

MASONRY WITHIN THE BELTWAY: TRENDS AND PROSPECTS

by
Stewart Wilson Miner, PGM

I have for some years been intrigued by the fortunes, or more properly, the misfortunes of Masonry as it is practiced in many of our larger urban areas. This interest has been the motivating force for this paper, in which it is my purpose to look at the Craft in what I believe is a rather unique geographical and fraternal setting. In this effort I will compile and analyze membership data for a period that spans the past three decades. In doing so it is my intent to not only look at the area as a whole, but also to look at its integral parts — to see, if you will, how they relate to and impact on each other.

The unique area to which I have referred is encompassed by the circumferential highway that bypasses our Nation's Capital. Although it has been in place for only a few years, it has already transformed the city and its close-in suburbs, reordered long-standing regional traffic patterns, and, for all practical purposes, has become an effective barrier or boundary, one that delimits and separates regions that are essentially dissimilar. This is not to say that every place within the Beltway is identical to every other place similarly located; that, of course, is not the case. But it is to suggest that the area is moving towards a form of homogeneity that gives it character and causes it to differ substantially from those regions that are outside the Beltway and more distant from downtown Washington.

The study area, which probably does not exceed 250 square miles, is small and complex. Extending some 18 miles east-west and about 14 miles north-south at its widest points, it incorporates the District of Columbia, the Federal District, and small segments of the Free State of Maryland and the Commonwealth of Virginia. This is the political center of our country; as such it is crowded, ethnically diverse, and increasingly cosmopolitan in

character. It is against that background that the Grand Lodges of Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Virginia struggle to maintain and preserve regular Freemasonry in this very significant part of our nation. That cause is worth every bit of the effort that ultimate success will unquestionably demand.

Let us begin by taking an overview of Masonry in the area within the Beltway during the study period. In 1952 there were in this area a total of 66 degree-conferring regular lodges. At that time 48 of them were in the District of Columbia, 11 in Virginia, and 7 in Maryland. By 1982 the total had been reduced to 56, of which 36 were in the District of Columbia, 13 in Virginia, and the original 7 in Maryland. The losses, it is evident, were confined to the District of Columbia, and the gains to Virginia, there being no change in the Maryland sector.

In the mere recognition of the loss of lodges, however, the seriousness of the decline is not really established. To do that it is essential that one also appreciate membership trends within the lodges — those that closed and those that remained in operation (see tabulation). It is apparent that Masonic membership in the area reached a high in the late 1950's (32,873 in 1957), following which a period of continuing loss set in. By 1982 the combined membership of lodges then in operation totaled 18,553, a mere 58% of what it had been 30 years earlier.

Thus in the past three decades the area within the Beltway lost 16% of its lodges and 42% of its membership overall. These figures lead one to surmise that trends over the period have impacted more severely on some lodges and on some jurisdictions than on others, a supposition that is supported by the tables included in this paper. Furthermore, trends within jurisdictions are not uniform everywhere.

MEMBERSHIP IN BELTWAY LODGES: 1952-1982

YEAR	1952	1957	1962	1967	1972	1977	1982
D.C.	25265	24473	22193	19174	15921	12771	10303
VA	4544	5515	6096	6255	6300	6047	5468
MD	2207	2885	3277	3403	3299	3055	2782
Total	32,016	32,873	31,566	28,832	25,520	21,873	18,553

Note: Entries shown for Maryland for 1962, 1972, 1977, and 1982 are actually for the years 1963, 1973, an estimated extrapolation, and for 1980, respectively. As the data becomes available to the author, the tabulation will be modified

In Maryland, for example, total membership in the 30-year period increased on the average by 19 members per year, leading to an estimated 1982 aggregate that was 126% of that prevailing in 1952. Looking at the data negatively, however, one may note the absence of new construction in this period, during which no new lodges were chartered. Furthermore, membership trends since 1967 have taken a decidedly downward course, and in truth the current total is demonstrably lower than it was in 1957. Of the lodges registering overall gains for the period, 5 of the 7, Cornerstone 224 appears to have compiled the best record. But the data also indicate that it has suffered disproportionately more than the rest of the Maryland group since the early 1970's.

The Virginia situation appears to be quite similar, at least superficially, especially in total gain overall, which amounted to 924 for the period or an average increase of 31 per annum. Significantly, Virginia added two new lodges during these years, John Blair 187 and Skidmore 237, which together account for a substantial (220 members) part of the increased membership in Virginia's sector of the area within the Beltway.

But if we look at the figures closely, just as we did in Maryland, we again find that the 1982 total is substantially below the high established for the period as a whole in 1972. Furthermore, just as in Maryland, the current total does not reach the level that prevailed in 1957. While the majority of the Virginia lodges registered gains (10 in all), there were some substantial losers. Interestingly they were the lodges with the

largest memberships — Henry Knox Field 349, Columbia 285, and Andrew Jackson 120. Also interesting is the relative lack of any definitive trend for Alexandria-Washington Lodge 22 during this entire period, when other lodges were experiencing both sharper gains and losses. Most of the Virginia Lodges within the Beltway occupy their own temples, and during the study period three new temples were constructed — for Elmer Timberman 54, for Arlington Centennial 81 and Glebe 181 jointly, and for Macon Ware 192. Planning for another is now underway.

Of the three jurisdictions within the Beltway, lodges subordinate to the Grand Lodge of D.C. have been hardest hit. The decline has been constant — from a high of 25,265 in 1952 to a low of 10,303 in 1982, when total membership was only 41% of what it had been 30 years previously. During this period the average annual decline was 499. Losses were particularly high in Naval Lodge No. 4 (from 1606 to 811), Lebanon Lodge No. 7 (from 1317 to 466), Washington-Centennial Lodge No. 13 (from 1031 to 287), and in Anacostia Lodge No. 21 (from 1222 to 566). Only two lodges registered memberships in 1982 that were in excess of levels prevailing in 1952, and in both instances the increase was due primarily to mergers. Merging has not prevented further erosion of membership rosters, however, as the record for several merged lodges will attest.

During the period 1952-1982 no less than 12 lodges in the District of Columbia ceased operations as separate entities. These included New Jerusalem No. 9, Acacia No. 18, Myron M.

Parker No. 27, King David No. 28, Congress No. 37, Joseph M. Milans No. 38, Warren G. Harding No. 39, Cathedral No. 40, Chevy Chase No. 42, Justice No. 46, Barristers No. 48, and Sojourners No. 51. Furthermore, in the year following the study period, Ben Franklin No. 50 was assimilated by Samuel Gompers No. 45.

Paralleling the decline in membership and the merging of lodges in the District of Columbia was the movement to gradually decrease the number of operating Masonic temples. Preparations for the sale of the Grand Lodge building on New York Avenue were initiated and Masonic Halls, including those belonging to East Gate No. 34 and Stansbury No. 24, were disposed of. Although no new degree-conferring lodges were chartered during the period, the jurisdiction was able to establish the Convass B. Dean Memorial Lodge in 1965 and the Pythagoras Lodge of Research in 1967. Both have well served the functions for which they were created.

Inherent in the assessment of data chronicling the past, such as those herein contained, is the possibility that such data may also infer the future — particularly if nature is permitted to take its course. Should the Craft opt for that unfortunate alternative, the outlook could be bleak indeed. Already there are indications that the maladies which have for so long afflicted regular Freemasonry in D.C. are now taking root in the adjacent suburbs as well. In those areas, it may be noted, the demographic structures of communities are in observable flux, petitions for the degrees in Masonry are declining significantly, and some of the largest lodges in those areas, not unlike their D.C. counterparts, are already reflecting the strain of substantial membership loss. All of the available evidence, in fact, suggests that such differences as may be noted in the health and welfare of inner-Beltway lodges are differences of degree and not of substance. Their cares, concerns, and fortunes, in other words, are communally mutual, and as such are deserving of area-wide attention.

I would be foolhardy, however, to assume that the formulation of constructive plans to meet the contingencies of the hour will be easy to accomplish. It won't be for there are those, and their numbers are legion, who look upon the difficulties of the Craft with studied disdain, convinced that in time the cycle that brought us to this juncture will correct itself. Most of them, in fact, are unacquainted with matters in their own lodges, to say nothing of affairs elsewhere. Apparently they believe that the best plan is no plan, and they act accordingly. They approach progress in a manner that proclaims the reality of the philosophy expounded by Sam Walter Foss, who in verse once remarked that:

One day, thru the primeval wood,
A calf walked home, as good calves should;
But made a trail all bent askew,
A crooked trail as all calves do.

Since then two hundred years have fled,
And, I infer, the calf is dead.
But still behind he left his trail,
And thereby hangs my moral tale.

The trail was taken up next day
By a lonely dog that passed that way;
And then a wise bellwether sheep
Pursued the trail o'er vale and steep,
And drew the block behind him too,
As good bellwethers always do.
And from that day, o'er hill and glade,
Thru those old woods a path was made;
Any many men wound in and out,
And dodged, and turned, and bent about
And uttered words of righteous wrath
Because 'twas such a crooked path.

But still they followed — do not laugh —
The first migrations of that calf,
And thru this winding wood-way stalked,
Because he wobbled when he walked.

This forest path became a lane,
That bent, and turned, and turned again
This crooked path became a road,
Where many a poor horse with his load
Toiled on beneath the burning sun,
And traveled some three miles in one.
And thus a century and a half
They trod the footsteps of that calf.

The years passed on in swiftness fleet,
The road became a village street;
And this, before men were aware,
A city's crowded thoroughfare;

And soon the central street was this
Of a renowned metropolis;
And men two centuries and a half
Trode in the footsteps of that calf.

Each day a hundred thousand rout
Followed the zigzag calf about;
And o'er his crooked journey went
The traffic of a continent.

A hundred thousand men were led
By one calf near three centuries dead.
They followed still his crooked way,
And lost one hundred years a day;
For thus such reverence is lent
To well-established precedent.

A moral lesson this might teach,
Were I ordained and called to preach;
For men are prone to go it blind
Along the pathways of the mind,
And work away from sun to sun
To do what other men have done.

They follow in the beaten track,
And out and in, and forth and back,
And still their devious course pursue,
To keep the path that others do.

But how the wise old woods-gods laugh,
Who saw the first primeval calf!
Ah! Many things this tale might teach,
But I am not ordained to preach.

While I am certainly not ordained, and couldn't preach even if I wanted to, I am nevertheless compelled to express my unwillingness to follow calf paths, old or new. Unfortunately there are many calf paths around, and I fear that they are being frequently utilized by Masons. One who shuns them, however, is a hypothetical brother of mine, a Mason who lives on the west coast, loves America, and is concerned about the continuing presence of regular Freemasonry in and around our national capital. And he is able, from his vantage point the breadth of a continent away, to keep parochialism and imagined self-interest from coloring his judgments.

Our anonymous brother begins his assessment by asking some pertinent questions pertaining to plans and policies already formulated to assess the issues of the day. He is not really surprised to learn that very little, if anything, has been

done to date to confront problems that have plagued Masonry within the Beltway for years. Rationalizing to a degree, despite his reluctance to do so, he asks himself why this area should be any different, noting the apparent preference of Masonic leaders everywhere to discuss rather than to relieve the concerns of the Craft. This disturbs him deeply, for he is a firm believer in the advantages that accrue to self-starters, in and out of the fraternity, and he strongly suspects that the early application of a measure of local initiative would have been in the general interest of inner-Beltway Masonry.

Not wishing to dwell on the negative, however, he begins to play with the data and to look with interest at the map. He is intrigued by the three-fold division of the area and begins to speculate on the benefits that might possibly accrue through unification of Masonic authority within the Beltway. Looking intently at the tabular summaries of membership, he notes that should such a merger be possible, the strength of the resultant Grand Lodge would be considerably enhanced.

His imagination runs away with his thoughts, and he begins to dream of something called the Grand Lodge of the Nation's Capital and of the measures that would have to be taken to integrate and unify the laws, customs, and rituals now in use in the area. Unquestionably he likes the idea, for in his mind it is fraught with potential. But being an experienced Mason, one who is appreciative of reality, he recognizes that desirable as unification may be for the area, the idea is undoubtedly one whose time has not yet arrived. In fact, he concludes, that time may never come.

"But even if unification is not possible," he reasons, "are there not advantages to be had in alternative modifications of authority in the area?" "I wonder what the outcome would be," he muses, "if jurisdictional lines within the Beltway were to be removed and the entire area considered open to work and development without restriction." In developing his thoughts he is caused to look at the Masonic history of the region and to contemplate the impact

thereon of the creation and subsequent diminishment of the District of Columbia.

Our hypothetical west-coast brother thinks about the fact that George Washington laid out the specifications for the Federal District; the fact that the Federal District originally included 30.75 square miles of Virginia territory; and the fact that this territory, which included what is now Arlington County and the City of Alexandria remained a part of the Federal District until 1846, when it was returned to Virginia. He also recalls that during the years of existence of the Virginia segment of the Federal District, the area was shared Masonically by the Grand Lodges of Virginia and the District of Columbia, both having operating subordinate lodges within it. Even more interesting to him is the discovery that for an indeterminate period between 1833 and 1843, Evangelical Lodge No. 8 of the District of Columbia met in the rooms of Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22. Furthermore the record indicates the relationship was entirely harmonious.

In such an arrangement there could be advantages for all concerned, our anonymous brother concludes, particularly for the lodges in the District of Columbia, which are now hard put to find either adequate meeting places or affordable high-quality building sites within the District. Our brother is of the opinion that the removal of this obstacle might well prove to be a motivating force that would lead to the rejuvenation of the Masonic movement, not only in D.C., but in the suburbs as well.

The cooperation of Evangelical Lodge No. 8 and Alexandria Washington Lodge No. 22, more than a century ago, preys on his mind. "Isn't this the precedent we need," he asks, "to launch a new era of cooperation?" And he cannot help but think that the pooling of selected resources would benefit the Masonic movement through the improvement of existing or the construction of new Masonic temples.

Somewhere he had read about the lodge that had a beautiful building lot in one of the finest suburban communities but was short of

construction money. Worse still, as he recalled the account, the lodge had found that bands do not loan money anymore to Masonic lodges. "Doesn't it make sense," he reasoned, "to facilitate the cooperation of the lodge with the lot with another lodge having money, even it is subordinate to another Grand Lodge?" "Why," he asks, "should those lodges not have the opportunity to meet under the same roof? Both would enjoy improved facilities, and it seems reasonable to assume that both would prosper." But again experience tells him that desirable though the concept may be, the chances of its implementation in the foreseeable future are scant.

Undaunted, however, and being enamored with the thought that the Craft can be advanced through the extension of existing cooperative efforts, our brother considers an alternative to the proposal to declare the whole inner-Beltway an open area Masonically. "If that cannot be done," he states, "can some small part of the area be so designated?" He has in mind the establishment of a free zone, consisting of one-mile strips on each side of the boundaries now separating the three jurisdictions sharing the inner-Beltway area. "Should this be acceptable," he declares, "the free zone could be used in a manner similar to that suggested for an area-wide zone of cooperation and development. In those instances where the Potomac forms the boundary between jurisdictions, our brother suggests that the free zone extend inland one mile from the shoreline on each side of the river.

Being both a good student of human nature and appreciative of the role that is always played by time in the development and acceptance of any new idea, our anonymous brother makes one last observation and suggestion. He notes that while the Grand Lodges claiming authority over the inner-Beltway area enjoy very harmonious interrelationships, working and social, there is at present no forum available to them for the discussion, on a tri-jurisdictional basis, of matters having area-wide import. The establishment of such a forum, he reasons, would not involve the expenditure of any resources, would not infer the abrogation of any

jurisdictional rights, but would, nevertheless, provide the means by which pressing inner-Beltway Masonic issues of mutual concern could be approached. To that end our brother therefore suggests that the Grand Lodges of Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Virginia consider constitution of what he terms the Inner-Beltway Masonic Council.

The proposal seems sound to me. If it, or some reasoned alternative to it is accepted, we may be able to stay off the calf paths of the present long enough to shape a future worthy of the Craft.