

Freemasons At Yorktown

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October 19, 1981 marks the 200th Anniversary of the surrender at Yorktown, officially ending the American Revolutionary War. This Short Talk Bulletin is the last of a series commemorating the American Bicentennial. We express sincere thanks to Brother Case for this summary of Masonic activity in and around Yorktown.

The settlement at Jamestown, Virginia in 1607, located on the James River, proved to be only a point of departure from which the firstcomers soon moved to better port facilities from which to ship products of their expanding agriculture. In 1781 only two houses remained at Jamestown, standing on the eroding riverbank.

Across the Peninsula, and nearer the open sea, Yorktown was pioneered at an early date, and the county seat located there in 1638. In 1680 it was named as one of 19 ports designated for trade and customs control, indicating that places on the James, Rappahannock and Potomac rivers were used considerably. Large scale planters typically had their own wharfs for direct export of tobacco and grain.

Freemasonry appeared in Virginia about 1730 at Norfolk, at Fredericksburg in 1750 and soon after at Port Royal, Petersburg, Hobbs Hole and Hampton. Traders from Britain, factors, sea-captains and sojourners are presumed to have held occasional lodges according to ancient usage, from which regularly chartered lodges naturally followed.

In 1755 the Golden Age of the settlement at Yorktown was losing its luster. The little town, on a cliff overlooking an arm of the Chesapeake Bay, was still the county seat, although already surpassed in commercial importance by other ports of entry and export. The population and productive enterprise were moving away from the depleted soil in tidewater territory.

Across the street from the Court House was the Swan Tavern, where a Masonic lodge was meeting on the 1st and 3rd Wednesdays under warrant from the Grand Lodge at London, dated August 1, 1755. The "constitutional fee" had been paid, and the lodge was kept on Grand Lodge rolls, with changes in numeration, until the Union of 1813, when the list was purged at organization of the United Grand Lodge of England. The lodge had never made any returns, there is no record of its representation at London, and there is no correspondence on file in the Grand Secretary's archives.

Neither is the name of any of the seven petitioners for the lodge "in York Towne, Virginia" under the number 205 known to us, much less is there any account of what they may have done, aside from their regular meetings, if they were continued. One account states that the lodge lapsed before the Grand Lodge of Virginia was organized at nearby Williamsburg in 1777. There were enough Masons in town to have continued or renewed some sort of existence, as on February 22, 1780 a charter was granted by the Grand Lodge of Virginia to a lodge at Yorktown with the number 9, the first lodge to be added to the constituent lodges. It had not been represented at the two earlier Grand Lodge conventions. We know the name of the Master, as the record shows that \$500 was contributed to the Grand Lodge Fund for Charitable purposes on behalf of the lodge by Rt. Wors. Thomse Wyld, Jr.

In 1781 Yorktown was a settlement of about 60 houses with a few hundred inhabitants, when Cornwallis was ordered by the British High Command to move his troops there in anticipation of an early waterborne evacuation. But delay in his relief and intervention of the French fleet left him stranded. The location was accessible for rescue by water but untenable for defense without control of approach from the sea.

Lafayette and his Light Infantry division had been sent south during the winter of 1780 to impede the advance of Cornwallis from the Carolinas into Virginia, a great arsenal and storehouse of warlike munitions. Wayne and a division of Pennsylvania Continentals were sent to reinforce Lafayette. The American forces maneuvered so as to contain the British within the peninsula and under such pressure, Cornwallis concentrated his command at Yorktown and began to fortify the place with a triple ring of earthworks. Lafayette called for help from the Commander-in-Chief.

Meanwhile, in early August, Washington received intelligence that de Grasse with a French fleet, and several thousand troops in convoy, was headed for the Chesapeake, and the threat of investiture of New York City was abandoned. A large part of the Main Army was moved across the Hudson, and, along with 6000 French soldiers under Rochambeau, was far away on an overland hike to Virginia before any effective move could be made by the British in New York City to stop the movement. The allied regulars, reinforced by Virginia militia, closed in on Yorktown and Gloucester, across the river. Siege works were opened on the sixth of October and heavy artillery emplaced, the undertaking ending when the British surrendered on October 19, 1781. The French fleet had blockaded the river, had landed 3000 infantry, and they played a crucial role in the final victory. The order of battle included 4000 militia. Honors for success of the Yorktown campaign must be distributed among many, without detracting from the glory merited by Washington as the grand strategist and commander-in-chief.

Returns of personnel under command of Cornwallis showed 5600 Red Coats, 3000 Hessians, 2000 Loyalists and 1800 negroes, the latter being laborers and servants. Among the British units penned up in Yorktown were detachments of the following regiments: 17th, 23rd, 33rd, 43rd,

71st, 76th, and 80th, several of which, at different times, are known to have had lodges among the officers.

No lodge could find a place to congregate, much less do any work, under conditions existing in Yorktown under siege, with 15,000 humans compressed within the tightening defense works. The Hessians had no lodges until later and then in the POW enclosure at Charlottesville, and in the final few months of the occupation of New York City.

None of the units of the Allied army investing the town had a lodge among their officers, and none existed in the Light Infantry detached for service under Lafayette. In fact, their detachment deprived the army lodges of the young Junior officers who were the most active in lodge work. Records of American Union show a gap in the minutes about that time. The lodges warranted under Pennsylvania were destined for service in the southern department, or on the way south.

No contemporary diarist or chronicler of the events at Yorktown give any hint of Masonic activity during the advance, during the investment and siege, or following the surrender.

We know that immediately following the surrender, Brigadier General O'Hara, who delivered Cornwallis' sword to Major General Lincoln, was entertained by Washington at table. This was protocol of the times and common courtesy. O'Hara gave no evidence of chagrin, in fact was "quite sociable and entirely at ease." That night Washington and his staff were occupied with preparation of dispatches to Congress, to enlarge upon the simple statement carried by mounted courier that "Cornwallis is taken! "

The next day was one of jubilation and several of the general officers kept open house. Some of the French officers recorded that when they rose from the table they went to call on Cornwallis who the day before was reported ill. Conditions in the town were "pestilential." On Sunday there were special services of worship and thanksgiving by the several brigade chaplains. On Monday, British POWs were marched off to detention areas at Frederick, Maryland and Winchester, Virginia. On Tuesday the 22nd, Cornwallis, who had been confined to his quarters by an attack of humiliation, was sufficiently recovered to be a dinner guest of Washington, along with the senior officers of all three armies. This magnanimous gesture by the victor was not expected to be returned by the vanquished.

Meanwhile, the Continentals were again on the march, Wayne leading his divisions southward to reinforce General Nathaniel Greene, the units of the Main Army hurrying back to the Hudson Highlands. The French remained at Williamsburg for clean-up operations, staying there for the winter and well into 1782. At least one lodge was held at Williamsburg among the French officers, for many of whom there was no hesitation on account of their religion.

Yorktown never recovered from the devastation of the occupation and siege of 1781, being additionally handicapped by the flight from the worn-out soils of the Peninsula, and the shift of production to the westward.

Obviously, Yorktown Lodge No. 9 was forced out of town when the British moved to the area in August, 1781, but a few of the faithful must have returned and found a place to meet somewhere in the ruins. We don't know from the record, as John Dove, longtime Grand Secretary, states that the Grand Lodge did not meet in 1781, '82 or '83. It resumed meetings in 1784 at Richmond, now the capitol of the state, but Yorktown Lodge was represented only by proxy. In 1786 the lodge was reported to have "shut their doors," but intended to resume labor when certain "obstacles" were removed. We are kept in the dark concerning what may have happened, as the lodge was conditionally "suspended" and nothing further is known about Masonry in Yorktown until 1817. Then the doors were opened upon the petition of several Brothers "to revive the labors" and the lodge recovered briefly, paying insurance on the Court House where it met. It went dark again in 1823, was declared dormant in 1826, and dropped from the rolls in 1832. For the next half century, the population of the town did not exceed a few hundred in number, not sufficient to form or support a lodge.

Meanwhile, during the War of 1812-14, British raiders had been sent into the Chesapeake Bay under orders to "destroy and lay waste such towns and districts upon the coast as may be found assailable." Yorktown was among the places visited. The Court House was burned along with other buildings, before the fleet moved up the Bay against the capitol city of Washington, which was burned, and Baltimore where the fort resisted under a Star Spangled Banner that flew through the night.

On February 22, 1850, Past Grand Master Robert S. Scott, orator when the cornerstone of an equestrian statue of Washington was being placed at Richmond, let his exuberance get the best of him, and by one statement originated a tale which has lost nothing in the retelling. He is quoted as saying " ... in Yorktown was Lodge No. 9, where, after the siege was ended, Washington, Lafayette, Marshall and Nelson came together and by their union bore abiding testimony to the beautiful tenets of Masonry." Ten years later, in his book entitled "Washington and His Masonic Compeers," Sydney Hayden quoted the statement with the comment that he had been "unable to verify the actual occurrence." William Moseley Brown, historian of Freemasonry in Virginia, called it "one of the weirdest sentences in the whole of Masonic literature."

Since there is no corroboration, there is no point to guessing why the orator picked only a few names, as those were well known to all Virginians and Masons, who were proud of them. Imagine any lodge meeting where the Commander-in-Chief was to be present that would not have attracted every Mason off duty at the time! At Philadelphia on St. John's Day in December, 1778, more than 300 Masons were in the procession to church. At West Point on St. John's Day in June, 1779, when Washington was guest of honor at an outdoor meeting in the Colonnade, 107 Masons 'paid their club'. At the meeting of American Union Lodge at Morristown on St. John's Day in December, 1779, more than 100 of the Craft crowded into the tavern where the meeting was held, and a frugal collation served.

A bi-centennial brochure titled a "Primer of Freemasonry in Yorktown 1755-1955" was written by Albert W. Banton, Jr. In anticipation of the 175th anniversary of the siege, he had identified more than 100 known Masons who were there. Aside from the general officers, there were many other of lesser military rank who afterwards advanced to positions of leadership in the Fraternity. The initial fable has often been repeated and elaborated, one writer going so far as to include Cornwallis in attendance! Reginald V. Harris, historian of Freemasonry in Nova Scotia, sought diligently for some evidence, but could never satisfy himself that Charles Cornwallis was a Mason.

Over a span of 30 years preceding the Civil War, Yorktown changed but little. When the Federal government resorted to forceful measures against the seceding states, an attempt was made to advance up the Peninsula against Richmond. An army under McClelland began to move in April, 1862 and again disaster and destruction was the lot of Yorktown village which was an anchor in the line of defense by the Confederates. The string of earthworks held for only two weeks before they were abandoned. The area became a supply base throughout the rest of the war. Then the town fell back into a drowsy routine after a decade of reconstruction and recovery.

Virginia Freemasonry made another of its great displays before the public on October 18, 1881 when the Grand Lodge laid the cornerstone of the Centennial Monument at Yorktown. Although Congress had authorized such a memorial years before, just after victory was achieved, it was not until a century had passed that the public memory was awakened. A joint Congressional Committee on the Yorktown Centennial Celebration had been appointed, and they requested the Grand Lodge of Virginia to participate in the program by conducting appropriate ceremonies as the foundation was laid.

Grand Master Peyton S. Cole issued an appeal for a large attendance, admitting the site was "remote and inaccessible. " More than 1000 Masons responded and took part in the grand procession under escort of Knights Templar. A tent city had been set up for visiting Masons and the military units which were assembled for the affair. Carriages were collected from wide and near to bring passengers from the railroad stations, several miles distant. The river was crowded with paddle-wheel steamers which in those days provided the most convenient way to reach the village, in fact ran into hundreds of landings all through Tidewater and up the Chesapeake. Grand Masters of the 13 original states had a part in the ceremonies, as did delegates from many other jurisdictions.

President and Brother James A. Garfield had accepted an invitation to attend, but an assassin's bullet caused his death on September 19th, and President Chester A. Arthur appeared instead. Garfield was eulogized as "a brilliant orator, an able, knowing and daring man. "

The Grand Master wore the Washington apron and sash loaned by Alexander Washington Lodge; he sat in the Botetourt chair loaned by the lodge at Williamsburg; he used a silver trowel

presented by his own lodge, Widows Son of Charlottesville; he wielded a gavel fashioned from the timbers of the Lake Erie flagship of Commodore Perry, which had been used at the battle monument at Monmouth and at Cleopatra's Needle in Central Park, New York City. The demonstration had public notice in every newspaper and magazine in the Nation.

Quiet returned to Yorktown for another few decades, until World War I brought thousands of military personnel, ship yard workers, and supporting services to the lower Peninsula. With a railroad spur and hard surfaced roads over which automobiles and trucks rolled into town, Yorktown was no longer remote and inaccessible. Now a center of military and social activity, the natural consequence was the revival of Masonic interest.

After a few years of informal gatherings, a Masonic Club was organized in 1924 from which a petition to the Grand Lodge of Virginia resulted in the issuance of a charter to Yorktown Lodge No. 353, dated February 11, 1925. The number 9 had been lost by reassignment long before, the number 353 was changed to number 205 in 1956, but numbers do not matter.

No longer meeting in a tavern, or in makeshift quarters, and after the trials, tribulations and vicissitudes of 225 years, the Lodge at Yorktown built a home of its own in 1936. Today it sits in a town literally risen from dust and ashes, one which in 1981 will be the focus of nationwide attention, this time on TV.

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