

## The Origins and Purpose of the Virginia Craftsmen

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Worshipful Master and brethren, it is a great honor to appear with you today. I last visited Virginia Research Lodge #1777 while serving as Master of Williamsburg Lodge #6 in December 1992. It also is great to be back here in the Babcock Masonic Building, where I spent many fun evenings while visiting W. Lance Walker DeMolay Chapter. So, it has been a while, but I see a lot of familiar and friendly faces here.

Even though I live in Illinois, I have followed Virginia Masonry very closely. I was raised in Lee Lodge #209 in 1983, which is the home of our Grand Senior Deacon Terry Ellison, who taught me my catechisms. In 1986, I joined Widow's Sons' Lodge #60 while I was in graduate school, and became friends with a brand-new member named Jeff Hodges, who will be our Grand Master this November. In 1987, I joined Williamsburg Lodge #6, and one of my mentors was our Grand Senior Warden Bill Rorrer Jr. So, I consider myself pretty lucky to be a lodge brother of three of our Grand Officers.

I first got to know your Worshipful Master two years ago through my close friend, Dee Novak, whom I have known for 35 years. When Worshipful Newhall learned that I belonged to the Virginia Craftsmen, he asked me to present a program about them. I have chosen to title this paper The Origins and Purpose of the Virginia Craftsmen. So, here I stand in the Virginia Craftsmen uniform that I received 22 years ago, although I have to admit that I think the waistband has shrunk a little, because it feels a little tight!

During the next few minutes, I would like to speak about why Allen Roberts founded the Virginia Craftsmen, and how its origins were based on the many examples of brotherhood during the Civil War.

At Grand Lodge in 1983, while I was State Master Councilor of Virginia DeMolay, I noticed a distinguished man wearing a medallion with a Confederate flag on it. Being a son of the South, I approached him and asked about it. He said that it was the medallion of the Virginia Craftsmen, and I was instantly fascinated by such an organization. That was my first meeting with renowned author and Right Worshipful Brother Allen Roberts.

### **What is this organization and why was it formed? What does it commemorate?**

Let us turn back to a stated meeting of Babcock Lodge #322, held on February 20, 1962, three days before I was born. At that stated meeting, fifty years after the lodge's founding, it was announced that the Glasgow Compass Travel Association of Scotland would visit in July. Many preparations were made during the ensuing months for the largest Masonic event ever held in Virginia.

On July 20, 1962, by a special dispensation, Babcock Lodge held a called Communication at the Richmond arena. Together with the Grand Officers, approximately 6000 Masons attended from virtually every state in the union, as well as at

least seven foreign countries. The 74-man delegation from Scotland was piped into the auditorium, assumed the lodge stations, and then conferred the Master Mason's degree. In subsequent days, the Scottish brethren participated in many other Masonic gatherings across Virginia. Moved by the beauty of the ritual work and by the brotherhood exemplified by the Scottish degree team, Brother Roberts and the members of Babcock Lodge proposed to form a similar association of Virginia Masons. From July until September, committees were formed to determine how best to create this organization.

On September 11, 1962, sixteen Masons met and decided to form the new association. Acting with the permission of the Grand Master, Grand Secretary, and Grand Lecturer, the association would be open to all Master Masons. Most of them were from Babcock Lodge, but the association also had a strong following from the Albemarle County area. Although the team would travel under the charter and sponsorship of Babcock Lodge, it would be an independent group.

Brother Roberts stated the group's purpose best in the book, The Diamond Years, "The name selected for the new group was the 'Virginia Craftsmen'. The primary purpose of the Craftsmen would be to put Brotherhood into action. The dress for the members of the team would be a Confederate cavalry-type gray uniform, trimmed in gold. This would graphically depict the purpose for the group's existence – to perpetuate a remembrance of the many acts of Brotherly Love performed by the Masons who wore the blue and gray during the American Civil War."

How did the Craftsmen put Brotherhood into action? By exemplifying excellent degree work, and spreading Virginia Masonic Brotherhood throughout the United States and "traveling in foreign countries" as our ritual states. The Craftsmen took a great deal of pride in their ritual, and counted many members of the Committee on Work in its membership, including former Grand Lecturer Harland Phelps. During the next thirty-odd years, the Craftsmen performed the Master Mason's Degree for many Virginia lodges, as well as in Kentucky; Connecticut, Ohio, New Jersey, Georgia, Vermont, Maryland, North Carolina, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, California, and Arizona. They also visited three Canadian provinces, as well as making several trips to Scotland.

### **What was the source of Brother Roberts' inspiration? And what did he mean by the many acts of Brotherly Love during the Civil War?**

One of the first examples of Masonic brotherhood in the Civil War occurred in June 1861. The Grand Master of Iowa, Thomas H. Benton, Jr., became the occupation commander of Little Rock, Arkansas, and immediately placed a guard of Union troops around the home of famous Scottish Rite Mason and Confederate General Albert Pike in order to save his valuable Masonic library from destruction.

One of the most unique Masonic events occurred in August 1861, when a Union regiment captured three Missouri Confederate sympathizers attempting to burn a bridge. The three were sentenced to death immediately, but before the sentence could be carried out, a

young girl appeared on the scene and pleaded for the life of one of the captives, saying he was her brother. She then jumped in front of the firing squad, but was quickly pulled away. Before the order of "fire" could be given, she made one more attempt. Breaking away to stand in front of the firing squad again, she stood still and gave the Grand Hailing Sign of a Master Mason. A Masonic captain in the Union regiment then came forward and postponed the execution until the following morning. Immediately following the postponement, some Masons in the regiment then took the girl away and examined her Masonically, finding that she had somehow received all three Masonic degrees. She explained that she and her brother had just arrived from Ireland, where her father was Master of his lodge. After the Masonic examination, the young girl and her brother were placed under a strong guard. However, the next morning, the regiment discovered that they had escaped during the night. The mystery of their escape was never solved; did it have something to do with their Masonic affiliation?

In September 1861, the Masonic college in Lexington, Missouri, was used as a fortress by a Union regiment from Illinois during a three-day siege. The Confederate commander was Brother and General Sterling Price, who apparently had no reservations about firing cannons and muskets at a building adorned with the square and compasses.

In July 1862, just before the battle of McMinnville, Tennessee, Brother and General Nathan Bedford Forrest made his headquarters at the home of Brother William Lusk. Just before he left, Forrest paroled four Union soldiers. The next day, one of the parolees returned with Union cavalry in an attempt to find out where Forrest had gone. The commanding officer demanded of Brother Lusk, "What time of day, sir, did General Forrest leave here yesterday?" Brother Lusk replied, "I declare I don't know." The officer said sharply, "Sir, your memory is very short. Didn't he leave here at precisely twelve o'clock?". The officer angrily pointed his pistol at Brother Lusk's head, who gave the Grand Hailing Sign of distress. The officer then jumped off his horse, took Brother Lusk by a strong grip, and stood there with him until the Union cavalry left.

Numerous cases of Masonic heroism occurred on battlefields. Recalling later the battle of Stone's River, Tennessee, an Ohio Mason wrote how the Confederates charged his line with bayonets, at which point all his comrades but him ran away. Literally on the point of a bayonet, he gave the time-honored request for help for a widow's son. The Confederate soldier lowered the bayonet pointed at him, and spared his life by capturing him instead. Many times, after battles, soldiers heard Masonic cries for help, and went between the battle lines to save wounded Masons of both sides.

During the battle of Shiloh, a Union cavalry regiment occupied a nearby town. The regiment's colonel rode by the town's Masonic temple, noticed that his troops had pillaged it, ordered them to return the property, and then posted a guard around it. Unknown to him, a concealed Confederate soldier and fellow Mason observed the scene. That night, after posting pickets outside of town, the Union colonel returned to his lodging. Unknown to him, a squad of Confederates were lying in ambush along the road. Just as the Confederates were preparing to open fire on the Union colonel, one of them recognized him as the person who had saved the Masonic temple, and ordered the other

squad members not to fire. Completely unaware of his narrow escape, he heard about it a few days later from a captured Confederate Mason.

Brother Joseph Fort Newton, a Texas Confederate, was captured and imprisoned at Rock Island, Illinois. After he became deathly ill in the prison camp, he was befriended by a Union officer who was a Mason, and was nursed back to health. After the war, the Brother Union officer gave him money and a gun, and saw him off for Texas. Brother Newton later wrote, "The fact that such a fraternity of men could exist, mitigating the harshness of war, and remain unbroken when states and churches were torn in two, became a wonder; and it is not strange I tried for years to repay my debt to it."

During the war, the military draft was so unpopular in the North that civilians looted and burned the Masonic temple in Port Washington, Wisconsin, because Masons were thought to be the cause of the draft. Many southern government buildings were spared the usual burning by Union soldiers because of Masonic ties. In Emporia, Virginia, the county clerk evacuated the courthouse when Union soldiers arrived, and placed his Masonic apron on the desk. After the soldiers left, he returned to find that it was the only building in town left standing.

Another example occurred in Mississippi in 1863, when Union soldiers began looting a Mason's home in preparation for burning it. Upon finding a Masonic apron in a drawer, a soldier alerted his superior, who ordered the house evacuated, guards placed around it, and offered an apology and compensation for the damage to the stricken family.

Perhaps the most famous Masonic act occurred at the Battle of Gettysburg. During Pickett's charge, Confederate General Lewis Armistead and Union General Winfield Scott Hancock, close friends and fellow Masons, led their troops into battle on Cemetery Ridge. Upon receiving a mortal wound, Armistead sent word to Hancock to come to his side, but Hancock was badly wounded also. Hancock ordered his staff member, Brother and Colonel Henry Bingham, to minister to Armistead. Before dying, Armistead passed his effects to Bingham. The scene is commemorated in a statue unveiled by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania on the battlefield three years ago.

During the war, the city of Winchester, Virginia, changed hands 72 times. By special dispensation of Union General Philip Sheridan, the lodge was allowed to begin working again in 1864. Even during the midst of bloody battles, Union and Confederate soldiers checked their guns at the door with the Tiler and met within as brethren. Future U.S. President William McKinley was made a Master Mason in Winchester during the war.

Many military lodges were formed during the war on both sides. National Zouave Lodge, organized at Fort Monroe, Virginia, invited the Masonic Confederate prisoners there to its meetings where they were enemies without its walls, but brethren within.

Here are some of my favorite stories about my own lodges:

A dreary rain was falling in Williamsburg on May 5, 1862. The cannons that had been

booming since the day before fell silent as the Confederates retreated from the invaders. Skirmishes occurred as marauding Yankees chased the retreating soldiers. Flames erupted from the Wren Building on the campus of William and Mary soon after the Yankees reached it. A company of Union soldiers advanced up Francis Street, searching each house, and taking any objects of value they found. The company reached the corner of Queen and Francis Streets, and entered the nondescript building on its north side. A flurry of activity occurred when a private reported back to the Union captain that it appeared to be a Masonic Temple. The Union captain looked at his gold ring with the square and compasses, and recalled his solemn vows as a Master Mason. Quickly, he posed his men in a cordon around the building with strict orders to let no one enter. In an attempt to preserve the records of the lodge, he took the oldest two manuscripts for safekeeping from looters. The next month, when his company was forced to retreat from Richmond, he delivered the manuscripts to Washington, where they were soon filed and forgotten. The two manuscripts were located in the Library of Congress in 1916 and 1938, respectively. It took two Acts of Congress to get the old minutes back to their rightful place in the lodge.

My hometown of Waynesboro was occupied on March 2, 1865, during a fierce battle. Brother Hunter McGuire, a Confederate doctor, attempted to escape, but his horse threw him. When he arose, he looked squarely into a carbine held by an angry Union soldier. He then gave the Grand Hailing Sign, at which a Union officer rode up, knocked the gun down, and took McGuire prisoner. Dr. McGuire then took the officer to a friend's house, where they had dinner. In return, the officer stopped the plundering and burning of the surrounding estate. During the battle of Waynesboro also, the Grand Master of Masons in Virginia, Colonel William Harman was killed in action.

The next day, March 3, 1865, Sheridan's men reached Charlottesville and occupied it. A few days later, Widow's Sons' Lodge was called upon to bury one of their members. Not wishing to be mistaken by Federal troops as an unlawful gathering, the Lodge sought permission from the commanding Union General to bury one of its members. The General had Masonic sympathies, and assured the Lodge that it would not be disturbed.

After the war, a group of Masons in Waynesboro decided to form their own lodge, and wrote to General Robert E. Lee asking his permission to name the new lodge after him. Lee Lodge #209 was chartered in 1867, and 116 years later, I was raised in that lodge.

Finally, brethren, I will close with a favorite story by Carl Claudy called "Three Dollars":

The Craftsmen of Tuscan Lodge were engaged in a mighty drive to secure pledges for the building of a new temple. Enthusiastic meetings were held, solicitation teams appointed, and lists of names and addresses compiled. Into the highways and byways went the solicitors, getting here a dollar, there a hundred, once or twice a thousand, often a ten-dollar pledge. Even in the Great Depression, men gave. To a certain printshop went one solicitor. The owner was a Mason, and gladly signed up for a hundred-dollar pledge. When the signature had been affixed to the blank, an old man setting type on a press approached the brother who had talked to his boss.

“Can I contribute?”, he asked, timidly. “Indeed you may!” was the delighted answer. “Although on my list, I have no other name of a brother in this shop.” “Oh, I’m not a Mason,” was the surprising answer. “I tried to be, but they wouldn’t have me. I wasn’t good enough, but I’d like to pledge anyway.” The solicitor brought forth his book of pledges. Somewhat nonplussed, he offered the blank to the man, who although he had been rejected, wanted to contribute. “I don’t want to sign anything” said the man. “I haven’t much. But I have a bill or so.” The man brought forth a wallet. From it, he took three one-dollar bills. “All I can afford,” he said. “But take it and welcome”.

The solicitor signed a receipt and handed it over. Then, still puzzled, he ventured: “Would you mind telling me why you, a non-Mason – indeed a rejected petitioner – should want to help us with our Temple? It seems rather – er – unusual”. “Sure, I’ll tell you. I’m pretty old. Older’n I look. The boss just keeps me on out of charity, I guess. When I was a kid of six down in Georgia, Sherman came through. War is hell, and he made it all of that. Burned everything – houses, farms, outbuildings, towns. Sherman’s Yankees came through our town. There was only me and sister – she was five – and Mother. We were all scared. We could see the smoke as the soldiers fired the houses on the one street of our little town. There was no place to go.”

“Mother was young and pretty, I guess, and she was afraid to go out. Afraid to run away – afraid to stay! She took sis and me down cellar. It was dark there, and cool. I guess she hoped they’d fire the house and go on, and we could escape unseen before it burned down over us. There was a lot of noise. Flames cracked in the house next to us. Men calling; feet overhead...seemed like the whole Yankee army paraded through our house. I remember sister crying, and Mother holding me tight, tight against her skirt. We heard furniture overturned, heavy steps – they climbed upstairs. There was silence for a minute of two. After that the steps overhead again...and a loud voice shouting ‘Out, out, I’ll attend to it, go fire the next house.’ The front door slammed. There were no more steps.”

“We cowered for hours, it seemed. At last, we went upstairs. I remember the house was a mess; chairs overturned, things strewn around...we went to the second floor. All the drawers were open, everything ransacked. The attic door stood open. Dad’s truck was there, open, Daddy was with General Lee. On top of the clothes in the trunk was something white. It had a blue edge, I remember. I didn’t know what it was. But Mother knew.”

“The white thing with the blue edge was a Masonic apron. The officer who found it must have been a Mason. He ordered his men out of our house, and said he’s ‘attend’ to burning it. But he didn’t. It was the only house in the town that wasn’t burned. He stopped for a moment, with tears in his eyes. “I wanted to be a Mason, but I was just a bum. They were quite right not to take me. But here’s my three dollars for that day long ago when Masonry saved by family”.

Brethren, that’s the true spirit of the bonds of Brotherhood that the Virginia Craftsmen have sought to commemorate since 1962. Thank you for the opportunity to be here!