

The 200th Anniversary of the Grand Lodge of Virginia: Behind the Scenes

Allen E. Roberts

Virginia Research Lodge

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A bit of background will help you to understand my involvement in the events of February 1978, the month the Grand Lodge of Virginia celebrated its 200th year.

From 1957 until 1970 I was a member of the Grand Lodge Committee on Masonic Information, Research and Publications. During this period the committee met at least twice a year with all of the Grand Lodge officers. This resulted in the continuity that helped advance the Grand Lodge throughout those years. It meant that each of us on the committee worked closely with those who would become Grand Masters. During much of this period I was Archer Gay's Deputy Grand Secretary.

In 1970 I left the committee to work on my own in the field of Masonic education. Later in the year the Grand Master fired me as Deputy Grand Secretary. For the next several years I was asked to do nothing for Masonry in Virginia. Because of my love for the Craft, this would have been devastating to me, but fortunately other Grand Lodges and groups put me to work for them.

Among these groups were the General Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons (an organization to which Virginia doesn't belong), and The Masonic Service Association. The latter I had done several things for, mainly because of my love for Conrad Hahn, its Executive Secretary. Together, among several other things, we started producing a series of Masonic leadership films.

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These films caused the General Grand Chapter to ask me to produce a documentary film about Royal Arch Masonry. In the meantime I produced a film for the MSA.

This is a roundabout way of explaining how I was brought into the planning for the 200th anniversary of the Grand Lodge of Virginia. It was the motion picture productions that did it.

In 1976 the Anniversary Committee had been meeting for five years. It appeared, from all indications, that the committee had accomplished little, although it had managed to reserve space in Williamsburg for the occasion. It did decide, also, that it would like to have a documentary film. For some reason I was asked to meet with the committee to discuss this venture. I showed them *The Saga of the Holy Royal Arch of Freemasonry* which I had produced for the General Grand Chapter. It appeared most of the committee liked it. I was excused. A discussion was held in "executive session." Then I was asked to do the same for Virginia. I later learned that two Past Grand Masters who didn't agree with this decision, and who were members of the committee, walked out and never returned.

To shorten a long story, I agreed and began work on a script. Every word of that script had to be approved by a sub-committee. In the meantime I was told there were many things about the planning of the overall celebration that weren't working. The entertainment group, for instance, had canceled its agreement. I suggested that the committee should work with someone who was familiar with overall entertainment procedures. When I was asked for suggestions, I recommended Walter J. "Jerry" Harmon, a member of Richmond Lodge No. 10. Previously Jerry worked with some large agencies.

The co-chairmen of the committee contacted Jerry. Because of him, and those he knew who could do the necessary work, the 200th Anniversary of the Grand Lodge of Virginia turned into a resounding success.

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Let me hasten to say that I never was aware of all the inner-workings of the committee. I do know that it was appointed in 1971 and that L. Douglas Delano, who would be Grand Master in 1976, was appointed chairman. Later, Stewart W. Miner, who was Grand Master in 1974, and a close friend of Delano's, became co-chairman. I do know that for ten years 25 cents per year was assessed for each member to help pay for the planned historic event. This assessment was wisely invested by Archer B. Gay up to his death, and I assume his actions were followed up by his successors.

One of the features planned for the 200th year was the publication of a Grand Lodge history. Ironically, now 15 years later there is no Grand Lodge history!

In 1979 I interviewed L. Douglas Delano (hereafter call "Doug"), along with Jerry Harmon, for an article for *The Altar Light*, a quarterly newsletter I was publishing at the time. As then said, its purpose was to provide lessons for future such ventures. As I said in the article, all controversial subjects would be avoided.

In answer to a question, Doug said the committee was select by the then Grand Master. Over the years newly elected Grand Lodge officers were added to this committee. Officers of appendant bodies were included. In addition, Doug made recommendations to succeeding Grand Masters who "usually" went along with these choices.

Doug did admit that the expertise of those chosen was not considered. He later told me that he found this a mistake, and he and his co-chairman "had to call on you and Jerry."

What goals did the committee set? Doug was asked. "One of the things we wanted was our history, but for varying reasons we didn't get it. Then, another thing we wanted to do was place historical markers about the state. We ran into governmental blocks there, so this wasn't done. I'd still like to see this done."

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Sub-committees were appointed to work on housing, obtaining mementos, and public relations. This latter task was given to Jerry Harmon, although he was never made a member of the full committee. But it wasn't done until it was evident after five years of virtual stalemate that additional help was needed. And, surprisingly, my recommendation of Jerry was accepted. As Doug said: "Fortunately, Jerry had a good background in the entertainment field. He saved us from disaster in this field."

How? I asked. "We had a fine group signed up, we thought, to provide the entertainment," Doug said. "It backed out. We didn't know what to do, so we turned to Jerry. We found that a committee of this type must have someone on it who is knowledgeable about entertainment, and all it covers."

As a result, Jerry obtained Ethel Merman, the First Lady of the American Musical Theater. With her came Eric Knight to conduct the Richmond Symphony Orchestra. So well did Miss Merman and Knight perform they were called on for more than a half hour of encores!

"I should mention," added Doug, "I saw your film, *The Saga of the Holy Royal Arch of Freemasonry*, and liked what I saw. I mentioned this to the committee. We viewed that film, then commissioned you to produce a Bicentennial motion picture for us. We were able to arouse considerable interest in our members throughout the state by letting them know about this."

To keep with my theme of "behind the scenes" I should tell you that I came within a fraction of not producing this film. I submitted a one page proposal and outline of what I planned and for how much, as I had done with everyone asking me to produce a film. Someone in the Grand Lodge turned this page over to the Grand Lodge attorneys. Back came a 12 page contract! I refused and *calmly* told them why. Another contract was drawn up. It was half the previous size. Again I almost refused to sign it, but then said: "What the heck, they know not what they are doing!" So I signed it.

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While working on the film, the committee agreed with Jerry that it would be nice to have a mural painted to depict the history of Freemasonry in Virginia. Jerry found Ms. Fran Gayle, an excellent artist. I was able to furnish her with many of the still pictures I was using in the documentary. She did the rest, furnishing us with a beautiful mural titled "The Heritage and the Challenge." This was displayed throughout the state during 1978. It now rests in the Grand Lodge library.

Perhaps at this point I should mention why this title for the mural was adopted. Early on I had decided "Challenge" for Virginia Freemasonry should be what we would seek to convey throughout the film. The best way to tell the story, I felt, was to have an elderly "Colonial" Mason tell the story to a young Master Mason. This is what we did; Ms. Gayle went along with this theme. The committee did, also. The mementos and banner were designed around this theme. The banner was featured in the concluding scene of the documentary. This was filmed in the first Lodge chartered by the Grand Lodge of Virginia – Richmond Lodge No. 10.

Doug was asked what he considered the highlights of the celebration of 1978. "Your film, *Challenge!* has to top the list because it's something of lasting value; the mural added much to the Communication in Williamsburg and the ten area celebrations this year; the presentation of the John Blair Medal to the College of William and Mary; the time capsule; the mementos; the presentation of the James Mercer portrait in the Virginia Supreme Court; and the displays carried throughout the state."

The tale of the James Mercer portrait is interesting, and something never told. While working on the script I found there was no known portrait of our second Grand Master! I started a search for one. It appeared hopeless, and then one of my favorite Past Grand Masters, Edward Herman Cann, suggested where one might be found. Dottie and I traveled to Port Royal, found a descendent of Mercer who had the only known portrait of him. I copied it on 16mm motion picture film and color slides. It's in *Challenge!*

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Later I had the portrait blown up and copied on canvas. I offered a duplicate to our Grand Lodge, but it was refused. Why? It wasn't quite as large as those in the museum! (Evidently the powers-that-be had never heard of borders.) Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4 wanted a replica, and it received one. One of my copies of the portrait was taken to a local artist, imitated, and then presented to the Virginia Supreme Court. The only other print is in the library of Babcock Lodge, which you may view later.

This story may as well be added to help bring you more of the behind the scenes episodes of this historical event. During the editing of the documentary film we ended with hundreds of feet of out-takes. Much of this could have been the basis of an excellent promotional film for our Masonic Home. I offered to do this for the Home, at no cost to it. The Board (or someone) turned down the offer. Why? "Because we haven't completed the improvements!" was the reason. To which I replied: "Tell me – what do you know of that is ever completed?" No answer was expected, or received.

Doug was asked, and said he was pleased with the attendance at Williamsburg. "We had Grand Masters from 35 states, all over Canada, plus England and Southern Africa," he said. "I haven't heard of anyone who didn't rave about the whole celebration."

The featured event of the celebration was the performance by Ethel Merman, whose father was a Freemason. She "brought down the house" with her excellent singing. Every seat in the large William and Mary hall was filled, and their occupants insisted on her continuing her performance. She later told me she had to react to the love she felt emanating from the audience — and she kissed me!

But, it took hours of planning and work to turn an unsuitable setting into one for a first class performer and performance. Jerry put it this way:

"Planners should take into consideration the suitability of the auditorium. In this case, another building might have cost more, but if you have to bring in sound equipment,

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lights, backdrops, and the multitude of items necessary for a successful show, the building costing more to rent may be the least expensive in the long run. We had to find and bring in all those things, and more."

"Let me hasten to add this," interjected Doug. "Make sure you have the qualified people you need – lighting men, stage hands, sound men. If it hadn't been for Jerry's knowledge of all these things, we would have been lost. Another observation: the entertainment was excellent; the Communication was memorable; the only real lasting thing is our motion picture. That will go on for years, and as you have proven in other places, 25 or 50 years from now it can be the basis of an updated film."

That proved an overly optimistic statement. Shortly after 1978 the film was buried. Within a short time few Lodges knew it existed. It wasn't even mentioned during this year when the Grand Master decreed that Virginia Lodges should open their buildings and activities to non-Masons. Yet (I say modestly) there is nothing that depicts the history of Freemasonry in Virginia more vividly.

And speaking of motion pictures, you should know that almost the entire commemoration in Williamsburg in 1978 was filmed. John B. Adams, and others, spent hours recording the non-ritualistic proceedings. This footage of motion pictures and stills was turned over to the Grand Lodge office for future generations. Where this went shortly thereafter is not public knowledge. In fact, projectors and other equipment purchased by the then Public Relations Committee for this event were somehow lost.

What happened to this Public Relations Committee that saved the Bicentennial celebration from becoming a fiasco? It was abolished a year later! As far as I can determine, none of its members who worked at their own expense traveling throughout the state in 1978 were publicly, or privately, thanked.

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Jerry was asked how he selected his public Relations Committeemen. "Most of them were not active in their Lodges," said Jerry. "Few of them were Past Masters, but they had the skills we needed. For instance, we found an inactive Mason who owned an exhibit business. Thank heavens he was willing to work with us. We even had to go outside of Masonry to find the proper people. I had to bring in three girls to handle the makeup. They, the soundmen and lighting operators, contributed their services.

"For the filming during the Communications we had to use Masons. Often they worked under intolerable conditions, because they weren't informed about what was going to happen. And the editing had to be done by Masons."

This brings to mind the filming done for the *Challenge!* at the Mosque in Richmond in 1976. I had two expensive camera crews there. Governor, and Brother, Mills Godwin was scheduled to be the featured speaker. Previous to his going on stage, I asked him if he would pull his ear when he was about to say something he would like perpetuated on film. He growled: "Everything I say is important!" His state trooper body guard laughed. I didn't. Filming isn't cheap. So we had to film and record his entire talk to edit down to about 30 seconds of something worth keeping. Well over \$2,000 went onto the cutting room floor! But we made him look good.

There were many memorable moments during the production of the Grand Lodge documentary. To record the importance of our Masonic ritual schools I traveled to the Eastern Shore, VPI and Fort Defiance. I was shocked. For over 15 years my family and I had attended the school at Fort Defiance, and occasionally VPI. The small attendance at these schools in 1976 was crushing. They once were crowded.

The reenactment of the formation of our Grand Lodge that occurred in 1778 was performed excellently by costumed members of Washington-Lafayette Lodge. I promised the cast from the Lodge they would be among the first to see the completed version of the film. This promise almost had to be abandoned. Why?

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To try to make a long story short, I was prohibited from showing the documentary until after it was "unveiled" in Williamsburg. This dictate came about because I had been asked to meet with a committee of Past Grand Masters in Ohio early in 1977 to discuss the production of a documentary for that Grand Lodge. I took a completed copy of *Challenge!* to show this committee. After it was viewed, I was asked if I could make one as good for Ohio. There was an uproar when the Virginia committee learned that the Ohioans had seen it a week earlier! The prohibition was the result.

As I have never knowingly broken a promise, I told the Grand Master (Doug Delano) I was going to keep that promise. He told me I could, and that he would go with me. This brings me to something I wasn't going to mention, but I think I should, because this ban was written into a statement I wouldn't sign until it was deleted for this one case.

The final payment was due from the committee at that time for the production costs. I was told I must sign a *notarized* statement signifying I had complied with the terms of the contract, and that if any law suit developed I, and not the Grand Lodge, would be completely liable. I was furious, on many counts, but mainly because this had to be signed before a notary public, something no Master Mason should ever be asked to do in a Masonic matter. But I was broke, and I've always paid my bills on time. I signed the statement so I could pay those final bills for filming, editing and tying the six tracks into a completed version.

Incidentally, *Challenge!* and *Precious Heritage*, the Ohio documentary, were entered in an international film festival in New York in November, 1977, in separate categories. The Ohio received the Gold Award for the best documentary of 1977; the Virginia film, a Silver Award in the history category. I was sneeringly asked why I had received a gold for Ohio's, but *only* a silver for Virginia's. (The "only" got me. These films were entered in competition with films with budgets up to 100 times larger.) I calmly answered: "Because the fellows in Ohio left me alone; y'all had to approve every word I wrote and every

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action to be taken." I should add: this was true, but I had reserved the right to make changes I considered necessary during the filming and editing — and there were many!

One of these "changes" occurred for the laying of the cornerstone of the new infirmary at the Masonic Home. I didn't want this to be dull, but didn't know how to "spice" it up. Then I received a phone call from a longtime Scottish friend, Robert McCarroll. He planned on coming to Virginia. Bingo! He was a bagpiper! I asked him to come here for the filming — along with his kilts and bagpipe. He did. And he led the march of the Grand officers and Freemasons, adding flavor for the filming.

One more thing concerning *Challenge!* and I'll say no more about it, although this paper could be filled with episodes concerning it. Those who have seen the film, have seen the original Grand Master's jewel (our Grand Master wears a replica). It's worn by James Tyree who portrayed the Grand Master of 1878, Beverly R. Weliford, Jr.

There are many who have never been named, and probably never will be, who deserve credit for turning the 200th Anniversary of the Grand Lodge of Virginia into a resounding success. L. Douglas Delano and Stewart W. Miner, co-chairmen, had to work, especially in the early stages, with men appointed by Grand Masters. A few of these were valuable, but certainly not all of them were. It wasn't until expertise was sorely required that they were provided with knowledgeable individuals.

In the Grand Lodge office, unknown to most, Mrs. Gwen Keran did a masterful job with publications and advertising. Many of the printed items that were passed out were designed by her.

Public (and internal) relations plays an important role in every successful endeavor. Freemasonry too often overlooks its significance. Jerry was asked what he did when he took over this task. "I had to determine what could and could not be done within the laws of Masonry," he said. "I turned to you for the answers, and found that Masonry has as

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much leeway as does any other organization to use to a full extent all the tools of public relations. There is a resistance to using these tools, because too many Masons are in the same position I was in – they don't know what they can and cannot do. The answer to this problem will ultimately lay in education.

"But Masonry can make exhibits, it can provide time capsules, it can have public entertainment programs if they are in good taste. It can produce motion pictures. When I put my committee together, with the approval of the Grand Master, I tried to anticipate the needs of the upcoming Bicentennial. I tried to anticipate the things the Grand Lodge would want to do. I picked my people accordingly. Even so, we did get involved in things unrelated to public relations!"

To conclude this account, I think it wise to stress what we determined is one of the most important ingredients. COMMUNICATION – from the beginning of any project to its end. PARTICIPATION must also be considered absolutely important. GOALS must be established by all concerned – not merely by the leadership. Many years ago I learned that "my" goals mean nothing to you; if you help me set those goals, they become yours AND mine.

You may find this formula of some importance:

Time + Talent + Money + Tender Loving Care = A Gala Celebration.