

Freemasonry in Winchester During the Civil War

Jeffrey G. Burcham

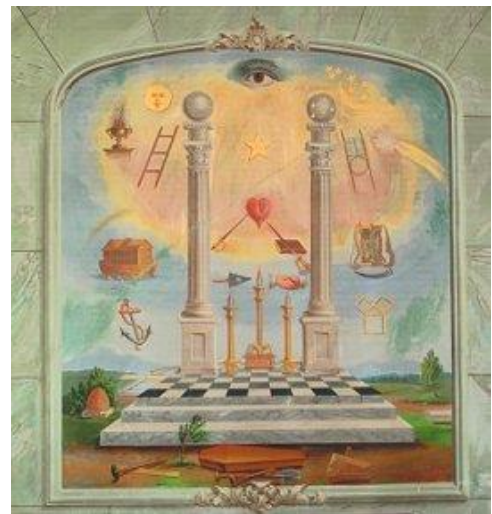
Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

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Editor's Note: Sprinkled throughout this paper are images of the frescoes painted by Mr. Ango, as described in the final paragraphs, and were not part of the original presentation.

"Freemasonry, notwithstanding, has still survived."

This phrase from the Middle Chamber Lecture of the Fellowcraft Degree can be said to summarize the experience of Winchester Hiram Lodge No. 21, A.F. & A.M. during the "War of Northern Aggression" (also known as the Civil War or the War Between the States). The Lodge suffered many privations during the War, including the loss of its meeting facility and much of its property. And yet, despite these tribulations, Winchester Freemasonry not only survived but toward the end of hostilities reaped substantial benefits, largely in consequence of the Federal occupation, which enabled the Brethren to erect the beautiful Masonic Temple in which the Lodge meets today.



Masonic Symbols

In order to more fully appreciate the history of Freemasonry in Winchester during the Civil War, it is necessary to briefly review the situation of the town and the Lodge immediately preceding the "late unpleasantness."

Antebellum Winchester was a thriving business community. Situated at the northern end of the Shenandoah Valley, it served as an important transportation center for goods and

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people, having access to road, river and rail. Mills, factories, crops and livestock abounded in the area, producing vast quantities of industrial products and foodstuffs, and earning the Shenandoah Valley its appellation as "the breadbasket of the Confederacy."

Strategically, the Valley held great value to both the Union and the Confederacy. The South coveted the Valley as a point of requisition for men and materiel; the North desired to control the Valley in consequence of its geographical situation which could be likened to a dagger aimed at the heart of the Union. In order to parry this menace, the Federals recognized the need to wrest the Valley from the Rebels. Winchester, as the "gateway to the Shenandoah Valley," quickly assumed great military significance to the warring principals.

Previous to the War, Winchester Hiram Lodge had enjoyed many years of growth and prosperity. Originally known as "Winchester Lodge No. 12, A.Y.M. ("Ancient York Masons"), organized Freemasonry had existed in Winchester since October 1, 1768, when a group of local Masons were granted a Warrant from the Provincial Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, sitting at Philadelphia. It was the first Masonic Lodge established West of



George Washington

the Blue Ridge Mountains, and the first Lodge in Virginia to be designated by number. Winchester Lodge was chartered ten years prior to the formation of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, and is believed to be the first Lodge to propose George Washington as Grand Master of Masons in Virginia. The Winchester Brethren subsequently accepted a second charter from the regular Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania in 1795, and remained loyal to the Pennsylvania authority until 1807, when the Lodge finally accepted a Virginia charter and designated "Winchester Hiram Lodge No. 21, A.F. & A.M."

The eruption of armed conflict and the secession of Virginia from the Union in April, 1861 had little immediate impact on Winchester Hiram Lodge, and the minutes do not mention

the impending war. One week following the bombing of Fort Sumter, however, the minutes reflect that a district convention scheduled to be held later that same year had been "indefinitely postponed." Although the Secretary provided no reason for this action, it is probably safe to assume that the decision to postpone the meeting was made in contemplation of the War and in consequence of the general call to arms throughout the neighborhood.

Winchester was fortunate in that it was initially spared the devastations of war. General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson was assigned command of the "Department of the Shenandoah" in October, 1861, and secured the region from immediate Federal invasion. During this time, the Lodge continued to meet more or less regularly.

Because of the comparative quiet which initially pervaded the Valley, the Lodge minutes contain few references to the War. There are, however, certain entries and incidents recorded by the Secretary which indicate that all was not normal. For instance, a Special Communication was called on July 17, 1861 for the purpose of attending the funeral of Lieutenant William Patten, a member of Lodge No. 67 at Lexington, Virginia, and an officer in the "Rockbridge Grays" who was doubtless encamped in the area. At the next meeting held on October 1, 1861, Brother John Bell Tilden Reed, a Chaplain in the Confederate Army and one of the Lodge's most venerated members, was elected and installed as Worshipful Master. Not surprisingly, Brother Reed, who first served as Master of Winchester Hiram Lodge in 1833, was one of its oldest members, since most the younger Brethren were either already under arms or preparing to join in the fracas. Upon receiving his command, Stonewall Jackson moved his forces into Winchester and the surrounding neighborhood. Shortly thereafter, in December, 1861, the Lodge passed the following resolution:

"Resolved, That the Lodge hold its meetings weekly during the sojourn of the Army in our midst; and that at each of these meetings, the Master and other qualified Brothers be selected to exemplify and lecture in the several degrees of Masonry."

Clearly, the Brethren encountered little or no interference from the occupying Confederate forces, and from the number of visitors listed in the minutes it can be fairly surmised that the resolution was successful in encouraging sojourning Confederate Masons to join the local Brethren in dispensing the Light of Masonry.

Unfortunately, the good times were short-lived. The February 1862 Stated Communication was canceled for want of a quorum, and on March 12, 1862, Union forces under the command of General N. P. Banks seized the town of Winchester. The citizenry was overtaken by a general panic and it was widely rumored that the Yankees would pillage the city and put it to the torch. These fears were not realized, however, and despite the natural tension which invariably exists between an occupation army and the



Four Cardinal Virtues

indigenous population, the Union soldiers demonstrated considerable restraint. Indeed, the only recorded "atrocities" committed by Federal troops involved the burning of "Selma," the residence of Senator James Mason, and the razing of the Winchester Medical College, which was ordered by General Banks in retaliation for certain indignities allegedly occasioned by certain students who, in 1859, spirited away the remains of one of John Brown's sons, Owen, who was killed during the raid on Harpers Ferry. According to local historians, the body was found lying near the railroad tracks by some medical students, and had been transported to the College for use as a cadaver. Interestingly, the remains were not found upon search of the College, and many believe they still reside somewhere in Winchester, carefully stored in a long-forgotten trunk in somebody's attic!

In consequence of the widespread military activity throughout the lower Shenandoah Valley, and particularly around the town of Winchester, the Lodge remained dark until April 20, 1863, when it suddenly resumed labor. Ten Brethren attended the

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Communication, including one from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and one from Sharpsburg, Maryland (which was the site of the bloodiest battle of the Civil War). What made this meeting especially remarkable was that it was apparently held with the consent of General R. H. Milroy, who then commanded the Union forces in occupation of the city!

The Lodge resumed labor somewhere on Loudoun Street, since its rooms at the Market House had been appropriated for military purposes. Apparently, the new facilities were not entirely satisfactory, as the Secretary noted that a committee was appointed to provide better lighting for the Lodge room. Doubtless, however, the Brethren were happy to meet again, and the following resolutions, passed unanimously at the initial Communication held during this time, evidence the eagerness with which they embarked on this period of renewed activity:

"Resolved, That we hail all Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons in regular standing as Brothers and that the members be authorized to invite any such to visit any future meetings of the Lodge ...

"Resolved, That, until further order, the regular communications of this Lodge shall be held on every Tuesday and Friday night."

Thirty meetings were held by Winchester Hiram Lodge between April 20, 1863 and June 12, 1863, during which time the Brethren conferred 23 Entered Apprentice and Fellowcraft degrees, and 25 Master Mason degrees, mostly upon Union soldiers. The total funds collected therefrom amounted to \$445.00. Additionally, the minutes reflect that the Lodge was presented with a handsome copy of the Holy Bible by Brother J. R. McDonald, a resident of Columbia City, Indiana and a Virginia native. Also interesting was the notation contained in the May 25, 1863 minutes, in which it was reported that Worshipful Brother Reed was voted an honorarium "for his zeal in carrying on Lodge work under very trying circumstances."

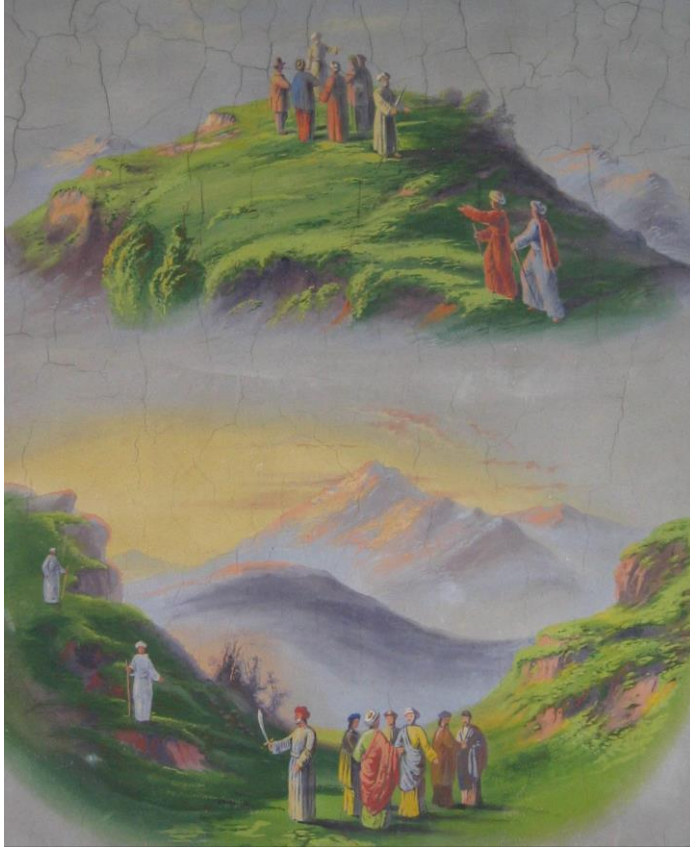
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The brief flurry of activity was suddenly interrupted when, on June 14, 1863, Confederate forces under the command of General Richard S. Ewell recaptured the town. It was not until October, 1864, when Federal troops under the command of General Phillip H. Sheridan repulsed a Rebel assault at the Battle of Cedar Creek, that Winchester was finally relieved of the terrible conflict which continued to rage between North and South, and which had laid waste and destroyed much of the region.

In late October, 1864, Brother Edwin S. Brent returned to Winchester. Brother Brent was a bookkeeper at the local Bank of the Valley of Virginia who had escaped to Baltimore, Maryland with the Bank's records and cash in 1862 in order to prevent their capture and destruction by Union troops. During his sojourn, Brother Brent became acquainted with Montgomery Blair, who served as Postmaster General in President Lincoln's cabinet. This acquaintance eventually proved to be of great assistance to the Lodge.

Upon returning to Winchester, Brother Brent sought permission to reopen Winchester Hiram Lodge. This proved to be a difficult task, however, as it required the approval of General Sheridan. By way of background, it should be noted that Sheridan was a most temperamental man who governed the Winchester area with an iron fist. Naturally suspicious of organizations which met behind closed doors, Brother Brent later stated that the General was particularly hostile toward the Masons, whom he regarded with great disdain because of his "political affiliations and his membership in the Catholic Church."

Brother Brent was initially rebuffed when he tried to see General Sheridan, who remained in seclusion at his headquarters in the Logan House on North Braddock Street. Learning that Sheridan required letters of introduction from his visitors, Brother Brent requested and received the same from his acquaintance, Montgomery Blair. The letter soon arrived, and Brothers Brent and George Legg, the Lodge Secretary, were granted an audience with the General. Sheridan received these two Brothers in the northeast room of his headquarters, surrounded by aides and orderlies. To nobody's surprise, the meeting



Hills and Vales

commenced very poorly. The General impatiently heard their request, then summarily refused to grant permission to reopen the Lodge. As luck would have it, however, Dr. C. H. Allen, a surgeon on General Sheridan's staff and a Past Master of Aurora Lodge in Vermont, interceded in behalf of the Brethren. Brother Allen espoused the cause of Masonry, noting that the fraternal bonds which existed between members of the Craft might alleviate tension between the townsfolk and the occupying forces. Masons on both sides would be afforded an opportunity to mingle in a peaceful and harmonious setting.

Furthermore, in order to allay the General's concerns, Brother Allen volunteered to attend every meeting to ensure against seditious activity. Persuaded by these arguments, and impressed by the sincerity of Dr. Allen, Sheridan relented and granted permission, albeit reluctantly, to reopen the Lodge. For his part, Worshipful Brother Allen attended the meetings as promised, and never once had occasion to report that the trust reposed in his Winchester Brethren had been violated in any way.

Winchester Hiram Lodge resumed labor on November 28, 1864, and embarked upon a period of unprecedented activity. By June 24, 1865, the Winchester Masons had raised 231 Master Masons, 207 of whom were Federal soldiers stationed in the area, including a young Captain from Poland, Ohio named William McKinley.

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Captain McKinley, who had been recently breveted to the rank of Major for distinguished service in the Third Battle of Winchester in September, 1864, was stationed near the town as part of the occupation forces. According to historians, McKinley, then just 25 years old, was visiting a field hospital one day when he notices a Union surgeon engaged in friendly conversation with some wounded Confederates. After witnessing the Yankee hand the Rebels some money, McKinley inquired the reason for this display of amiable intercourse, upon which he was informed that the gentlemen in question were Masons. William McKinley, it is said, was so favorably impressed by this demonstration of brotherly love and affection that he hastened to join such an organization whose bonds transcended even the enmity of war. The future 25th President of the United States was initiated, passed and raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason on May 1, 2, and 3, 1865 and, as was the custom of most of the Union soldiers who were made Masons in Winchester at that time, requested and was granted a demit. Interestingly, young Captain McKinley was raised by Worshipful Brother Reed, a Confederate Chaplain!

Brother McKinley later affiliated with Canton (Ohio) Lodge No. 60 in 1867, and became a charter member of Eagle Lodge No. 431 (now William McKinley Lodge No. 431) in Canton in 1869. Subsequently, he was exalted a Royal Arch Mason in 1883 and was created a Knight Templar in 1884.

On May 20, 1899, President McKinley traveled to Winchester and visited his "mother" Lodge. Although the Lodge was not opened for the purpose of officially receiving its most distinguished Brother, it was reported that he climbed the stairs to the Lodge room and stood near the Treasurer's desk to greet all who came to pay their respects. Before departing, Brother McKinley promised to revisit the Lodge again. Tragically, however, he was unable to fulfill his promise for at 4:07 o'clock p.m. on September 6, 1901, while standing in a receiving line in the Temple of Music at the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, New York, President McKinley was shot by an avowed anarchist named Leon Czolgosz. Brother McKinley languished for eight days before expiring from his wounds, thus becoming the third American President to die at the hands of an assassin.

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On May 1, 1965, the Grand Masters of Virginia and Ohio commemorated the initiation of William McKinley by unveiling a tablet identifying the location of the building where he was made a Mason. The tablet is attached to the south wall of the Dominion Bank building, and is but a short walk from the Winchester Masonic Temple. The Civil War wreaked terrible havoc upon the town of Winchester and its citizens. According to official records, six battles were fought within a five-mile radius of the town. Winchester had been occupied and evacuated 72 times during the course of the War, and had changed flags on 34 occasions, including four transfers in one day. The old Taylor Hotel, located directly across Loudoun Street from the Temple, once changed hands five times in a single day.

In and around the town, more than 200 houses had been completely destroyed, and many others had been damaged by combat or from use as hospitals, slaughterhouses, stables and the like. More than 80% of the personal property of the residents had disappeared and, according to a British visitor to the Valley in October, 1865, the area in and around Winchester resembled one vast moor, devoid of homes, barns and fences, and utterly cleared of forest and foliage.

Freemasonry in Winchester, however, not only survived the War but by the end of 1864, had begun to thrive. The income derived from the aforementioned degree work amounted to \$4,044.00, including \$40.00 in Virginia banknotes and \$60.00 in Confederate currency. By the end of 1865, the Brethren began discussing the possibility of constructing a building to permanently house the Lodge. Eventually, the Lodge purchased the Miller lot for \$3,520.00 and erected the Masonic Temple in which it meets today.



Time, Patience, and Perseverance

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The cornerstone was laid on May 29, 1867, after which the construction began in earnest. About the same time, the Brethren decided to have the Lodge room decorated with frescoes depicting scenes pertaining to the ritual. A committee was appointed and after some discussion, the services of a Mr. Ango were secured to perform the work. Little is known of Mr. Ango, who was "loaned" to the Lodge by the Peabody Institute of Baltimore, Maryland, and there is no evidence that he was a Mason. It is thought that he used a Masonic monitor to guide him in his work.

Most Worshipful William Moseley Brown, the author of Freemasonry in Winchester, Virginia, provided the following narrative in regard to the Lodge's dealings with the artist in question:

"He (Mr. Ango) was either so careless in the amount of time spent on the work or was so addicted to the use of intoxicants that the project required much longer time than was originally estimated. Finally, various members of the Lodge made it their business to escort the artist from his room each morning, see that he had breakfast and then reported to the Lodge room, locked him in the room, carried his noon meals to him there, and escorted him to supper and then to bed at night. It was only in this way that the work was finally completed after arrangements were made with Professor Knapp, of the Peabody Institute, to grant further time for this purpose. It is stated, that the artist in question was allowed a certain amount of liquid refreshment while he was actually at work, this being apparently necessary to furnish him with the requisite inspiration to enable him to carry on his labors."

The frescoes were completed in the summer of 1868 at a total cost of \$826.00 and have never been retouched. Because little natural light enters the room, the frescoes have retained much of their original color and perspective. They constitute one of the most unique collections to be found in the world and are truly priceless.



The Masonic Temple was dedicated on July 22, 1868, and Winchester Masons entered upon a period of peace and prosperity which continues today. The Lodge emerged from the War stronger and wealthier than at any previous time in its history and, despite the hardships attendant with those terrible times, the Brethren never lost sight of the brotherly love and affection which characterizes all good Masons. Accordingly, it can be said of Winchester Hiram Lodge No. 21, A.F. & A.M., that Freemasonry, notwithstanding, has still survived.

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