



Freemasonry
and the
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of the
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“200 Plus”

The United States Constitution and Freemasonry



1987-1988 marks the 200th anniversary of the signing and ratification of the Constitution of the United States of America.

Freemasons support the principles established in this great document . . . and pause to reflect on some of the events and the patriots responsible for the American Independence and the creation of the Constitution which guarantees freedom.

The complete story requires volumes. A few snapshots in time are illustrative.

Freemasonry

Modern Freemasonry began with the formation of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717. As English settlers came to the American colonies, they brought their Masonry with them.

A Masonic book, *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (originally printed in England in 1723) was reprinted in Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin in 1734 (the same year he became a Grand Master of Masons). It was the first Masonic book published in North America.

Freemasonry, then and now, includes men of virtually every religious belief. *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* declared that Masonry only obliged its members "to that religion in which all men agree, leaving their particular opinions to themselves."

Boston Tea Party

The British Parliament passed the Tea Act of 1773, and many colonists found the three penny tax levied by the Act objectionable. On December 16, 1773, a group of "Indians" boarded three ships and dumped 340 chests of tea into the Boston harbor.

While it has been frequently claimed that Paul Revere and other Masons of St. Andrews Lodge in Boston carried out this action, the record is not clear. The Lodge minutes for November 30, 1773 state "N.B. (no business) Consignees of tea took up the brethren's time." On December 16, only five members attended the Lodge meeting. At the bottom of the minutes of that meeting, some large flourishes have been claimed to resemble the letter "T" but the significance is illusory.



Tensions in the Colonies

Each colony had its own governor, but the English Crown controlled many of the daily activities of the colonists. Conflicts between the government and the people arose.

In 1761, a "Writ of Assistance" authorized the Crown to search any home or place of business for goods not purchased in England. James Otis, General Advocate of Massachusetts (who had become a Mason in St. John's Lodge in 1752), refused to enforce the Writ and resigned his position. He argued eloquently that the use of a general language Writ was contrary to the natural law. Otis is particularly remembered for the words, "Taxation without representation is tyranny."

Tensions cracked with the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770. Samuel Adams' oratory about the event inflamed the people, but it was the copies of engraving by Paul Revere (who later became the Grand Master of Masons in Massachusetts) that kept the event vivid in their memories.



First Continental Congress

On September 5, 1774, the First Continental Congress began its meetings. Peyton Randolph (a Master of the Lodge at Williamsburg, and the last Provincial Grand Master of Virginia) was its President. This Congress adopted resolutions to induce England to repeal a number of laws the Congress considered to be offensive.

Second Continental Congress

In April 1775, the British marched to Lexington and found a body of militia in their way. Shots were fired; eight Minute Men were killed; and the Redcoats marched on to Concord.

The Second Continental Congress met on May 10, 1775, the fighting at Lexington and Concord still vivid in their minds. Parliament had not responded to the olive branch resolutions of the First Continental Congress. Adding fuel to the fire, King George III had declared all colonists rebels; and war became certain. In June, 1775, George Washington (who was made a Master Mason in the Lodge at Fredericksburg in 1753) was unanimously elected Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army. He promptly set off for Boston, but arrived after the Battle of Bunker Hill had been fought.



Bunker Hill

In June 1775, the Americans attempted to fortify a hill near Boston. The Redcoats attacked, but the Americans held. The British attacked again, and the Americans continued to hold. At the third attack, the Patriots ran out of ammunition and the British prevailed. The American casualties were 441, but the British lost 1054. General Joseph Warren (Provincial Grand Master "for Boston and 100 miles thereabout"), fighting as a private and killed at the Battle of Bunker Hill, is generally regarded as the first man of distinction to lay down his life in the cause of American liberty.



Masonic Philosophy

The institution of Freemasonry did not promote the War for American Independence. Then and now, Masonic teachings specifically forbid all discussion of political matters within the lodge. Loyalty to the existing government is understood. While Masonry itself played no part in the War, Masons were conspicuous participants. Masonic principles of belief in God, practice of moral precepts and respect for the views of others were clearly present.

The natural rights philosophy of a "higher law" was essential to the thinking of the American patriots. They believed that individuals joined with each other to create government, surrendering certain individual rights for the benefit of all. However, the patriots believed that certain inalienable rights could not be surrendered, and the government was bound to protect these rights.

Declaration of Independence

This view of a "higher law" is evident in the opening paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence.

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776 by John Hancock, President of the Congress. When asked why he signed his name so boldly, he replied, "So that King George can read my signature without putting on his spectacles." John Hancock was made a Mason in Merchants Lodge No. 277 in Quebec in 1762, and he affiliated with St. Andrews Lodge in Boston that same year.

Eight of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence were Masons: Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, Joseph Hewes, William Hooper, Robert Treat Paine, Richard Stockton, George Walton and William Whipple. An additional 24 signers of the Declaration may (or may not) have been Masons, as the proof is not adequate.



Articles of Confederation

Congress completed the Articles of Confederation in November, 1777, but the document required that all 13 states ratify it before it became effective. Ratification did not occur until March, 1781. While the articles provided a plan of perpetual union and a firm league of friendship, the net result was a loose confederation of the several states. There was only one unit of government empowered to act: the Congress. There was no executive and no judicial branch. While people today are critical of the Articles of Confederation, the Articles were a step forward.

Constitution of the United States

In the hot summer of 1787, fifty-five deputies met in Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation. They debated and ultimately produced the Constitution of the United States. Twenty of the delegates are generally regarded as having been Freemasons. Of the thirty-nine who signed the document on September 17, 1787, thirteen were Masons. Others may also have been members of the fraternity.

George Washington and Benjamin Franklin were the best known and among the most highly regarded of the signers. Three served as the first Grand Master of Masons in their jurisdictions: Gunning Bedford, Jr. in Delaware, John Blair in Virginia and David Brearly in New Jersey. Other Masons who signed the Constitution were Jacob Broom of Delaware, Daniel Carroll of Maryland, Jonathan Dayton of New Jersey, John Dickinson of Delaware, Nicholas Gilman of New Hampshire, Rufus King of Massachusetts, James McHenry of Maryland and William Paterson of New Jersey.

While there was disagreement and ultimate compromise, the philosophical foundation upon which the Constitution was constructed is consistent with the philosophy of Freemasonry. Reflect upon the Preamble:

We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessing of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish . . .

The Constitution of the United States of America is a document of which Freemasons are justly proud.



The Constitution That Almost Wasn't



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As we prepare for the opening of the celebration of the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution on September 17, 1987, it is time to look back. Now, 200 years later, it is all too easy to take the Constitution for granted — indeed, most of us do so. We assume that, given our war for independence, the Constitution was somehow inevitable. In reality, however, the creation and ratification of the Constitution were the culmination of a chain of events that began years before the delegates met in Philadelphia. It was, indeed, a product of untiring efforts by patriotic and farsighted individuals — some of the leaders were Masons — laboring against seemingly insurmountable odds posed by regional and ideological conflicts. George Washington, a Mason and foremost among our Founding Fathers, called the Constitution a “miracle.”

We cannot appreciate what an extraordinary accomplishment the Constitution represented without some understanding of the historical setting in which it arose, and particularly of the weaknesses of the Confederation which preceded it. As we know, the Thirteen Colonies considered themselves separate, independent, sovereign states after the American revolution. During the war, they had entered into what they called a “firm league” or alliance under the Articles of Confederation. In many respects, the Articles read like a multilateral treaty among independent nations, reflecting the jealousies among the Thirteen States over their sovereignty. Article II, for example, stated:

The said states hereby severally enter a firm league of friendship with each other . . .

Nothing more than a "firm league of friendship" to carry on a war against a great world power!

The terrible privations, the needless deaths from starvation and freezing that Washington's troops suffered at Valley Forge, only a few miles from where the Constitutional Convention later met, attest to the weakness of the government under the Confederation. Given the lack of a strong central authority to levy and collect taxes and raise armies, it is a wonder the Revolution was successful, and therefore that there was any occasion to convene the Constitutional Convention. Fortunately, George Washington's indomitable strength of character made up for some of the flaws of the Confederation.

The weakness of the Confederation not only dictated Washington's military strategy of trying to keep his ragged armies of amateur soldiers on the move, but also helped shape his political philosophy and that of some of his officers. They came to see that for some purposes a strong central government was imperative. John Marshall, another Mason, was a young lieutenant with Washington at Valley Forge during that terrible winter. His views on the need for a strong national authority later led him to fight for ratification of the Constitution in his native Virginia, then found their way into opinions of the Supreme Court when he became Chief Justice. Alexander Hamilton, also one of Washington's officers, saw that if the payment of taxes by the people and by the states was voluntary, there never would be a nation in the true sense. He said that what was needed was not the kind of structure that appealed to "the narrow colonial sphere in which we have become accustomed to move," but rather an "enlarged kind suited to the government of an independent nation."

Thus, Washington, Marshall and Hamilton, along with Madison, James Wilson, and many others, knew that the loose government under the Articles of Confederation was what might be called today a "paper tiger." To continue that structure would not only inhibit development of the new Nation and encourage the parochial rivalries and conflicts that had almost led to disaster during the Revolution; it would also tempt the great powers to exploit the states' lack of unity.

But convincing the states of the need for a stronger central government was no easy task in 1787 and 1788. In the 18th century and, indeed well into the 19th, many people thought of themselves as Virginians or New Yorkers first and Americans second. The men of Massachusetts Bay, for example, regarded themselves as allies — *allies* of other states. And it is recorded that during the Revolution, when New Jersey troops reporting for duty at Valley Forge were asked to swear allegiance to the United States, the soldiers declined, saying, "New Jersey is our country."

This ambiguity of allegiances did not vanish with the ratification of the Constitution. It is illustrated by an episode that occurred 74 years after the Constitutional Convention in another critical period of our history. In 1861, after the fall of Fort Sumter and with war seemingly imminent, President Lincoln offered to Robert E. Lee the command of the Union Army. Lee, then a career colonel in the United States Army, hated slavery, loved the Union, and was distressed at the idea of its dissolution. But he was so much a product of the age of his father, "Lighthorse" Harry Lee, one of George Washington's generals, that he rejected Lincoln's offer. He resigned from the Army and abandoned his beautiful

home overlooking the Potomac and the city of Washington, fully aware his property would be confiscated by the government in the event of war. Lee then went to Richmond — 120 miles south — to offer his services for the defense of Virginia — not for the support of secession, not for the defense of slavery, not for the dissolution of the Union, but simply for the defense of his native state. This episode has helped me understand the enormous difficulty of persuading the Americans of the Thirteen Original States to think of creating a federal union with a constitution binding them together as a true nation.

Quite aside from their loyalty to their own states, the American people in 1787 had a great fear of central governments stemming from the fact that they had fought a revolution to escape from the distant, strong, insensitive central government in London. This fear was reflected in the action of the Continental Congress when it met in New York early in 1787 to consider convening the Constitutional Convention. Washington, Hamilton, Madison, and others had worked tirelessly to persuade their countrymen of the need for a true constitutional convention. Madison and Hamilton persuaded the 1786 Annapolis convention to invite the states to send delegates to such a convention in Philadelphia in the spring of 1787, and had finally succeeded in getting the Continental Congress to consider the issue, but it refused to fully endorse the idea. Its resolution was explicit: The meeting was to be called "for the *sole* and express purpose of *revising* the Articles of Confederation." There was no hint of drafting a new Constitution.

Congress' limited mandate, however, was the least of the problems Washington and other advocates of a strong central government would encounter at Philadelphia. The first obstacle was convincing the 55 delegates, representing 12 states — Rhode Island sent no one — that the states needed to surrender some authority and sovereignty to a new, unknown, and as yet undefined national government. Governor Edmund Randolph of Virginia, a dedicated Mason, seized the initiative at the beginning of the convention by proposing the so-called Virginia Plan for a strong national government. Under Randolph's plan, the government would consist of a legislative, executive, and judicial branch. The national legislature would be given broad powers both to pass laws and to invalidate state laws found to be in conflict with the national constitution. Many of the delegates initially found the proposal too radical. Before long, however, most had agreed to the broad outlines of the plan. Once agreement was reached on that point, it was clear the convention would do much more than merely "revise" the Articles of Confederation.

The next major obstacle was finding a method of electing the national legislature that would be acceptable to both the small and the large states. The large states — Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts — wanted representation based solely on population. The smaller states, understandably fearful that such an arrangement would limit their voices in the new government, wanted each state to have equal representation. The Convention almost disbanded several times over this issue. Feelings were tense, utterances occasionally harsh. Finally, a Committee on Compromise was selected with 81-year-old Benjamin Franklin — another Mason — at the head. This committee proposed what we know as The Great Compromise: proportional representation in one house of Congress, equal representation in the other. Franklin's wisdom had averted disaster.

On the last day of the Convention, before any of the delegates had signed the Constitution, Franklin made his final conciliatory speech:

Mr. President, I confess that there are several parts of this Constitution which I do not at present approve, but I am not sure I shall never approve them: For having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better information or fuller consideration to change opinions, even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment, and to pay more respect to the judgment of others . . .

I cannot help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention who may still have objections to it, would with me, on this occasion, doubt a little of his own infallibility — and to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument.

Franklin's speech no doubt persuaded many of the hesitating delegates. All but 3 of the 39 delegates remaining in Philadelphia then signed the Constitution.

After all the drama of the Philadelphia Convention, the Constitution still had to run the gauntlet of the states' ratification processes. The Constitution encountered such stiff opposition that the vote was uncomfortably close in several important states: 187 to 168 in Massachusetts, 57 to 47 in New Hampshire, 30 to 27 in New York. Two states, North Carolina and Rhode Island, actually rejected the Constitution, but later ratified it after all the other states had done so.

The Virginia ratification convention, which extended over a three-week period, was perhaps the most dramatic and certainly one of the most important. Popular and articulate heroes like Patrick Henry strongly opposed the Constitution. But Patrick Henry's oratory was countered by the calm, analytical logic of James Madison and John Marshall, then a 33-year-old Virginia lawyer. They were backed by George Washington, James Monroe — another Mason — and other leading Virginians. Yet when the vote was called on the final day, it was 89 to ratify and 79 opposed. Just think of it — a margin of only 10 votes when Washington, Madison, Marshall and Monroe were for it! Without Virginia's ratification, there may not have been a Constitution — at least at that time.

Today, as the opening of the Bicentennial — on September 17, 1987, approaches, we face a challenge not wholly unlike that faced by the Founders: instilling in the hearts and minds of all Americans a deeper appreciation for and a keener understanding of our Constitution and the principles on which it is based. Our success depends on the willingness of patriotic Americans to press Bicentennial programs in their own communities. We must come to see that in 1787 "we the people" began something entirely new in the history of governments.

I salute the members of the Scottish Rite for the efforts you have already made. I invite all Americans to follow in the tradition of patriotism and service exemplified by Washington, Franklin, and Marshall, and to join with our Commission in meeting this important challenge.

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