

The Fredericksburg Masonic Cemetery

Daniel W. Thompson

Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

August 18, 2018

During my last visit, I spoke about the history of the Fredericksburg Masonic Lodge and some of its patriotic members. Today I'd like to give you a little background on the oldest Masonic Cemetery in the U.S. One of the most historic spots in the Fredericksburg community is the Masonic Cemetery, located in the heart of the city at Charles & George Streets.

Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4 acquired the land from an early member of the Lodge, Brother James Somerville, as recorded in a deed, dated April 5, 1784 . . . 234 years ago. He was a merchant of Scottish decent and an early mayor of Fredericksburg, serving 3 terms between 1784 and 1793.

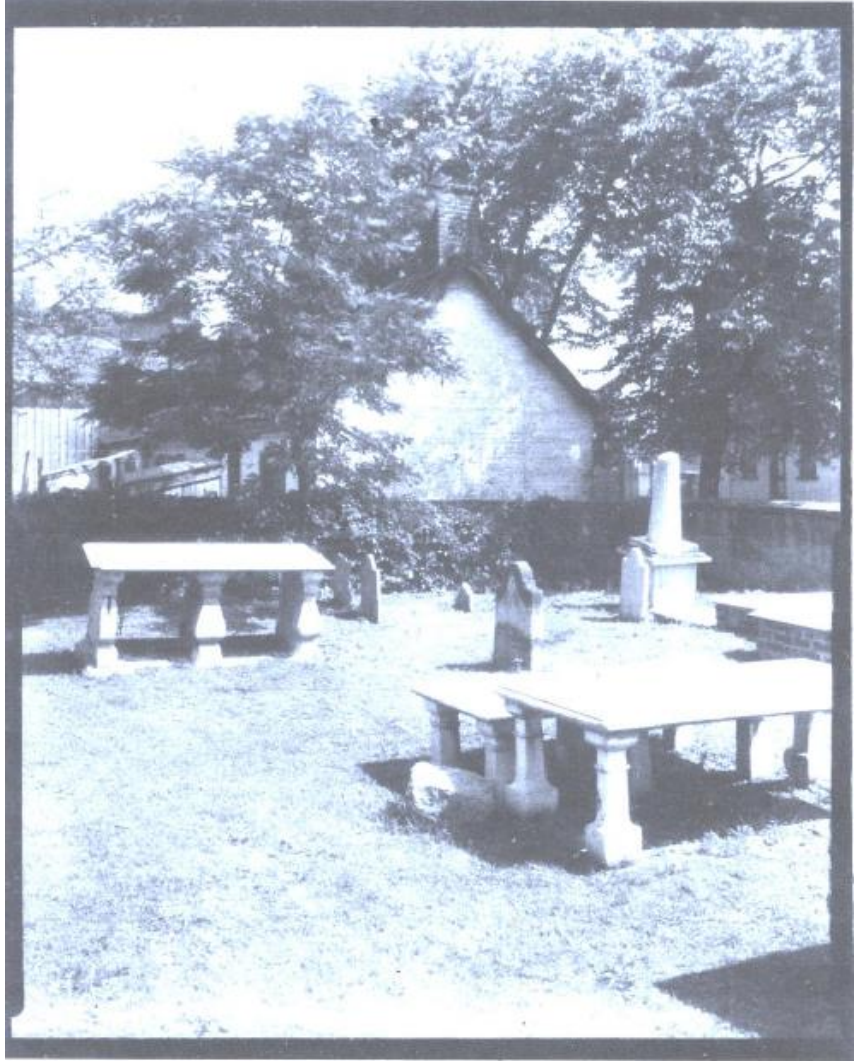
The original plans for the lot called for the construction of a permanent Lodge building, which unfortunately never happened. In 1799, due to some political differences, some members of Lodge No. 4 withdrew and organized the Fredericksburg American Lodge No. 63. They purchased a lot at the corner of William and Liberty Streets to be used as their burying ground.

American Lodge No. 63 became defunct during the Civil War and its holdings were acquired by Lodge No. 4. In 1937 there was a newspaper report that described this cemetery as 'much neglected'. Many of the old grave stones had fallen or were broken as to be unidentifiable.

The Fredericksburg Masonic Cemetery – Daniel W. Thompson

In 1954, the remains of graves with surviving stones and the headstones were moved to the Fredericksburg Masonic Cemetery, and the old site was sold for commercial development.

In 1991 a member of Lodge No. 4, Robert Hodge, took on the task of producing a plat and trying to identify each headstone in the cemetery. For reference sources he used the book *Minor Sketches of Major Folks* by Dora Jett, published in 1928 by Dominion Press; and the



**The Fredericksburg Masonic Cemetery
Library of Congress Archives – 1927**

Spotsylvania County Works Progress Report, Volume 2, prepared about 1937. Other sources included the local newspaper files and the Rappahannock Library. This work includes information on 234 graves.

In the early 1900's, the Lodge wanted to raise funds to build a Masonic Temple and Memorial to George Washington on the site of the cemetery. Two problems. First, the Lodge attempted to raise funds from Masons all across the U.S. only to have our wrist

The Fredericksburg Masonic Cemetery – Daniel W. Thompson

slapped by the Grand Lodge. A ruling in 1907 stated it was un-Masonic to solicit funds outside of our own jurisdiction, without the Grand Master's permission.

The other problem was the Lodge wanted to move several of the remains interred to another location in the cemetery to allow room to build the Temple. This resulted in a law suit by one of the heirs, which ended up in the Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia and was decided in favor of the heirs.

Currently, the cemetery is under the care of the Lodge's Building & Grounds Committee and on a regular basis the grass is cut and the weeds trimmed. As caretakers, we are honored to care for the final resting place for many of Fredericksburg's great and near great.

Time doesn't permit me to discuss all 234 graves, but I'd like to mention a couple.

Robert Brooke

b. 1751 d. February 25, 1799

Governor of Virginia, Lawyer. Born at "Mansfield" in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, in 1751 to Richard and Ann Taliaferro Brooke. The second son of four children. He was educated at Edinburgh University in Scotland.

He joined Captain Larkin Smith's company of cavalry, and was captured by the British at Westham near Richmond in 1781. After the war, he returned to Spotsylvania County and began to practice law, later moving that practice to Fredericksburg. In 1766 he married Mary Ritchie Hopper and settled on an estate that would later be known as "Federal Hill".

The Fredericksburg Masonic Cemetery – Daniel W. Thompson

Robert would represent Spotsylvania County in the House of Delegates from 1791 to 1794. In 1794 Virginia Governor Henry Lee left office to command the Federal Army at the Whiskey Rebellion and the assembly elected Robert Brooke to replace Henry Lee as Governor of Virginia. Robert was elected to a second, one-year term in 1795. Following his second term as Governor, he was elected to replace James Innes as Attorney General of Virginia in 1796 and served this position until his death in 1799.

Robert was a member of Fredericksburg Lodge #4 and in November, 1795 succeeded John Marshall as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Virginia.

General John Minor

b. May 13th, 1761 d. June 8th, 1816 at Richmond

"He was as brave a man and as true a patriot as ever lived." William Wirt.

General John Minor was born in 1761 at the home of his ancestors, Topping Castle, Caroline County, and died in 1816. He became a soldier of the Revolution when he was a young boy. He was a fine lawyer, an engaging and warm-hearted citizen. In the war of 1812, he was given the title of General.

When General Minor was a member of the Virginia House of Delegates, it is said he introduced the first bill in the General Assembly for the emancipation of slaves. This he did in 1782, in Richmond.

He was the uncle of Matthew F. Maury, and an intimate friend of James Monroe. General Minor was the first Commonwealth Attorney of Fredericksburg. He built "Hazel Hill", located at the lower end of Princess Ann Street. This property is now owned by the Shannons.

The Fredericksburg Masonic Cemetery – Daniel W. Thompson

At the time of his death, he was in Richmond attending to some professional engagements, he was taken sick and after an illness of two days he died.

After his death his family occupied the house now owned and occupied by Mr. C. Wister Braxton, located on lower Main Street, or as called many years ago "Lovers Lane". Matthew F. Maury was a frequent visitor to the house.

Benjamin Day

b. September 24th, 1762 at London d. February 16th, 1821

"He removed to this county early in life and took an active part in the Revolution, having served with credit as an officer of the American Army. A great portion of his time since has been devoted to the public in discharging the duties of magistrate, in which he was un-commonly zealous and useful. The Male Charity School of Fredericksburg is chiefly indebted for its prosperity to his unremitting attention in the principal management of its concerns, over which he presided until the time of his death."

Major Benjamin Day was twice Mayor of Fredericksburg, warden, and vestryman in Saint George's Church. He was a real philanthropist. He served in the Revolutionary War as aide de camp to General Woodford and Lord Stirling. He was adjutant of the Second Virginia Regiment in 1777.

He was an enthusiastic Mason and was one of the seven Grand Masters for the Grand Lodge of Virginia, furnished by Fredericksburg Lodge, having been elected to that office, November 27, 1797.

Lewis Littlepage

Go to the old Masonic cemetery in Fredericksburg, and in a far corner, where the wild vines and the hardy grass struggle for mastery, you may see a legend inscribed upon a large flat stone:

This is the tomb of Lewis Littlepage. For the multitude, it is simply an unpleasant finale to the life of a well-known man. To the imaginative, it starts a train of thought – a play of fancy. One sees the rise of the star of Poland. Gay youths and maids pass and repass to the sound of music and laughter. The clank of a sword sounds above the measured foot fall on a polished floor. A soldier passes in all the bravery of uniform. It is General Littlepage silently going to an audience with the King of Poland. The massive doors open without a challenge, for as a passport to the palace, on the uniform of this soldier glitters a large gold key – the gift of Saint Stanislaus.

Suddenly the scene changes. Amid the surging hosts and in the thick of the bloody clash at Prague, when the anguish of uncertainty was crumbling . . . the courage of a kingdom, a man is seen, riding with reckless abandon. Tearing through the lines and holding aloft the tattered standard of Poland, comes Littlepage of Virginia. With the rallying cry of his adopted land, he gathers up his troops and gloriously defends the flag he loves. Our eyes again stray to the legend on the tomb: Disillusionment!

His return to his old home! His death! We see this also, but with this is the knowledge that he lived greatly, and in his ears, while dying, sounded again, the shout of victory, while his heart held the dream of the old romance.