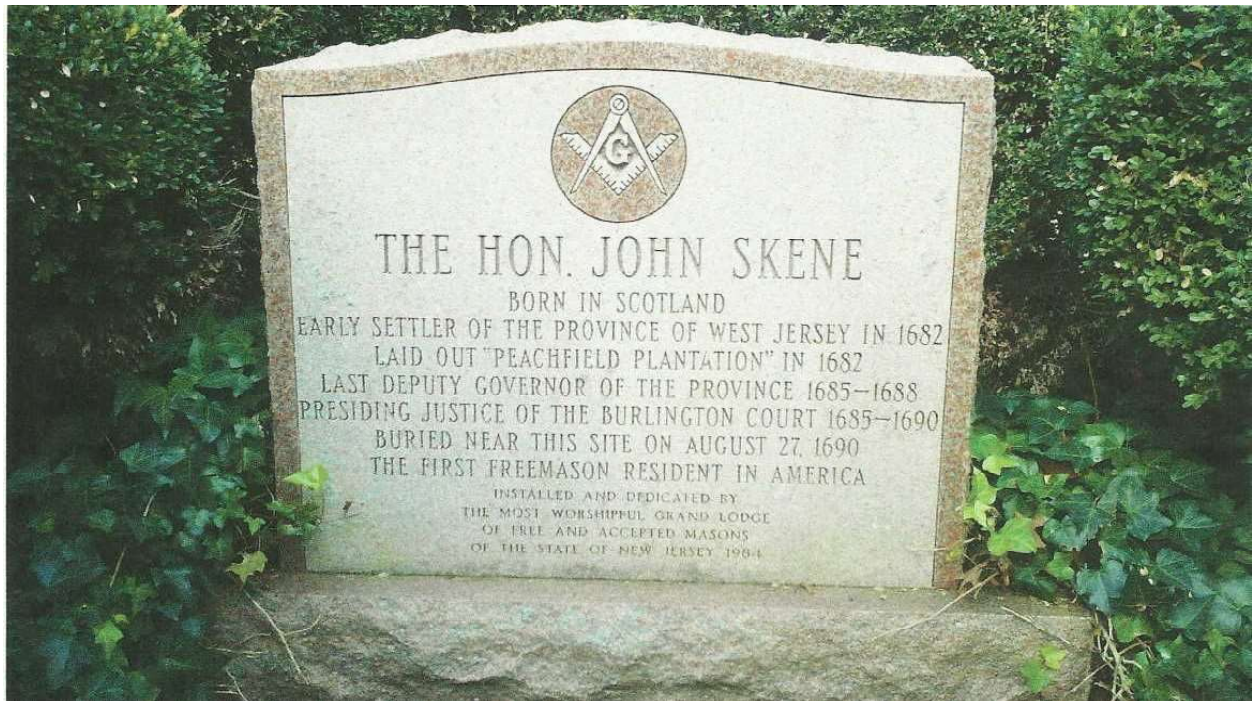


Brother John Skene: First Freemason in America
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Brother John Skene: First Freemason in America

In early July, I was invited to attend the Memorial Service and Festive Board in Honor of Brother John Skene on Saturday, August 27. The Memorial Service was to be held at Historic Peachfield Plantation in Westampton in the afternoon, followed by a Festive Board at Mount Holly Lodge #14 F&AM in Mount Holly. In attendance from out of state, was my spouse, Lady Holly Chandler, along with Worshipful Mark Tabbert from the George Washington Masonic National Memorial and Worshipful Robert Cooper, who recently retired as the Historian and Archivist for the Grand Lodge of Scotland.



This was a memorable event for me, not only because of the George Washington Lodge of Research having a focus on Scottish and Colonial Masonry, but because it likewise became something of a reunion for Worshipfuls Tabbert, Cooper and myself, who were all participants of the BBC Scotland documentary, “*Secrets of the Masons*”¹ which airs on Amazon Prime. Lady Holly also had time to enjoy the beauty of that area of New Jersey and received a promise from me that we would again find our way back there (she is unaware that these brethren have agreed to make this Masonic event an annual affair).

¹ BBC-Scotland. 2018. *Secrets of the Masons*. Edinburgh.

BROTHER JOHN SKENE



Bob Cooper
Curator, Grand Lodge of Scotland

Mark Tabbert
Director of Collections
George Washington Masonic National Memorial

all and sundry
Bro. Shelby Chandler
Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4
Virginia

New Jersey is honored with claiming the distinction of having Brother John Skene as a citizen, and who happens to be the first known Freemason in America. He was born in Newtyle, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, and was the eldest surviving son of Liliias Skene née Gillespie and Alexander Skene, a merchant. In 1659 he was admitted as a burgess or town representative in Aberdeen.² In October 1682, he arrived in America and settled in the county of Burlington, New Jersey, where he purchased a 500-acre plantation he called Peachfield.³ Brother Skene is recorded to be a member of Aberdeen Lodge No. 1 in Aberdeen, Scotland.⁴

It was the Master of the Lodge, Harrie Elphinston, who was the booking agent and who arranged passage on the vessel, *Henry and Francis*, on which many Aberdeenians emigrated to

² Skene, William Forbes. 1887. Memorials of the family of Skene of Skene. Aberdeen: New Spalding Club.

³ National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in The State of New Jersey. 2022. Peachfield. Accessed 2022. <https://peachfield.org/about/>

⁴ Aberdeen Lodge No. 1. 1670. Work Book of 1670. Meeting Minutes, Aberdeen: Aberdeen Masonic Lodge.

New Jersey, in America.⁵ The arrangement was made under the patronage of the Earl of Perth, one of the chief proprietors of New Jersey, also a Freemason. Brothers Robert Gordon, George Alexander, John Forbes, also on the same list of members, purchased an interest in New Jersey. John Forbes came to West Jersey in 1684, then returned to Scotland. John Skene settled at Burlington, capital of West Jersey, and was Deputy Governor from 1685 until his death in 1690.

At Peachfield Plantation, hosted by the National Society of The Colonial Dames of America in The State of New Jersey, a memorial ceremony presentation and a laying of a wreath was performed by various Masonic scholars of New Jersey Masons, led by their Deputy Grand Master, Most Worshipful David L. Tucker, who has recently become the Grand Master of Masons in New Jersey. Most Worshipful Tucker is also a member of the New Jersey Lodge of Research. The guest speaker of this event was Worshipful Bob Cooper, whose contribution to Scottish Freemasonry gave him the attention of all.

One note of importance, as explained in Worshipful Cooper's research, which he likewise reiterated during the George Washington Masonic National Memorial's "*Scottish Freemasonry in America Symposium*", was that the reason there was a significant number of Scottish merchants stationing themselves in Colonial America was because of Scotland's geographical positioning in comparison to England. Because of trade routes reliance on wind and currents moving across the Atlantic Ocean, arrival of American goods can reach Scotland two weeks earlier than they could if arriving in England.

Another factor in Scottish strength in colonial trade was likewise present because of King James I of England, who was also King James VI of Scotland. During the time when colonial trade was at its nascent beginnings, King James granted charters to many Scottish merchants and entrepreneurs. He granted a charter to the first Scottish settlement in Nova Scotia in 1621, which after four attempts became permanent in 1629.⁶ Scottish merchants expanded into the Americas as far south as their Darien colony, now in Panama, but eventually failed because of malaria and Anglophobia among Spanish colonials.⁷

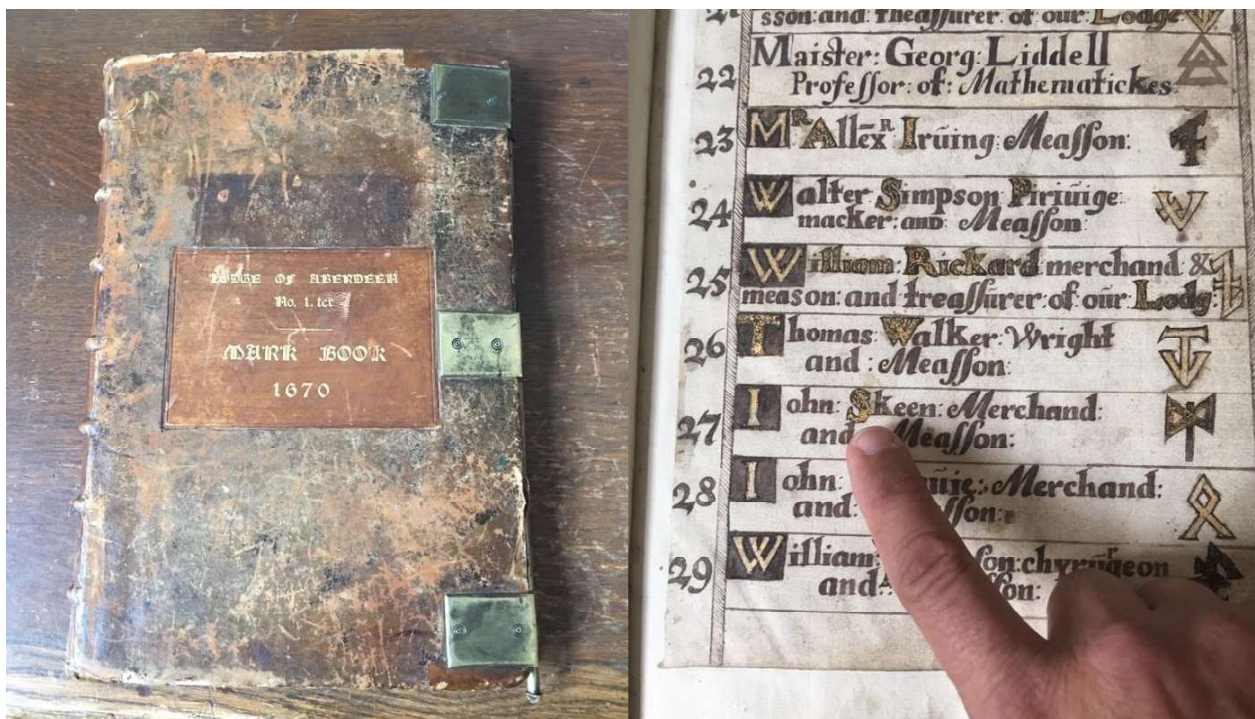
⁵ Ashlar Group, LLC. 2020. "Aberdeen Alter, the Lodge." The Masonic Encyclopedia. Accessed 2020. <https://masonicshop.com/encyclopedia/topics/entry/?i=5467>.

⁶ Fry, Michael. 2001. The Scottish Empire. Edinburgh: Tuckwell Press.

⁷ Paul, Helen Julia. 2005. "The Darien Scheme and Anglophobia in Scotland." University of Navarre. Accessed 2020. <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.unav.edu/documents/29056/6784817/10.pdf>.

What we do find is that Scottish Freemasons, such as John Skene, Harrie Elphinston, the Earl of Perth, Robert Gordon, George Alexander, John Forbes, and King James himself took on the venture into Colonial America and became both merchants and political patrons to these Scottish merchants. Even in Fredericksburg, Virginia, many of the Lodge's founding members were Scottish merchants, such as Daniel Campbell, John Neilson, Adam Hunter, Robert Patton, Gustavus Wallace and Bazil Gordon, who is the first millionaire in America.⁸ The evidence is clear that the Scottish merchant class and Scottish Freemasonry became successful in America.

So, in closing, what we learned during the John Skene Memorial in New Jersey, as well as during the Scottish Freemasonry in America Symposium in Virginia, is that Scottish influence in Colonial America is vital to understanding Freemasonry in America, and it could be said that the origins of our Virginia Grand Lodge was heavily influenced by Scottish Masonry through the Scottish Lodges which helped start this first independent Grand Lodge in America. As such, the works of our George Washington Lodge of Research is of great importance today as we are now being recognized as leaders of and contributors to Scottish Freemasonic knowledge.



⁸ Walker, J. Travis. 2002. A History of Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4, A.F. & A.M., 1752-2002. Fredericksburg: Sheridan Books, Inc.

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