the greatest man in American history that we honor him. We, as Masons, honor him as the greatest Mason in our history in America.

It is well to thrust into the consciousness of America that George Washington was a Freemason, and that his membership in the Craft was of assistance to him in his life as an individual, in his leadership as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army, and in his work as President of the United States. The fact of his Masonic connections has been so universally ignored by historians and biographers that one suspects a conspiracy of silence in the matter.

Washington's career as a Mason began on November 4, 1752. On that day he was initiated in the Lodge at Fredericksburg, Virginia. The origin of the Fredericksburg Lodge is shrouded in mystery. There is a tradition that the Lodge operated under a warrant issued by Thomas Oxnard, then Provincial Grand Master of the Provincial Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. Oxnard's warrant from the Grand Lodge of England stated that he was to be "Provincial Grand Master of North America." Thus he had the authority to warrant a Lodge anywhere on the continent. That he warranted the Lodge in Fredericksburg must remain only a tradition. It could have been a self-constituted Lodge, existing by "immemorial usage," as sometimes occurred in those days.

Washington was born, and was still living at this time, at Brydges Creek, a few miles from Fredericksburg. At the time of his initiation he was not yet twenty-one years of age. However, he became a Master Mason on August 4, 1753, so that he was well over twenty-one when he became a full-fledged Mason, which was probably all that the laws of the Lodge demanded.

Though Washington was young when initiated he was mature for his years. He had been exposed to conditions, and shared experiences, that toughened a lad beyond his years. At this time he was a Major in the Virginia militia, and a surveyor who was able to carry out difficult assignments in that area of his activities.

In his earlier years in Masonry he was not particularly active. When he moved to Mount Vernon, he was too far away from his Lodge to visit it very often. There is some evidence that when he went North to Boston in 1756 he held Masonic discourse with brethren in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. In 1783 a Lodge at Alexandria, Virginia, was chartered under the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. In 1786 the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania dissolved, and reformed as an independent Grand Lodge. Rather than turn in its Charter and obtain a new one from the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, Alexandria Lodge petitioned the recently constituted Grand Lodge of Virginia for a Charter. In their desire to honor the man who had so recently won the freedom of the States, the Alexandria brethren invited Washington to become the first Master of the new Lodge. He consented, and on April 29, 1788, Edmund Randolph, who was Governor of Virginia as well as Grand Master of Masons in Virginia, issued a Charter to George Washington and other brethren. Thus Washington became the first Master of Alexandria Lodge. He held this office for twenty months, and thus during the early part of his first term as President of the United States. He was the only President who was Master of his Lodge while President.

George Washington was nominated by at least one Lodge, and by one Grand Lodge, as General Grand Master of The Grand Lodge of the United States. But as he believed in the sovereignty of the States as political bodies, so he believed in the sovereignty of State Grand Lodges, and withdrew his name from the venture.

In 1793, when the cornerstone of the Capitol building of the United States was laid, President Washington officiated in the Masonic service used at that time, not only as President of the United States, but as Grand Master, pro tem, of the Grand Lodge of Maryland which was the officiating body.

When Washington was installed as President of the United States on April 30, 1789, the oath of office was administered by Chancellor Robert R. Livingston, then Grand Master of Mason in New York. The Bible used had been borrowed from St. John's Lodge of New York, and is still in the possession of that Lodge.

What it was in Freemasonry that attracted George Washington in his youth, and held him to it till his death, is not too difficult to discover. The character of Washington had an affinity for the exalted teachings of the Craft. The Mason who reads his words must have the feeling that this man was a Mason. His farewell address is supposed to have been written by Alexander Hamilton, but it is known that the President revised and amended it. In that address he expressed the hope that "union and brotherly affection may be perpetual." He speaks of unity as "the main pillar in the edifice of your real independence." He advises his countrymen that they cannot "shield themselves too much from the jealousies and heartburnings which render alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection." He refers to "the pillars of human happiness." In the light of our teachings the following question is very significant: "Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained

without religion. Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." He admonishes his people to "observe good faith and justice toward all nations, and to cultivate peace and harmony with all." He asks that they be "guided by a sense of justice and benevolence."

We have more than this indirect evidence to establish his interest in Freemasonry. He wrote a letter to King David's Lodge in Newport, Rhode Island, in which we find these words: "Being persuaded that a just appreciation of the principles on which the Masonic fraternity is founded must be promotive of private virtue and public prosperity, I shall always be happy to advance the interests of the Society, and to be considered by them as a worthy brother." In a letter to the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts he wrote: "It is most fervently to be wished that the conduct of every member of the fraternity may tend to convince mankind that the great object of Masonry is to promote the happiness of the human race." All of these quotations, indirect and direct, express the essence of our Masonic teachings. They are an expression of the laws of life George Washington learned, or found reinforced in Freemasonry.

Sometimes a small, and seemingly incidental, and apparently insignificant event in the life of an individual becomes magnified by its results into an event of national, or even world importance. November 4, 1752 will not be found in any record of important events in the history of our nation; but it may well be that the initiation of George Washington as a Mason that day was one of the great events in American history.

It is generally agreed without Washington the American Revolution would have failed. In his book, "The Epic of America." James Touse Adams says: "The Revolution was only saved from being an abortive rebellion by two factors, neither of which could be counted upon in 1776: one was the character of George Washington, the other, the marshalling against England of European powers. . . . There have been greater generals in the field, and greater statesmen in the cabinet in our land and other countries. There has been no greater character. When we think of Washington it is not as a military leader, nor as an executive or diplomat. We think of the man who by sheer force of character held a divided and disorganized country together until victory was achieved." John W. Davis, in one of his addresses said: "The American Revolution succeeded because George Washington lived."

While it is generally agreed that without Washington the Revolution would have failed, I am going to hazard the assertion that without Freemasonry, George Washington could have failed. On June 15, 1775, the Continental Congress elected him as Commander in Chief of the Continental army. On July 3 he assumed command of the army on Cambridge Common. He found a set of conditions which he had not at all anticipated. He had to deal with subordinates, who, according to John Adams, fought among themselves "like cats and dogs." He found an appalling lack of discipline in the camp. Ordinary privates spoke to officers in terms of familiarity. They walked out of camp when they wanted to, and came back when the notion took them. Washington straightened it out. Courts-martial were held almost every day. Officers were dismissed for ignorance, carelessness, unmilitary behaviour, and cowardice. In a letter that he wrote four months after he assumed command he said: "Such a dearth of public spirit, and want of virtue; such stock-jobbing and fertility in all low arts to obtain advantage of one kind and another I never saw before, and pray God I may never see again. Could I have foreseen what I have, and am likely to experience, no consideration on earth should have induced me to accept this command."

It was Freemasonry that helped to save the situation for the Commander in Chief. One of his difficulties was to get officers on whom he could depend. He brought close to him some who were brother Masons, such as Nathaniel Greene of Rhode Island, and Henry Knox of Boston. His general staff had a large proportion of Masons, and he came to depend upon such men as Steuben, Montgomery and Gist. On one occasion at a Masonic meeting it was discovered that seventy almost of the present were officers close to Washington.

The Commander in Chief fostered the Masonic spirit in the army. He encouraged the formation of military Lodges. In an army of fifteen thousand men we know of eleven military Lodges, and there may have been many more. There was American Union Number one, formed in Dorchester, near Boston, and later activated and now working in Marietta, Ohio. Many State regiments had their own field Lodges. At Newburgh, New York, Washington caused a hall to be built called The Temple of Virtue, as a meeting place for the Lodges. We have records of Washington celebrating the Feast of St. John the Baptist, or the Feast of St. John the Evangelist with some of these Lodges. When the city of Philadelphia fell again into the hands of the patriots in 1778, Washington took part in a Masonic celebration of the event. For on the day of St. John the Evangelist, December 27, with sword at his side, and in full Masonic regalia, he marched at the head of a solemn Masonic procession to Christ Church where a Masonic divine service was held.

It was no accident, and no coincidence, that in the later stages of the Revolution there came invaluable aid from France. The very distinguished Mason, Benjamin Franklin, was our representative there. At the beginning of the Revolution, the French King and his advisers were not inclined to help in any way. It was Franklin's Masonic contacts that brought him close to the leaders in Government whose cooperation made it possible for him to secure the money and supplies from France, so desperately needed by Washington. That is a very interesting story in itself.

It was the fact that Washington had about him Masons whom he could trust that must have helped him to survive the difficult days when he had to face the lukewarmness of the Colonies, the treachery of the Conway cabal, the shortage of

supplies, the lack of money, and the desertion of thousands of his troops. He could say of them what Ulysses said of himself and his followers: "That which we are, we are, one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

When the Revolution was over, Washington modestly retired to his estate at Mt. Vernon to try to rebuild his fallen fortunes. But it was not long before the state of confusion in which the country found itself gave him no rest. he could not be inactive when there was work to be done. Having won liberty, he sought to establish unity. He consented, reluctantly, to be a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. He served as its President, and helped to guide it to constructive action. Again came the call of duty and he became the first President of the United States. In all of his activities he gave himself disinterestedly to the creation of a nation in which men would be able to establish their lives in brotherhood.

"Show me the man you honor," says a proverb, "and I will show you the man you are." We honor ourselves as we honor Washington, and thus acknowledge our debt to him. While we look about us and contemplate the mighty structure that constitutes this Republic, we do not cry out: "Behold mighty Babylon which I have builded." Rather, in humility and gratitude to we acknowledge our debt to Washington and the Masons who helped him to find victory.

This service in his memory is a symbol of the tribute that we would pay to the memory of our first President. It stands for all the things we feel that cannot become articulate in speech. It is our tribute to one whose life has stood up under the pitiless scrutiny of the years; one whose reputation has survived the criticism of his enemies and the adulation of his friends; one whose name is unsullied, and whose fame is untarnished after one hundred and sixty years and more - the greatest figure of the world of his day, and one of the greatest of all times.

We honor him for the decisiveness and inflexible purpose that inspire our admiration and emulation. We honor him for his wise counsel as a statesman that rebukes our expediences in the face of the world's needs and dangers. We honor him of this consummate integrity that shames the corruption of our day, and dares us place men of honor in positions of high responsibility. We reverence him for his faith in God that challenges us to strive for the achievement of that freedom under God which is our high destiny.

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