

Chapter X

The Hand of the Great Architect

THE SINEWS OF STRENGTH

The Grand Master whose privilege it was to usher in the new century was William Polk, elected to succeed Davie on December 4, 1799 and re-elected on December 3, 1800. Unlike Davie, who had been a Mason for less than a year at the time of his elevation to the highest office, Polk's affiliation with the Craft dated back to the time of his initiation at Phoenix Lodge in Fayetteville toward the end of 1789.' He had later become a member of Phalanx Lodge at Charlotte, to which he belonged at the time of his election as Grand Master.²

Serving with Polk on the Grand Lodge in his first term were Montfort Stokes and Waightstill Avery as Senior and Junior Wardens, Robert Williams as Grand Secretary and Henry Potter as Treasurer. Acting in the place of James Glasgow, the suspended Deputy Grand Master, was John Louis Taylor, one of the special judges appointed to preside at the trials of Glasgow and the other defendants in the land-fraud case.' Edward Jones and William Duffy were appointed by Polk to the office of Grand Deacon. Absolom Tatom as Grand Pursuivant, Stephen Carney as Grand Marshal, Peter Casso as Steward, and Thomas Pound as Tyler. The only change made in Polk's second term

came as a result of John Winslow's election to the office of Junior Warden.⁴

The year 1799 was an especially heartening one to those who might have worried over whether the indictment of prominent Masons in North Carolina and Tennessee might have the effect of tarnishing the good reputation so carefully nurtured by the Craft in the preceding decades. The chartering of five new lodges in 1799 was an encouraging indication, there having been but one previous year in the history of North Carolina Masonry— 1797— when more new charters were issued.⁵ Following the chartering of Friendship Lodge No. 36 at Fort Barnwell in Craven County, the Grand Lodge authorized the erection of William R. Davie No. 37 at Lexington, Rising Sun No. 38 at Morganton, Davie No. 39 in Lewiston, and the hopeful new lodge at Raleigh known as Hiram No. 40, formed by those members of old Democratic No. 21 who had not been tangled in the web of the land-fraud.⁶ A charter for Polk No. 41 at Knoxville, Tennessee in 1800 was the last one issued by the “Grand Lodge of North Carolina and Tennessee” in the 18th century.⁷

With a strong Grand Lodge and growing membership, it was clear by 1800 that Masonry had not been damaged by the scandal and that it could look forward to an era of continued progress in North Carolina. But it was in the proceedings of the subordinate lodges that the best demonstration of this fact might be found.

PLUCKED FROM THE FLAMES

The rise of busy towns in the Piedmont and Mountain regions of North Carolina and the further growth of the older eastern communities was a stimulant to the further development of Masonry, but one that could not be gained without certain hazards. One of these was the ever-present danger of fire, the result of the clustering of large numbers of wooden frame buildings in places where fire-fighting equipment was primitive. This had not been a grave menace for the greater part of the 18th century, when buildings were not yet crowded together, but, as the 19th century approached, several North Carolina communities experienced destructive conflagrations. Masonic lodges, often located at a tavern or other structure in the most thickly-developed portion of a town, were not infrequently among the victims of this new hazard.

To review the minutes of the two lodges located at Wilmington is to appreciate the concern created among urban property-owners by the constant threat of a disaster against which there existed little or no effective safeguard. In the proceedings of St. John's No. 1 for April 26, 1798 appears this stark notation:

On the Night betwixt the 21st & 22nd April 1798 a fire broke out in a bakeshop occupied by a Mrs. Rhalph and in a few hours entirely consumed the whole square N.E. of the courthouse and many other buildings.⁸

Neither of the Masonic lodges appears to have lost property in the fire, although St. Tammany's, which on May 8th paid \$2.00 "to Kate for taking care of Jewels &c. belonging to this lodge in the late fire", may have had a narrow escape.⁹ In the fall of the same year the Secretary noted that there had been "No Lodge held in November on account of the conflagration."¹⁰ Again, however, St. Tammany's escaped injury.

The warning in the spring ought to have been better heeded. In the second fire, on October 31, 1798, St. John's No. 1 was a principal victim. A meeting had been called for November 1st to instruct representatives to the Grand Lodge and, although some members attended, it was found to be impossible to transact business for want of a quorum. The minutes for this meeting mention the "dreadfull calamity which befell this town by conflagration ... by which many of the Members were sufferers, and a great part of the furniture destroyed"¹¹ The doleful entry of November 29th, the next scheduled session, was that no lodge could be held for want of a lodge-room.¹²

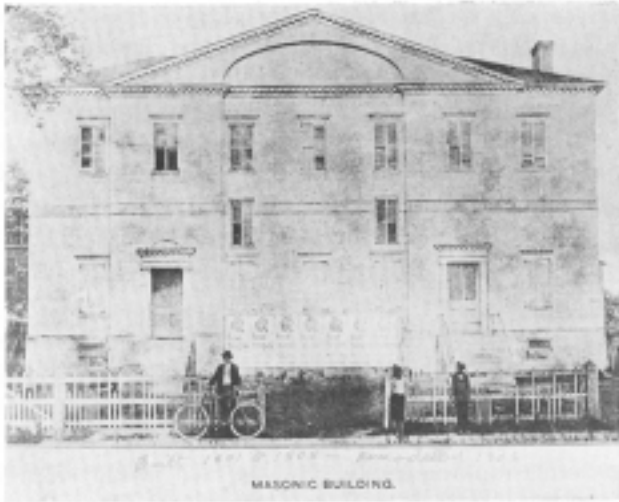
A curious instance of the dangers associated with fire was the experience of St. John's No. 3 at New Bern. The Masons of St. John's had begun holding meetings in a room of Tryon's Palace in October, 1792, had paid for repairs to the roof and windows in the summer of 1795, and were apparently well-settled there when, on the evening of February 27, 1798, a fire completely demolished the famous old structure.¹³ Perhaps because the Masons had held a meeting there earlier in the evening—and because some members of the lay community entertained paranoid ideas of what Masonry meant—suspicion fastened on members of St. John's Lodge as having deliberately razed the Palace¹⁴

Suspensions faded when it was learned that some of the property of the lodge had been lost in the fire and the remainder saved only because of the exertions of Brothers James McMains and Jacob Johnston. Further investigation established that the fire was probably started accidentally by a Negro woman who went into the basement that night with a torch to search for eggs in some hay stored there.¹⁵

The peril of fire underscored for many Masons, especially in the older eastern towns, the unwisdom of their dependency for lodge-rooms on the facilities of public-houses and other buildings over which they had no authority in such elemental matters as fire-protection. Unanimity Lodge at Edenton might meet, when not dormant, in the secure halls of the Chowan County court house, but most lodges had access to no such structure. The obvious solution to the problem of fire, for those lodges wealthy enough to afford it, was to build their own lodge-halls of fire-resistant materials and on lots where the danger of the structure being ignited from some adjacent building could be all but eliminated.

As far back as the spring of 1796, a committee had been formed by St. John's of New Bern to look for a lot on which to erect a new lodge-hall.¹⁶ Nothing had been decided, however, and on March 10, 1798, less than two weeks after the destruction of Tryon Palace, St. John's appointed a new building committee made up of Worshipful Master Francis Lowthrop, Wardens George Ellis and Francis L. Hawks, William McClure, Richard Hunley, William Johnston and Isaac Taylor.¹⁷ In September, this committee reported that it had selected two lots on Hancock and Johnston Streets near the Academy and that Mrs. Elizabeth Haslen was willing to sell them for \$250.00.¹⁸ An alternate proposal to use the old Palace grounds was set aside and, in the following March, Architect John Dewey was employed to draw up plans for a building of 50x36 feet.¹⁹ The cornerstone of the new lodge-hall, a brick structure, was laid at ceremonies on April 15, 1801 and the building was in use by the beginning of 1804.²⁰ An outstanding specimen of Georgian architecture, the hall still serves as the home of St. John's Lodge.

The plans for a lodge-hall at New Bern were paralleled by efforts to erect one at Wilmington. St. John's Lodge No. 1 at the latter town had also been contemplating the construction of its own building prior to the conflagration of 1798. A committee



New Bern Masonic Hall. Old photograph of Masonic Hall built for St. John's Lodge No. 3. The building was remodeled in 1903. (St. John's Lodge No. 3, New Bern).

charged with deciding whether to build or purchase was appointed in June, 1797, and on February 22, 1798 Brother Edward Jones, Solicitor-General of North Carolina and a member of this committee, conveyed to the lodge a proposal by Benjamin Smith of Brunswick that they purchase from him a house on Market Street.²¹ The St. John's brethren resolved to offer Smith up to \$1250.00, a profit of one-fourth over what they understood he had paid for it, but no bargain, was concluded with Smith and the plan was dropped.

This was the situation when the fire of October brought matters to a head. A new committee on buying or building was created at the end of 1798 but decided nothing.²² The problem was solved, however, in 1803 when Peter Carpenter gave the lodge a lot on Front Street on which a lodge-hall was soon afterward erected. Carpenter's will in 1810 left the lodge funds for a ten-foot high brick wall to enclose the lot.²³

A lodge that may have constructed its own quarters prior to the beginning of the 19th century, earlier than any other in North Carolina, was American George No. 17 at Murfreesboro. There are no existing deed records for Murfreesboro in the 18th century but the memoirs of a New England merchant who

traded seasonally in that town at the close of the century mention “a masonic hall” which “supplied the place of all public buildings” and where “Strolling companies of comedians sometimes displayed their talents.....”²⁴ The present hall in Murfreesboro was erected after the Civil War but the earlier structure seems to have been in use as late as the 1850’s.²⁵ Old Cone Lodge, it will be recalled, seems to have owned at least a half-interest in a lot on Bank Street in Salisbury in 1775, but it is doubtful that a lodge-hall was erected on it.²⁶

NOTABLES OF THE CRAFT

The ranks of North Carolina Freemasonry at the close of the 18th century included many men of achievement and distinction. Some of these, including governors, congressmen, justices and other ranking public officials, have already been introduced in the foregoing pages. There were others, however, whose abilities pointed in different directions and who, for that reason, are less well-known to later generations. The name of Dr. William McClure of New Bern, for example, long a zealous advocate of Masonry, is preserved in ancient records as the inventor, in the 18th century of “a new kind of boat”.²⁷ That of Francis Lister Hawks of the same town is renowned as North Carolina’s ablest 19th century historian.²⁸ Sometimes the names on the Masonic rolls are not all that they appear to be. The “Thomas Jefferson” who occasionally visited Royal White Hart Lodge around the close of the century was only a Northampton County farmer²⁹ and John Kennedy of New Bern became a Master Mason at St. John’s No. 3 only eight days after Richard Nixon had been raised to Fellow Craft in the same lodge.³⁰ Brother Stephen Bastard of Halifax seems to have been a model citizen.³¹

Many of the leading Masons were physicians and some of these became important figures in the early history of the nation. Dr. John Sibley of Fayetteville, Master of Phoenix Lodge in 1798,³² was a versatile New Englander who settled in North Carolina shortly after the Revolution, in which he had been a surgeon’s mate.³³ At Fayetteville, Dr. Sibley was editor of the Fayetteville Gazette and a leading man of affairs for almost twenty years before he left for what was then the French territory of Louisiana in 1802 on a business trip.³⁴ He became so attracted to the lower Mississippi region that he decided to make

his home there and was afterward an invaluable source of information when the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon in 1804.³⁵ Dr. Sibley's reports to Jefferson's government on the Indians, languages, flora, fauna, geography, climate, and other particulars of the Mississippi and southwestern regions provided abundant data and led to his appointment in 1805 as Indian Agent. He was later a judge, state legislator and militia colonel as well as one of the foremost pioneers of the American Great Plains.³⁶

Curiously parallel was the life of Dr. Calvin Jones who, with John Sibley, attended the Grand Lodge of 1799 in Raleigh.³⁷ Dr. Jones was an agriculturalist, military leader, newspaper editor, and political figure as well as one of the foremost medical men of his day. He was born in Sheffield, Massachusetts in 1775 and settled in Smithfield, North Carolina in 1795.³⁸ He was one of the founders of the Medical Society of North Carolina in 1799³⁹ and an early advocate of vaccination for smallpox.⁴⁰ He published widely on such topics as the treatment of scarlet fever and kept extensive journals on his practice. He was co-founder of the Raleigh Star, mayor of Raleigh, adjutant-general of North Carolina, major general of militia, and a trustee of the University of North Carolina. He died in Tennessee in 1846.~'

There were numerous other outstanding physicians among the Masons of North Carolina as the 19th century approached, such as John C. Osborne of New Bern, Nathaniel W. Hill of Wilmington, John Umstead of Hillsborough, and others.⁴² Perhaps it was the rationalistic flavor of Masonic teachings which attracted to the Craft the only members of the 18th century community who might fairly be described as scientists.

THE DEATH OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

The death of former President Washington on December 4, 1799 was an event of special significance for the Masons of North Carolina. Many were still living who had shivered with him through the winter at Valley Forge and fought beside him at Brandywine and Germantown. Fresh in the memory of these and others was Washington's visit to North Carolina in 1791 and the gala receptions for him at Halifax, New Bern, Wilmington, and other places. In a nation of a little over five million people, a sizeable proportion had, at one time or

another, met the General personally, heard him speak, applauded his carriage down a muddy street, or glimpsed his tall figure spurring a mount between field headquarters. Probably not before the introduction of radio on a wide scale would a president be as widely and immediately experienced by so large a percentage of the citizens of the country.

Still, in a time of slow communication, it was almost two weeks before North Carolinians had been generally informed of the death of the first president. At Halifax, the brethren of Royal White Hart Lodge, meeting on December 27th, were “informed of the death of our beloved Brother George Washington Grand Master [sic] of the United States.”⁴³ The members resolved to wear white crepe on their left arms for a period of one month.⁴⁴ On January 22nd, Washington’s birthday, the lodge gathered at 11 a.m. and marched to the church to attend divine services and hear a funeral oration by Chaplain James L. Wilson.⁴⁵ But a recommendation from the Grand Lodge that all Masons wear a black scarf on their left arms for sixty days was declined at Halifax due to the arrangements previously made.⁴⁶

These lacklustre proceedings were put to shame at Wilmington, where formal Masonic announcement of Washington’s death came at a meeting of St. Tammany’s No. 29 on January 1, 1800. Here, the Masons concluded to wear a white ribbon on the left arm for ninety days, “and shou’d any further mourning be order’d by Congress, this Lodge will wear it in addition to the white ribbon.”⁴⁷ When the Grand Lodge recommendation was received, St. Tammany’s promptly resolved further to wear the black crepe, or “Love Ribbon”, along with the white ribbon.⁴⁸ A notice was published for all Masons not belonging to military units to attend church-services on January 19th “to pay funeral Honors to our late Illustrious Brother Genl. George Washington

Similar ceremonies occurred in many other lodges across the state and were complemented by numerous other recognitions on the part of the lay community. Many of these reverent occasions were to be called back to memory a quarter-century later when the Marquis de LaFayette passed through North Carolina and ignited a thunderous “Last Hurrah” from the surviving Continentals and their offspring.⁵⁰

An interesting Masonic association with Washington in North Carolina was the residence at New Bern for a while in the

first years of the 19th century of a talented portrait-artist named William J. Williams. In 1794, at the request of the Masonic lodge in Alexandria, Va., Williams had painted a portrait of Washington, then President of the United States. The artist completed the painting in thirteen sittings at Philadelphia and received \$50.00 from the lodge, where Washington had been a Master for a period of eight months.⁵¹ A native of New York, Williams came to New Bern in 1804, was a frequent visitor at St. John's Lodge, and in 1805 executed a portrait of Francis Lowthrop, which was commissioned by the brethren.⁵² Both the Lowthrop portrait and a photographic reproduction of the Washington painting by Williams now hang in the New Bern lodge-hall.⁵³

THE GRAND LODGE ASTRIDE ITS MOUNT

The approach of a new century may have helped to spur the North Carolina Grand Lodge to close out the old century with a flourish of decisions aimed at strengthening the Craft. A long-overdue action of the Grand Lodge in 1799 was the formal dissolution of a number of lodges which had given no indication of life for several previous years. These were Royal William No. 6 at Winton and Unanimity No. 7 at Edenton, both of them old Montfort lodges, Caswell Brotherhood No. 11, in Caswell County, Independence No. 12 in Chatham, Rutherford Fellowship No. 14 in Rutherford County, Eagle No. 19 in Hills-borough, Raleigh No. 20 in Tarboro, Laurel Hill No. 22 in Richmond County, and Malta No. 23 at Germantown.⁵⁴ Taking account of both the issuance of new charters and the revocations of dormant ones, the number of active subordinate lodges under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge in 1800 stood at twenty-nine.⁵⁵ This seems to have been the largest number in the history of the Craft in North Carolina up to that time.

For all the new faces and new policies to be discerned in North Carolina Masonry in the closing years of the 18th century, there was a kind of reassurance as the new century opened that some things never changed. In December, 1802, Brothers Stephen Carney, Bassett Stith and Matthew C. Whitaker, delegates from Royal White Hart Lodge No. 2, brought before the Grand Lodge a claim by the Halifax lodge to first precedence in the hierarchy of North Carolina lodges. It appeared from the suit by Royal White Hart that this issue between itself and

Wilmington St. John's had been postponed in 1789 until the two lodges had produced proof of their claims but that neither had subsequently produced any proof, so that the matter was still open.⁵⁶

It was a new tempest in an old tea-pot. Both St. John's No. 1 and Royal White Hart No. 2 had been remiss in late years with respect to their obligations to the Grand Lodge, the latter as an expression of petulant objection to its second rank.⁵⁷ It took only a brief investigation, however, in 1802, to establish that the Grand Lodge in 1789 had resolved that lodges failing to submit proof would be numbered in rotation as they applied for charters and that it was on this basis that the charter-numbers had been assigned.⁵⁸ Once more, the tenacious issue of precedence, a sore irritant to the harmony of the Fraternity for many years, was set at rest. Only the most optimistic, however, could have expected it to stay that way. New Bern St. John's, at least, for once distinguished itself by remaining silent on the subject.

The last significant order of business taken up by the Grand Lodge of North Carolina in the 18th century was the question of forming a national Grand Lodge. Upon receipt of a circular letter from the Grand Lodge of South Carolina, dated December 31, 1799 and calling for a convention for the purpose of forming a "Grand Lodge of the Union", the Grand Lodge took the matter under study and in 1801 reported in favor of the proposition.⁵⁹ The North Carolina body resolved that the creation of a "supreme continental Grand Lodge on antient masonic principles" was a highly desirable goal, formally endorsed the idea, and directed the Grand Secretary to have printed copies of the resolution forwarded to all other Grand Lodges in the United States.⁶⁰ The convention was not convened until 1807, when it was discovered that it was impossible to reach agreement on many of the matters in which Grand Lodges in various states had long since diverged from one another.⁶¹ Seven decades of what amounted to local autonomy had erected barriers that a pervasive mood of antifederalism could not efface. The failure of the ecumenical spirit to bear fruit in 1807 was a harbinger of difficulties in reconciling differences that Masons have never since that time felt strongly motivated to solve. There is still no "Grand Lodge of the Union."



John Hall, N.C. Supreme Court Justice, elected Grand Master of N.C. Masons in 1800. (N.C. Grand Lodge of A.F. and A.M.)

STATE AND NATION

The history of Freemasonry in 18th century North Carolina had been a ragged pattern of fits and starts, leaps and lapses. For a decade after its inauguration at Wilmington in 1754, the example of St. John's Lodge No. 1 was apparently copied only at New Bern. But the next decade had witnessed a splendid rise from these two to at least eight chapters. The dislocations of the war, however, not only stymied this progress but dealt the Craft in North Carolina a blow from which it did not recover for more than a dozen years after the first skirmish of the Revolution at Moore's Creek Bridge. There were still no more than twelve lodges in North Carolina at the beginning of the year 1788 and several of these appear to have been dormant.

A dramatic development of Masonry followed the creation of the Grand Lodge of North Carolina in 1787 and generated a momentum that carried into the early years of the 19th century. Not until 1830 was this initial impetus interrupted, a consequence of the William Morgan affair and the brief rise of the Antimasonic Party.⁶²

By the year 1800, some twenty-seven of the 347 subordinate lodges in the United States were located in North Carolina and perhaps 1000 of the nation's 16,000 Freemasons.⁶³ In view of the fact that some ten percent of the free population of America lived in North Carolina at that time, it will be seen that Masonry had enjoyed better success elsewhere than here. But this relative ill-success of the Craft in North Carolina was due, perhaps, to the slow recovery of the lodges of the state after the Revolution rather than to any fundamental antipathy between the purposes of the Order and the sentiments of North Carolinians. The appeal of Masonry, however, appears to have been more effective among professional and mercantile classes in the 18th century population, and North Carolina was yet a province in which the agricultural element was heavily predominant.

Numbers tell only a small part of the story anyway. In a time of crisis, a time such as the years from 1760 to 1790 in the United States, it was vitally important that there were institutions in which those who shaped public policy and the national destiny might come together frequently in harmony and brotherhood. Freemasonry was such an institution. In a time when faith in traditional religious teachings had been eroded by the revolutions in men's minds, it was useful to have institutions that reminded men of their duties to their God and their fellow man. Freemasonry was such an institution. And, finally, in an epoch that pulled men loose from the moorings of tradition of every kind, it was desirable to have institutions of venerable antiquity that could withstand the tumult and remain rock-like amid the chaos. Freemasonry was such an institution.

The subordinate lodges that have been established in North Carolina since 1754, more than 700 in number (both extant and defunct) along with the coordinate orders of the Craft, trace their inheritance back through more than two hundred and twenty years of progress within the borders of this state, back through an historical record into the Anglo-Norman Middle Ages, back through legend to Biblical foundations thought to be nearly 6000 years old. But the Order has never played a more meaningful role in the affairs of men than it did in the latter half of the 18th century. The national Bicentennial Celebration is an appropriate time for Masons to look back over that long record of achievement and to shape for themselves and their Order a future that will do honor to their illustrious past.