

# The Greatest and Best: Brother John Marshall

Thomas P. Tignor

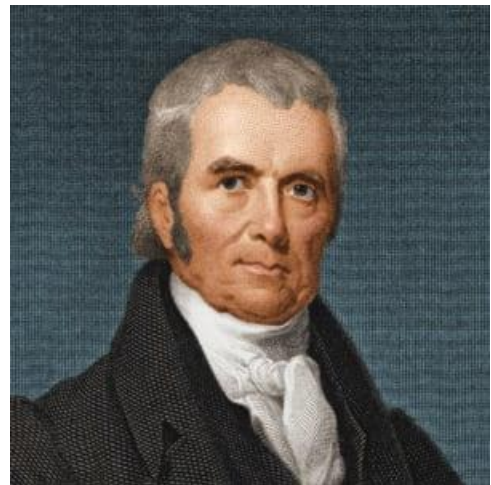
Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

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*The greatest and best of men in all ages have been encouragers and promoters of the Art; and have never deemed it derogatory to their dignity to level themselves with the Fraternity, extend their privileges and patronize their assemblies.* James Anderson

When we started our Masonic journey, we heard these words. They were true when George Washington heard them and they are true today. We will be considered "the greatest and best" by our future reviewers.

Without fear of contradiction, I believe every man here this morning will know the one Brother who I will try to present in a little different manner. We know him as a great soldier, a great lawyer, a great diplomat, a great government servant, and the greatest Supreme Court Justice this country has ever known. Yes, John Marshall is the greatest and best for my remarks this morning.



**John Marshall**

As I look around this Lodge I know several of you take great pride in the fact that you are members today of the two Masonic Lodges and Royal Arch Chapter that numbered John Marshall as a Brother and Companion some two hundred years ago. I know we have members of this Lodge who are members of Richmond Lodge No. 10 and Richmond Randolph Lodge No. 19 as well as Richmond Royal Arch Chapter No. 3. We take pride in

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the fact that John Marshall was also a member of these three great Masonic bodies. May we bring as much honor to our great fraternity as he did.

John Marshall was born in a log cabin in Fauquier County near Germantown, Virginia on September 24, 1755, the oldest of 15 children of Colonel Thomas Marshall and Mary Randolph Marshall. Mrs. Marshall's family tree included the Jeffersons, Randolphs, and Lees. John Marshall came from the right Virginia stock. His father was a longtime friend of George Washington. In fact, he was one of George's surveyors on the great Fairfax estate. His father also served in the House of Burgess at Williamsburg with Patrick Henry, George Washington, George Wythe and Thomas Jefferson. From this family background John Marshall had his beginnings.

John Marshall did not see a school until he was some 10 or 12 years of age. His mother was well educated and she was the one who taught him and his 14 brothers and sisters their early education. When John was 12 he was tutored by Rev. James Thomson of Scotland. After his outstanding military service to his country, he took courses in law for six to eight weeks at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg under George Wythe. He was admitted to the bar on August 28, 1780 and Thomas Jefferson, who was then Governor of Virginia, signed Marshall's license to practice law.

His distinguished military service to his state and his country is often overshadowed by his great judicial accomplishments. Let's briefly review his military record. He began his military service as a lieutenant in the Fauquier County militia. He held the rank of lieutenant and later captain in both the Culpeper Minutemen and the Virginia Continental army. His combat experience in the Revolution carried him from the Battle of Great Bridge near Norfolk in 1776, to Brandywine, Delaware; Germantown, Pennsylvania; Monmouth, New Jersey and on to Valley Forge. At Germantown he was wounded. At Valley Forge he learned to revere George Washington as the symbol of the American cause. He also met Alexander Hamilton and renewed friendship with James Monroe. He suffered the cold winter at Valley Forge. He fought the British at Monmouth Courthouse, New Jersey in

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June 1778 in 100° heat. In July and August 1779 he fought along the Hudson River at Stony Point. This completed his military service to his country. The events of his military career and the military career of his father had great influences on their future lives.

While serving with Washington at Valley Forge, John Marshall determined that his future should be in the legal profession. He had been appointed deputy judge advocate responsible for the prosecution of court-martials. At Valley Forge he took affidavits, handled witnessing proceedings and settled minor disputes. He was in effect the county court judge. This was the beginning of his judicial career. Remember it was at Valley Forge he started his journey to greatness as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States.

His military career also had the greatest effect on his personal life. One could build a great love story on John Marshall. It started at Yorktown and ended here in Richmond. From the autumn of 1779 until Christmas day of 1832, for almost 53 years, if Polly Ambler was the one who shared his life as a loving wife, companion, mother and friend.

His father, Colonel Thomas Marshall, was stationed at Yorktown in command of a Virginia artillery unit. It was here John Marshall met and fell in love with a fourteen-year-old, Mary Ambler, known to her friends as Polly. Polly Ambler, at that early age knew what she wanted and announced it while going to a ball in honor of Captain Marshall that she was resolved to set her cap for him.

In the spring of 1780 while on "inactive interval" from the Army John Marshall studied law at the College of William and Mary at Williamsburg under George Wythe. Was it law or Polly which attracted him to the College of William and Mary? If you can remember your romantic days, you can best answer this question. Incidentally these six or eight weeks at the foot of George Wythe was the formal legal studying of John Marshall. Think about that — Six to eight weeks at the College of William and Mary. On Marshall's Law Notes are written the name 'Ambler, Polly Ambler, Polly, Miss Maria Ambler.' Yes, John had more on his mind than law and George Wythe.

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The Amblers moved to Richmond, Virginia to be near the new State capital when John Marshall was studying at William and Mary. Somehow Marshall immediately moved to Richmond about the same time. Although John Marshall was admitted to the bar in Fauquier County, Virginia on August 28, 1780 he soon moved to Richmond and lived there the remainder of his life. Needless to say, from the time he moved to Richmond the courtship of Polly Ambler and his career as a lawyer was enjoined. They were married on January 3, 1783 in the parlor of "the Cottage" in Hanover, County, Virginia. The bride was almost seventeen and the groom was twenty-seven. In time they became parents of ten children, six of whom lived to maturity.

From January 3, 1783 until Christmas Day of 1831, a period of 44 years as husband and wife, as mother and father, as companions, as friends, and yes, as lovers, the romance of Polly and John Marshall was always one of the strongest forces and influences of his life. This ended on Christmas Day of 1831 for John Marshall. He simply could not accommodate the shock of Polly's death. He mourned in private. One of his Associate Supreme Court Justices, Joseph Story, once found him in tears and the Chief Justice told his close friend, Story, that he rarely passed a night without weeping over Polly.

On Christmas Day 1832, a year after his wife's death these words express his feelings "It was the will of Heaven to take to itself the companion who had sweetened the choicest part of my life, had partaken of all my feelings and was enthroned in the innermost recess of my heart. Never can I cease to feel the loss and to deplore it. I have lost her. And with her I have lost the solace of my life." Yes, she remained the companion of his retired hours. When he was alone and unoccupied, his mind unceasingly turned to her. What greater love.

There are many unbelievable events of a personal nature associated with John Marshall. One of the most interesting, which clearly demonstrates his fortitude and will power, is the incident in which he decided to be inoculated against smallpox.

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Virginia discouraged inoculation and persons desiring to take this precaution against contracting the disease were required to have written consent of every living adult within a two-mile radius. When Marshall considered the extent of these restrictions he was persuaded to go to Philadelphia where it was believed inoculation laws were more liberal and physicians better qualified and skilled. Marshall walked the couple of hundred miles to Philadelphia and, after recovering from the illness caused by the inoculation, he walked home again. He walked 35 miles a day. Is this fortitude as we hear in the Entered Apprentice Lecture?

Now for the real purpose of this paper and, also, the hardest part: The Masonic life of John Marshall.

It has been very difficult to assemble Masonic information on John Marshall. From the limited resources available to me here in Richmond, I have been able to convince myself that, in many ways John Marshall carried the banner of Freemasonry to higher heights than many of us realize. The research has been difficult but the results have been most rewarding for the researcher and, I trust will be interesting to you, especially to the Brethren of Richmond No. 10, Richmond Randolph No. 19 and the Companions of Royal Arch Chapter No. 3, all of Richmond, Virginia.

The starting point should be easy. When and where was Marshall raised a Master Mason? Believe it or not, we cannot determine the time and place. Richmond Lodge No. 13, now No. 10, claims John Marshall and perhaps this is correct; however, no dates and places are indicated.

It is believed he became a Freemason while in the Revolutionary Army, perhaps while serving that winter at Valley Forge with George Washington. Although we cannot find the specifics, we know he was a Master Mason, a member of Richmond No. 10. He was also a member of Richmond Randolph No. 19. Richmond Royal Arch Chapter records indicate he became a Royal Arch Mason in the period 1792-1794.

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Let's assume he was raised at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777-78 at the age of 22 or 23. We know his Masonic activities started at an early age. We do know that on January 2, 1786 he was appointed to a Committee by the then City Council of Richmond to form a scheme of lottery agreeable to an act of the General Assembly to raise a sum of money not exceeding 1,500 pounds to erect and complete Free Masons' Hall in Richmond. The scheme did not meet with the expected success but the building proceeded and was occupied by Richmond Lodge No. 10 on July 11, 1786. Grand Lodge held its semi-annual communication there on Oct. 27, 1786. Richmond Royal Arch Chapter met in this building March 31, 1792 and everyone in is invited to attend the 200th anniversary of this great Chapter on March 31, 1992. You know, Masons' Hall is located at 1807 E. Franklin Street, and is now the home of Richmond Randolph No. 19. This is the oldest Masonic Building in continuous use in the United States and it should be one of our Masonic monuments. This is another story.

Although out of order datewise, let's take a moment to consider Masons' Hall. This is where John Marshal received his first judicial experience. He was Recorder of Richmond and as such acted as a Judge in Masons' Hall. He also practiced law from this building. In 1788 the citizens met in Masons' Hall to instruct their delegates to adopt or reject the Constitution. It is said that John Marshall, on instructions and urging from George Washington, had a strong influence in getting the delegates to adopt the Constitution over the strong opposition of Patrick Henry. Although the vote was close, the Constitution was adopted by Virginia.

John Marshall presided over a visit of General Lafayette and his son, George Washington Lafayette, given by Lodges 10 and 19 during 1824 when Lafayette toured the country. John Marshall was present when the cornerstone was laid for the Virginia State Capitol on August 18, 1785. He helped to lay the cornerstone of Masons' Hall on October 5, 1785. On Oct. 27, 1786, at age 31, John Marshall was appointed Deputy Grand Master of Masons in Virginia by Most Worshipful Edmund Randolph. Marshall and Randolph were members of No. 10, No. 19 and Richmond Royal Arch Chapter No. 3.

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Between 1786 and 1790, John Marshall attended 15 sessions of the Grand Lodge. Perhaps the fact that his office was located in the same building as Grand Lodge had some bearing on his attendance.

It was reported that John Marshall was the person responsible for the purchase of the Master's chair for No. 10. He had it made in England and it is still the Master's Chair for Richmond Randolph No. 19. Two weeks ago, I sat in this chair prior to a Chapter meeting.

At Grand Lodge in 1792, John Marshall became Deputy Grand Master a second time. This time he was the first Deputy Grand Master to be elected. During the 1792 session of Grand Lodge, he acted as Grand Master and presided over Grand Lodge.

He had a most unusual honor in 1792 and 1793. As Deputy Grand Master he signed the dispensation to start Marshall Lodge in Lynchburg. In 1793, as Grand Master he signed the Charter for Marshall Lodge. This is the only time a Deputy Grand Master signed papers to name a Lodge in his honor. In reviewing the history of Marshall Lodge, no record is indicated that John Marshall ever visited Marshall Lodge. Strange but fact.

At Grand Lodge in 1793, John Marshall was elected Grand Master at the age of 38. As Grand Master he changed the time of Grand Lodge from October to November. While Grand Master, Grand Lodge requested the Grand Master to report to Grand Lodge minutes of all his proceedings during the recess. This was the forerunner of the Grand Master's Address to Grand Lodge.

On November 23, 1795 John Marshall presided over his last Grand Lodge as Grand Master. Brother Robert Brooke was elected Grand Master. One of John Marshall's first duties as Past Grand Master was to give an account of his proceedings during the recess of Grand Lodge. He reported on eight Dispensations.

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The following resolve or motion appears in the Nov. 24, 1795 minutes of the Grand Lodge:

"That the Grand Lodge are [sic] truly sensible of the great attention of our late Grand Master, John Marshall, to the duties of Masonry, and that they entertain a high sense of the wisdom displayed by him in the discharge of the duties of his office, and as a token of their entire approbation of his conduct, do direct the Grand Treasurer to procure and present him with an elegant Past Master's jewel."

This was the first time such action was taken for a Past Grand Master. Yes, his greatness was noted by his peers.

In December 1799, John Marshall suffered one of his greatest losses. On December 14, 1799, George Washington died. It fell upon John Marshall to pay one of the greatest tributes to George Washington as he addressed the House of Representatives by saying: "Our Washington is no more. The hero, the patriot, and the sage of America . . . the man on who in times of danger, every eye turned and all hopes were placed . . . lives now only in his own great actions and in the hearts of an affectionate and afflicted people." His voice bespoke the anguish of his mind and a countenance expressive of his deepest regret.

The next day John Marshall introduced Henry Lee's resolution in Congress immortalizing Washington as "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." Immediately after Henry Lee's eulogy to Congress, John Marshall offered a resolution that a marble monument be erected by the United States in the Capital City of Washington and that the family of George Washington be requested to permit his body to be deposited under it and that the monument be so designed as to commemorate the great events of his military and political life.

Congress did not appropriate money to build this monument. John Marshall headed a private organization and was able to get Congress to donate a site for the monument.



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The cornerstone was not laid until July 4, 1848 in ceremonies conducted by the Grand Lodge of District of Columbia. It was finally dedicated with Masonic ceremonies on Feb. 21, 1888, 82 years after George Washington's death. Remember the part John Marshall had in the great Washington monument when you next see it in Washington or in print. *As a footnote: John Marshall wrote five books on the life of George Washington.*

Time does not permit me to review Marshall's service to Masonry in the nineteenth century. He was an active Mason during the 1800s serving on many Grand Lodge Committees and at many Grand Lodge activities. Perhaps, this paper may inspire some of you to do a little research of your own on this great Mason.

Let me conclude with a very few comments regarding his departure from his earthly pilgrimage. He died on July 6, 1835 at age 80. His body was first returned to his home at now 9th and Marshall Street in Richmond and he is buried in Shockoe Cemetery in Richmond where Brother Perry D. Mowbray and I visited this week. The graves are marked. However, it is almost impossible to read the markings on the stones. I wonder if consideration could be given to restoring these markings so that generations to come may be able to identify the stones.

On July 9, 1835, Masonic services were held for Mt. Wor. John Marshall by Richmond Randolph No. 19 for the "purpose of paying the last sad tribute of respect to our late Worthy Brother, John Marshall, Chief Justice and late Master of the Grand Lodge of Virginia." The procession was formed at the Lodge and moved to the county court house where they met the body and thence proceeded to the house of the deceased, on the corner of Marshall and Ninth Street, where a suitable discourse was delivered by Right Rev. R. C. Moore, then to Shockoe burial ground, where the body was interred with usual Masonic honors. Another great Mason, John Dove who was Master of Richmond Randolph No. 19, conducted the Masonic service.

Tradition states that the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia cracked while tolling his death.

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A few personal thoughts on the greatness of John Marshall: He was a man of tremendous personal abilities. Over and over again one ability seems to come forth. He had the ability to unify. He unified his comrades at the age of 19 at Oak Hill in Fauquier County. At Valley Forge, he unified his comrades. His personable, winsome, and remarkable capacity for leavening the dough of serious purpose with the yeast of humor and diversion unified his troops. In his legal vocation, he soon became a lawyer's lawyer. He unified his colleagues. As a diplomat, he unified his country when he refused a bribe to settle the French differences. This event, when he told the American people of the attempted bribe, made Marshall a national hero and started his distinguished career as a public servant. As Chief Justice of the Supreme Court he unified our government into three separate and distinct parts. He unified the Judicial branch and made this country a country of law and order. He unified the Supreme Court Justices to act as one in their deliberations and decisions. And somehow he unified the Masons into the great Fraternity of Brotherhood under the Fatherhood of God. He was Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth by the way he lived and served.

Thus ends this incomplete paper on a very small portion of the life of one of the greatest and best of men in all ages who was an encourager and promoter of our Art; and who never deemed it derogatory to his dignity to level himself with the Fraternity, extend its privileges and patronize its assemblies.

For the privilege and honor of working so hard to present this paper, I will be forever grateful. It has been a pleasure and one of the most rewarding efforts of my life. And to Peter Peck, I thank you for planting the seed.