

Some Masonic Misconceptions

By Allen E. Roberts

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He has contributed a great deal to the Masonic Service Association both in writing and service.

The following article will contain statements of fact that will go against popular belief. But, in the interest of truth and accuracy, we as Masons, must tell our story correctly. – Editor

As with any organization that dates back to antiquity, Freemasonry has "inherited" numerous myths. Some of these have been "invented" and perpetuated by Masonic writers; others have been concocted by critics and opponents of the Craft.

The Masonic Service Association has from its inception attempted to seek out and spread only the truth about Freemasonry. This is an attempt to fulfill a part of the goal of the MSA.

Freemasonry has taught its valuable philosophical lessons through allegory and symbols. Anecdotes are used by historians and speakers to illustrate important points. These help in the search for truth in an interesting and factual manner.

On the other hand, myths can be dangerous. They can be outrageous lies. They can be disguised as truth. Once told they can be perpetuated for centuries. Some have been used in an attempt to enhance the image of Freemasonry. Yet the truth about Masonry needs no elaboration.

Millions of great men have been, or are, Freemasons. There have been many great men who were not members of the Craft. Among the latter, are some whom well-meaning writers claim were Masons, such as Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and Patrick Henry. These men were not Freemasons, but the myths are still prevalent.

Nothing in the writings by, or about, Patrick Henry show that he was ever a member of the Craft.

Thomas Jefferson did participate in the laying of the cornerstone of his university in Charlottesville. Freemasons did conduct the ceremony with the approval of the six Visitors of Central College (as it was then named). Among these Visitors was Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson

participated as a Visitor – not as a Master Mason. A thorough search of Jefferson's papers reveals no indication that he was ever a Freemason.

"The Petition," a famous painting by the world-renowned artist John Ward Dunsmore, depicts Alexander Hamilton as one of these in attendance in American Union Lodge. Hamilton was not a Mason. There were several other non-Masons pictured. Dunsmore, using his "license as an artist," started a myth that continues to this day.

American Union Lodge was not a myth, however. It was chartered by Connecticut and still exists as American Union Lodge No. 1 at Marietta, Ohio. It was the famous Military Lodge George Washington attended on several occasions. "The Petition" portrays the dozens of Revolutionary War Masons (and some non-Masons) who were present on December 27, 1779 when the Lodge met in Arnold's Tavern, Morristown, New Jersey. Those present agreed with the petition of General Mordecai Gist that there should be a General Grand Lodge for the United States. And they unanimously selected Washington to become the General Grand Master.

Although some agreed with this concept, it went no further. Over the years there have been other unsuccessful attempts to form a National Grand Lodge, however, each United States Grand Lodge remains sovereign.

Well-meaning Masonic speakers and leaders have told us over the years that all of George Washington's generals were Freemasons. Stories still persist that claim Washington wouldn't make Lafayette a general until he had become a Mason.

The late James R. Case and Ronald E. Heaton, through publications of the MSA, corrected the story of the generals as Masons. During the War for American Independence, thirty-three generals were Freemasons, a long way from being "all."

The Marquis de Lafayette, although a teenager when he came to America to fight for the cause of freedom, was already a Freemason. It is not known, even though they were almost as close as father and son, that Washington and Lafayette ever discussed Freemasonry.

The Baron von Steuben was also a Freemason when he joined Washington. But there have been those who claimed it wasn't until he became a Mason that Washington made him a general. Actually the Commander-in-Chief needed von Steuben's expertise. Masonry played no known part in his selection to train the American troops.

A Masonic myth that won't go away concerns "The Boston Tea Party" and St. Andrew's Lodge of Massachusetts. True, the Lodge didn't meet on the night "Indians" turned Boston harbor into a giant tea pot. It's also true the minutes ended with a scroll, a symbol that by no stretch of the imagination can be considered a "T." And in spite of claims here and there by descendants, not a single participant has ever been identified. Now – that's secrecy!

Speaking of secrecy, I've been taken to task (not often politely) for claiming Freemasonry is not a secret society. I further claim there are no secrets in Freemasonry. A secret society is one that no one knows exists; whose members are unknown. In countries practicing freedom, Masonic buildings are clearly marked; members can openly wear the universal Square and Compasses to identify them as Freemasons.

However, the critics of Freemasonry grab everything available that condemns this organization or Brotherhood. They can find these exposes in any large book store. The "secrets" of the Craft, often distorted, are their's for the reading. Television now makes the ritual of the Craft available, even for the uneducated.

For several years there has been no excuse for anyone to claim all the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Masons. Through publications of the MSA authored by Ronald E. Heaton this and other claims were proven not true. Here's the truth: ten signers of the Articles of Confederation; nine signers of the Declaration of Independence; thirteen signers of the Constitution were, or would become, Freemasons. There doesn't need to be any exaggeration; this is an excellent percentage of the participants.

Edmund Randolph, Grand Master of Masons in Virginia, did not sign the Constitution. He did, however, fight for its adoption in Virginia. Without his support it is doubtful that the opposition of Patrick Henry could have been overcome.

It's interesting to note that one important item of this period has never surfaced as a myth or fact. Four presidents of the Continental Congresses were Freemasons. Peyton Randolph of Virginia was the first. Then came John Hancock of Massachusetts, Henry Laurens of South Carolina, and Arthur St. Clair of Pennsylvania.

Another myth that surfaces periodically tells us that the thirteen governors of the original colonies were Freemasons when Washington was inaugurated President. Not so. From the Battle of Lexington until 1789, thirty different men served as governors. Ten of these were Freemasons! That's a long way from all, but it's one-third. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could claim the same percentage today?

One more myth concerning George Washington should be set to rest, then we'll conclude. Washington never was a Grand Master. He was, however, the Master of a Lodge, although there is no evidence that he ever presided as such.

Alexandria Lodge No. 39 of Pennsylvania asked the Grand Lodge of Virginia for a new charter. Washington was an Honorary Member of this Lodge. When Grand Master Edmund Randolph signed the Virginia charter, Washington's name appeared in the place where the Master's normally would. This made him the charter Master. The following December Washington, while President of the United States, was elected Master. Although he was never installed he did become a Past Master of Alexandria Lodge No. 22.

To keep the record straight about Washington and Freemasonry take into account his civic activities. These left little time for fraternalism. Also take into account the love and respect displayed by his fellowmen. Finally ask yourself: Would the widow of a man who didn't love Freemasonry have requested a Masonic funeral?

Let's stop perpetuating myths and exaggerations about Freemasonry. This oldest, largest and greatest fraternal organization needs no embellishment. It has stood the test of time and adversity.

Let's simply tell the truth. Freemasonry is an organization of men who are taught to put into practice the Brotherhood of Man under the Fatherhood of God. When truthfully implemented can there be any greater purpose for Freemasonry's existence?

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