

# George Washington and the Virginia Conventions

Donald Maynard Robey, MPS

Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

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Since becoming a Mason I had often wondered why George Washington was not chosen as the first Grand Master of Masons in Virginia when the Grand Lodge was organized in 1777-78. When the Worshipful Master asked me to present a research paper in this Lodge, I knew that it had to address this subject which has concerned me for some time. I suppose that we each have a subject which we enjoy and would like to spend more time researching, but in the busy everyday world in which we all live, we tend to put off doing things until we are forced to do so by some motive.

When I originally asked why Washington was not selected as the first Grand Master, I was told that, at the time, he was not a Past Master of a Lodge and had refused to accept the office of Grand Master for that reason. As Masonry teaches by making comparisons with some physical object or historical allegory, I would like to now share with you some research I have done regarding where General Washington was during the several "Conventions", as they were known, which were held in Virginia prior to the formal organization of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, and to show why I believe he did not become our first Grand Master.

## THE INVITATIONS

I could not determine the exact date when all of the Lodges in Virginia were invited to attend the first Convention to be held, but we do know that it was early in 1777<sup>1</sup> when

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<sup>1</sup> William Mosely Brown, page 50, *Freemasonry in Virginia*, 1936

letters were sent to all of the Lodges that were then known to exist in Virginia by Williamsburg Lodge, calling for a Convention to consider the steps necessary to be taken in declaring Virginia's "Masonic" independence from the various Grand Jurisdictions under which they were then chartered. I believe that the Revolutionary War which was in progress at that time had a definite effect on the desires of the Freemasons of Virginia to organize the first independent Grand Lodge in America.

To begin our comparison of events we find early in 1777, on January 3rd to be exact<sup>2</sup>, General Washington, who only one month earlier had crossed the Delaware River on Christmas Eve to attack the British Army at Trenton, personally led the American Continental Army in a surprise attack against Lord Cornwallis's Army at Princeton, New Jersey. The Continental Army was successful in this engagement and drove the British troops from the field with losses by the British of 500 killed, wounded and captured due to this battle.

## THE FIRST CONVENTION

The first Convention to discuss the forming of a Grand Lodge in Virginia was held on May 6th, 1777. There were only five lodges represented at this meeting<sup>3</sup> and the only action they took was to appoint a committee, and I quote from the minutes of that meeting, "For drawing up reasons why a Grand Master should be chosen."

At the time this convention was being held, Washington was headquartered at Morristown, New Jersey<sup>4</sup>, deeply involved in plans to prevent General Howe's Army from taking the City of Philadelphia. The most significant parallel I find at this time in history is the fact that our Brother Benjamin Franklin was in Paris at the court of Louis the 16th,

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<sup>2</sup> Page 469, *Writings of Washington* (Vol. 6)

<sup>3</sup> Page 50, *Freemasonry in Virginia*

<sup>4</sup> Sawyer, page 522, *Washington* (Vol. 1)

presenting the cause of the American Republic with eloquent purpose. Already his pleading had won many influential friends for the struggling young nation across the Atlantic. He particularly inspired the young Marquis de Lafayette, who, at his own expense, in his own ship, and with a command of eleven well-born young men as chivalrous as himself - Baron John DeKalb among them - the Marquis de Lafayette sailed secretly from a Spanish port in the spring of 1777, prepared to give his life, if necessary, for the cause of freedom in America.

## THE SECOND CONVENTION

The second Convention of the Lodges was held just one week later on May 13th to hear the reasons from the Committee previously appointed, on why the Lodges of Virginia should choose a Grand Master and establish an Independent Grand Lodge. The reasons presented by the Committee were as follows<sup>5</sup>:

1. The divided and sub-divided authority then existing among the Lodges in Virginia.
2. The absence of any benefits coming from the appointment of Provincial Representatives by foreign Grand Masters.
3. The impossibility of appealing to the authorities beyond the sea for eliminating abuses and obtaining warrants for new Lodges under conditions then prevailing.
4. The precedent set by the Original Organization of the Grand Lodges of England, Ireland and Scotland, when they were founded, in declaring themselves, "As by mutual consent, separate from all foreign power whatever."

A resolution was adopted at this meeting to inform all of the Lodges of the reasons presented by the Committee and inviting them to attend another meeting on June 23, 1777, for the purpose of electing a Grand Master of Masons in Virginia.

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<sup>5</sup> Page 52, *Freemasonry in Virginia*

## THE THIRD CONVENTION

At the Convention on June 23rd it was resolved to recommend, and I quote directly from the minutes: "His Excellency, General George Washington as a proper person to fill the office of Grand Master<sup>6</sup>," but in case such an appointment of Nominal Grand Master was not made by June 1, 1778, the President of the Convention should issue a call for a final meeting to elect a Grand Master. The president of this convention held on June 23rd, 1777, was James Mercer, the Worshipful Master of Fredericksburg Lodge.

While this convention was being held on June 23rd at Williamsburg, Virginia<sup>7</sup>, we find General Washington with the Continental Army still headquartered at Morristown, New Jersey patiently watching General Howe's British troops in anticipation of their attempting to take over the city of Philadelphia.

At the first sign of movement by General Howe's Army towards Philadelphia, Washington struck camp at Morristown and centered his main force at Middlebrook, New Jersey, to oppose the British troops and prevent the taking of Philadelphia. General Howe, knowing that Washington had cut off his direct route to Philadelphia, sent eighteen thousand men by ships through the Chesapeake Bay to ultimately take possession of the City of Philadelphia on October 4, 1777, after many long engagements with various units of the Continental army during the summer and fall of that year.

During the long winter of 1777, when no "Conventions" were held in Virginia, we find the Continental Army in winter quarters at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, and as you all know, enduring the most severe hardships ever imposed on any American Army in the history

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<sup>6</sup> Page 53, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Page 293, *Writings of Washington* (Vol. 8)

of this country. On June 29th, 1778<sup>8</sup>, Washington's troops engaged the British troops at Monmouth Court House, New Jersey as they were in the process of evacuating the City of Philadelphia. General Charles Lee's Brigade was to attack the British from the rear of their line of march but due to some unknown reason the British force turned back the Continentals and had them in full retreat when General Washington's army met with them. Alexander Hamilton was one of Washington's personal aides at this time and was present with Washington during this battle and described it in detail in a letter dated July 5, 1778. I quote directly from this letter which is an excellent account of Washington's ability to rally the troops under him<sup>9</sup>:

I never saw the general to so such advantage, his coolness and firmness were admirable. He instantly took measures for checking the enemies advance and giving time to the army which was very near to form and make a proper disposition. He then rode back and had the troops formed on a very advantageous piece of ground. America owes a great deal to General Washington for this day's work. A general rout, dismay and disgrace would have attended the whole Army in any other hands but his. By his own good sense and fortitude he turned the fate of the day. Other officers have great merit in performing their parts well, but he directed the whole with the skill of a Master Workman. He did not hug himself at a distance and leave an "Arnold" to win the laurels for him, but by his own presence he brought order out of confusion, animated his troops and led them to success.

## THE FOURTH CONVENTION

The Fourth and final Convention of the Lodges of Virginia was held on October 13, 1778, at Williamsburg. This anniversary we now celebrate each year as "Founders Day." This meeting was recorded as having been held agreeably to an advertisement by Right Worshipful James Mercer, who later became Virginia's second Grand Master.

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<sup>8</sup> Page 130, *ibid.* (Vol. 12)

<sup>9</sup> Page 144, *ibid.* (Vol. 12)

The minutes of this very important meeting in the history of our Grand Lodge state, "It is the opinion of this convention that it is agreeable to the Constitutions of Masonry that all the regular Chartered Lodges within this state should be subject to the Grand Master of the said state."<sup>10</sup>

It's interesting to note that in the minutes of this meeting it shows that Colonel Warner Lewis, a Past Master of Botetourt Lodge was elected to the office of First Grand Master of Masons in Virginia but he declined to accept the office. I couldn't find any reasons given for his declining, but I did find some contention<sup>11</sup> on the part of Botetourt Lodge regarding these conventions to attempt to form a Grand Lodge in Virginia. Since Colonel Lewis declined the office, the minutes state: "The Right Worshipful John Blair, Past Master of the Williamsburg Lodge was nominated and unanimously elected as Grand Heater and was pleased to accept the office."

On October 13, 1778, General Washington was headquartered at Fredericksburg, New York.<sup>12</sup> Almost all of his letters at this time are concerned with the British ships located near New York and how the Continental troops were to be quartered during the winter of 1778. Just four days after this "Convention"<sup>13</sup> on October 17th, British General Burgoyne was defeated and captured by Washington's Army under General Schuyler at Saratoga, New York. "Benedict Arnold's mad dash against the British, contrary to orders, the summary removal of General Schuyler - who planned the campaign in every detail - and the appointment of General Gates to succeed him were the salient features of the Saratoga battle that kept gossiping tongues wagging long afterward."

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<sup>10</sup> Page 54, *Freemasonry in Virginia*

<sup>11</sup> Page 55, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Page 72, *Writings of Washington* (Vol. 13)

<sup>13</sup> Page 541, *Washington* (Vol. 1)

## THE INSTALLATION

October 30th, 1778 was selected as the date for the ceremony of the installation of the newly elected Grand Master and his officers. On that date occurred one of the most notable Masonic occasions in the history of Virginia Freemasonry. I could find no record to prove what building the meeting was held in, but many feel that it was probably in the historic "Apollo Tavern" in Williamsburg.

This meeting was marked by probably the largest gathering of Freemasons ever held in the Commonwealth up to that time. Forty-Nine Brethren were in attendance to see Right Worshipful John Blair installed as the First "Grand Master of Masons in Virginia."<sup>14</sup> The proceedings of this installation show that "Rev. James M. Fontaine of Boutetourt (sic) Lodge" was installed as the first "Junior Grand Warden" of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, rather than "Grand Junior Warden" as the office is known today in Virginia.

## RESULTS OF RESEARCH

I am of the opinion after reading everything available to me concerning Washington's whereabouts and all of the letters he wrote and received during the time our Grand Lodge was being organized, that he was never personally requested to be the first Grand Master of Masons in Virginia, by letter or otherwise. I base my opinion on many reasons:

1. I believe the delegates were merely trying to establish a level of quality in their statement in the minutes of the June 23rd meeting concerning Washington "as a proper person to fill the office of Grand Master."<sup>15</sup>
2. William Mosley Brown, in "Freemasonry in Virginia" states that "the suggestion, that he accept the office of Grand Master, was communicated to Washington."<sup>16</sup>  
If Washington had received a letter from the Secretary of the Convention or any

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<sup>14</sup> Page 57, *Freemasonry in Virginia*

<sup>15</sup> Page 53, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Page 53, *ibid.*

Mason in Virginia concerning this subject, he surely would have responded in some fashion. All during this time he wrote hundreds of letters but no mention of any such letter or response is included in any records.

3. The minutes of the October 13th meeting make no mention of any refusal by Washington to accept the office as they do with Warner Lewis declining to accept.
4. On October 30, 1778<sup>17</sup>, General Washington was still headquartered near Fredericksburg, New York, greatly concerned that the winter of 1777 not be repeated. He was mainly concerned "that the late crop of wheat in Virginia, below the Blue Ridge, has been almost generally destroyed by weavel." In another letter on this same date to John Parke Custis in Virginia, Washington gave directions on the disposition of crops for the year at Mt. Vernon and advised Custis: "We are yet in a state of suspense respecting the enemy's intentions of evacuating New York wholly, or in part; circumstances daily arising to justify one in the adoption of either opinion." This letter, among many others, proves that Washington was in constant contact by letter with his associates in Virginia and definitely could have been contacted concerning his accepting the office of Grand Master in Virginia.

## CONCLUSION

I must say that I have the greatest admiration for George Washington. If his circumstances had been different when the situation came to select the First Grand Master of Masons in Virginia, I'm certain it would have been a different story. The fact that he accepted the office of Worshipful Master of Alexandria Lodge No. 22 when it was chartered by the Grand Lodge of Virginia in 1788 is evidence of his concern for our fraternity and his willingness to be of service to it. I firmly believe that during the anti-Masonic period in the early 1800's the fact that the name of Washington was so closely associated with Masonry, was one of the principal reasons that kept our fraternity from being completely eliminated.

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<sup>17</sup> Page 182, *Writings of Washington* (Vol. 13)

As the great Carl Claudy said in 1932<sup>18</sup>:

"(Washington was) so obviously a man's man, a soldier, a statesman, a planter, a diplomat, a thinker of great thoughts of his government and his people. It is no wonder that the fraternal aide of life made to Washington a powerful appeal, no wonder that the ancient craft of Freemasonry should have become so interwoven with his life. But particularly is it natural, that a man who so loved his home, and whose religious feelings were so strong should turn to his lodge for that particular variety of spiritual strength which to many men comes from no other place.

The effect upon character produced by a man's religion and church affiliation can only be measured by the yardstick of a man's reputation, few great men have set down in black and white those things of the spirit which, intimate and personal, are the very man himself.

The same may be said of a man's Freemasonry. What it is "in his heart" can only be judged by the externals. Judging by this standard, Washington frequently expressed his love and veneration for his masonry and his lodge. Many of his closest friends and associates, his generals and military aides in the revolution were of the ancient craft, and his whole life of consecration and service to his fellow man carried out the ideals which radiate from the Masonic Altar.

Members of the Ancient Craft understand why Freemasonry made so great an appeal to the great leader but anyone who will read even a little of the history of Freemasonry will readily comprehend why this body of truth, this organization of such great teaching and high endeavor, this crystallization of moral ideals, was at once a magnet and a comfort to Washington."

I pray that this is what our Brother Washington would have desired that I say to you this day in an attempt to clear up many misunderstandings regarding his situation when our Grand Lodge was being formed.

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<sup>18</sup> Page 667, *History of the George Washington Bicentennial Celebration* (Foreign Participation Volume)