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MASONS IN THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

by Robert B. Malwitz

The history of the American War for Independence leads one to conclude that great deeds and the recognition that goes with them are shared by many. In the brief scope of this paper it is impossible to pay tribute to all the Masons whose ideas, bravery, and sacrifice contributed to the War for Independence. Notwithstanding, throughout the early history of our country Masonry played an important part. It will be my objective to identify some of the lesser known, but not insignificant, Masons of that time and their contributions to the cause of freedom. Since their time our country has continued to espouse the same basic ideals that guided these early patriots. Thus, through a succession of ages are transmitted the excellent tenets of our institution.

Many of the names of these early freedom fighters are unknown today, yet their contributions should not go unrecognized. Without them our history would certainly have been different. They gave their lives and their fortunes. They came from all parts of our great land. From New Hampshire, William Whipple, Nicholas Gilman, Sr., Alexander Scammell, all members of the Continental Army and creators of the United States. Vermont had its Green Mountain Boys, Ethan Allen, Seth Warner, Robert Cochran, and Joseph Waite.

Colonial life was not an easy one. There were no modern means of entertainment, no television, radio, or telephones. Newspapers were small and letters took days and weeks to go from city to city. Slavery, the flash point of the mid-1800's, prevailed and slaves outnumbered white servants in every colony south of Maryland by 1720. Colonial society tried to duplicate that of England. The dress, mannerisms and education of that time were English. While Harvard, founded in 1650, William and Mary, founded in 1693, and Yale, founded in 1701, were developing, the wealthy sent their sons to England to be educated. Yet, as the colonies tried to imitate England, England sought to drain from the colonies, by taxes and other fiscal means, their economic lifeblood. This was not an unusual nor unaccepted practice of colonial power and it lead by stages to the War for Independence.

Freemasons came with the early settlers and with the military lodges of the
British Army. Since most British military units spent not less than two years in Ireland, most of them held Irish warrants. These Lodges were small, yet they functioned as they do now. The British military lodges were instrumental in establishing and spreading Freemasonry in the colonies as they travelled frequently from place to place. It was not uncommon for them to leave charters for new lodges and even members to carry on the work. For example, on September 9, 1759, Quebec surrendered to the British army and within months it would have been reasonable for a Masonic meeting to be held with brethren from the following military units, stationed in the area, to be present: the 47th Regiment, the 48th Regiment, the 15th Regiment, and the 43rd Regiment. Many of these units traversed the colonies and thus as new colonies (later States) such as New Hampshire and Vermont were formed Masonry was already present. The formal concerns of Masons in the lodges, then as now, were chiefly the ballot on candidates, the work of the degrees, examination of visitors, relief of distressed brethren, their widows and orphans, discipline of offenses, plans for social occasions, purchase of furnishings and supplies, and other routine matters. They also provided a place for their members to gather in a social environment.

Neither the War for Independence nor the involvement of Masons with this cause, was an overnight development. In the years prior to the opening of formal hostilities the sentiments of the colonists were slowly turning toward the concept of separation. The ideals of freedom were growing like seeds thrown upon the fertile field. In May 1767, a decade before the start of open hostilities, John Morin Scott, a future Congressman from New York wrote over the signature, "Freeman": "If the interest of the mother country and her colonies cannot be made to coincide, if the same constitution cannot take place in both, if the welfare of the mother country necessarily requires a sacrifice of the most valuable natural rights of the colonies, their right of making their own laws and disposing of their own property by representatives of their own choosing, then the connection between them ought to cease, and sooner or later it must inevitably cease. The English governments cannot long act toward a part of the dominions upon principles diametrically opposed to its own, without losing itself in the slavery it would impose upon the colonies, or teaching them to throw it off and assert their own freedom."

Masonry played a large part in forming the ideas and defining the goals of that period. It encouraged men to think, act, and live as free men not bound to a system of government devoted to draining their life's blood. From the mid-1760's events evolved quickly to the point where armed confrontation was all that was left.
In December 1767, Brother Philip Livingston, St. John's Lodge, New York and a founder of Kings College (now Columbia) espoused ideas against internal taxation and duties by authority of Parliament. Brother Robert R. Livingston, PGM New York, signer of the Declaration of Independence and negotiator of the Louisiana Purchase, tried in vain to stop the issuance of the hated tax stamps in the mid-1760's. In 1761 Brother James Otis, St. Andrews Lodge (Boston), soldier at Bunker Hill, lawyer, and legislator, spoke out against the writs of assistance, which were general search warrants issued to revenue officers to allow them to search and seize property from houses believed to contain goods which had been smuggled to avoid paying taxes imposed by the Navigation Acts. Brother Otis had been Advocate General to the Crown and resigned that position to petition the Crown to cease the intolerable taxes. John Adams, who was not a Mason, was present at Brother Otis' pleadings said, "Otis was a flame of fire. With a promptitude of classical allusions, a depth of research, a rapid summary of historical events, a protusion of legal authorities, a prophetic glance of his eye into futurity and a torrent of impetuous eloquence, he hurried away every thing before him. American independence was then and there born; the seeds of patriots and heroes were then and there sown; to defend the vigorous youth, the non sine dis animosus infants. Every man of a crowded audience appeared to me to go away, as I did, ready to take up arms against the writs of assistance. Then and there the first scene of the first act of opposition to the arbitrary claims of Great Britain. Then and there the child Independence was born."

It can be clearly demonstrated that Masons and Masonry played a part, in fact a large part, in the forming of the United States. The ideals of Masonry helped to guide many of the leaders of that time. Since our brethren were scattered throughout the colonies and in fact were of many different backgrounds and beliefs, Masonry did unite men of every country, sect, and opinion.

The War began in many different places, at different times, and was started by different people. We often think of a clear cut demarcation from peace to war yet this did not happen. Many of the colonists did not want war or separation. They only wanted peace and the right to determine their own future. Some saw that this could only be done through separation and they pushed, pulled, tugged, and forced the separation. All the parties acted as they had to act. Masonry could not provide the balm necessary to close in peace and harmony. War was inevitable.

Many of the revolutionary period leaders were Masons and much of the planning and execution of the plans for independence were made in and
around the lodges of that day. Frequently, Masons met at taverns since they had rooms overhead to accommodate the brethren at labor. Yet the overwhelming evidence demonstrates that Masonic meetings, then as now, often occurred in places where non-Masonic matters were formulated. For example, after the lodge was closed and the craft were at refreshment, discussions ran freely. Undoubtedly, many "plans" were laid and developed during such gatherings. One of the better known meeting places was the Green Dragon Tavern in Boston. The Green Dragon Tavern was organized as the "1st antient" lodge in Boston in 1752. It was also known as "Free Mason's Arms". It has been described as the "headquarters of the Revolution". The question has been posed, I am sure, How much 'treason' was hatched under this roof? The answer will probably never be fully known; but much was unquestionably concocted within the walls of the Masonic Lodge.

Masonry and Masons were deeply involved in all aspects of the events prior to and during the War. It would be impossible to do more than scratch the surface here. Nevertheless, a brief look at some additional events and people who directed or participated in them to the benefit of the country is in order. Masonry requires much in exchange for its laurels. Honor is perhaps one of the greatest. Brother Henry Knox, future colonial military leader, organizer of the December 26, 1776, Delaware River crossing and future Secretary of War played a meaningful part in an event in Boston in early March 1770 which became known as the Boston Massacre.

On March 5, 1770, a British sentry named White was accused of attacking a "boy" and the sentry was in turn attacked by a "mob" when he called for help. Upon help arriving, the British soldiers were pelted by snowballs and rocks thrown by the "mob". The soldiers fired, killing five and wounding six. Brother Knox, who was a book seller, tried to prevent the acts which culminated in the massacre. Brother Knox "was desperately trying, as even the Tories later admitted, to do 'everything in his power to prevent mischief on this occasion'". Having fruitlessly sought to keep the boys from bothering White, the sentry, he came over and clutched Preston's coat. (Preston was the leader of the relief party.) Preston stopped while the party continued toward the Customs House. 'For god's sake, take care of your men', Knox said 'If they fire, you die'.? Brother Knox realized that the British were being goaded and tried to stop the confrontation to no avail. At the trial of Capt. Preston, the key question was who gave the order to fire. Defence counsel John Adams noting that Brother Knox had stopped the Preston party as it approached, realized that the order to load weapons had to have been given while Capt. Preston was talking with Brother Knox and was able to save Capt. Preston's life. Brother Knox, by his
actions, tried to stave off a conflict that could not be stopped and then stood up in defence of the man whom he could easily have left to his own resources. Honor bound Brother Knox to stand up and save Capt. Preston’s life.

In June 1772, Brother Abraham Whipple, St. John’s Lodge #1, Providence, RI, led a party which attacked and burned the British Revenue Cutter Gaspee, which had run aground while chasing a colonial vessel. When challenged by Lt. Dudington, the Gaspee’s commander, Bro. Whipple responded, “I am the sheriff of the county of Kent, God damn you! I have got a warrant to apprehend you, God damn you! So; surrender, God damn you!” A few moments later Lt Dudington was severely wounded and the Gaspee was destroyed. While all the members of the raiding party were well known and in spite of rewards being offered, no evidence was ever produced and no trials were ever held. As a result of this and other acts, the British were induced to form a Royal Commission to seek out the guilty parties, arrest them, and transport them to England for trial. But as noted above no trials were ever held. The end result of this was that the now famous Committees of Correspondence were formed. These Committees were in effect the only real means of inter-colonial communications. They provided a vivid albeit distorted account of the British rule and helped to keep the flame of independence lit.

In November 1773, three ships, Hall, Bruce, and Coffin, arrived in Boston Harbor loaded with tea. The tea was moored at Griffins’ Wharf and under the law of that day it had to be cleared by Customs or become subject to seizure within twenty days. The Boston town meeting, which in effect governed the city, refused to let the tea land and the British admiral refused to let the ships depart prior to unloading. At a November 16th town meeting, held in part to discuss the tea, Sam Adams, Adams was not a Mason, cried out, “This meeting can do nothing further to save the country.” At the town meeting Brother John Rowe of St. Andrews Lodge asked whether the tea would mingle with salt water. The Masons at the Green Dragon sang, “Rally, Mohawks! Bring out your axes and tell King George, we’ll pay no taxes.” Then members of St. Andrews Lodge and others numbering about 90 went to Griffins’ Wharf and destroyed the tea. Brother, Worshipful Master, and future Grand Master of Massachusetts, Joseph Warren, who would die at Bunker Hill was accused of being a leader of the rebel group who dressed as Mohawk Indians and threw the tea into Boston Harbor, as was Brother John Hancock. Brother Paul Revere was also present. The “Mohawk” raid was carried out by the North End Caucus, which met at the Green Dragon Tavern, of which many of the members of St. Andrews Lodge were active members.
The struggle divided families as well. Brother John Rowe, Grand Master of St. John's Grand Lodge and uncle of John Rowe of St. Andrews Lodge kept a diary and his entry for November 16, 1773 reads in part, "...the body meeting in the forenoon adjourned until afternoon. Broke up at dark. A number of people appearing in Indian dresses went aboard the three ships Hall, Bruce, Coffin. They open'd the hatches, hoisted out the tea and flung it overboard, this might, I believe have been prevented". The Boston Tea Party led to the passage of the Boston Port Bill which closed the Port of Boston until the tea was paid for, approximately $75,000. This in turn further united the colonies and in Virginia plans were laid for annual congresses. Brother George Washington is claimed to have said he would raise a thousand men for the cause. At this point nothing short of war would settle the issue.

The War for Independence began in the hearts of men and ended on the battle field. Boston was, by its very location and collection of merchants, a natural flash point. The British realized this and on December 3, 1774, HMS Scarborough, commanded by Captain Barcaly, arrived in Boston with circulars that prohibited the sale of arms and ammunition to the colonies. Brother Paul Revere was given the task of taking copies of these and other messages to the Portsmouth, New Hampshire Committee of Correspondence. There local patriots, being aroused by the correspondence, in turn, on December 13, 1774, attacked and overcame Ft. William and Mary, located outside Portsmouth, with minimal shots being fired and no injuries recorded. The attack was led by Brother and Major General, then Major, John Sullivan of Portsmouth. Brother Sullivan was involved in several major engagements in the War. In future years he was elected Governor of New Hampshire, appointed as a federal judge, and the first Grand Master of New Hampshire.

While history generally places the first shots of the war at Lexington, New Hampshire was involved in acts of war several months before. Still, the now famous events at Lexington and Concord are now burned into the history each child is taught and deserves our attention. The events at Lexington and Concord and Paul Revere's famous ride both took place within a 24 hour period and are directly related to each other. In fact, without Revere's ride events would have turned out quite differently. The British military commander, General Gage, headquartered in Boston had married a local girl and was not unsympathetic to the Colonial cause. General Gage realized that the local colonial forces, such as they were, were gathering arms and ammunition. He knew that they had buried cannons at Concord and that sooner or later he would have to go after them. General Gage realized that he did not have a sufficient force to control the colonies and in effect left them to their own
devices. His superiors in England, however, wanted Gage to govern and
govern by force. After all, Gage did have 4,000 troops at his disposal.

Gage was ordered to arrest members of the Provincial Assemblies. Realizing
that his situation was impossible, Gage decided to take the magazine at
Concord and to try to pacify his 'masters' with this act. In order to get to
Concord the British would have to pass through Lexington. Thus, Gage set his
plans in motion. He knew of the weakness of the Provincial armies, and he did
not want to make martyrs of the rebel leaders whom he would have to chase,
if he could locate them, and he already knew where the cannons were
located. Sam Adams and Brother John Hancock, having left Boston to plan
and collect new adherents, were staying in the house of Jonas Clarke in
Lexington. As luck would have it, both sides were in the same spot at the same
time, but for different reasons. The British wanted the cannon at Concord and
the Americans thought they wanted Adams and Hancock as well.

The story of Paul Revere's midnight ride was immortalized by Longfellow.
The colonial leaders had begun to disperse knowing that they were in jeopardy.
Only a few were left in Boston. To them fell the task of giving the alarm and
signaling to the rest what route the British march would take. 'One if by land,
two if by sea', these were the instructions given to Brother John Pulling, Jr., a
vestryman at North Church. Even the smallest details were left to Masons to
perform. Brother Dr. Joseph Warren, Prov Grand Master, who was to die at
Bunker Hill within three months, was the highest ranking 'rebel' in Boston on the
night General Gage decided to march toward Lexington. Brother Warren
assembled the Committee on Safety, dispatched Revere and others and in
effect helped feed the flame of revolution.

Through the night Paul Revere rode from Boston toward Lexington avoiding the
British patrols. He arrived in Lexington in the early morning, sounded the alarm
and provided the colonial militia time to assemble long before General Gage's
soldiers arrived. Later in the same day the two sides clashed and the war had
two rallying points. An interesting side note to Lexington is that depending on
who is writing the history the 'shot heard round the world' could have been fired
by either colonists or British.

On the plain at Lexington, Capt. Parker issued his now famous command, 'Stand
your ground. Don't fire unless fired upon; but if they mean to have war let it
begin here'. In Tourtellot's Lexington and Concord the following is found,
"Lexington, April 25, 1775, I, John Parker, of lawful age, and commander of the
militia in Lexington, do testify and declare, that on the nineteenth instant, in the
morning, about one of the clock, being informed that there were number of regular officers riding up and down the road, stopping and insulting people as they passed on the road, and also was informed that a number of regular troops were on their march from Boston, in order to take the provence stores at Concord, ordered our militia to meet me on the common in said Lexington to consult what to do, and concluded not to be discovered, nor meddle with said regular troops (if they should approach), I immediately ordered our militia to disperse and not to fire. Immediately said troops made their appearance and rushed furiously, fired upon and killed eight of our party, without receiving any provocation therefore from us. Signed John Parker.9

When the lead British element approached the 77 men on Lexington Green, Major Pitcairn, who would die at Bunker Hill just a few weeks later, cried, "Disperse, ye villains, ye rebels! Disperse! Lay down your arms! Why don’t you lay down your arms and disperse!"10 Where the shot came from will probably never really be known. As Tortellot notes, ‘Someone, possibly one of the provincials off the common, fired a shot. Perhaps it was meant to be an additional alarm—a common practice since the days of Indian raids. Or perhaps a British soldier, carried away by the excitement, fired at the minutemen. Or else a young officer backed up an order to the minutemen to lay down their arms with a warning shot from his pistol or possibly someone’s musket flashed in the pan by accident. In any case, the tense but almost silent scene of a moment earlier on the little common erupted suddenly into noisy and wholly uncontrolled violence.

Major Pitcairn, an officer of the Marines commanding Light Infantry Companies, could not restrain the troops, who had long since broken ranks and were firing at random with no orders from anyone. Pitcairn rode in among them, shouting orders to stop the firing and striking his sword downward furiously in the regulation cease fire signal. The Light Infantry paid no attention to him.11 On came the light infantry, moving swiftly in the fresh night air. In a moment more occurred the incident of Major Pitcairn’s order and pistol shot. Regardless of who fired the first shot and for what purpose, it did occur and history, being written by the victors for the most part, leads us to believe that the shot came from the British, yet we may never really know. In any event, Masons were there and played an important part in this event as well.

June 17, 1775, was a day like many spring and early summer days in New England, yet before it was over the colonial war was to take on new and special significance. For this was the day that the battle of Bunker Hill was fought. Masonry was there. It suffered just as did the people on both sides.
General Washington had been appointed to lead the Continental Army and had gone no more than twenty miles from Philadelphia when a courier rode up and relayed the story of Bunker Hill, another turning point in the war in which the Masonic presence was felt.

Brother and General Washington upon hearing of the favorable account given by his newly formed army is reputed to have expressed the idea that the liberties of the country are safe. The battle, while a loss for the Continental Army, did help to weld the untrained militia into a fighting army. Brother and Major General Joseph Warren arrived late to the battle. The commander was Brother and Brig. General Israel Putnam. When Warren arrived on the scene Putnam said: "I am happy to see you, General. I am relieved of command, and will obey your orders." To this Warren replied, "I have no command here, I have come to give what assistance I can and to let these damned rascals see that the Yankees will fight." Brother Warren seeing that Brother Putnam had taken command chose to fight not as an officer but as a private in the field.

The battle lasted less than an hour. Major Pitcairn was shot in the head and died after being carried from the field by his son. General Warren, also shot in the head, died a brief time later. Brother Warren lost his life during this battle and Masonry lost a great leader. It was during this battle, when ammunition was running out that Brother Putnam uttered his now famous order 'don't fire till you see the whites of their eyes'. Brother Putnam served only a short time in the field because of a stroke which severely hampered his activities. He was, however, to show great courage and resourcefulness in his brief sojourn upon the battlefield.

Thus, Masonry offered two of her sons to the country; one died, the other was to play a part for only a brief time. A third participant of the battle of Bunker Hill, which actually took place on Breed's Hill, was Brother Richard Gridley. Brother Gridley was the engineer of the fortifications on Breed's Hill. The fortifications were built in a single night, by hand, under Brother Gridley's direction. Brother Gridley was raised in Master's Lodge, Boston, on April 4, 1746. He served as Master of his lodge in 1756. He was Grand Junior Warden from 1758-1760 and Grand Senior Warden from 1760-1761. In April 1776, Brother Gridley's engineering skills were again called upon. Brother Washington directed him to plan the fortifications overlooking Boston. Due to his efforts the British seeing they had been outmaneuvered gave up Boston.

Brother Richard Henry Lee, a Virginia Mason, on June 7, 1776, drafted the resolution that these colonies are and of right ought to be, free and
independent states'. In less than 32 days the Declaration of Independence would be written by a committee of Thomas Jefferson, Brother Benjamin Franklin, Provincial Grand Master 1749, John Adams, Brother Roger Sherman and Brother Robert Livingston, Grand Master of New York 1784-1800. Thus, at least three of the drafters of the Declaration of Independence were Masons. The rest is history.

Even in this brief accounting, it is evident that Masonry played a large part in the formation of our country. Its history is interlaced with Masons and masonry. Depending on your point of view the colonial period may or may not be one of the most illuminating of times, yet beyond any doubt Masonry played a key role in leading the way down the path to freedom and it lit the path for the future. No brief retelling of the history of that time can do justice to all the Masons who were there and who participated in the acts of their day. All we can do is look back and take good heed of our early brothers.

ENDNOTES

7. *Paul Revere*, P.255
8. Ibid, P. 268
10. *Patriots*, P 239
11. Ibid, P. 132-133
12. *Patriots*, P 280
13. Ibid, P 280
14. Ibid, P 286