

Thomas Jefferson and a Masonic Ceremony

Lewis A. Martin, Jr.

Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

September 23, 1989

Laying the Cornerstone of Central College

The topic which I originally submitted to the Worshipful Master, "Freemasonry in Charlottesville," is obviously too broad to be covered in the time allotted to me, and in the span of your tolerance, to hear from me. But I do want to talk with you this morning about two matters that have to do with Freemasonry in Charlottesville which you may find of interest and on one of which the evidence, while not as yet entirely conclusive, seems, nevertheless, to point to a rather final and definite conclusion.

The event about which I wish to speak is the laying of the cornerstone of what is now the University of Virginia, and the other matter is whether Thomas Jefferson - Mr. Jefferson to those of us who live in Charlottesville and Albemarle County - was ever a Freemason.

On August 9, 1817, a committee was appointed by Widow's Sons' Lodge No. 60 to act jointly with a similar committee from Charlottesville Lodge No. 90, in requesting the Visitors of Central College the privilege of laying the cornerstone of that institution. No further reference to this most interesting ceremony appears in the records of No. 60. But from the complete account of the occasion to be found in the records of No. 90, we are informed that permission for the Masonic bodies of Charlottesville to lay the cornerstone was obtained from Thomas Jefferson, one of the Visitors of Central College.

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The ceremony was conducted jointly on October 6, 1817, by the two lodges with the assistance of the Visitors of Central College, each Lodge bearing an equal share of the expenses.

The recorded proceedings of the ceremony and a report of those proceedings forwarded to the Grand Lodge of Virginia referred to the members of the two lodges who acted as officers for the occasion as Grand Officers. The Grand Lodge disapproved of the reference to these officers as Grand Officers and of the inscription of their names as such on the scroll deposited with the cornerstone, and therefore refused to sanction the publication of the ceremony. It did, however, publish the oration delivered on that occasion by Brother Valentine W. Southall, a member of No. 60.

The following article appears to have been prepared for the press and gives an interesting account of the ceremonies. The introduction was written by Bro. Valentine W. Southall and the narrative by Bro. Alexander Garrett of Charlottesville Lodge No. 90, who acted as Grand Master on this occasion:

Agreeably to previous announcement, the Masonic Societies of Charlottesville, Nos. 60 and 90, convened on Monday, 6th day of October to aid their fellow citizens of Albemarle and circumjacent counties in laying the cornerstone of the Central College, which by the liberality of the public and the generous aid of the State legislature, called for the above ceremony at an earlier day than was contemplated; it being only a month or two anterior to this occasion that the subscription papers were exhibited to the subscribers. The morning was fine and mild, and tho' at one period of the day the heavens were partially overclouded, yet it again broke off and nothing transpired to interrupt the pleasing and gratifying task.

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The interest which the public seemed to take in this effort of Virginia was to everyone a high and delightful evidence of the liberal spirit of our people - it was a sure presage that their aid and support will never be wanting in the advancement of learning and education - that their hearts and their purses are open to the great cause of humanity and the amelioration of the Condition of Man on Earth. It was the court day of the County and Superior Court of Albemarle, yet the judges descended from their Bench, the people deserted their temple of justice, the houses were shut, business of all kinds suspended, and in one rolling tide the multitude pressed to the spot where the first twig of science was to be planted. It was indeed a scene worthy of the best feelings of our nature - not only as to the cause which had summoned so large and respectable body of citizens together, but the further grateful phenomenon of witnessing in the precession two ex-Presidents and the present chief magistrate of the Union, forming three of the six Visitors, who by law are the guardians of the institution.

The societies having arrived at the site, a line was formed before the stone, the Worshipful Grand Master directly in front, the six Visitors (including with the above gentlemen Genii John H. Cocke, Mr. David Watson and Mr. Jos. C. Cabell) on his right; the Corn bearers on his left; the Principal Architect, Orator and aid facing the Grand Master in front.

The ceremony was opened with an appropriate invocation from the Revd. Dr. King to the throne of Almighty God that He would assist and protect the undertaking.

An anthem was then sung, after which the Right Worshipful Grand Master said: "Gentlemen you have been pleased to grant to us, the Masonic order, the high and important privilege of laying the cornerstone of this building, will you further

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indulge us with your aid and participation on this interesting occasion?" The Visitors signifying their assent, the Right Worshipful Grand Master proceeded: "May Almighty God, without invocation to whom, no work of importance should be begun, protect this college, the object of which institution is to instill into the minds of youth principles of sound knowledge, to inspire them with the love of religion and virtue and prepare them for filling the various situations in society with credit to themselves and benefit to their country."

The Architect assisted by a brother next placed the stone in its bed. The secretaries then deposited in the stone a phial containing a piece of parchment on the one side of which was written, "Laid by Lodges No. 60 and 90 on the sixth day of October A.L. 5817 A.D. 1817. Alexander Garrett, Right Worshipful Grand Master, Allen Dawson, Deputy Grand Master and Substitute, Rev. William King, Grand Chaplain, John M. Perry, Architect;" on the opposite side, "Visitors of the Central College, James Monroe, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John H. Cocke, Joseph C. Cabell, David Watson." The different metals were next deposited. The stone having been settled in its bed by the Architect and aid, the Architect presented the Deputy Grand Master with the square, plumb and level, who in like manner presented them to the Right Worshipful Grand Master saying, "Right Worshipful Grand Master, I present you with these implements used by our ancient fraternity, with which you will please proceed to ascertain the fitness of this stone." The Right Worshipful Grand Master on receiving the same presented them to the Visitors of the Central College saying, "Gentlemen, will you, if you please, apply this square, plumb and level to this stone and ascertain its fitness?" Then James Monroe, the Chief Magistrate of the United States received the same and applied them severally to the stone, after which he returned them to the Right Worshipful Grand Master who in like manner applied them and striking the stone three times with the mallet said, "May the Grand Architect of the Universe grant a blessing on this foundation stone, which we have now laid, and by his providence enable us to finish this and

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every other work undertaken for the benefit of the Republic and perpetuity of our free institutions; Brethren, I pronounce this stone well formed, true and trusty." This was followed by three loud huzzas, after which the band played *Hail Columbia*.

The Right Worshipful Grand Master then received severally the vessels contain the corn, wine and oil, and addressing the Visitors of Central College said, "Gentlemen, as the scattering of corn and the pouring out of wine and oil on such occasions are a part of our ceremonies, with you leave, I will proceed to perform that duty." The Visitors signifying their assent, the Right Worshipful Grand Master scattered the corn and poured out the wine and oil on the stone, saying, "May the all bountiful Author of Nature bless the inhabitants of Virginia and particularly the guardians of this our infant institution, with all the necessaries, conveniences and comforts of life, increase their love of knowledge and liberty, give them energy to prosecute their present undertaking, to the credit of themselves, the advancement of our youth, and the security of our liberties. Assist in the erection and completion of this building, protect the workmen against every accident and long preserve the structure from decay, and grant to us all in needed supply the Corn of Nourishment, the Wine of Refreshment and Oil of Joy. - Amen."

The Right Worshipful. Grand Master then addressed the Rev. Grand Chaplain saying, "Right Rev. Sir, have we here the first and greatest light of Masonry?"

The Grand Chaplain replied, "I hold it in my hand Right Worshipful Grand Master."

The Right Worshipful Grand Master: "What instruction does it give upon this occasion?"

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Rev. Grand Chaplain replied, "Thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation, a cornerstone, a tried stone, a precious stone, a sure foundation. Judgement also will I lay to the line and righteousness to the plummet, for behold, the stone I have laid before Joshua, upon one stone shall be seven eyes, behold - I will engrave the engraving thereof saith the Lord of Hosts. Bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord - lift up your hands in the sanctuary and bless the Lord, the Lord that made Heaven and Earth bless thee out of Zion."

Bro. Valentine W. Southall the orator of the day was then conducted by his aid to an eminence prepared for the occasion and from whence he addressed the audience.

The Right Rev. Grand Chaplain then offered up an appropriate prayer invoking prosperity and perpetuity to the institution.

The Right Worshipful Grand Master then addressing the Visitors of the Central College, said "Gentlemen, the Masonic societies, having exercised your kind privilege granted them by laying, with your aid, the cornerstone of this structure, beg leave to offer you their best wishes for its prosperity and your individual health and happiness."

Thus closed the ceremony which will long live in the recollection of those who witnessed it, when the societies with the Visitors of the Central College, Judges and Gentlemen of the bar repaired to the Stone House in the town of Charlottesville and sat down to a dinner prepared for the occasion, where reigned an undisturbed feeling of pleasure and harmony that welcomed in the approaching evening.

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A more recent condensed account of the cornerstone laying ceremony appears in Philip Alexander Bruce's History of the University of Virginia 1819-1919, Volume 1, pp. 189-90:

The morning that was to witness the ceremony of laying the cornerstone was at first fair, but the clouds later on began to gather; happily, however, only to disperse and leave the weather clear again. The County and Superior Courts, with their promiscuous attendance of citizens, set upon business and amusement, were in session Charlottesville; but when informed of the impending event, the judges left the bench, and accompanied by the crowd of hangers-on, repaired to the scene. The doors of all the stores were locked, private houses shut up, and the entire population of the little town darkened the road to the College. They were animated, some by an interest in learning, some by a spirit of diversion, and some, perhaps, by a desire to gaze at a group of three men composed of two former Presidents of the United States, Jefferson and Madison, and the present incumbent of that office, Monroe . . .

The cornerstone was laid with the customary state by Lodges 60 and 90. Rev. William King was the chaplain, John M. Perry, the architect, and Alexander Garrett, the worthy Grand Master. President Monroe applied the square and plumb, the chaplain asked a blessing on the stone, the crowd huzzaed, and the band played *Hail Columbia*. Corn was now scattered, and then Valentine W. Southall delivered the address to the general audience. With the grand-master's address to the Visitors, the ceremony was concluded.

Was Thomas Jefferson A Freemason?

Now, as to whether Thomas Jefferson was ever a Freemason. It is interesting to note that no Masonic designation is given to any of the six Visitors, although we know that James Monroe had been made a Mason in Williamsburg Lodge No. 6.

It may be that since Mr. Jefferson had given permission to the Masonic bodies of Charlottesville to conduct the ceremony just described and had participated in that ceremony as one of the Visitors of Central College, the assumption was made and handed down over the years that he was a Mason.

My mentor in Masonic Research was M. W. William Moseley Brown, PGM of Masons in Virginia and a charter member and Past Master of this lodge. In his work, George Washington Freemason, 1962, he states: ". . . there is considerable contemporary evidence to indicate that [Thomas] Jefferson was himself was a Mason," but he provides no evidence or even any footnote or appendix reference to substantiate this assertion, which standing alone, is nothing more than mere speculation.

I suspect that the notion that Thomas Jefferson was a Freemason is, in truth, mere wishful thinking that a person as great and talented as was Thomas Jefferson, particularly in the fields of art and architecture, and who was associated with so many prominent personages who were Masons, such as George Washington, James Monroe, Benjamin Franklin, General Lafayette, and his neighbor and personal secretary, Meriwether Lewis, who was made a Mason in Door to Virtue Lodge No. 44 in Charlottesville, to name a few, must himself have been a member of the Fraternity.

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While I was attending the Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in July of 1972, I went down to Independence, Missouri, one weekend to visit the Harry S. Truman Library. Among the displays relating to President Truman's many activities is one devoted to his Masonic career, which included service as Grand Master of Masons in Missouri. The Masonic display contained pictures of the various Presidents of the United States who were Masons, and included in the group was a picture of Thomas Jefferson.

I went over to the information desk which was occupied by a young girl and told her that I thought the picture of the Masonic presidents on display with Mr. Truman's Masonic memorabilia was in error to include Thomas Jefferson as having been a Mason. It appeared to me that she was probably a summer employee who was inexperienced, and she seemed taken aback that the accuracy of one of the exhibits was being challenged. I assured her that I was not faulting her about any possible mistake, and I suggested that she might want to make a note to have someone verify whether Thomas Jefferson was in fact a Mason.

During the years that have intervened since then, I have often wondered whether the display was ever corrected.

A few weeks ago I telephoned the director of the human Library and told him what I have just related to you. In response to my inquiry he has written me a letter in which he tells me that the displays in the library are changed from time to time. He included a picture postcard of the 1972 Masonic display and a copy of the group of pictures showing the Masonic presidents of the United States which was a part of the 1972 display. He said that the group of pictures was placed on display, not because it was historically accurate, but because it had belonged to President Truman and was one of the items he had with

him in the White House. He also sent me the text of a label from a more recent exhibit which indicated that there is no documented proof that Thomas Jefferson, James Madison or Abraham Lincoln were Masons, although legend has it that they were. So it seems that the original mistake in showing Thomas Jefferson as having been a Mason has now been corrected.

There were three lodges active in Albemarle County, Virginia, in close proximity to Mr. Jefferson's home at Monticello: Door to Virtue Lodge No. 44, established in 1795, its last recorded meeting being held on March 31, 1821; Widow's Sons' Lodge No. 60, which is still active; and that same Lodge having received a dispensation authorizing the temporary establishment of a lodge in the town of Milton, Albemarle County, Virginia, on October 17, 1799, with its charter being issued by the Grand Lodge of Virginia on December 17, 1799.

It seems almost inconceivable that if Thomas Jefferson was made a Mason in, or ever attended, a meeting of any of these lodges the records would have so indicated. That they do not is strong evidence in itself that Mr. Jefferson was not a Mason. Furthermore, there is no evidence or reference in any of his correspondence or other writings to indicate that he was a Freemason.

With the death a few years ago of Dumas Malone, Jefferson scholar and author of a five volume work on the life of Thomas Jefferson, the most outstanding authority on Thomas Jefferson living today in Charlottesville is Professor Merrill D. Peterson, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Virginia.

I spoke recently with Professor Peterson who said that he knew of nothing that would indicate or even suggest that Thomas Jefferson was ever a Freemason. He told me that

an exhaustive work is now in progress to edit all of the writings of Thomas Jefferson and has been completed through 1800. He said that the only reference he know to have been made by Mr. Jefferson on the subject of Freemasonry was in a letter to Bishop James Madison, written in Philadelphia on January 31, 1800, concerning Illuminatism and the views of its founder, Adam Weishaupt, a German professor of canon law in Bavarin.¹ The object of Illuminatism was, by the mutual assistance of its followers, to attain the highest possible degree of morality and virtue, and to lay the foundation for the reformation of the world by the association of good men to oppose the progress of moral evil. Its form of organization was modeled after that of the Masonic institution.² In his letter, Mr. Jefferson states:

. . . He [Weishaupt] says, no one ever laid a surer foundation for liberty than our grand master, Jesus of Nazareth. He believes the Freemasons were originally possessed of the true principles & objects of Christianity, and have still preserved some of them by tradition, but much disfigured . . . He proposed therefore to lead the Freemasons to adopt this object & to make the objects of their institution the diffusion of science and virtue.

But this single reference to Freemasonry by Mr. Jefferson in all of his correspondence and communications gives us no clue to substantiate the proposition that he was a Mason.

It may be too early to make a final judgment about whether Mr. Jefferson was or was not a Mason until the editing of all of his papers has been completed, but at this time the evidence seems to be that he was not.

¹ Thomas Jefferson, Writings, p. 1076, Compilation and notes by Merrill D. Peterson, 1984

² Mackey, Albert G., An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, Revised Edition, 1919, Vol. 1, p. 346

The Challenge of History

Although we have now reviewed the historic Masonic event in which Mr. Jefferson participated in his capacity as a Visitor of Central College, and have concluded that Mr. Jefferson was not a Mason, there is yet one further matter for our consideration.

History is more than a monument to the past, more than a road marker in the journey of human progress. It is interesting to know what has happened in the past, to have events and personages come alive in story and film, but the greatest contribution of history is in providing lessons for the living which will help us who live in the present learn from past events and the experiences of those who have gone before, how to make life more enjoyable and more productive.

The cornerstone laying ceremony we have reviewed today, I believe, provides a salutary message and lesson for all of us who are in attendance at this meeting. Masonic ritual and ceremonies are like a sermon for all who participate in and observe them - all the more so if they are presented with competence, proficiency and dignity.

I would, therefore, challenge each of you today, you who are leaders in your lodges, to heed the lessons of history and use the Masonic cornerstone ceremony as a means of generating interest in our fraternity. To do so will require achieving proficiency and competence in performing that ceremony, and also, in following the example of our earlier brethren, in requesting permission to perform such services. We may not have judges leaving the bench and the doors of all stores locked, private house shut up and the entire population of the town darkening the road to the site of the ceremony, but I believe that in failing to perform the Masonic cornerstone laying ceremony, we are missing an opportunity to ignite interest in and enthusiasm for Freemasonry that is sorely needed if our fraternity is to flourish.

There may be, indeed there are, other things that we can and should do to insure the survival of organized Freemasonry, but I do not believe we can or should do less than make history come alive through a renewal of the art and craftsmanship of cornerstone laying by Masonic lodges. Cornerstones previously laid by Masonic lodges should not become as tombstones - monuments to a craftsmanship that is dying, but rather markers to a vital and a living craft.

We owe it to those who labored before us to thus keep Freemasonry alive and flourishing.