

House Reunited

By: Allen E. Roberts

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This STB is an excerpt from his new book by the same title. House Reunited. Please see page 8 for ordering instructions. – Editor

The merciful role Freemasonry was to play during the bitter years of reconstruction started on the day Confederate General Robert E. Lee was; forced to evacuate the trenches in front of Petersburg, Virginia. Union General Godfrey Weitzel, a Freemason, marched his troops into Richmond, Virginia, the Confederate capital, and immediately eased the minds of the inhabitants.

The General ordered his troops to fight the fires which had been set by the fleeing Confederates; Federal soldiers were used to subdue the rioting and looting mobs; the homes of women whose husbands were fighting with Southern troops had guards placed about them. Most important of all, Weitzel, on his own initiative, ordered food rushed to the starving city.

Major A.H. Stevens, General Weitzel's provost marshal, a member of Putnam Lodge in Massachusetts, placed Union soldiers about Masons; Hall, the home of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, (today, the oldest Masonic building in the country) to save it from looting and destruction by the unruly mobs. He went even further and used his men to protect the homes of many Richmond Freemasons.

The charitable acts of the Freemasons who captured the capital city of the Confederacy were talked about throughout the South. They helped soothe the pangs of surrender and undoubtedly caused many Southerners to cease fighting earlier than would have been the case if the inhabitants of Richmond had been treated brutally.

The Army of Northern Virginia, under the command of General Robert E. Lee, surrendered on April 9, 1865, at Appomattox Court House. On the 10th, Lee bid his command a sorrowful farewell and left for his home in Richmond. Ulysses S. Grant, the Union commander, left for

Washington, leaving behind the Freemasons from Maine, General Joshua L. Chamberlain, to accept the surrender of the Confederate forces. Chamberlain turned what could have been humiliation for the Southerners into something they could recall with pride. As the Confederate soldiers marched to stack their weapons, the general ordered his men to give the conquered soldiers a full military salute!

Chamberlain's brotherly act, a Masonic trait, was remembered and talked about wherever the former soldiers of Lee's army traveled. The South learned there were men who were not vindictive, but were ready to lend a helping hand whenever possible.

Unfortunately, there were men who could not and would not forgive the citizens of the states that had seceded from the union of states. There were many who believed the states of the former Confederacy should be punished. A War had been fought on the principle that no state had the lawful right to withdraw from the Union. But when the war ended, many of those who had proclaimed that principle refused to let the seceding states return to their former status.

Abraham Lincoln, before his cowardly murder, made it clear that he believed the best course for the Federal Government to follow should be one of moderation.

Prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1861 Andrew Johnson (now president) sought to prevent a "civil" war.

In spite of the efforts of Johnson and many other Freemasons, in and out of Congress, some of the Southern states seceded. The way was paved for the outbreak of civil war. And throughout the Civil War, Freemasonry did its best to ease the pangs of hatred and misery. When the war ended it was Masonry and individual Freemasons who appeared to work the hardest to reunite the un-united states; to make the period of readjustment one of restoration rather than the "reconstruction" it turned out to be.

While the politicians, most of the newspapers in the country, and many clergymen were laying the groundwork that would give the country a decade of anti-masonic bitterness, Grand Lodges and Grand Chapters throughout the United States were asking for a cessation of all hostilities. The words of William F. Jefferys of the Grand Chapter of New Jersey are typical: "Freemasonry has now to perform its great mission in this country which is to 'spread the cement of Brotherly Love and Union.' We believe there is a Divine Providence in the fact that our Order is at this time so powerful and numerous, for its influence in the present crisis must prove most salutary."

Albert G. Mackey, General Grand High Priest, told his companions, Freemasonry had done "more than any other organization of men towards ameliorating the horrors and inhumanity of war." He went on to add "But although there is no longer a battle of arms, dissensions still exist. Bitter feeling is not altogether allayed./ Some men will remember the past with revengeful or unforgiving thought." He called upon Freemasonry to beseech men to "lay aside all bitter animosity, to remember that they have a common language... It is our duty when hatred lingers in the land to seek to overcome that hatred with love.

The Grand Master of Masons in Georgia, John Harris, called upon his members to "meliorate the condition of our fellow-men, to relieve the distressed and needy, to wipe away the widow's tears support the orphan and relieve the distressed from want and destitution."

It was a large order Harris was asking his members to undertake. the Grand Lodge of Georgia was almost bankrupt, as were all the Masonic bodies in the former Confederate States. Their bonds were worthless; many of their farms and homes had been destroyed; money was practically non-existent, and there were few ways to earn a living. The majority of the Grand and Subordinate Lodges reported zero balances in their bank accounts.

But Freemasonry proved its universality. The more prosperous Northern and Western Lodges sent money and supplies to the Freemasons of the South; and they were happy to help. C W Nash, Grand Master in Minnesota, reported the dire need of Freemasons in the south. He asked his members to aid them and concluded with; "in the spirit of Masonry, forgive the errors of the past, remembering that to forget is noble, to forgive is divine; that indiscretion in them should not destroy humanity in us." Those present contributed \$2,292.65

Such acts of kindness did more than will ever be known to eventually cement the country together again. The thanks expressed by the Grand Master of Alabama, Wilson Williams typical of what the South had to say. He reminded his; members that when the war had ended they were powerless to aid the needy, but "the voice of cheer" from Northern Masons brightened their lives. "They bid us welcome to their hearts and give of their substance to relieve our necessities... By it the gulf of strife is bridged over, and we enter a land of peace and harmony."

Masonic acts were helping to ease the bitter pangs of war, but political acts were keeping the sections apart. The shooting war had ended; a new war, a war of words, had taken its place. Referring to those who did not want the Southern States returned to the Union, President Johnson stated: "Before our brave men have scarcely returned to their homes to renew the ties of affection and love, we find ourselves almost in the midst of another rebellion."

Freemasonry was to have an uphill battle during the decade of reconstruction. Could it win by patiently practicing its tenets and teachings'?

We have reason to be thankful that our lives and health have been spared amid the chances and changes of these of the stormy period it has been our lot to witness, and for the generally increasing harmony and prosperity which seem to prevail throughout the nation. And here I feel again justified in referring to our beloved institution, by saying that to Freemasonry the people of the Country are indebted for many mitigations of the sufferings caused by the direful passions of war.

Gen. John W. Geary Governor of Pennsylvania

House Reunited by Allen Roberts is available through The Masonic Service Association 8120 Fenton St Silver Spring MD 20910-4785 Cost: \$3.50 each (PPD)

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