

The Virginia Craftsmen

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I want to tell a story today about a special group of Masons. These Masons were members of a Masonic degree team known as the Virginia Craftsmen. What makes this story so special to me is not that they performed the ritual better than anyone else. They did a good job on most occasions, but not perfect. It is not that this group traveled to many different Lodges in the Grand Lodge of Virginia and other Grand Jurisdictions in this country and in Canada, Scotland, and England. In my opinion, what makes this group of Freemasons so special is that for over thirty years they attempted to put "Brotherhood in Action".

This story has its beginning in July of 1962. Babcock Lodge No. 322 was celebrating its 50th Anniversary and had invited the Glasgow Compass Travel Association to exemplify the Master Mason Degree. With the number of Masons expected for this event, the Lodge made arrangements to hold this special communication at the Richmond Arena. On July 20, 1962, thousands of Masons filled the Arena to witness this degree team from Scotland perform the ritual. The number of Masons present will never be known, but Allen E. Roberts in the "Diamond Years", a history of Babcock Lodge, estimates over 6,000 Masons present. One of the many positive effects of the visit of the "Scotsmen" was a proposal to form a similar association to the Glasgow Compass Travel Association.

On July 31, 1962, ten Masons, held a meeting at the Babcock Masonic Temple in Highland Springs, Virginia, discussing the possibility of forming a degree team. The visit by the

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Scottish Masons a few days earlier had shown these men what the Universality of Freemasonry really is. For several hours the men discussed what a group dedicated to the principles of Freemasonry could accomplish. These men also realized that there would be pitfalls and enemies. Therefore, any group such as this needed to be built on a solid foundation. This group elected Allen E. Roberts as Temporary Chairman and he appointed committees to draw up a constitution and by-laws, to design a uniform, and to nominate officers.

Over the next several weeks the committees spent many hours in meetings and discussions. This work proved fruitful and on September 11, 1962, in the Temple of Babcock Lodge the Virginia Craftsmen were born. A Constitution and by-laws were adopted. The committee left nothing to chance. The Constitution and by-laws had been earlier submitted to Edward H. Cann, Grand Master, the Grand Secretary, Archer B. Gay, and the Grand Lecturer, George R. Marshall. Their recommended changes had been incorporated in the Constitution and the by-laws.

It is interesting to note that a team of "Northerners" were the ones that worked out the plans for the formation of the Virginia Craftsmen. They were Don Belanger, Allen E. Roberts, Robert A. Hamilton and Jack Quel.

The design of the uniform was of Confederate gray trimmed with gold and based on a Confederate cavalry uniform. The monogram on the uniform was a Confederate battle flag with the initials "V-C" overlaid with gold, with the square and compasses in silver. The adopted by-laws limited the membership to Virginia Masons, but this was changed in later years. The term of officers was for one year. Allen E. Roberts was elected as the first President and was continually elected in this position throughout the entire existence of the "Craftsmen". Their Constitution, adopted September 11, 1962, reads as follows:

CONSTITUTION OF THE VIRGINIA CRAFTSMEN

BEING IMBUED WITH A STRONG sense of Brotherly Love and a desire to promote true and lasting friendship through Freemasonry among all people wheresoever dispersed, this Association has been created.

THE SOLE PURPOSE OF THE VIRGINIA CRAFTSMEN shall be to unite like-minded Master Masons into a band of Brothers to further the first Tenet of Freemasonry --- Brotherly Love ---through the exemplification of the Sublime Degree of Master Mason according to the Ritual as prescribed by the Grand Lodge of Virginia, in any Tiled Lodge holden under any Grand Lodge recognized by the Grand Lodge, Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons of Virginia.

TO PERPETUATE A REMEMBRANCE OF the many sacrifices made by Freemasons who wore the Blue and the Gray of opposing forces during the Civil War, and who fought and died for a cause they felt just, but who remembered to practice without their Lodges that which they had learned within, the VIRGINIA CRAFTSMEN, when at Work, shall dress in Confederate style, and shall adhere to the gentlemanly and warmhearted manner of the Southland.

REALIZING THE WIVES OF MASONS determine in a large measure the usefulness of their husbands to the Craft and the type of Freemasons they will be, the VIRGINIA CRAFTSMEN hereby gives it consent and encouragement to the organization of a separate and distinct Ladies Auxiliary having as one of its purposes the providing of wholesome entertainment for Masonic gatherings when so requested.

BECAUSE THE MOTHER LODGE IS THE backbone of Freemasonry, and knowing no structure can be stronger than its foundation, all members of the VIRGINIA CRAFTSMEN shall owe their first allegiance to the Lodge that gave them Masonic birth; this Association shall in no way interfere with the business of any Lodge or body of Masons, but shall always be ready and willing to assist any Lodge in every way possible, when requested to do so.

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Also, with the adoption of this Constitution, a ladies auxiliary was formed in association with the "Craftsmen", named the Virginia Charmers. The first and only President in the entire existence of this auxiliary was Madaline Hamilton. This group did a magnificent job over the years in supporting the Virginia Craftsmen. It is safe to say that without the support of their ladies and families, the Virginia Craftsmen would not have existed very long.

The first appearance of the Virginia Craftsmen was at the Masonic Home of Virginia on December 23, 1962, when they and the Virginia Charmers entertained the residents by singing Christmas Carols. This was the forerunner of the entertainment group which was quite active over the first several years. They provided musical entertainment for different Masonic groups. After several years the Charmers must have stopped the entertainment part of their activities and turned to supporting the "Craftsmen" with money making projects. As you may remember, for many years the Virginia Charmers served the lunches following the quarterly communications of Virginia Research Lodge.

The Virginia Craftsmen first appeared in uniform on March 23, 1963, when they participated with Acca Temple in an "All Masonic Night" at the Mosque in Richmond, Virginia. Their first Degree Work was on March 25, 1963, when they raised William George Keenan to the Sublime Degree of Master Mason at Babcock Lodge No. 322. The "Craftsmen's" first work outside of Virginia was on March 30, 1963, when they exemplified the Master Mason Degree at the Scottish Rite Temple in Louisville, Kentucky. This was the first of many trips outside of Virginia.

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The list of states, provinces and countries that the Virginia Craftsmen visited during their existence is as follows:

Maine	Ohio
New Hampshire	New York
Massachusetts	Indiana
Connecticut	Michigan
Vermont	Illinois
New Jersey	Missouri
Delaware	Iowa
Pennsylvania	Arizona
Maryland	California
North Carolina	New Brunswick
South Carolina	Quebec
Georgia	Nova Scotia
Alabama	Ontario
Kentucky	Scotland
Tennessee	England
Louisiana	

The Virginia Craftsmen worked regularly during their 30 year existence. As I mentioned earlier they did a fairly good job with the ritual, but it wasn't perfect. Although their work received praise from many Grand Masters, and Masonic leaders, in and out of Virginia, there were some critics. It was the opinion of some of the "Craftsmen" that the group should avoid doing work in Virginia. It seems like there were always a few who seemed show up and count the mistakes, and these few seemed to be very vocal with their criticism.

Throughout its existence, the Virginia Craftsmen always attempted to put Brotherly Love into action. The Craftsmen would be invited to help Lodges and Grand Lodges celebrate special occasions. They never charged anything for their visits. On a few occasions their expenses were paid, but on numerous occasions each member paid his own expenses. In my opinion each member probably felt that the experience of being a Virginia Craftsmen was one of the most educational and delightful experiences in his Masonic life. It was an experience well worth the money that he spent.

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The Virginia Craftsmen did more than just confer the Master Mason Degree. They participated in parades and took part in several dedication ceremonies. On October 2, 1972, in St. Francisville, Louisiana, the Virginia Craftsmen, dressed in their uniforms, laid a wreath at the grave of a deceased Mason, John E. Hart. Brother Hart was a Federal Naval officer during the American Civil War and died while his ship was shelling St. Francisville in 1863. A Masonic Lodge in the area was requested to bury Brother Hart with Masonic honors. They acted in true brotherhood and carried out this request. Over 100 years later the Virginia Craftsmen were proud to be a part of the rededication ceremony of the tombstone of Brother Hart at the cemetery at Grace Episcopal Church in this Louisiana community.

On October 27, 1987, Donald Maynard Robey, Grand Master of Masons in Virginia, on behalf of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, agreed to rededicate the Robert E. Lee monument on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia. Most Worshipful Brother Robey asked the Virginia Craftsmen to dress in their uniforms and assist him in this rededication ceremony. It was recorded by Allen Roberts in his history of the Virginia Craftsmen that the falling rain on this occasion did not dampen the spirits of the participants or the mood of the large number of people gathered to witness these proceedings.

I believe the secret to the longevity of the Virginia Craftsmen was the existence of a core group of members in this association that believed strongly in this group's purpose that was adopted back on September 11, 1962. They were always willing to take time out of their busy schedules to travel to other Lodges and to other Grand Jurisdictions to carry out their work. They were never heard complaining about the paying of their own expenses. Another very important key, if not the most important, to the success of the Craftsmen, was the excellent support given to the Masons of this group by their ladies. These Masons and their ladies enjoyed being a part of this exciting association that always attempted to put the Brotherhood of Freemasonry in action.

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On July 17, 1993, the Virginia Craftsmen met at the Airport Hilton Hotel in Richmond, Virginia, for a banquet. Most Worshipful Matthew Lyle Lacy, II, who served as Grand Master of Masons in Virginia in 1979, was the special speaker. On this special night Dr. Lacy reminded the Craftsmen, their ladies, and families, that he had been with them in Vincennes, Indiana in 1979, when they helped the Hoosiers celebrate the 200th anniversary of the freeing of Fort Sackville by the Virginia Mason, George Rogers Clark.

This banquet was a fine event, but no one there realized that this would be the final activity in the long history of the Virginia Craftsmen. Old age was catching up with many of the members of the Craftsmen, and there had been other faithful members taken from this group by death. The President, Allen E. Roberts, had been slowing down because of poor health, and no one wanted to attempt to fill his shoes as the leader of the Craftsmen. Therefore, in March of 1997, when Allen E. Roberts died, so died the Virginia Craftsmen.

The source of this paper is "Brotherhood in Action!" the story of the Virginia Craftsmen 1962-1994, by Allen E. Roberts, 1994.