

George Washington's Masonic Career

By

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Under the Prestonian system, being used at that time, Washington was a Mason, and could attend all meetings, as all business was conducted in the first degree at that time, (which is another story). It was not until March 3, 1753 he received the Fellowcraft Degree, and not until August 4, 1753 was he made a Master Mason.

The Question of Washington’s Royal Arch Membership

The next question that may be asked is, “Was Washington a Royal Arch Mason?” Technically, he was. However, he was not a Royal Arch Mason as we recognize the degree today due to the changes in the ritual since that time. On December 22, 1753, four months after Washington was raised to the degree of Master Mason, Fredericksburg Lodge conferred the Royal Arch Degree, under the authority of its warrant. This is the earliest record known of the conferral of the Royal Arch Degree. However, there were references to the Holy Royal Arch Degree as early as March 11, 1745. Although there is no record, it is possible that it may have been conferred in Fredericksburg prior the December 22, 1753 recorded date. According to the records of Fredericksburg Lodge, the entire membership were to receive the degree as a blanket degree for all members. Hence, there was no need to list the names of the entire membership.

If further evidence is needed, Brother C. C. Hunt, Chairman of the Research Lodge Committee, mentions the circle on Washington’s apron, now owned by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, which displays the letters, “H.T.W.W.W.T.K.S.”, and within the circle is a beehive which indicates the mark selected by Washington, a most appropriate selection.

I would also add at this point that the Watson-Cassoul Apron, on display in the George Washington Masonic National Memorial, also displays Royal Arch and Mark Master’s symbols upon it.

At this point, the question may be raised, “Was Washington a Mark Master?” Permit me to quote from the research of Brother Bemish, a member of the Grand Lodge of New Jersey. “The Lodge now

possesses a copy of a Bible which has records of the West family, which is now in the Officers’ Mess at Newsby, on which is engraved, ‘On this Sacred Volume, Washington received a degree in Masonry’”. The 46th was in winter quarters in Philadelphia at that time. Tradition and the general opinion say it must have been the Mark Master Degree that was being conferred at that time. The Mark Degree was being conferred in and around Philadelphia at that time. Also, it was in 1777, at the time of the truce, when Lodges were opened and visited by Masons from both sides of the line, an event not commonly known.

The Question of Washington’s Honorary Membership

At this point, the question may be raised, “Was Washington an Honorary Member?” In the early days of Masonry, there was no such thing as an Honorary Membership. In the Constitution of Masonry, it states, “There shall not be any honors in Masonry.” There was no mention of Honorary Mason or Member in the early rules and regulations, so where did it begin? Since Washington was not mentioned in the beginning, I will return later to that part of his career after providing this background.

This story begins in the mid-1700s. Among the members of Unity Lodge in Massachusetts, there was a Medical Doctor, named Griffith, who was well liked by the Brother and considered a well qualified Doctor by his peers. In fact, he was offered a post in a New York hospital and, with mixed emotions, decided to take the position.

After he had settled in New York, Dr. Griffith attended Lodge, and later became a member of Lodge No. 169, Ancient York Masons. The years passed and everything was running smoothly until the Grand Session of 1780 at which time a visitor, Brother James Swann, Esquire, of Unity Lodge, recognized Dr. Griffith and questioned his presence, stating that Dr. Griffith had been dropped from Unity Lodge for non payment of dues.

This was very embarrassing to everyone, and especially to the two Grand Jurisdictions of Massachusetts and New York. Dr. Griffith admitted that what Brother Swann had said was true, but it

was his understanding that when he left Massachusetts, he was a free agent to join a Lodge in New York. Dr. Griffith had explained his early Masonic membership and background to the members of Lodge 169, Ancient York Masons, and they voted him into membership. When the two Grand Lodges met on the problem, because Dr. Griffith was so well liked, it was decided that Unity Lodge should make Dr. Griffith an Honorary Member and free of any further dues. This made Dr. Griffith the first known Honorary Member or Mason in this country.

We now return to George Washington's Honorary Membership. On June 24, 1784, George Washington participated in the St. John's Day Observance held by Alexandria Lodge No. 39. At that time the Lodge held a Warrant from the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. It was during the course of this meeting, while at refreshments, that the members agreed to make Washington an Honorary Member of their Lodge No. 39. We will never know how or when Alexandria Lodge No. 39 heard of Honorary Member or if they just decided to do it. Later that evening, the Lodge voted and elected George Washington an Honorary Member with all rights and benefits.

Historically, this made George Washington the second Honorary Member in the States and the first in Virginia. This action taken by Alexandria Lodge No. 39 also set a precedent for the future in Virginia Masonry though at the time, Alexandria Lodge No. 39 was still under the jurisdiction of Pennsylvania. (I will pick up this story later on.)

The Question of Washington as Grand Master

Next, we are questioned on Washington being Grand Master. Visitors to the George Washington Masonic National Memorial from all over the country continue to say and believe that George Washington was the first Grand Master of Masons in Virginia. Strange as it may seem, it is very difficult to convince these Masons that he was not, without hurting their feelings. Thus, through necessity, I was determined to find out how that story got started.

Virginia was the first of the Colonial States to form their own Grand Lodge. To begin the search, it was

necessary to go to the proceedings of the establishment of the Grand Lodge of Virginia. I therefore take the following quotes and material from the minutes of Williamsburg Lodge, and the letters and proceedings of those early meetings. Although I have, and have made copies of, those early records, to save time, I will just skip to the important points of the story.

By a quick scan of the minutes, we arrive at the point where James Kemp read into the minutes the following, "Peyton Randolph 1721 – 1775".

Acknowledged and referred to as Grand Master on the Treasurer's books of the Lodge held in Crown's Tavern in 1762, Peyton Randolph was first Master of Crown Point Tavern Lodge under the English charter of 1773. Minutes referred to Randolph as Provincial Grand Master of Virginia. At the death of Randolph, October 22, 1775, while attending the Continental Congress, the Office of Provincial Grand Master became vacant.

Due to the strong feelings against the Crown at that time, no replacement Provincial Grand Master appointment was requested. I read from the minutes of Williamsburg Lodge December 3, 1776: "...On a motion made, Resolved that the Master of this Lodge be directed to write to all the regular Lodges in this state requesting their attendance by their deputies at this Lodge in order to choose a Grand Master for the state of Virginia on the first day next assembled. William Waddell, W.M."

At this point, to save time, I again skip to the meeting held June 23, 1777 which is the first mention of George Washington as Grand Master. This Convention was unanimously in favor of dispatching letters to each of the Lodges in Virginia, requesting each Lodge to consider the name of the proper person to be elected Grand Master. This Convention recommended that they consider His Excellency General George Washington to fill the office of Grand Master.

Skipping to the business meeting of October 13, 1778 in which the Committee appointed to wait on General George Washington as directed, extending the nomination of Grand Master of Masons in Virginia, reported: "General Washington was most gracious in receiving us into his busy schedule and expressed pleasant surprise at being offered so

honorable and distinguished a position. However, on reflection, the General was unable to accept the honor. His first reason being he felt unqualified for the office as he had never served as Master of a Lodge; his second reason being the pressures and obligations as General of the Continental Army had to take precedence over all other duties and he would be unable to fulfill the obligations of Grand Master.”

Now, my Brothers, that is what happened, so why do so many Masons still insist and believe Washington to be the first Grand Master? I now have finally discovered the answer. Oddly, the jewel worn by the Grand Masters of Virginia was designed and partially engraved for Washington before they found out that Washington had declined the appointment, after which additional engraving was added. All these years, the Grand Masters of Virginia have been traveling all over wearing this jewel and showing it off and letting Brethren read the engraving on the back which reads, “Original jewel made in 1778 to be worn by George Washington as first Grand Master of Masons in Virginia. He declined the offer, being in command of the Army. It was therefore first worn by Gov. John Blair who was the first Grand Master.”

During the last 200 plus years, every Grand Master showed off the jewel. Lack of information, which they might not have known, led them to point out that the jewel was made for Washington and very few read past the first few lines.

The Question of Washington as General Grand Master

What next? Masons and their families from all over the country ask questions and make statements in error. We expect this and try to answer them but they are hard to convince of their errors. Some of the questions and statements such as: “Washington received the 33rd Degree.”; “Washington was a member of the Knights Templar.”; “Washington was elected General Grand Master.” we laugh off and treat as a joke.

But the question of Washington being elected General Grand Master of the United States bothered us in searching for the truth for, technically, this

could be answered “Yes AND no.” depending upon interpretation. This question caused me to research just what happened. I have copies of records from the proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania and the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts and copies are also in the George Washington Masonic National Memorial. I might say in truth, “Yes, George Washington was elected General Grand Master of Masons by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania.” But no, Washington never served as General Grand Master, nor was he ever requested to serve. I doubt if he ever knew of the election or suggestion of the office.

Letters were sent to other Grand Lodges explaining what they had done and asking for agreement. The only letter of reply that I found was from Massachusetts, dated September 4, 1780. I quote a section of that letter.

“...I laid the same before them and had some debate...It was agreed to adjourn the Grand Lodge for three weeks to give the proxies instructions and receiving their acquiescence in the approval...am well assured that no one can have any objections to so illustrious a person as Washington serving as General Grand Master. But at the same time it will be necessary to know from you his prerogatives as such, whether he is to appoint sub-grand or provincial Grand Masters of each state, ...”

I also have a copy of a letter from Trinity Lodge, Lancaster Massachusetts dated September 19, 1780 which, unfortunately was widely misinterpreted. It reads in part,

“... we would beg leave to offer such objections as appear just, consistent with the constitutions of ancient masonry – not that we would mean to suggest that his Excellency, General Washington, is not fit in every manner for the Office of G. Master, and deserving of every Honour, but we do conceive that the grand Lodge of Philadelphia had no right to make choice of G. Master without previous consultations in the other lodges of America and on full consideration it appears to us to be a dangerous innovation.”

This letter was widely misinterpreted as an objection to Washington’s qualifications by those who read

only the part that said, “General Washington is not fit in every manner for the Office of G. Master.” It appears the appointment by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania was not accepted by the other Grand Lodges. Yet, a medal was struck in 1797, having on one side Washington in military dress, with the legend, “G. Washington, President 1797” and, on the reverse side, the emblems of Masonry surrounded by the letters “G.W.G.G.M.” Thus, my Brethren, this may be argued, pro and con, yes and no, something to tease the mind. However, when asked if George Washington was ever General Grand Master, we say, “No.” If you agree with us, please help us to stop the story.

The Question of Honorary Membership in Virginia

When the War was over and the Grand Lodge of Virginia in session, Alexandria Lodge No. 38, chartered under the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, on October 24, 1788, requested a charter from the Grand Lodge of Virginia. At this time, Washington consented to the use of his name as Master. The Grand Lodge of Virginia issued the Charter to Alexandria Lodge No. 22, holden under the Grand Lodge of Virginia, on April 28, 1788 naming George Washington as Charter Master. He served from April 28, 1788 until December 20, 1788, at which time he was re-elected for another full term. This action by the Grand Lodge of Virginia, accepting an Honorary Member of a Lodge as its Charter Master, established the principle of recognition of Virginia Honorary Members as having all the rights and benefits of membership and the requirement that all Virginia Lodges pay to Grand Lodge the per capita assessment for Honorary Members in the same manner as for regular members. That is why the Grand Lodge of Virginia is the only Grand Lodge to have this requirement.

