

**THE ANTIQUITY OF WASHINGTON's LODGE and  
SEARCH FOR ITS MISSING MASTER**

**GEORGE WASHINGTON**

**LODGE OF RESEARCH**

**No. 1732 A.F. & A.M.**

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**September 8, 2019**

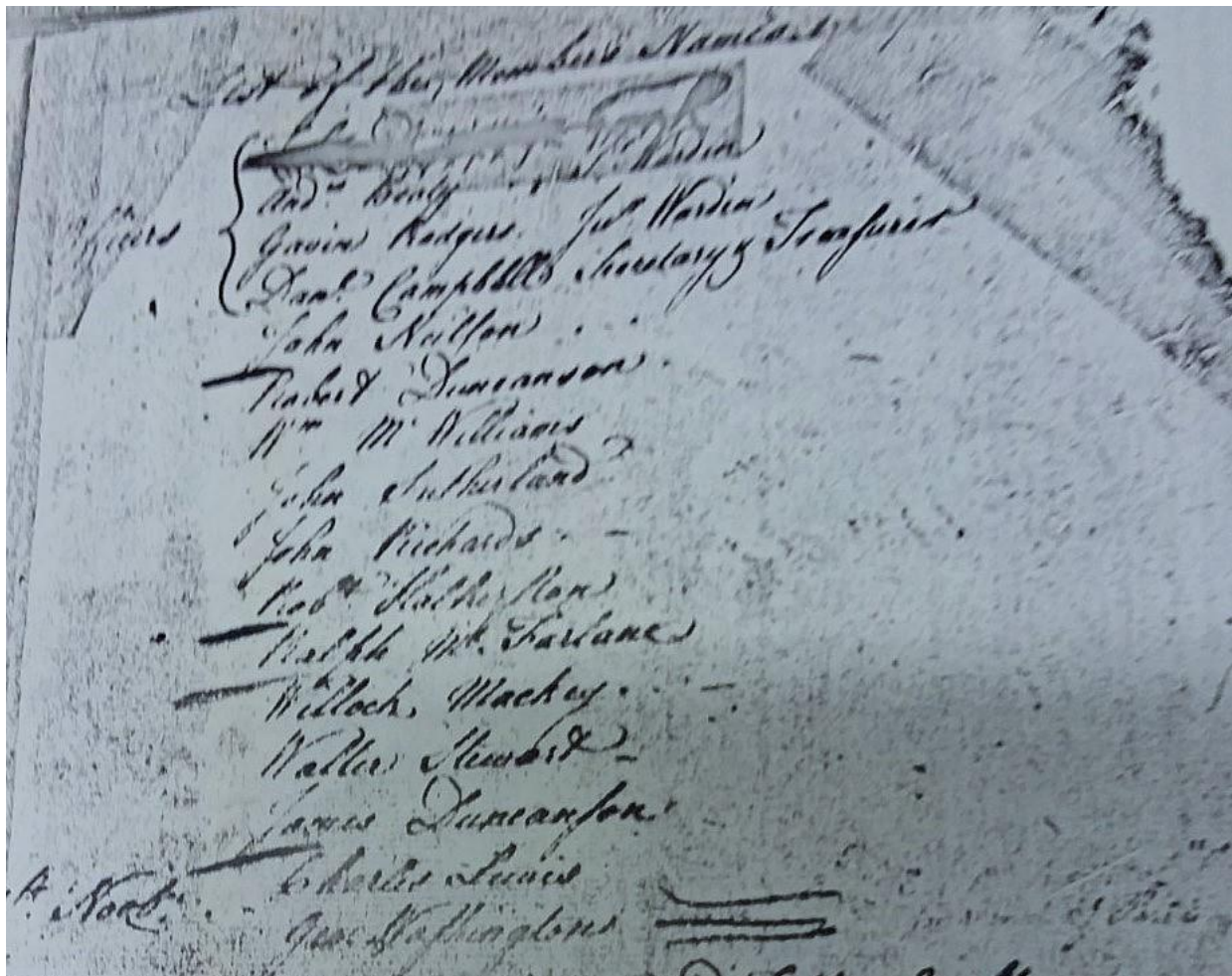
## I. INTRODUCTION

There is a placard in the old upstairs museum and anteroom in Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4 which reads, ‘On September 1, 1752, Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4 was established.’ The claim that Bro. George Washington’s Mother Lodge was founded on that date has frequently been repeated. For example, M.W. Silvanus Quinn, the Lodge’s first major historian, states that the Lodge ‘was organized on the first day of September, 1752.’<sup>1,2</sup> The name of the presiding officer that night has famously been inked out,<sup>3</sup> and it is commonly repeated that it is the first Worshipful Master of the Lodge whose name has been blotted out. This paper will examine these claims in light of available evidence. It does not claim to know with certainty how old the Lodge is, when it was organized, by whom, or who was its first Master. It will, however, advance the thesis that the preponderance of the evidence, circumstantial as it may be, renders it more likely than not that the Lodge existed for some period of time before 1752 and probably had one or more Worshipful Masters before that date. The question of the unknown—though probably not first Master is tied closely to the question of the early history of the Lodge, and is examined from a new angle. At a minimum, it is hoped this paper will help dispel the aura of certainty that surrounds much of the early history of the Lodge and separate fact from conjecture.

## II. THE YOUNG LODGE HYPOTHESIS

The claim that ‘the Lodge at Fredericksburgh’ (as it was then known) was founded on September 1, 1752, is based on a single if key piece of evidence—the fact that the earliest dated entry in the Lodge’s oldest preserved Minute Book bears this date. That this was the first meeting of the Lodge does not, however, necessarily follow. First, there is nothing about the entry of September 1, 1752, to suggest that a new Lodge was being organized. There is no mention of an election or installation of officers, and no mention of the Lodge receiving a Charter or Dispensation. In fact, there is no record of anything unusual having taken place on that date. This entry merely contains the names of fourteen members present, including

the partially blotted out name of the presiding Worshipful Master.<sup>4</sup> Those of the Master, Senior and Junior Wardens, and Secretary/Treasurer are bracketed with the word ‘Officers’ in the margin, which suggests that they were most likely the actual elected officers of the Lodge at the time. The very next entry on this same page was that for November 4, 1752, at which George Washington was initiated into the Mysteries of Freemasonry (Figure 1). As discussed further below, this and several subsequent entries appear to have been written in the hand of the Lodge’s then Secretary/Treasurer, Daniel Campbell.



**Figure 1.** Minute Book entries from September 1 and November 4, 1752.

Were this the first meeting of the Lodge, it seems reasonable to expect some mention to have been made of that fact. In addition, the Minute Book originally consisted of loose sheets that were only bound together in their present form in 1926.<sup>5</sup> Many of the early records, specifically those from 1771 to 1862, were lost as a result of the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862. There is therefore a strong possibility that there were earlier minutes that have never been recovered. One might speculate that the reason the page shown in Figure 1 has been preserved may have more to do with the initiation of George Washington (recorded on the same page) than with anything else, in light of his future prominence.

It has been pointed out in discussions with brethren of the Lodge that there is evidence suggesting that the Lodge at Fredericksburgh was in 1752 relatively young. First, the early Minute entries are very brief. Secondly, the Lodge's ledger book, preserved with the Minutes, contains several purchases of supplies shortly thereafter needed to run a Lodge (e.g., gavels, ballot box, aprons, jewels).<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, many new brothers were being initiated, passed, and raised between 1752 and 1754. All this may be expected for a new Lodge. The evidence, however, is circumstantial, and suggests only that the Lodge may have been relatively young at the date of that earliest meeting for which records still exist. It does not necessarily follow that this was the first meeting.

Conversely, two pieces of evidence that appear to argue against the young Lodge hypothesis are discussed below, before turning to the question of the identity of the 'Lost' Worshipful Master—(1) the circumstances of Ill. Bro. George Washington's initiation, and (2) the record of the first known conferral of the Royal Arch Degree.

### **III. THE WASHINGTON CONNECTION**

Let us put ourselves in the place of a young man in colonial Fredericksburgh (at it was then known) in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century. Fredericksburgh was a burgeoning trading town, and a bustling, if rather rustic, hub

of social activity clustered around several taverns and ordinaries, many a few blocks north of where the Lodge now stands.<sup>7</sup> The early meeting place or places of the Lodge are unknown, but it was common for Lodges in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to meet at such taverns. We do know that the Lodge paid John Jones' tavern, at the site of what is now the Hugh Mercer Apothecary Shop, for broken glassware around 1753, and that they began meeting across the street at Charles Julian's tavern by 1756.<sup>8</sup> Whether it had a regular meeting place in 1752, or where it might have met that night in November 1752 when a young man from across the river was initiated into the Mysteries of Freemasonry, has not been determined.

Consider, however, according to the "young Lodge" hypothesis, that the Lodge was supposed to have been barely two months old when Bros. George Washington and Charles Lewis were initiated. In fact, this was the first recorded meeting after September 1, 1752. As hard evidence is lacking, let us therefore ask if the idea is plausible. We must remember that in 1752, George Washington was not yet Commander of the Continental Army, Father of his Country, or President of the United States. He was already an accomplished young man, having accompanied George William Fairfax on surveying expeditions and having been named county surveyor for Culpeper County.<sup>9</sup> His family was landed but not particularly wealthy. It is easy to look back through the lens of history and forget that Washington was not always the venerated general and statesmen we remember him as today. In 1752, though he was already beginning to distinguish himself, he was but a twenty-year old youth.

We may ask if it is plausible that such a youth would be among the first members initiated into the new Lodge. It appears rather more likely that the first members of the Lodge would have been among the most prominent merchants and patrons in the town. The attraction to an ambitious young man of joining a well-established and respected association of such men is obvious. What might have impelled him to join an enterprise that was barely two months old is not. It has been asserted that Bro. Washington came into the Lodge through the sponsorship of his brother-in-law, Fielding Lewis,<sup>10</sup> who was a prominent

merchant in Fredericksburgh and whose store did not sit far from the aforementioned taverns. This is a possibility. Unfortunately, there is too little known about either George Washington's youth or the early history of the Lodge to reach any definite conclusions as to what brought their destinies together.

#### **IV. THE HOLY ROYAL ARCH**

As noted in the early Minutes of the Lodge, the Royal Arch Degree was conferred on Daniel Campbell, Robert Halkerston, and Alexander Wodrow on December 22, 1753.<sup>11</sup> Famously, this is the oldest preserved record of the conferral of the Royal Arch Degree in the world. (Certainly this could not have been the first ever actual conferral of the degree, underscoring that—as with the Lodge's Minutes—the earliest surviving record does not necessarily correspond to the first occurrence.) At the time, the Most Sublime Degree was conferred not in separate chapters, but in Craft Lodges. Presiding over the Royal Arch Lodge that night was Right Worshipful Simon Frazier, who has been widely theorized as being the identity of the blotted-out Master of the Lodge.

Consider that this conferral of the Royal Arch Degree occurred a mere fifteen months after the date of that earliest known meeting. However, this Degree can only be conferred on Past Masters. It was the practice in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century that the recipients be actual, and not virtual, Past Masters, as is the common practice today. Therefore, these individuals must have presumably presided as Masters of a Lodge, though this did not necessarily mean they were Masters of the Lodge at Fredericksburgh. This would also include those who conferred the Degree, including R.W. Frazier, as he must have received the Degree before having conferred it. The possibility that at least some of these individuals may have served as Worshipful Masters elsewhere (e.g., elsewhere in Virginia, or possibly Scotland) needs to be considered. Daniel Campbell, for example, was a Scottish merchant who traveled regularly to Scotland, as he would to obtain the Lodge's Scottish Charter in 1758. However, if at least some of these six individuals—the three candidates and the three conferring officers—had not been raised and served as Worshipful Masters

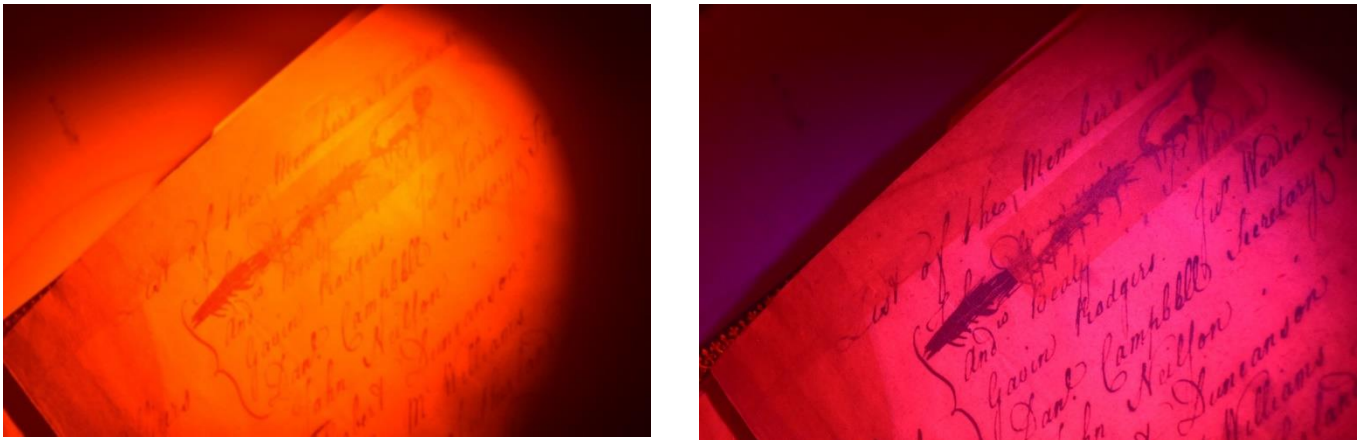
elsewhere, there is simply not enough time for them to have been rendered Past Masters of the Lodge between September 1752 and December 1753 in order to receive the Degree. The short time between the earliest known meeting and the conferral of the Royal Arch Degree therefore suggests that the Lodge may have been operating for some time before 1752 and that the Master whose name is blotted out was likely not the first Worshipful Master of the Lodge. As an aside, it should be noted that the Holy Royal Arch was at the time associated with the Ancients, and not with the Moderns. This fact could also shed light on the various theories of the origins of the Lodge, though this is outside the scope of this paper.

## **V. THE MISSING MASTER OF FREDERICKSBURG LODGE**

The identity of the blotted-out Master from the Minutes of September 1, 1752, could well hold the key to unraveling the mystery of the origin of the Lodge. It has long been conjectured that this could be the same Simon Frazier—also spelled Fraser—who presided at the Royal Arch Degree in December 1753.<sup>12</sup> This argument largely rests on Frazier’s subsequent history of having become a British general in the American Revolution, later dying at Saratoga. Thus, the conjecture has been that his name may have been blotted out because he betrayed his countrymen. This is an enticing theory, but, as seen below, can now largely be discounted. Apart from the fact that Frazier’s name appears in the Minutes from December 1753, and was not blotted out on that occasion, actual physical examination of the Minute Book shows traces of evidence that can be used to lay this theory to rest. For in actuality, the name has been only partially effaced, and modern imaging technology and handwriting analysis have been used in an attempt to reconstruct the missing portions of the name.

The apocryphal story of the blotted-out name of the Lost Master—often referred to without any evidence as the ‘First Master’ of Fredericksburg Lodge—has been often repeated, but few have actually seen the Minutes entry. Additional views of this page under different light sources are shown in Figure 2

below. These images and the document studies discussed below are courtesy of local law enforcement personnel, who have been gracious enough to assist us in trying to unravel the mystery.



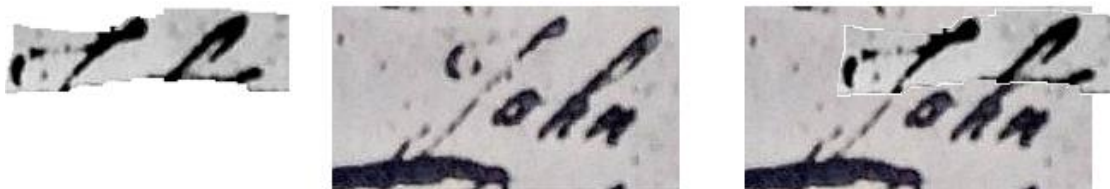
**Figure 2.** *Enhanced images of the blotted-out Master's name from the Lodge Minute Book.*

From physical examination of the page, we now know that the name was effaced so violently that the paper underneath the blot has been destroyed. It appears that first the name had been crossed-out with hatch marks, then smeared over with ink of a similar color to that of the rest of the writing. Because the ink has clearly faded over the last two hundred fifty-plus years, we cannot conclude at this time that the same ink was used in the blot as in the original writing, or that these actions occurred contemporaneously. Based on these observations, it appears the effacement was a deliberate act, and not an inadvertent or innocent one, such as tipping over an inkwell or trying to correct a mistake. The destruction of the underlying paper removes the possibility of ever imaging beneath the ink blot to see the name underneath directly. Fortunately, there is enough left of the top and bottom of the letters remaining to safely rule out the Simon Frazier theory, and to narrow down the pool of possibilities. These efforts and their results have recently been documented in the July and August 2019 issues of the Trestle Board for Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4, and are summarized below.<sup>13,14</sup>



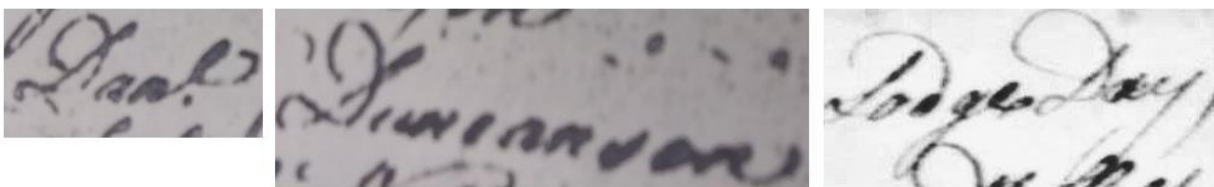
First, a tentative match has been made to a letter dated June 28, 1754, from Daniel Campbell to George Washington.<sup>15</sup> This letter is currently in the possession of the National Archives. The match between the Campbell letter and the early Minutes of the Lodge support what had reasonably been presumed—that the Minutes are indeed the handwriting of Daniel Campbell, the Lodge’s then Secretary/Treasurer. While this result is not surprising, it does bolster attempts to reconstruct the missing portions of the Master’s name by superimposing other lettering from the early Minutes which are in the same hand over the remaining (i.e., top and bottom) portions of the name.

The Minutes are in a flowing script popular in the Eighteenth Century. To the Author, it appears to be in a style known as English Cursive, Round Hand, or Italian Hand, though identification of the style of script—which could shed light on the author’s background—would require submitting the Minutes to professional handwriting analysts. This step has not been done, although as stated above the document has been examined forensically by local law enforcement professionals. Four lines below the blot is the name of John Neilson. As shown below in Figure 3, if the blotted-out portion of the name is removed and the remainder superimposed over the ‘John’ from ‘John Neilson,’ it appears to be a perfect match. That the Master’s first name cannot be ‘Simon’ is apparent from the closeup, as the name clearly contains a letter with a tall loop, which ‘Simon’ does not. Based on this, it is concluded that the Simon Frazier theory has been effectively ruled out.



**Figure 3.** *Top of the Master’s first name, blotted-out portion removed (at left); the first name of John Neilson from September 1, 1752 (at center); the two names superimposed (at right).*

The Last Name is more difficult to decode, but it is clear from the images that it is longer than the first name, probably with two or possibly three syllables. This is indicated by comparing the lengths of the two names. The handwriting in the early Minutes and the aforementioned Campbell letter contain large looping D's, and it is the author's contention that the last name contains probably two syllables and begins with 'D.' Some exemplars are illustrated below in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** *Characteristic looping D's from the names of Daniel Campbell and Robert Duncanson (at left and center), and from the Campbell letter to George Washington of June 28, 1754 (at right).*

This is not merely the author's conjecture. The detective who examined the handwriting was able to tentatively identify three letters in the Master's name—'T' and 'h' from the first name and the initial 'D' from the last name, though as seen above, the supposed 'T' is thought to be a 'J' from 'John.' In addition to this, Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4 contains a series of typed notes for M.W. William Moseley Brown's book *George Washington, Freemason*.<sup>16</sup> Among the notes is a list of early members of the Lodge, including the following inscription:

*D-----, John*  
*This obliterated name is that of the WM on the earliest list of members*  
*1 Sep 1752. Was it Douglas?*

From all of this, it appears fairly certain that the missing Worshipful Master's first name was 'John,' and his last name began with 'D' and most likely had two syllables. It is the author's contention that the most likely candidate for the Worshipful Master of the Lodge at Fredericksburgh in September 1752 was John

Dandridge. Col. Dandridge is well-known to historians as the father of Martha Washington, and of course father-in-law of George Washington. The biggest obstacle to this theory is that records showing that Col. Dandridge was a Mason are lacking. There is, however, the following passage from M.W. Charles Callahan's book, *Washington – The Man and the Mason*,<sup>17</sup> relating to his Masonic membership:

*Jacob Van Bamm, his early fencing-master; the Weedons and the Mercers; his brother-in-law, Colonel Fielding Lewis; John Dandridge, his wife's father; the Warners, Spotswoods, Willises, Paynes, Balls, Popes, and FitzHughs were among the members of that now famous old institution, and a record of their meetings would be to us, who look upon the past with particular reverence, interesting indeed.*

Most of those mentioned here were known members not only of the Fraternity in general, but of the Lodge at Fredericksburgh specifically. The exception to this is Jacob Van Bamm, who was a prominent early visitor, along with several others, from Williamsburg. Callahan does not cite a source for this information, and the author has not corroborated it in other published sources. There is no other mention of Dandridge's name in the Lodge's Minutes. If, however, his name had been blotted out for whatever reason, that would hardly have been surprising. Circumstantially, we know that Dandridge was a wealthy planter from New Kent County and well-known in and around Williamsburg. We know that there was Masonic activity in Williamsburg dating from the 1730s.<sup>18</sup> We know that the Lodge's Minutes include many early visitors from Williamsburg. Most interestingly, we know that John Dandridge is buried in the cemetery of St. George's Episcopal Church, which is located a few blocks from the taverns mentioned earlier. (Coincidentally, it is also about a block from the current location of Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4.) M.W. Silvanus Quinn expressed surprise at the discovery that Dandridge was buried in Fredericksburg, and there has never been a satisfactory explanation of what he was doing in Fredericksburg when he died there in 1756.<sup>19</sup>

These considerations are all circumstantial, but it should be considered that there is more evidence, both forensic and circumstantial, for the Dandridge theory than there ever was for the Frazier theory. This of course is far from making any conclusive determination of its veracity.

## **VI. CONCLUSIONS**

Having examined the historical evidence, this paper does not arrive at a definitive conclusion regarding either the antiquity of Fredericksburg Lodge or the identity of its ‘Lost’ Worshipful Master. The historical records are few. However, it does essentially rule out the prevailing Simon Frazier theory and indicates several avenues for future research. Based on the forensic and circumstantial evidence, the author contends the following: (1) that the Lodge at Fredericksburg very likely existed for some unknown, but possibly short, period of time before September 1752; (2) that there were likely one or several Masters of the Lodge prior to September 1752, who were involved in the conferral of the Royal Arch Degree some fifteen months later; (3) that Ill. Bro. George Washington was already joining a mature organization when he was initiated into the Lodge two months later; (4) that John Dandridge had a closer connection with Fredericksburg than previously known, and may have been an early—though likely not the first—Master of the Lodge; (5) that Col. Dandridge and Bro. Washington may have been acquainted through their association with the Fraternity as early as 1752; and (6) that Williamsburg Masonry may have played a stronger role in the establishment of the Fraternity in Fredericksburg than previously suspected. The reader is invited to weigh the arguments and draw his own conclusions.

## ENDNOTES

1. Silvanus J. Quinn, *The History of the City of Fredericksburg, Virginia* (Richmond: The Hermitage Press, 1908), 217, <https://archive.org/details/historyofcityoff00quin/page/12>.
2. Silvanus J. Quinn, “Washington’s Lodge,” *The American Tyler* XX, No. 3 (1905): 64.
3. J. Travis Walker, *A History of Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4, A.F. & A.M., 1752 – 2002* (Fredericksburg: Sheridan Books, 2002), 3.
4. Walker, *A History of Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4, A.F. & A.M., 1752 – 2002*, 3-4.
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6. Walker, *A History of Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4, A.F. & A.M., 1752 – 2002*, 13.
7. Paula S. Felder, “Early Taverns Lived Up Fredericksburg,” *Free Lance Star*, December 4, 1999, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1298&dat=19991204&id=PzIzAAAAIBAJ&sjid=jQgGAAA AIBAJ&pg=2209,1211872&hl=en>.
8. Walker, *A History of Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4, A.F. & A.M., 1752 – 2002*, 14.
9. “George Washington’s Mount Vernon: Surveying Career,” accessed August 2019, <https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/washingtons-youth/surveying>.
10. Shelby L. Chandler, “Washington: Early EA or Fortunate Freemason” (November 2012): 4.
11. Walker, *A History of Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4, A.F. & A.M., 1752 – 2002*, 11-12.
12. Walker, *A History of Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4, A.F. & A.M., 1752 – 2002*, 3-4.
13. “Search for Fredericksburg’s Lost Master – Part I,” *Trestle Board, Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4* (July 2019), 3-4, <https://www.masoniclodge4.org/trestleboard>.

14. “Search for Fredericksburg’s Lost Master – Part II,” Trestle Board, Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4 (August 2019), 3-5, <https://www.masoniclodge4.org/trestleboard>.
15. *George Washington Papers, Series 4, General Correspondence: Daniel Campbell to George Washington (1754)*, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mgw441977/>.
16. William Moseley Brown, *George Washington, Freemason* (unpublished/draft notes).
17. Charles H. Callahan, *Washington – The Man and the Mason*, 6<sup>th</sup>. Ed. (Washington: National Capital Press, 1913), 265.
18. “Freemasonry in Williamsburg, Virginia: A History of Williamsburg Lodge #6, A.F. & A.M.,” accessed August 2019, <http://www.williamsburgva6.com/home/lodge-history>.
19. Quinn, *The History of the City of Fredericksburg, Virginia*, 236.