

Chapter II

The Montfort Era

JOSEPH MONTFORT

In spite of his prominence and influence in the colony of North Carolina as well as his contributions to Masonry in particular, very little is known of Joseph Montfort—almost nothing of his early life. He is said to have been born in England in 1724 and he appears to have settled in what was then Edgecombe (now Halifax) County around 1750.¹ In 1753 he married Priscilla Hill, daughter of Colonel Benjamin Hill of Bertie, by whom Montfort appears to have come into a sizeable estate.² Victorious in his first campaign for the General Assembly in 1762, he was for the next fourteen years a leading figure in the colony. He served as Clerk of the Court of Edgecombe until the creation of Halifax County and was afterward the first Clerk of the Halifax District Court.³ He attained the rank of colonel in the provincial militia and was one of the commissioners of the town of Halifax where he had a home and a store, among other properties.⁴

The major public service of Joseph Montfort commenced with his appointment as Treasurer of the Northern District of North Carolina in 1764, an office he was destined to hold for many years. He remained a member of the legislature until 1768 and returned for still another term in 1773. In April, 1775, he

22~ LAUNCHING THE CRAFT



Joseph Montfort, Grand Master of North Carolina Masons, 1768-1776, and only person to hold that office in the colonial era. (N.C. Grand Lodge of A.F. and A.M.).



Floor of Montfort House. Archaeological research by N.C. Dept. of Cultural Resources has revealed basement floor of Halifax house owned by, and probably residence of, Joseph Montfort. (Ben. P. Robertson, 1974).

was elected to the Provincial Congress at New Bern, but, already in ill-health, died the following spring as the war with England was just commencing.⁵ His landed estate included well over 30,000 acres of land scattered in large tracts across North Carolina and he must have been one of the wealthiest North Carolinians of his time.⁶

It was not, however, in public service but in his Masonic activity that Joseph Montfort performed his most signal labors. Probably already a Mason prior to his arrival in North Carolina, he was certainly a member of Royal White Hart Lodge from the time it was chartered in 1764 and had probably belonged to the parent lodge at Marsh Store before that.⁷ His leadership at Halifax first became apparent in June, 1765 when he was elected, at successive meetings, to the offices of Treasurer and Master, which duties he performed simultaneously thereafter.⁸ But it was following the initiation into the lodge of James Milner in early 1767 that Montfort launched his campaign to breathe new life into Royal White Hart Lodge and North Carolina Masonry in general.

During 1767, Royal White Hart began making up for its deficiencies by the purchase of glassware, a Bible and cushion, and other articles necessary to well-conducted meetings.⁹ The minutes for the Festival of St. John the Evangelist in December of that year contain the first mention of a procession and ball at the court house, signs that the Halifax brethren were beginning to take their Masonic responsibilities more seriously and to promote more vigorously their fraternal purposes. Having paid a visit to England during that winter, Montfort appeared at the lodge again in May, 1768 with a charter for Royal White Hart signed by Henry Somerset, Duke of Beaufort, the Grand Master of England.¹⁰ Secretary James Auld was directed to send a letter of appreciation to the English Grand Lodge and a committee of four, including Montfort and Milner, was named to draw up a new code of bye-laws for the conduct of the Halifax lodge.¹¹

Royal White Hart was now well-launched toward the more exalted role that Joseph Montfort and James Milner envisioned for Masonry in North Carolina, but their effectiveness could be only very limited so long as there was no organization of the various lodges scattered about the colony into a co-operative system. Sickness, bad weather, and other causes for a time delayed action, but in December, 1770, with Montfort elected to another

term as Worshipful Master and Milner now in the new office of Deputy Master,²² the stage was set for more far-reaching efforts.

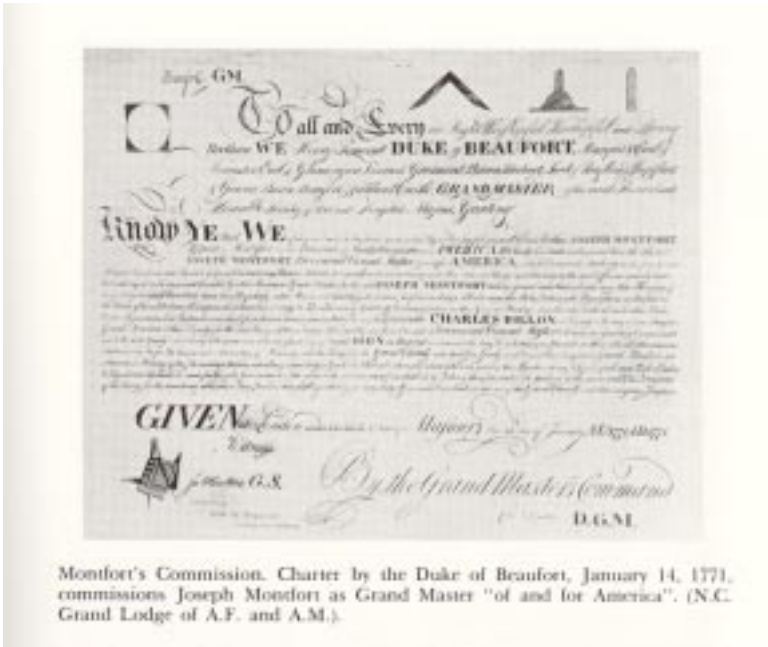
The exact chronology of Montfort's movements during the winters of 1770 and 1771 seems to be important but is not easy to follow. He was present for the St. John's Day celebration at Halifax on December 27, 1770; he attended no meetings during 1771 but was present again on March 13, 1772, bringing with him a charter appointing him as 'Provincial Grand Master of and for America.'¹³ The document was dated January 14, 1771.

The question of chronology seems significant because the charter is dated at a time when Montfort could not have been in England. Since the minutes of the Grand Lodge of England refer on February 6, 1771 to Montfort's appointment (as "Provincial G.M. for North Carolina"),¹⁴ it would appear that the commission was not back-dated in, say, late 1771 when Montfort was probably present in England, but that he had applied for the commission by letter prior to his visit to England and that it was awaiting him when he arrived.

The comprehensive language of Montfort's commission has been at the heart of many Masonic debates from that day to this—and not alone in North Carolina. The question is often raised as to whether Montfort had been commissioned, as the document literally states, Provincial Grand Master for all of English America, or whether it was intended that his authority should be limited to North Carolina alone. The evidence on the point is ambiguous. Masons in Virginia appear to have recognized the wider interpretation of Montfort's authority¹⁵ and Montfort himself seems to have understood his commission as covering the entire colonial domain.¹⁶ But, when the Duke of Beaufort in 1768 had commissioned John Rowe of Boston in the place of the deceased Jeremy Gridley, it was Rowe's distinction to be styled "Grand Master for North America",¹⁵ a still more sweeping delegation of power. Since Rowe was still exercising his office in Boston in 1771, there is no reason to suppose that the Duke had intended to replace him with Montfort nor does Rowe appear to have been aware of any intended encroachment upon his prerogative.

It is virtually certain that the commission granted to Montfort was intended primarily for exercise in the province of North Carolina, though it was probably not thought necessary or desirable to limit him exclusively to that colony.¹⁸ In other words,

THE MONTFORT ERA ~ 25



Montfort was free to grant charters for lodges in other colonies besides North Carolina in instances where he was requested to do so. It is probably indicative of Montfort's own view that he never referred to himself as Grand Master of North Carolina but of America.¹⁹ The grander title probably carried with it an added measure of influence with the subordinate lodges over whose affairs he now assumed control. The whole question, it may be confessed, is not a little academic since the only exercise of authority by Montfort outside North Carolina seems to have been the charter he granted to a lodge in Virginia in 1775.²⁰

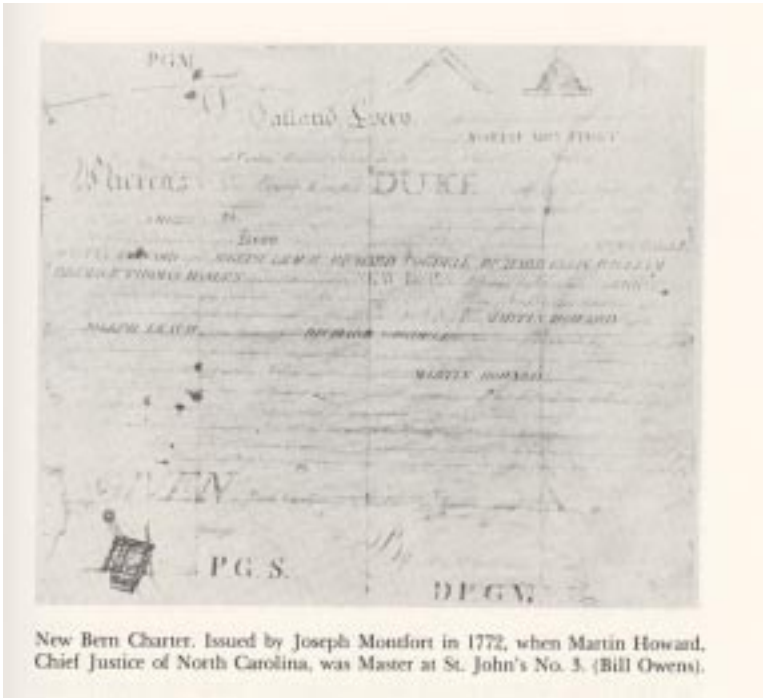
THE MONTFORT GRAND LODGE

Joseph Montfort began his administration as "Provincial Grand Master of and for America" in an auspicious way by presenting to Royal White Hart Lodge in March, 1772 "an elegant floor cloth", evidently acquired in England, which was promptly ordered by his brethren to be "put in an Elegant frame, with suitable Emblematical figures."²¹ This generous gift remains a treasured possession of the lodge to this day.



Montfort Floor Cloth. Presented by Joseph Montfort to Royal White Hart Lodge in March 1772. Probably acquired by him in England. (Bradford L. Rauschenberg).

THE MONTFORT ERA~ 27



The first fruit of Joseph Montfort's wider responsibility in Masonic affairs was the charter he issued for St. John's Lodge at New Bern, which now became number two in the Montfort hierarchy behind his own "East", or seat of authority, at Halifax. This charter, bearing the date January 10, 1772, was not received by the New Bern lodge until the following August.²² Montfort, probably just off the boat from England, had been present at a meeting of St. John's on January 11th of that year but evidently had to delay the issuance of the charter until he could procure the necessary materials, seal, and so on, and appoint subordinate officers for his new Provincial Grand Lodge. The back-dating of the New Bern charter by several months may have been only for the purpose of legitimating all business of the lodge since the January date (though it failed, technically, to certify the adoption of bye-laws and other business conducted on January 9, 1772),²³ or it may have been for the purpose of insuring the precedence of the lodge at New Bern over another lodge then in the process of being organized at Kinston.

28 ~ LAUNCHING THE CRAFT

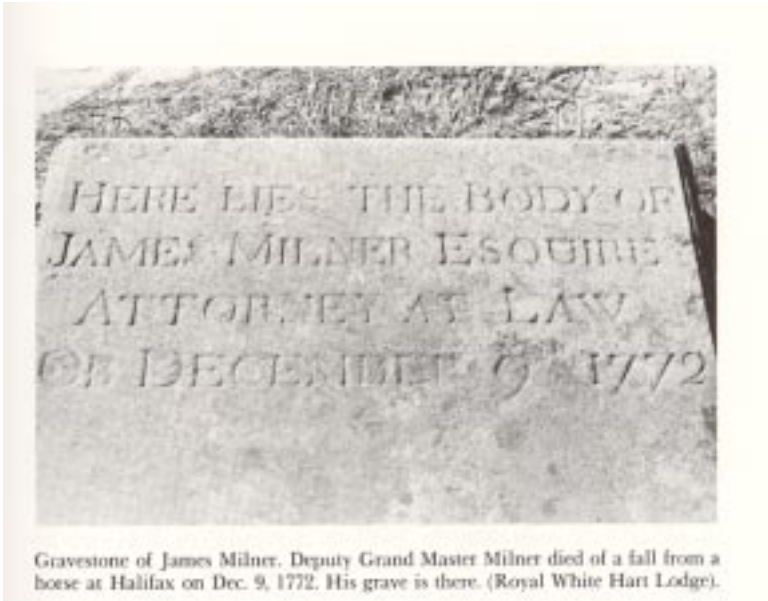


James Milner's Bookplate. Milner, Deputy Grand Master under Montfort, owned probably the largest and best library in N.C. and used this plate in his books. (UNC Photo Service).

The New Bern lodge, as we have seen, went back at least as far as 1755. Moreover, it had evidently been in continuous operation since that time, as shown by a paragraph that appeared in a New Bern newspaper on December 28, 1764 in connection with the visit there in the preceding week of the new lieutenant-governor of North Carolina, William Tryon:

On Thursday [December 27th],” the paper reported, “being the Feast of St. John the Baptist,* the Members of the Ancient and Honourable Society of Free and accepted Masons, belonging to the Lodge in this Town, met at their Lodge-Room; and after going thro’ the necessary Business of the Day, retired to the Long Room in the Court-house, to dine, where was served up an elegant Dinner: the Lieutenant-Governor honored them with his company; where also dined many other Gentlemen: The usual and proper Healths were drunk; and at drinking the King and the Craft the artillery fired 3:3:3.²⁴

*The reference to the feast as that of “St. John the Baptist” may be either an error by the reporter or an archaism dating to the period before 1717, when Masons began recognizing St. John the Evangelist as one of their patron saints. The December celebration, of course, honors the latter saint.



In the interim between his return to North Carolina in early 1772 and the receipt by New Bern of its new charter in August, Montfort had appointed as his Deputy Grand Master his friend James Milner, who had succeeded him in December, 1771 as Master of Royal White Hart No. 1. Still less than in the case of Montfort has history yet provided suitable information about the background of James Milner. To review the inventory of his effects at the time of his death is to be forcibly struck by the apparent breadth of interest of the man—his “Musick Books, 1 Spy Glass, 1 Microscope & Apparatus, 1 Magnet, 1 Prism Glass, 1 Camera Obscura, 1 Solar Telescope &c. 1 diagonal Machine”, to mention only two lines of a document that runs on for many pages. The 621 books in his astonishing library cover a marvelous range, from “1 Masons Companion”, through dozens of medical treatises, a long shelf of Greek and Latin works, the history, plays, poetry, and so on, to his splendid collection of legal volumes.²⁶ He appears to have been a native of Scotland and to have lived for several years in Virginia before moving to Halifax around 1766.²⁷ Beyond this, the record is at present mute.

Appointed by Montfort to the office of Grand Secretary was William Brimage, Secretary of the lodge at New Bern but a member of Royal White Hart as well. Whether or not other

grand officers were also appointed by Montfort does not appear from the scanty records of the time, but this trio possessed the energy and experience in Masonic organization and public affairs to achieve Montfort's goals.

Almost immediately, the new Grand Lodge suffered a stroke of ill-fortune. On December 9, 1772, Deputy Grand Master Mimer fell from a horse at Halifax and fractured his skull, dying instantly.²⁸ But the loss proved to be more of a personal one to Montfort, who with his daughters, shared liberally in Milner's will, than critical to the interests of Masonry. The vacant position was filled by Cornelius Harnett, another dedicated son of the Craft, who had been for many years an officer in St. John's Lodge at Wilmington.²⁹ No doubt the wider geographical distribution of Grand Lodge leadership was desirable in giving the governing body a broader base of support.

Montfort's campaign to quicken the pulse of Masonry in North Carolina appears to have suffered no loss of momentum from Milner's untimely death. St. John's of Kinston,* the third of Montfort's lodges, was probably chartered before the end of 1772³⁰ and it is thought that there were at least six or seven more lodges authorized by Montfort in the next three years.³¹ Although the identity of Montfort lodge number eight has never been satisfactorily established, it is thought that the colonial Grand Master chartered Royal Edwin No. 4 at Windsor in 1773, Dornoch No. 5 in Bute County in 1773 or 1774, Royal William No. 6 at Winton in 1774, and Unanimity No. 9 at Edenton in 1775.³² In addition, Montfort chartered Cabin Point No. 7 in Virginia in 1775³³ There may have been other lodges chartered by Montfort between the time of the Edenton charter and the Grand Master's death in 1776, but this remains conjectural.

Whether the officers of the Montfort Grand Lodge ever held a meeting in their official capacity is uncertain. Thomas S. Webb's *Freemason's Monitor*, published in 1802, contains the statement that the North Carolina Grand Lodge officers "convened occasionally at Newbern and Edenton, at which latter place the records were deposited previous to the revolutionary war."³⁴ This source adds that "During the contest the records were destroyed by the British army, and the meetings of the grand lodge [were] suspended."³⁵ In view of the fact that the

*Kjnston, until 1784, was known as Kingston.

THE MONTFORT ERA ~ 31

British Army never visited either New Bern or Edenton during the war, some doubt attends Webb's accuracy, but it is entirely possible that such meetings of Montfort's officers were held and that records were kept of their sessions. The possibility must remain, however, dubious pending the discovery of records affirming the fact.

THE LATER MONTFORT LODGES

Of the four Masonic lodges known to have been authorized by Joseph Montfort in North Carolina between the time of James Milner's death and the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, scarcely anything is known about three of them. Only Unanimity Lodge, the last one formed, has preserved its minutes and other papers from those closing colonial years. For our scant understanding of the work of the three little-known lodges, we are forced to rely largely on brief references in the records of other lodges and an occasional nugget of data drawn from some non-Masonic source.

Of the Kinston lodge, it can be said only that its early members seem to have included several who would later become very prominent men—not only in Masonic affairs but in those of the state as well. One of these was Richard Caswell, a Maryland native who would in later years serve as North Carolina's second Grand Master and for six terms as Governor of the state. Arriving in North Carolina at the age of sixteen in 1745, Caswell found employment as a surveyor and by the time he was nineteen had acquired an estate of 3000 acres of land.³⁶ In 1754 he was elected to the General Assembly from Johnston County and would hold that seat until the outbreak of the Revolution, serving as Speaker during 1770 and 1771.³⁷ His legislative experience and his early reputation as a hero of the war with England, which will be discussed in the next chapter, made him one of North Carolina's most popular and respected men during the Revolutionary Era. His brother Benjamin seems to have been another member of the colonial lodge at Kinston.³⁸

Equally as mysterious as Kinston No. 3 is the early history of Montfort's fourth lodge, Royal Edwin at Windsor. That it was warranted in or before 1775 is established by the minutes of Unanimity Lodge which record a visit to Edenton on November 11, 1775 by John Johnston, identified as Master of Royal Edwin, along with his Windsor brethren Andrew Oliver and Silas White

Arnett.⁴⁵ Thomas Hunter appears to have been another Master of this lodge prior to the period of America's independence.⁴⁰

A curious bit of evidence bearing upon the first years of the existence of Royal Edwin Lodge is the Masonic apron that turned up in Tennessee in 1888. This venerable relic of Masonry had been handed down among the descendants of Henry Belote of Bertie County, North Carolina.⁴⁷ It was said to have been made by a Miss Spivey of Bertie prior to her marriage in July, 1776 to James Bate. It seems that Miss Spivey and her mother were the only local seamstresses who could be induced to make Masonic regalia, there having been "a great prejudice" against the Craft in Bertie at that time, perhaps because of the association with the lodge of several prominent Tories or owing to the influence of dissenting clergy in the region.⁴² Belote later moved to Tennessee and was for many years a member of Gallatin Lodge No. 6 in that state, which he joined in 1808.⁴³

Still less is known of Dornoch Lodge, the fifth of the lodges established under the grand mastership of Joseph Montfort. Evidence of the existence of this lodge, located in Bute County, is based mainly on the number assigned to it and to the fact that several persons known to belong to it early in 1785 were Masons of long standing.⁴⁴ It is believed to have met in a log cabin which stood near the present boundary between Warren and Franklin Counties, east of Highway #410, and to have been formed by some of the younger members of Blandford Bute Lodge.⁴⁵ Bute had become Warren by 1791 when Dornoch applied for, and received, a new charter from the Grand Lodge, but no further evidence of its activity is known and Dornoch probably became dormant soon afterward, perhaps by associating itself with Blandford Bute.⁴⁶

Royal William Lodge No. 6, still another Montfort lodge, was chartered in the latter part of 1774 at Winton, County Seat of Hertford County. Hardy Murfree was apparently a member of this lodge when, on November 11, 1775, he visited and joined Unanimity Lodge at Edenton.⁴⁷ Like most of the other North Carolina lodges, Royal William probably ceased to operate during the war-years. It revived briefly after the war but disappeared in the 1790's when most of its business and professional members moved to the new town of Murfreesboro, ten miles distant.⁴⁸ Masons who, in all probability, gained their first Masonic experience at Royal William Lodge were William

Person Little, for whom the town of Littleton was named, Dr. John Bryan Bunbury of County Tipperary, Ireland, and Joseph Dickinson, an English merchant who was initially affiliated with Royal White Hart in Halifax.⁴⁹

The question of which lodge may have held the eighth rank among those chartered by Montfort has been the subject of a good deal of scholarly speculation. It has been proposed that this lodge might have been located at Murfreesboro, a forerunner to American George No. 17, which was chartered there in 1789.⁵⁰ But the town of Murfreesboro was only a plantation landing before it was laid off and incorporated in 1787 and there was scarcely a population in the vicinity large enough to justify the erection of a new lodge within ten miles of Royal William No. 6.⁵¹ The theory of a “Royal George Lodge No. 8”, located at or near what later became Murfreesboro⁵² thus becomes an insupportable notion. For all we know at present, Montfort’s eighth lodge, like his seventh at Cabin Point, Virginia, may not even have been in the colony of North Carolina.

A better possibility for the eighth Montfort lodge is Old Cone Lodge at Salisbury. There is no clear proof that this lodge was in existence prior to the American Revolution but several pieces of evidence point to that conclusion. A memorial from Old Cone to the Grand Lodge of North Carolina in 1806 claimed that it was “chartered whilst this State was under the British Government...⁵³ That this claim was probably accurate is shown by the will of an Irishman named William Temple Coles who died in Salisbury in 1775 and requested that a moiety of a half-acre lot owned by him on what is now Bank Street be conveyed to “the Society of Freemasons”⁵⁴. Coles also asked that his remains be given a Masonic burial. There is no evidence that Joseph Montfort knew of the existence of this lodge, which lay so far to the west of his own seat of authority, but it seems reasonably certain that it was operating during his lifetime.

THE MONTFORT LODGES AT WORK

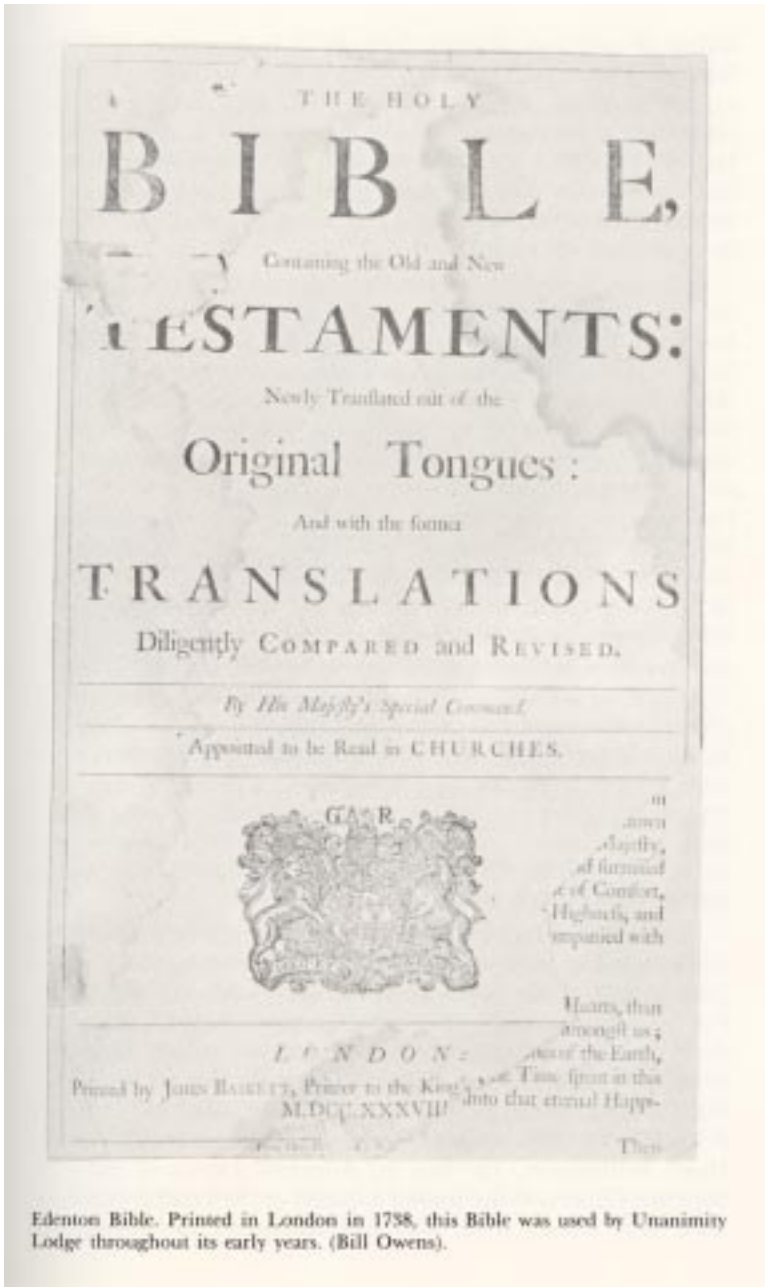
The character of the conduct of the Montfort lodges must be judged from the partial minutes of only three of the lodges that functioned during his administration. These were Royal White Hart No. 2 from 1765

No. 7 from November, 1775 until Montfort's death five months later. No other proceedings of Montfort lodges have survived.

The Halifax lodge, as we have already observed, enjoyed a period of vigorous activity under Montfort's close and energetic supervision. Although it was not found to be feasible to build a lodge-hall, Royal White Hart continued to meet frequently "under the Sign of the Thistle" at Martin's tavern through the year 1772 and probably beyond. There is some evidence, however, that the Halifax brethren, perhaps in disarray as a result of the antagonism generated by the war with England, had ceased to hold meetings before the beginning of the year 1776. At any rate, when Henry Montfort of Halifax, elder son of the Grand Master, applied for his own initiation into Masonry, he did so on January 27, 1776 at Edenton, where, because business was about to call him away, he was approved and initiated on the same evening.⁵⁵

The lodge at New Bern, headed by Chief Justice Martin Howard,⁵⁶ was, in the meantime, flourishing. Howard's subordinate officers included Craven County Sheriff Richard Cogdell and Joseph Leech, both of whom served terms as State Treasurer, New Bern Mayor Dr. Thomas Haslen (builder of the first brick house in New Bern), and William Brimage, the Provincial Grand Secretary.⁵⁷ With only eleven members at the time of Montfort's warrant in 1772, St. John's No. 2 more than doubled its membership in the year that followed.⁵⁸ During that year, the lodge met twenty-eight times, an extraordinary frequency for that era.⁵⁹ Its members entertained more than 150 visiting brothers, including many sea-faring Masons from Europe, the West Indies, and other colonies.⁶⁰

Lodge-meetings during the first year and a half of operation at New Bern were held in the taverns of Brothers James Ince and Andrew Mack,⁶¹ though St. John's would soon be able to move into more sumptuous quarters at Tryon Palace. Besides the expense of such a heavy schedule of meetings, the lodge was financially sound enough in these months to purchase a good many Masonic implements and other articles, including a cedar chest, an engraved copper plate for certificates, parchment skins for printing the certificates, an engraved seal, wax and wafers for the seal's impression, and so on.⁶² There was also a contribution to the Grand Charity in England (upon receipt of their charter in August, 1772) and local charity for Mrs. DeBruhl,



Edenton Bible. Printed in London in 1759, this Bible was used by Unanimity Lodge throughout its early years. (Bill Owens).

widow of engraver Michael DeBruhl.⁶³ It may have been the burden of so much expense that led to some belt-tightening toward the end of this early period, including a formal suggestion to Brother Ince that he provide only “a decent frugal Dinner” for a St. John’s celebration at his “King’s Arms” tavern and a resolution that “no supper shall be ordered unless three persons shall be entered, passed and raised. Nor shall the expense be more than 40/ each”⁶⁴

Edenton, where Masonry survived the turmoils and threats of the war without interruption, had a lodge that was somewhat less active than St. John’s of New Bern but which is of genuine interest in the history of colonial Masonry in North Carolina. While the existing records of Halifax and New Bern, the only other urban lodges of the colony for which we have records, concern chapters already equipped for work at the time the minutes begin, Edenton is seen as one that had to order all of its furniture, hardware, apparel, implements and appurtenances. From the “tin case” ordered as a repository for its charter in November, 1775, Unanimity went on to order structural changes in its lodge-room, including steps for the Master’s Chair, a Bible, twenty-six sheep-skins for aprons, books for the minutes and bye-laws, a “Lodge Board and inkstand” for the Secretary, silver and brass candlesticks, snuffers, a twelve-foot pine table, a pine cupboard six and a half feet tall, sugar, rum, drinking bowls, a chest, a ballot box with balloting balls, a twenty-four-inch gauge, a square and compasses, a Master’s rod, two truncheons, three mallets, two Steward’s rods, a “sand glass”, scarf, punch spoon, officer’s jewels, and various other implements.⁶⁵ A fully-equipped lodge was an expensive undertaking even in those rustic years.

The guiding lights of the Craft at Edenton in the opening years included William Knight (the first Worshipful Master), John Boggs, John McCrohon, Charles Johnson, and Roger Pye.⁶⁶ Conspicuous by their absence from the Masonic circle were virtually the entire body of Edenton’s ruling Establishment, including Samuel Johnston, Joseph Hewes, and (after 1782 when he arrived in Edenton), the Rev. Mr. Charles Pettigrew, all of whom were Freemasons.⁶⁷ James Iredell and Dr. Hugh Williamson, the first an Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court and the second a framer of the Federal Constitution, were among those who had apparently never been ap

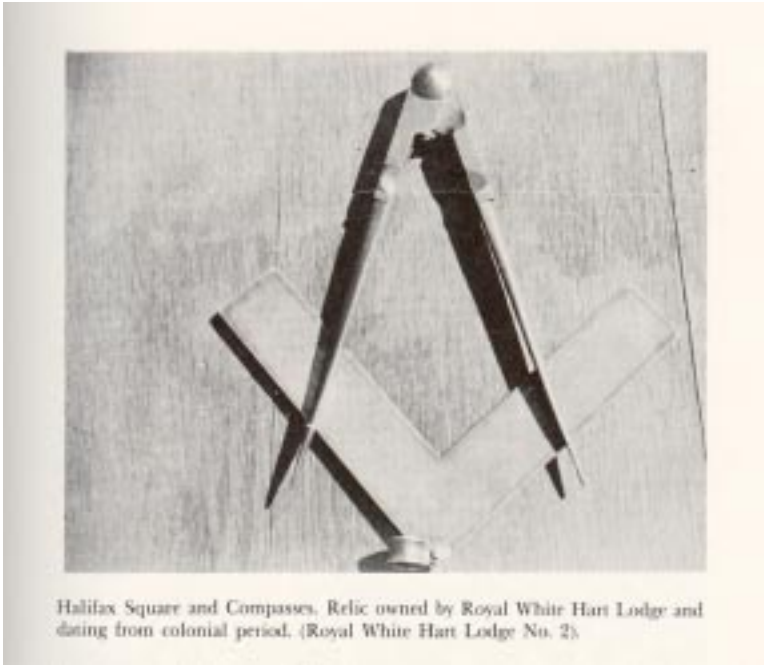
renticed to Masonry and who found no strong reason to associate with the men of Unanimity.

It is not easy to account for the failure of Unanimity Lodge to attract the leaders of the Edenton community. In other towns, public officials and other principal citizens were prominent in the local lodges. It has been suggested that the drinking proclivities of the Edenton brotherhood may have had a negative effect on some in the town.⁶⁸ It is also possible that class-lines were more strictly drawn at Edenton than elsewhere in North Carolina and that the professional and landed gentry there disdained association with the merchants and inn-keepers who formed the lodge in the first place. Even Robert Smith, the merchant-prince who is said to have introduced John Paul Jones to Masonry at old Kilwinning Lodge in Scotland,⁶⁹ held aloof from Unanimity. The physicians of the neighborhood, including Drs. Dominick Pembrune, Samuel Cooley, and Lott Brewster, were steadfast in support of the fraternity but the lawyers (excepting only the Deist Jasper Chariton) avoided it⁷⁰

The initiation of Colonel Edward Buncombe, a grandee of Tyrrell County, in May, 1776 may have lifted the hopes of Unanimity for a time and the lodge was to receive a multitude of transients during the years of the Revolutionary War, but membership at this lodge remained rather undistinguished and the Craft was to know a disappointing experience in Edenton during the 18th century. Historians have not yet satisfactorily answered the question of just why.

COLONIAL MASONIC GOVERNANCE

Of the several sets of bye-laws and regulations handed down from lodges of the Montfort era, only those of Royal White Hart can be said to have been strongly influenced by Montfort himself. The earliest rules of the lodge, those of 1765, called for regular meetings only on the third Fridays of June, September, December and March, besides the usual gatherings on the days of St. John The Baptist and St. John the Evangelist.⁷¹ There were provisions that the Tyler summon a sufficient number to attend whenever one was to be entered, raised or passed, provisions concerning the character of those applying for membership, and a rule prohibiting "Indecent Behaviour, Profane words, Disclosing to any Except they be members of this lodge, what has been said or done in the same, leaving the lodge while



[it is] sitting without leave from the Master, or speaking in the Lodge without Rising and addressing the Master...”⁷² This simple code, amended in the following year to provide that one or two negative votes should not exclude an applicant until a majority had heard and approved the reasons, served Royal White Hart during its first four years of operation.” They reflected the easy-going atmosphere that prevailed in the lodge before Montfort became Worshipful Master in the early summer of 1765.

Joseph Montfort and James Milner made up one half of the committee appointed at Halifax in 1769 to draw up new bye-laws for their lodge. An analysis of these new regulations reveals aspects of the character of Masonry in these years which do not appear on the face of the lodge-minutes themselves. The Halifax bye-laws of 1769 called for meetings on the first and third Tuesday of each winter month (October through March), and on the first Tuesday of each other month, besides the St. John’s Day festivals.⁷⁴ This schedule, if rigorously observed, would have meant up to twenty regular meetings a year in addition to extra sessions, which tended in those days to be frequent. The

schedule probably reflects the high tide of Masonic enthusiasm then running at Halifax, for the stronger lodge at New Bern was content to schedule only one meeting a month (first Thursdays)⁷⁵ besides the feast-days. Edenton's bye-laws, still less demanding of the brethren, called for meetings on the second Friday of every month or, with feast days, eight sessions annually.⁷⁶ Nor does it appear that it proved practical for Royal White Hart to hold more than six meetings, special or regular, in any pre-Revolutionary year after the 1769 bye-laws went into effect. Montfort and Milner were apparently never entirely able to infuse their brethren with quite the ardent kind of energy that they themselves possessed.

The Halifax bye-laws also specified that the third stroke of the Master's gavel was to signal the reign of silence and order at meetings.⁷⁷ The Chair would recognize any member who wished to speak or to move about and no brother was to rise while another had the floor. No member or visitor was to leave without permission from the Chair except in emergencies. Members were strictly enjoined from engaging in "any religious or state disputes", profane language, the hissing or ridiculing of a brother, or any other "Indecent Behaviour." An additional infraction and fine was charged against any member who was so forgetful of Masonic virtue as to "sing an obscene song, or appear Intoxicated in the Lodge

⁷⁸

A comparison of the Halifax bye-laws of 1765 and 1769 reveals a much more serious and disciplined approach to lodge-regulation in the latter, a clearer preception of the standards that should govern the behavior of a good Mason. It would be hard to show that the new code was vigorously enforced, but the Masonic ideal had been committed to paper where it might serve as a guide to any who wished to avail themselves of it.

The New Bern minutes, perhaps because the rules of St. John's No. 2 had carried over from the period prior to Montfort's elevation to the title of Grand Master, contained no regulations governing the conduct of meetings until November, 1772 when it was ruled that each member must "behave himself ... in a Sober, Orderly, and Decent Manner", refraining from "private or public Conversation" without the consent of the Master, from speaking twice on the same subject without permission from the chair, or leaving the room without authority."

THE MONTFORT ERA ~ 41

The regulations at Edenton suggest either a somewhat more boistrous, or else more puritanical, group of brethren. Here, the twentieth article forbade “political or obscene discourse” or the casting of aspersions “on any of our neighbours, either male or female.” The next article authorized any member, with the consent of the majority, to give words of “Instruction” to “a weaker Brother” or to receive such instruction if the brethren present willed it. Disputes between brethren were to be settled by majority vote and it was also forbidden for any member to sue another in court for debt. No one was to be admitted if drunk and the lodge was prepared to tolerate only one instance of a member getting drunk during a meeting, “as such an unlikely accident might happen”, on pain of expulsion. Also forbidden were whispering, swearing, and singing “obscene songs”. “But”, concluded a happy afterthought, “there be no limitation to good moral songs and toasts.”⁸⁰

Other typical rules of the period specified the fees to be paid by entered apprentices, fees for being passed or raised, the procedure for admission, regulations regarding visitors, on balloting, on excused and unexcused absences, dues, expenses of regular and extra meetings, and so on. Frequent changes in, or additions to, the rules and periodic thorough revampings kept the regulations abreast of the light gleaned from experience and the shifting ethical standards of a revolutionary generation. Many Masons felt strongly that the codes of conduct encouraged by their order were the most demanding of any system ever devised by the mind of man. Herein lay the source of the difficulties between Masonry and the organized church of that era. Not many Christians of the evangelistic age commencing in the late 18th century were willing either to accept or to ignore the claims of the Freemasons or any similar order.

THE MONTFORT ERA IN RETROSPECT

Joseph Montfort, with the initial help and inspiration of his able deputy, James Milner, might have accomplished great things had not early death and Revolution brought about circumstances which were to sweep away many of the seedlings they planted. But even the mutilated records of these years just before the war provide ample evidence of their unprecedented vigor and their dedication to the principles of the Craft. Montfort is known

to have visited every lodge in his realm whose minutes are even partially preserved.⁸⁷ In four years he chartered more lodges in North Carolina than had been formed in all the years preceding. He encouraged a close association between his lodges and the Grand Lodge of England, exercised his commission in behalf of Masons in other states where opportunity permitted, and elevated men of high distinction to his Grand Lodge Council. These things we can say in spite of the fact that the record of most of his achievement has been lost. Moreover, virtually all of the lodges under his jurisdiction either revived after the Revolution or provided the personnel and experience for new lodges into which they were afterward incorporated. The one at Cabin Point, Virginia participated in the formation of the Grand Lodge of Virginia in 1778.⁸² If Montfort can be said to have fathered five lodges, or eight, or more, then he was grandfather of many of the dozens of North Carolina lodges founded in the quarter-century after his death, besides others in Virginia and Tennessee.

North Carolina Freemasonry appropriately venerates the name of this illustrious patron of the Craft.