

## *“An Angel Has Fallen”*

### **THE DARK DAYS OF DEMOCRATIC LODGE**

The year 1797 was a time of strange and wonderful events in the history of North Carolina Masonry. Even as William R. Davie crowned his Masonic career with momentous achievements and set the stage for his most memorable public services, there came from down inside the innermost councils of the Craft and the state the first faint signals of an onrushing calamity. In the months that followed, the cheers of success turned to groans of dismay as both the state and Craft were forced to deal with a situation for which neither one was prepared by any prior experience.

The alarm that startled both the public and Masonic leadership of North Carolina at the close of the year 1797 seems to have sounded first in the halls of Masonry. The Grand Lodge, meeting on December 10, 1797, issued a routine call for Brother Rhodam Atkins, the well-known architect of the State House, to appear before the next meeting to answer certain unspecified complaints made against him by several members of Democratic Lodge No. 21 in Raleigh. The Secretary's minute indicates only that Atkins would be required to show cause why he had failed to convene the lodge agreeable to its charter and his own responsibilities as Worshipful Master.<sup>1</sup>

At the next Grand Lodge meeting, on December 15th, Atkins appeared and made a statement that satisfied the governing body with the reasons “why the charter remained with him” but again the minutes are obscure on the circumstances, citing only that “some omission in the Officers or Brethren of the Democratic Lodge ...has occasioned the members totally to neglect the duties required of them by their Charter and the obligations of Masonry.”<sup>22</sup>

Nothing in these hazy proceedings is particularly suspicious and the cause of the difficulty may only have been some technicality regarding the division of responsibilities among the officers of Democratic Lodge. The historian’s curiosity is whetted, however, by the discovery, in the Grand Lodge resolution resulting from Rhodam Atkins’ testimony, of the role in Democratic’s affairs that was now to be played by a figure whose name had a disturbingly familiar ring. It was Dr. Redmond Dillon Barry, focus of the imbroglio at Tarboro during the preceding year. By resolution of December 15th, Dr. Barry was appointed new Master of Democratic Lodge and directed to convene his brethren for the purpose of appointing other officers, after which the lodge would be expected “to work and perform the several duties required of them as Masons.”<sup>23</sup>

It will be recalled from the foregoing pages that Dr. Barry had created a Masonic and public uproar at Tarboro during 1795 and 1796 out of his personal difficulties with some of his fellow Masons and other prominent citizens. After assaulting the councils of the Craft and the columns of the public press for almost two years with his tirades, Dr. Barry had slunk at last away from Tarboro at the beginning of 1797 and come to Raleigh. With friends at the Grand Lodge and a character less fully revealed to the general public at the capital, he was soon comfortably established in his new environment. He was enrolled at Democratic Lodge, where his misadventures of the past appear to have been viewed differently than they had been among his former neighbors at Tarboro. His apparent rivalry with Rhodam Atkins, however, indicates that he was almost immediately back at his old trade of fomenting factions and cultivating hostilities.

The existing minutes of Democratic Lodge—those from February, 1793 to the end of 1794, are of little assistance in reconstructing the grounds for the difficulties at the Raleigh lodge in

later years, although it would seem that Democratic was a place of steamy intrigue even before Dr. Barry brought his peculiar talents to bear upon the situation there. The lodge included among its members some of the most prominent citizens of the community, including Dr. Richard Fenno, Colonel William Brickell, Theophilus Hunter (near whose plantation the city of Raleigh had been laid out in 1792), Dugald McKeithan, John Conroy and others. The meetings of the Democratic brethren were sometimes held in the dignified halls of the State House itself.<sup>4</sup>

Democratic Lodge No. 21, like “Solomon Lodge” at Masonboro, is more amply known to legend than to history. Some years ago, Masonic historian J. Ray Shute attempted to reconstruct from stray fragments of legend a coherent account of the lodge but his efforts led him again and again into blind alleys from which there appeared to be no logical exit.

Strange tales have been told”, wrote Shute, “about this lodge. Some have intimated that the group were Tories and held forth as loyal English subjects, others have written that they were grouped together into this Lodge for political and social reasons. Again, we have heard that their meetings were wine-feasts and very popular functions—these, and many more, are tales heard about the ancient and defunct Democratic Lodge No. 21, of Raleigh, North Carolina.<sup>5</sup>

Proceeding warily from the realm of fable toward the realm of history, Shute discovered that the members of Democratic Lodge had been mainly “a few old soldiers” of the Revolution and “some foreigners who had come to Raleigh to work on the Capitol and aid in building up the new city . . . .”<sup>6</sup> They were said to have held their meetings at Peter Casso’s (or Cassau’s) tavern “at the head of Fayetteville street” and “the old time custom of serving refreshments in a liquid form was one of the chief attractions of the meetings; and often ‘twas said, ‘There was the sound of revelry by night.’”<sup>7</sup> There was even a tradition that Democratic Lodge had included a group of atheists who were sympathetic with the principles of the French Revolution, “and in consequence of this sentiment there arose confusion, dissensions and discord in the lodge.”<sup>8</sup>

Still another legend recorded by John Nichols, a former Master of Hiram Lodge No. 40, was that the trouble at Demo-



William Polk. Distinguished Colonel in Revolutionary War, for 42 years a Trustee of the University of North Carolina, Grand Master of Masons in N.C., 1799-1800. (N.C. Grand Lodge of A.F. and A.M.).

cratic was rooted in the opposition of a foreign element headed by Rhodam Atkins and a “native element” under the leadership of Colonel William Polk, a “pronounced churchman”.<sup>9</sup> It was owing, thought Nichols, to this conflict that Democratic Lodge in 1799 surrendered to the Grand Lodge its jewels, furniture and regalia and ceased its operations. Some of the former members of Democratic joined together in the same year to form Hiram No. 40, also located in Raleigh.<sup>10</sup>

Whatever may be the substance of these legends, and it is probably not very much, the common element among them—a history of discord and conflict at Democratic Lodge—is undoubtedly accurate. A petition of 1799 to the Grand Lodge mentions certain “unhappy feuds” within the lodge but gives no indication what they may have been.” It was, in spite of everything, a prestigious chapter. (It does not appear from existing records that Colonel William Polk was ever a member of Democratic Lodge).

The principal source of friction at Democratic No. 21 was probably neither a contest of Christians against atheists, natives *versus* foreigners, teetotalers and toppers, nor Whigs in oppo

sition to Tories. A more obvious cause for the disturbance was the deep involvement of at least three members of the lodge in the most shocking scandal ever to shake the Craft and the government of North Carolina. The three were Gee Bradley, John Conroy, and Dr. Redmond Dillon Barry.

#### THE PLOT DIABOLICAL

In the year 1796, Andrew Jackson, then a young Tennessee Congressman, discovered quite by accident that there was some sort of suspicious business going on in the Nashville office of Surveyor-General Martin Armstrong. Further inquiry revealed that this office was the center of a succession of awesome misdeeds involving the illegal conveyance of enormous tracts of land in Tennessee. The chain of evidence appeared to lead relentlessly back across the Appalachians and into the seat of North Carolina government as well as the Tennessee State House. If so, it would certainly involve some of the most distinguished leaders of both states. The first traces of what would prove to be the “crime of the century” had come to light.

The Nashville land-office of Martin Armstrong owed its existence to the fact that North Carolina, when it ceded to the United States in 1789 the territory from which Tennessee was formed, retained rights to certain extensive tracts of land in the new state. It was intended that the lands held in reserve would be utilized to compensate a large number of North Carolina veterans of the Revolution for their services. In the decade ~that followed, a great many grants were issued through the Nashville office, all of them bearing the endorsement of the Secretary of State of North Carolina—James Glasgow.<sup>13</sup>

Governor Samuel Ashe of North Carolina received word of these findings and suspicions late in the year 1797 and promptly set about bringing the malefactors to justice. Summoning his Council of State, Ashe announced that “an Angel has fallen” and revealed what he knew of the case.<sup>14</sup> On December 18th, three days after Rhodam Atkins had appeared before the Grand Lodge to explain the situation at Democratic Lodge No. 21, the Governor sent a special message to the House of Commons calling for a full investigation. A committee was formed in the legislature and directed to conduct an inquiry and make recommendations to the Chief Executive.

The land-fraud case burst over North Carolina and Tennessee with the roar of a cannon. The matter had no sooner been opened than its implications spread into the highest offices of both states, insuring the wreck of a score of brilliant careers and the prosecution of a host of lesser figures on the fringe of the governments. Ashe's application to John Sevier, Governor of Tennessee, for the Nashville land-papers to be forwarded to Raleigh for examination, was denied, raising the strong possibility, later found to be all too true, that Sevier himself (Master of the Nashville lodge) was deeply embroiled in the fraud.<sup>15</sup>

John Sevier's past history made it easy to credit the reports of his involvement in the land-office scandal but few North Carolinians could bring themselves to accept the validity of the charges against James Glasgow.<sup>16</sup> Secretary of State for more than twenty years (the only person up to that time ever to have held the office), Glasgow was one of the most popular and well-respected North Carolina public figures of his generation. He had been one of the outstanding patriots of the Revolutionary Era, a member of the provincial congresses at Hillsborough in 1775 and Halifax in 1776, a member of the New Bern Committee of Public Safety, and a Colonel in North Carolina's militia forces during the war. Throughout those and all the intervening years, Glasgow had been regarded as a man of unimpeachable rectitude and virtue.

The Craft of Masonry felt the charges against Glasgow with particular dismay. His earlier Masonic career, briefly outlined in previous chapters, included his membership in the "First Lodge of Pitt County" as far back as 1767, his role in the Tarboro Convention of 1787 that initiated the North Carolina Grand Lodge, his election as first Grand Secretary in that year and Deputy Grand Master in 1789. On several occasions, Glasgow had served as Grand Master pro tern and he had once been a nominee for Grand Master as well as Master of several "occasional lodges" of the Grand Lodge. As Secretary of State he had signed the act of 1797 incorporating the Grand Lodge and he had shared with Davie in all the progress achieved by the Craft since 1792. He had seemed all along to embody the very best in Masonic discipline and reverence.

The name of James Glasgow, moreover, seemed to have been enshrined permanently in the hall of North Carolina heroes.

Glasgow County (formerly a part of Dobbs County) had been named for him in honor of his public services. Davie-Glasgow Lodge No. 26 linked him in apparent immortality with the Grand Master in recognition of his Masonic contributions. And yet, as the legislative committee informed Governor Ashe in the closing days of 1797, "Every hour's progress produces additional instances of the frauds committed in the obtaining of military land warrants. . .<sup>17</sup>

The machinery of state rumbled into ominous motion in response to the report of the investigating committee and warrants began to pour forth for the arrest of the men believed to be concerned in the corruption. Besides Glasgow, who was suspended from his state office, several members of Democratic Lodge No. 21 were caught in the lengthening net of suspicion and indictment, including John Conroy (also a member of the Grand Lodge),<sup>18</sup> Captain Gee Bradley, and Dr. Barry.

During the Winter of 1797-1798, the winds of rumor blew tornadoes across North Carolina and Tennessee as the charges spread to include many eminent and respectable citizens. It was alleged that Glasgow and his henchmen had contrived a score of tricks for executing deeds to non-existent veterans of the Revolution, by granting the same tract to more than one grantee, by issuing deeds for more land than service-records could justify, and by a bewildering array of other illegal and unethical practices. Across the mountains in Tennessee, Governor Sevier and others implicated in the fraud held a secret meeting at Nashville and agreed that an effort must be made to steal certain incriminating papers housed in the Comptroller's office in the North Carolina State House. Failing this, the plotters concluded, it would be necessary to burn the building itself.

The Nashville conspirators designated William Tyrrell, formerly a clerk in Glasgow's office, as agent in their "Mission Impossible" scheme. A nervous accomplice, however, betrayed the plot to Judges John McNairy and Howell Tatom in Nashville and these two magistrates dispatched an express rider to Raleigh to attempt to reach the Governor before the deed was executed. "Over precipitous cliffs", says one melodramatic account, "in the sharp winds of winter, through the dense primeval forests he sped away."<sup>19</sup> Ashe was instructed that he must destroy the message as soon as he read it lest the name of the messenger become known and attempts be made on his life.

(Ashe apparently did destroy it).<sup>20</sup> A double guard was ordered to be placed at the Comptroller's office and, a few nights later, a Negro named Phil, the property of William Tyrrell, was apprehended in the act of attempting to break into the office. He was tried and hanged as the case against the plotters became increasingly more conclusive.<sup>21</sup>

It was in this crippling atmosphere of suspicion and alarm over plots and counterplots that Davie was elected Governor in 1798. It now became his responsibility that Glasgow and his confederates were brought to justice, the Grand Master pursuing his former Deputy down the twisting trail of fraud as vigorously as the cumbersome legal machinery of the day would allow. By Act of Assembly, a special panel of judges had been created to hear and determine the case, its members being former Governor Samuel Johnston, future Chief Justice John Louis Taylor, John Haywood and Spruce McKay. Haywood, considered the ablest trial lawyer in the state, was enticed from the panel and into responsibility for defending the accused when Glasgow put temptation before him in the form of a thousand "Spanish milled dollars".<sup>22</sup>

Although Glasgow was found guilty at his trial in June, 1800, the case was a ludicrous parody of justice forestalled. With Davie in retirement and Benjamin Williams in the governor's office, the prosecution lost something of its original momentum and Glasgow was fined 2000 pounds for his role in the affair. Several others were also convicted but the larger number in one way or another appear to have avoided punishment, several of these by breaking bond and fleeing the state. Gee Bradley was one of those acquitted; John Conroy was convicted.<sup>23</sup>

One of those who vacated North Carolina a step ahead of the sheriff was the nefarious Past Master of Democratic Lodge No 21, Dr. Redmond Dillon Barry. The doctor took up residence at Washington, D.C. where he was still located when, in the latter part of August, 1803, he suffered a fatal accident. "His death", the Raleigh *Register* tersely announced, "was occasioned by the kick of a horse on the head."<sup>24</sup> Some no doubt saw it as a triumph of justice. James Glasgow's distressing situation had been confronted by the North Carolina Grand Lodge on December 3, 1799, six months before his conviction. It was resolved that the Deputy

Grand Master should be suspended "until he shall make his innocence appear on a legal investigation .....<sup>25</sup> After his conviction, he was expelled from the order and he soon afterward moved to Tennessee, where, strange to say, he enjoyed a large measure of esteem and usefulness for many years to come. He died in advanced old age in the first weeks of 1820.<sup>26</sup>

North Carolina and the Craft of Masonry, both jolted by the Glasgow land-frauds, recovered quickly from the effects of the case. The lesson both had learned of the perfidy of human nature was one that was older than the remotest origins of civil government or the Order of Freemasons but it fell with particularly cruel force on a generation that revered its Revolutionary patriots as beings who were set apart from the weakly race of mortal men. Sadder and wiser, the state and Craft put the 18th century behind them and entered chastened upon a new century with more modest illusions.

James Kincaid

Plan & Elev 50 by 37 25 feet pitched with roof  
to have the upper story under

14 large windows in "facing & casing & casing 436/44

1 out side door <sup>transoms</sup> facing & casing

1 in plain the in

having the same in a cornice only a foot

laying on rough floor & plain with board

weatherboarding all the above the front only plain

Chimney rail & wall base of stairs & in the entry

below & upstairs

Run up the stairs with a rail for the same

Chimney facing plain work

I shall assist with all his hands in raising

the frame

half money & half goods & provisions

The Committee appointed to superintend the  
building a Lodge report

They have engaged with James Gordon  
to do the work above described for the  
sum of two hundred dollars

They have contracted with James Porter  
for the saw mill lumber at four pounds

per thousand at his mill and two thousand  
at twenty shillings per ton volume of the  
Landing

Pat. Sarbe Chairman