

Observations On Masonry In The Federal District

1793 – 1864

By

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Creation of the Federal District

Fate dictated the creation of the Federal District, hereafter termed the District of Columbia, in the aftermath of the revolution and the establishment of the Federal Government. When the United States Constitution was adopted on September 15, 1787, Article 1, Section 8, Clause 17, included language authorizing the establishment of a federal district. The district was not to exceed 10 square miles and be under the exclusive legislative authority of Congress. On July 16, 1790, Congress authorized President George Washington to choose a permanent site for the capital city and on December 1, 1800, the capital was moved from Philadelphia to an area along the Potomac River.

During the period of the Revolution, the Continental Congress was a nomadic body. At different times within a single year, 1777, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Lancaster and York had the distinction of being the seat of Congress. In 1783, the delegates were comfortably settled in Philadelphia, and might have stayed there indefinitely had not mutinous continental soldiers come upon them suddenly, while in session, demanding their long overdue pay. Slighted and alarmed, Congress moved to Princeton, N.J.

The need for a permanent seat of national government, preferably some piece of virgin territory wherein a "Federal Town" might be built, became imperative. From 1783 until 1789, the Continental Congress considered offers from various sections of the country; but so many proposals were made, and such rivalry was shown, that Congress soon began to see in the "Federal Town" question a very dangerous issue: the matter was a major source of contention and controversy between North and South.

The Residency Bill passed in 1790 authorized the President to select a site "not exceeding 10 miles square" somewhere in the Potomac region, and the establishment therein of the permanent seat of government of the United States. Maryland, by an act passed on December 29, 1788, and Virginia, by an act passed on December 3, 1789, had previously authorized "the cession of such portion of their territory, as might be selected by Federal authorities for the seat of the General Government."

In October 1790, President Washington took up his role of agent. He inspected many Potomac sites, and in January 1791 he made his decision, choosing the land in Maryland, which is now the District of Columbia, and a smaller section across the Potomac in Virginia territory, including the town of Alexandria. The boundaries of the territory chosen were described as follows: "beginning at Jones' Point, being the upper cape of Hunting Creek in Virginia, and at an angle in the outset of 45 degrees west of the north, and running in a direct line ten miles for the first line; then beginning again at the same Jones' Point, and running another direct line at a right angle with the first, across the Potomac, ten miles, for the second line; then from the terminations of the said first and second line, running two other direct lines, of ten mile each, the one crossing the Eastern Branch aforesaid and the other the Potomac, and meeting each other in a point." Georgetown and Alexandria were within the limits of the District as surveyed - the remainder was plantation or farmland.

The territory thus defined prevailed until 1846 when Congress voted to give back to Virginia all the land that state had given to the government for the creation of the District of Columbia. This move returned about 32 square miles of territory to Virginia. Residents of Alexandria and what is now Arlington County, Virginia, thus lost District of Columbia residency and again became Virginia citizens. This return of territory had fraternal as well

as political significance; thereafter candidates for Masonry living in the returned territory had only one option – to petition a Lodge subordinate to the Grand Lodge of Virginia.

Early Freemasonry in the District of Columbia

Original Lodges in the District

As of 1793, there were only three regularly chartered lodges working within the Federal District: Alexandria Lodge No. 22 in the town of that name, chartered by the Grand Lodge of Virginia, Lodge No. 9 in Georgetown, and Lodge No. 15 in the City of Washington, both of which were chartered by the Grand Lodge of Maryland. In the first three years of existence of the Federal District, these Lodges and the Freemasons of the area had publicly participated, at the invitation of and with the civil authorities in the laying the historic cornerstones of the Federal District Boundaries. Thereafter Masonry, in the Maryland part of the District of Columbia, began to thrive, and by 1811 there were a sufficient number of Lodges to form a new Grand Lodge.

Formation of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia

In forming the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia invitations to participate were extended to Alexandria Lodge No. 22 and to Alexandria-Brooke Lodge No. 47, both of which were Virginia Lodges meeting regularly in the city of Alexandria. Alexandria Lodge had previously worked under a Pennsylvania Charter, and was now well satisfied with its position in the Grand Lodge of Virginia, declined. Brooke Lodge participated freely, however, and played a significant role in the creation of the Grand Lodge of D.C.

The Life of Brooke Lodge

Brooke Lodge thrived for a number of years and was instrumental in the creation of another Lodge in Alexandria, Evangelical Lodge No. 8. It opted to affiliate with the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia in which it became Brooke Lodge No. 2. Like many other Lodges, however, it suffered during the course of the anti-Masonic wave that erupted in consequence of the Morgan affair, and in 1833, the recall of the charter was ordered. Satisfaction of this

demand was delayed for some time, but on August 7, 1838 the charter, tools, jewels, and implements were finally surrendered.

Brooke Lodge met in a hall that it erected on St. Asaph Street, between King and Cameron Streets, a location in which Brooke Royal Arch Chapter and Evangelical Lodge No. 8 also found a home. Relations between Brooke Lodge and Alexandria-Washington Lodge were quite amicable, and the two lodges often came together for joint celebrations and feasts. The fact that they subordinate to different jurisdictions did not impact on their fraternal relations.

Evangelical Lodge No. 8

Evangelical Lodge No. 8 at Alexandria was chartered in 1824 on the recommendation of Brooke Lodge No. 2. Both lodges used the same meeting place and were closely associated. At the demise of Brooke Lodge in 1833, Evangelical Lodge met in the rooms of Alexandria Lodge, a curious circumstance since the latter lodge, as previously noted, was under the obedience of the Grand Lodge of Virginia. No jurisdictional disputes, however, ever arose between the two lodges.

Having existed for most of its life in the anti-Masonic period, early in 1843 Evangelical Lodge decided to surrender its charter. The Grand Lodge postponed action for more than a year, during which it elected a member of Evangelical Lodge to be Deputy Grand Master for Alexandria, but all efforts failed to save the situation. In 1844 the lodge was dropped from the District rolls, as of December 27, 1843, the date on which the charter had been formally surrendered. The Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia now had no lodges working on the Virginia side of its grand jurisdiction.

In conjunction with its deliberation of the Evangelical matter, the relationship of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia and Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22 became strained, perhaps through inadequate communications. At any rate, at the semi-annual communication of May 2, 1843, the Grand Lodge received a communication from Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22 giving information on the expulsion of a certain Wm. Ward, late a member of said lodge (Evangelical Lodge),

from all the rights, privileges, and benefits of Ancient Freemasonry, and the Grand Secretary was directed to so inform all the subordinate lodges in the District of Columbia.

This communication was not well received in the Grand Lodge, probably because the said Wm. Ward was a member of both Brooke and Evangelical Lodges. Whether or not he was also a member of Alexandria-Washington Lodge is not known. Nevertheless a resolution was immediately offered and adopted by the Grand Lodge of D.C. as follows:

Whereas this Grand Lodge has suffered itself to be trifled with and insulted, the feelings and affections of its members alienated, so much so that many had determined to quit the Order entirely, by suffering a body of foreign Masons to expel some of its officers and members without making the charges for such expulsion known to the Grand Lodge, where the parties accused could have had a fair hearing and meet their accusers face to face; therefore be it

Resolved, That hereafter this Grand Lodge will not suffer any foreign body of Masons to suspend or expel any of its officers or members without a fair and impartial trial; and that all complaints against any officer or member shall hereafter be communicated in writing to this Grand Lodge.

The records of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia do not thereafter address this issue, probably because of a forthcoming political decision that would modify the territorial extent of the District of Columbia.

Loss of Virginia Portion of the District

In 1846 the Congress ceded back to Virginia its portion of the District of Columbia. The area of the District which had been one hundred square miles was thereby reduced to sixty-nine square miles. Having no lodges south of the Potomac River, no jurisdictional problems confronted the Grand Lodge as a result of this Congressional action. The former portion of the District was thereafter regarded as masonically within the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, and our Grand Lodge advanced no claims based upon its former authority there. It

would be mere conjecture to imagine what agreement might have been reached between the two Grand Lodges if Brooke Lodge and Evangelical Lodge had still been working in 1846, but we may note that for 35 years Alexandria Lodge No. 22 had worked unhindered within the District of Columbia Grand jurisdiction while under the allegiance to the Grand Lodge of Virginia.

Masonry in the Metropolitan Areas at the Outbreak of the Civil War

Following the return of the Virginia portion of the District of Columbia to Virginia, Masonry in Alexandria was in the hands of Alexandria-Washington Lodge alone until 1853, when Andrew Jackson Lodge was created. The rest of the Virginia area, that is Arlington County, was without a Masonic presence, a situation that was extended many decades until the chartering of Columbia Lodge No. 285 in 1905. The proliferation of lodges in the Virginia portion of the District has been, for the most part, confined to the 20th century.

The situation was much different in the Maryland Sector of the District of Columbia, where the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia was, in contrast, prospering. At the time of the outbreak of the Civil War this Grand Lodge contained as many as 11 subordinate lodges as follows: Federal No. 1, Washington-Naval No. 4, Potomac No. 5, Lebanon No. 7, New Jerusalem No. 9, Hiram No. 10, St. Johns No. 11, National No. 12, Washington-Centennial No. 14, Benjamin B. French No. 15, and Dawson No. 16. Moreover growth continued thereafter, slowly but surely, until the post- World War II era.

Masonry During the Metropolitan Era During the Civil War

War in every age has a way of impacting on the entirety of society and the institutions of man, and in this respect the Civil war was typical. Communications between the North and the South were hampered, and in the absence of fact, misunderstanding often prevailed. Such was the case in Masonry, at least so far as the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. area was concerned.

On February 12, 1862, at a time when the area was well into the war, the Grand Master, Charles F. Stansbury found it necessary to call the Grand Lodge together in Special Communication. He did so in order to submit to the Grand Lodge information on a question which he thought was beyond his province as Grand Master to decide. At this time he reported that he had received a petition from Theodore G. Palmer, and nine others, who are vouched for as worthy Master Masons, praying for a dispensation to form a new Lodge in the city of Alexandria, VA. Brother Palmer, he said, had reported that there was at that time no lodge working in that city, that no charter could be found, that everything appertaining to the Lodges formerly existing there having been removed, and that the Masons residing in Alexandria were thus cut off from all enjoyment of their Masonic privileges. Brother Palmer also stated that the Grand Lodge of Virginia had forbidden those working under its jurisdiction to recognize or hold Masonic intercourse with Masons who adhere to their allegiance to the Union.

Grand Master Stansbury stated that:

“Under ordinary circumstances, a petition of this kind could not have been for a moment entertained by the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of this jurisdiction; because to grant such a dispensation would have been a clear invasion of the territory of a sister Grand Lodge – and act which the Masons of this country have uniformly repudiated. The question for us now is, whether the present state of things would justify us in establishing a new precedent, in order to afford our brethren of the loyal part of Virginia the rights and benefits of our Order.

“Upon this question I do not intend to express – indeed I have not formed – a decided opinion. It is certainly very undesirable that any considerable portion of the fraternity should, for an indefinite period, be cut off from the advantages of Lodge intercourse and instruction. The spirit of the fraternity languishes and dies when thus deprived of its proper aliment. But no advantage is to be purchased at the expense of a wrong.

“If the proposed dispensation can be fairly considered an invasion of the jurisdiction of the

Grand Lodge of Virginia, I am inclined to think it ought to be refused; but can it be so considered, if the Grand Lodge of that state has practically and voluntarily repudiated her jurisdiction over all the loyal portion of her territory, and left the fraternity there without the means of Masonic intercourse or discipline, and destitute of Masonic government? Does not that part of her domaine revert to the condition of a territory in which no Grand Lodge has ever been established, and in which, therefore, the dispensations of any Grand Lodge are valid until a proper local Grand Lodge has been organized?”

After a short recess of the Grand Lodge the following resolution was offered by PGM George C. Whiting:

Resolved, That when the petition of Bro. Theodore G. Palmer, and others, for a dispensation to open and hold a new Lodge in the city of Alexandria, VA., under the name and style of “Union Lodge, U.D.,” shall be presented to the Most Worshipful Grand Master, with such a certificate of ability, good and moral standing, as is required by the 20th article of the Constitution of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, the Most Worshipful Grand Master be advised to issue a dispensation, constituting Bro. Theodore M. Palmer, W.M., Bro. George W. Knabb, S.W., and Bro. E.H. Delahay, J.W. – the same to be returnable to this Grand Lodge at its annual meeting in November next.

The resolution was referred to a committee for examination and report to the Grand Lodge at an early day. On February 15th, 1862 the Grand Lodge again met to consider the appeal for dispensation. At that time the Grand Master said:

“When I convened you to ask your advice on this subject my mind was not made up as to what course it would be proper for me to pursue in regard to it; but, the more I reflect upon it, the more I am convinced that duty to the petitioning brethren should decide us to grant their prayer as soon as they make their petition conform to the requirements of our Constitution. I will state, as briefly as I can, some of the principal reasons which influence me to this judgment.

“It will not be gainsaid that for a Grand Lodge to grant warrants of constitution for Lodges outside its geographical jurisdiction is not, necessarily, an act of usurpation. These are cases in which it is universally admitted to be proper, as in the case of California, before cited, anterior to the organization of its Grand Lodge. In order to make the grant of a warrant of constitution improper, it must invade the jurisdiction of a Grand Lodge which is in the actual exercise of Masonic authority over the territory when such warrant goes into operation. In Masonry, as in civil life, we have to recognize facts as they are. The government *de facto* is that which we must respect; and the government that cannot be found – that can neither grant privileges, afford protection, nor punish offenders, is as if it were not, in Masonic, as well as civil, contemplation.

“This Grand Lodge originally held jurisdiction over the Masons of Alexandria. It never formally resigned it, but tacitly admitted that it was transferred to the Grand Lodge of Virginia by act of the Federal Government in retro ceding that portion of the District of Columbia to the state of Virginia. What, then, is it which regulates our status in regard to that portion of the District? Evidently, the action of the Federal Government. The act of the Federal Government brought that territory under our jurisdiction in the first place. Its act took it away from us, and its act can restore it. The condition of that territory, Masonically, is regulated by the status accorded to it by the Federal Government. That this has been so, in the past, cannot be denied.

“Now the Federal Government does not acknowledge, at the present time, the jurisdiction of the disloyal government of Virginia over that state. On the contrary, it recognizes another government, loyal to itself, and quite exceptional, irregular and provisional, in its stead. If the recognition of the Federal Government is our guide, ought we to recognize the jurisdiction of a disloyal Grand Lodge any more than the Federal Government recognizes a disloyal state government?

“Is then, the Grand Lodge of Virginia loyal or disloyal? I think there is not a member of this body who believes she is loyal. At all events, her

exercise of jurisdiction is actually and practically confined to the disloyal part of the State. If disloyal, we are not bound to respect her jurisdiction. If loyal, and her authority is suspended, by circumstances beyond her control, over a part of her jurisdiction, she ought, if she has the true spirit of Masonry, to be grateful to any Grand Lodge that will step in and do her duty for her during a temporary and unavoidable disability. Such an act is really one of comity and friendship, not of aggression.

“I regard, then, that part of Virginia which is cut off from communication with the Grand Lodge, as a territory fairly open to any and all Grand Lodges, as much so as if it had never enjoyed any Masonic privileges. Should these unhappy national differences be composed, and Virginia resume her former place in this great and glorious Union, her Grand Lodge will be restored to her authority over all forces within her geographical limits. The temporary warrant will be resigned to her, and her right of jurisdiction acknowledged by the fraternity here and elsewhere.

“I have no desire to enlarge the limits of the authority of this jurisdiction. I am influenced solely by a desire that no Mason who desires to enjoy the privileges of our Order shall be debarred from doing so by reason of not being able to gain access to the proper fountain of Masonic authority; and, especially, I may add, on account of his fidelity to his country, and to the most sacred obligations of personal and Masonic honor.

“These are my views, hastily thrown together. I give them as a member of this body. Having called you together to ask your advice, I shall be governed by it, whether it accord with my own opinion or not.

Letter received from P.G.M. B.B. French

The Grand Master’s remarks were followed by the reading of a letter received from Past Grand Master Benjamin B. French. In this letter, French reviewed the principles underlying Grand Lodge authority and made the following observations:

“From your address (i.e., the Grand Master’s), I learn that the Grand Lodge of Virginia forbids those working under its jurisdiction to recognize or hold Masonic intercourse with Masons who adhere to their allegiance to the Union. No more high-handed, outrageous, unmasonic proceeding could be had. Just as well might any Grand Lodge in America attempt to prevent Masonic intercourse with Masons in Europe, and thus deprive Freemasonry of its most social, useful, and benevolent feature. Such things cannot be permitted by *The Great Body of Masonry*, and it is the sacred duty of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, at this Capital of the Union, and nearest to Virginia, to take the initiative in rebuking so internal a Masonic heresy. Are we to fold our arms, and stand by and see our true brethren in Virginia thus trodden in the dust by the heel of political despotism, in the garb, but without the soul, of Freemasonry? I trust not. We must help them – we must step boldly forward and afford them aid to enjoy their inalienable rights and privileges, until madness ceases to rule those who now control the Grand Lodge of Virginia.

“I had doubts until I ascertained precisely the action of that Grand Lodge. Those doubts are now removed, and I do not hesitate one moment to counsel the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia to authorize the Grand Master to issue dispensations to loyal and worthy brethren anywhere in Virginia to open Lodges and proceed to work, until the Grand Lodge of Virginia shall return to the principles of Free Masonry, and assume her legitimate sphere among the Grand Lodges of the Union, and, I may say, of the world.”

The Grand Lodge, after the failure of several legislative proposals pertaining to the issue, authorized the Grand Master to issue a dispensation to form Union Lodge, which was done. That dispensation was issued, the Grand Master declared, because “it appears that there is no Masonic Lodge now open and working in said city, wherein Masonic brethren can meet for Masonic intercourse and instruction, and the enjoyment of their Masonic privileges, and that these petitioners are cut off from all communication with the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of the State of Virginia, to whom they might otherwise apply for a dispensation or charter.”

The Grand Master in his report to the semiannual communication of the Grand Lodge again spoke to this issue. At that time he reported that on the 22d of February, he had issued a dispensation to Theodore M. Palmer, as W.M., George W. Knabb, S.W., and E.H. Delahay, J.W. of a Lodge in Alexandria that would be known as Union Lodge. He said that the dispensation was issued because “it appears that there is no Masonic Lodge now open and working in such city, wherein Masonic brethren can meet for Masonic intercourse and instruction, and the enjoyment of their Masonic privileges, and that these petitioners are cut off from all communication with the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of the State of Virginia, to whom they might otherwise apply for a dispensation or petition.”

The names of the stationed officers are recorded in the membership files of the Grand Lodge of D.C. In each instance, however, the membership card, which indicates the man’s office in Union Lodge, states that the previous Masonic history of the individual is not known.

The Grand Master continued as follows: “An attempt has been made to represent this as an act unfriendly to the Grand Lodge of Virginia and an invasion of her territory. I did not so intend it, nor do I so regard it. If the Grand Lodge of Virginia has the interests of Masonry at heart — universal Masonry I mean — her first desire must be that all Masons, everywhere, should have the means of enjoying their Masonic privileges and rights. In her own jurisdiction she will see that ample provision is made for that purpose. Beyond it, she must sympathize with any and all movements tending to the same object. If, from any cause beyond her control, she is prevented from extending protection and government to those who, under ordinary circumstances, are subject to her authority, she ought to deem it an act of truest friendship in any who will, during her disability, step in and do her duty for her, without denying any part of her rightful power or jurisdiction.

If I, as the nearest relative, neighbor or friend of a man suddenly stricken with paralysis, undertake to protect his family, and guard his interests, until his return to consciousness and vigor, the judgment must be perverse indeed that could only see in such

an act an unfriendly and injurious invasion of my neighbor's authority. The illustration is exactly in point. We do not pretend to any territorial rights in Virginia. The moment she resumes active control of the fraternity in Alexandria, our dispensation will be surrendered to her Grand Lodge, and a charter applied for from the normal and legitimate source of Masonic authority within her boundaries. In a communication received a few days ago from Bro. Palmer, he requests that the dispensation may be continued, in view of the possibility of the formation of a new Grand Lodge of Virginia, and of the extension of the boundaries of the District of Columbia to their old limits. I recommend that Union Lodge be continued under dispensation.”

The recommendation of the Grand Master was acted on favorably by the Grand Lodge, which in due time learned that the facts on which the dispensation had been issued were erroneous. Hence, on December 27, 1864, the dispensation was withdrawn, and the Grand Lodge immediately took such steps as were necessary to make amends to the Grand Lodge of Virginia and to resolve any problems that might arise therefrom amicably and in the best interest of both Grand Lodges. From that time forward until this very day the Grand Lodge of Virginia and the Grand Lodge of D.C. have worked together in peace and harmony. This labor, in the interest of Masonry universal, was capped, perhaps, in 1975, when the Grand Lodges, in recognition of their interdependence, recreated an arrangement that had prevailed from 1793 to 1846, whereby both Grand Lodges enjoy a modicum of jurisdiction over candidates in a significant part of Northern Virginia.

