

Freemasonry and American Revolution – GW Masonic Memorial

The origins of Freemasonry are obscure. The creation of the Craft (as it is also called) occurred over time between the first recorded gentleman joining an Edinburgh stonemasons' lodge in 1599 and the 1721 publication in London of *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* by Scots Presbyterian minister James Anderson.¹

Freemasonry is fundamentally a self-improvement, volunteer association that teaches moral, intellectual, and spiritual lessons through three initiation ceremonies. Freemasonry's three degree are modeled after a craftsman's progress: Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master Mason. Freemasonry was, and remains, open to all men of good reputation who profess a belief in Deity (referred to in lodge as The Supreme Architect of the Universe). By the 1750s a variety of Christian and non-Christians, European, and non-European men, and a few women, were members.²

Freemasonry grew popular within cities as political, commercial, and intellectual elites gathered within a lodge. With aristocratic, and later royal patronage, Freemasonry evolved into the preeminent fraternal organization of the eighteenth century. The earliest records of American Masonic lodges are in Philadelphia. In 1732, Boston's St. John's Lodge was duly constituted by the Grand Lodge of England and remains the oldest lodge in North America. Interwoven with the British Enlightenment, Masonic lodges formed throughout Europe and the Americas. The network of Scots, English, and Irish Lodge helped knit the British commercial empire together.³

Although American elites initially joined the Freemasons to keep pace with genteel English behavior, the fraternity contributed to the spread of the ideas and ideals behind the American Revolution. During the revolutionary era, Masons of note included George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, James Otis, and Paul Revere. While individual Freemasons actively participated in the American Revolution, Freemasonry, as an institution as well as its local lodges, remained politically neutral.⁴

Washington joined Freemasonry in the Lodge at Fredericksburg, Virginia. He was 20 years old when he received the first degree of Entered Apprentice on November 4, 1752. He paid the lodge two pounds and three shillings to join. Ten days after turning 21, on March 3, 1753, he was passed to the second degree of Fellowcraft. On August 4, 1753, he was raised to the third degree of Master Mason. The lodge's surviving minute book records Washington attending only two more meetings: September 1, 1753, and January 4, 1755.⁵

Many of Washington's brothers in the Fredericksburg Lodge later served within in the Continental Army or Virginia Militia, including Hugh Mercer, George Weedon, and Thomas Posey. Washington's "Mother Lodge" was renamed and numbered as Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4 after the creation of the Grand Lodge of Virginia in 1778. It continues to meet today.⁶

Beginning in 1778 and through the remainder of his life, Washington was a frequent participant in Masonic ceremonies. On June 24, 1779, for example, Washington attended American Union Lodge's celebration of the Feast of St. John the Baptist. That lodge comprised officers and enlisted men within the Connecticut regiments. He also visited King Solomon's Lodge in Poughkeepsie, New York, on December 27, 1783.⁷

After the war, in 1784, Washington accepted the invitation of his friends and neighbors to attend a June banquet at Alexandria Lodge No. 39, where he was elected an honorary member. Four years later he agreed to be charter master of the lodge when it transferred its allegiance from the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania to the Grand Lodge of Virginia. In 1794, the lodge commissioned William Williams to paint Washington dressed in Masonic regalia. After Washington's death the lodge changed its name to Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22.⁸

As president, Washington exchanged letters with many Masonic local lodges and state grand lodges. He also met delegations of Freemasons during his visit to Rhode Island in 1790 and his 1791 tour of the southern states. His most significant Masonic activity, however, occurred on September 18, 1793. Acting as grand master pro tem, he presided at the Masonic ceremonial laying of the United States Capitol cornerstone.⁹

At Washington's 1799 funeral, brothers of Alexandria Lodge performed Masonic rites. After Martha Washington's death the lodge acquired many valuable items from the estate, including a Masonic apron sent from France in 1793. With these items and many curiosities, the lodge opened a museum in 1812.¹⁰

In 1910 the George Washington Masonic National Memorial Association was formed. Then in 1932 the Association dedicated its great Masonic Memorial to Washington in Alexandria, Virginia. Today Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22 displays many of its valuable Washington artifacts and continues to meet there. [The George Washington Masonic National Memorial](#) welcomes the public seven days a week to view its many exhibitions and enjoy the spectacular view for the top of its 333 foot tower.¹¹

Washington himself best articulated his membership in, and relationship to, Freemasonry when he replied to the brethren of King David's Lodge in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1790:

*Being persuaded that a just application of the principles, on which the Masonic Fraternity is founded, must be promotive of private virtue and public prosperity, I shall always be happy to advance the interests of the Society, and to be considered by them as a deserving brother.*¹²

Mark A. Tabbert
Director of Collections
George Washington Masonic National Memorial Association