



# **The Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons of Virginia**



## **Committee on Masonic Education**

---

### **Lodge Presentation Program Paper**

---

## **FREEMASONRY DURING THE CIVIL WAR**

**Brother Joel Richard Jones**

**District Educational Officer, Masonic District 17**

This year marks the 150th anniversary of some of the bloodiest battles of the American Civil War, such as Shiloh and Antietam, as well as the battle of the U.S.S. Monitor and the C.S.S. Virginia (often referred to as the “Merrimac”). It is, therefore, appropriate for us to take a brief look at how that War impacted Freemasonry, and conversely how Freemasonry impacted the war. True brotherhood was severely tested both on and off the battlefield.

The Civil War is said to have been the single most divisive event in our nation's history. No other war, political event, or national crisis has ever approached the same levels of animosity and mistrust among our citizens. During the War, brother fought against brother, fathers against sons, and families were split forever over their beliefs related to the war. Not surprisingly, the Civil War also destroyed the bonds of many organizations, including churches.

Yet, Freemasonry remained almost immune to the ravaging social effects of the war. Masons held fast to the ties of the brotherhood that brought them together in the first place. The ideals and moral codes that

we, as Masons, strive to abide by, helped to overcome the hatefulness generated by the War.

There are a number of reasons why our Fraternity, more than most other organizations, was able to survive the turbulence. One reason was the long and storied history of our Craft. Our beliefs and the tenets of the Lodge predate not only the Civil War, but also the Constitution; and the founding of our country. When such sacred tradition not only exists, but flourishes for that many years, it becomes so engrained in its members that it is almost impossible to take down.

A second reason why Masonry held firmly together was that membership in a Masonic Lodge was by choice only. As you well know, any man interested in becoming a Mason must, "of his own free will and accord," seek out a member of a Lodge and request a petition for membership. There's no draft; no coercion. We are Masons, because we steadfastly believe in the Craft.

A third reason is the structure of Freemasonry itself. Our rules and customs clearly enabled Masonry as a whole to avoid the turbulent politics and divisiveness of the War. This allowed the Lodge during the War to continue to function as a place where a man could go if he needed help, sought moral support, or simply wanted a quiet haven from the storms of war that were raging. It was then, and continues to be today, a place where true brotherhood exists.

A great example of these ties of brotherhood during the Civil War occurred on the battlefield at Gettysburg where 93,000 Union troops did battle with 71,000 Confederates. Of those numbers, more than 35,000 men were killed or wounded in only three days of fighting in early July 1863. Of the men who fought, nearly 18,000 were Masons, 5,600 of whom

became casualties.

One of the most noteworthy events that occurred at Gettysburg was the huge Confederate infantry push that we all know as "Pickett's Charge." On July 3, 1863, Gen. George Pickett, a member of Dove Lodge No. 51 in Richmond, ordered nearly 12,000 men to embark on a long rush across open fields towards the center of the Union line at a place called Cemetery Ridge.

The man leading that Confederate charge under Pickett was General Lewis Addison Armistead, a member of Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22. Originally from North Carolina, he had attended West Point, and fought with the US Army for a number of years in the West before resigning his Union commission to fight for the South.

During his service in the West, Armistead served with, and became very close friends with, a fellow officer named Winfield Scott Hancock, a member of Charity Lodge No. 190, in Norristown, Pennsylvania. It had been nearly three years since the two friends had any contact, but at Gettysburg, Armistead and Hancock both came to realize early on that they would soon face off in battle. We can only imagine the deep emotional effect that this reality had on each of them.

General Hancock had taken command of the fragmented Union troops on Cemetery Ridge on July 1st. He organized them into a strong front that had withstood heavy pounding from Confederate guns for two straight days. His position in the center of the Union line was the focus of Pickett's Charge.

During the intense action that ensued, both men were wounded. Armistead was shot from his horse, and severely wounded. Hancock's saddle took a hit, driving shrapnel into his thigh.

As the battle waned, it became clear that Armistead's injuries would surely be fatal. His thoughts turned toward his old friend Hancock, who was somewhere behind the Union lines. In an act of desperation, yet with a clear mind, Armistead gave the grand hailing sign of distress, which was clearly seen by Union Captain Henry Bingham, a physician and a member of Chartiers Lodge No. 297, Canonsburg, Pennsylvania.

Bingham came to the fallen Armistead, and identified himself as a fellow Mason. The two men spoke briefly, and Armistead inquired about his friend and Masonic Brother, General Hancock.

After hearing that Hancock was slightly wounded, yet was still in command, Armistead asked Bingham to do him a personal favor. He asked him to deliver to Hancock some of his cherished personal effects, including his Masonic watch, and the Bible upon which he had taken his obligation.

Capt. Bingham, of course solemnly agreed. He comforted Armistead as best he could, arranged for his medical care, and said his farewell. He then returned to the Union camp to deliver Armistead's keepsakes to Gen. Hancock. Armistead was taken to a nearby field hospital where both Union and Confederate soldiers were being treated, and he died from his wounds two days later.

The fact that Armistead chose to use the sign of distress signified that this war was over for him, and that there was another more pressing matter on his mind, as he lay there on the battlefield at Gettysburg – his overwhelming sense of brotherly love.

Many would wonder what could lead one of the highest ranking and most respected officers in the Confederacy to lay aside the ideology of the war and all of his training as a military man, to call out to a Brother Mason from the other side. But as Masons, we should know the answer which

was commemorated by a monument dedicated by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania at the Gettysburg National Cemetery. The monument, with Masonic symbols is clearly displayed on its pedestal, is a testament to acts of brotherly love among enemy soldiers and is inscribed with a simple phrase: "*Friend to Friend – A Brotherhood Undivided.*" 1.

In the years leading up to the war, the questions of secession, slavery, and states' rights had been as much on the minds of Masons in this country as was the case with other citizens, and there was a sense that it would be almost impossible to avoid imminent warfare between the opposing states.

The strength and force of Masonic principles can be so clearly appreciated in a letter drafted by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania in June of 1861, just after the onset of hostilities, and sent in response to a communication it had received from the Grand Lodge of Tennessee, lamenting the situation that the country was in. Here is the pertinent quote from that letter:

**"As to the present deplorable state of this country, Masons cannot fail to have opinions as to the cause that produced it. It is to be feared that some of our Brethren are in arms against the Union of the States; others are in the ranks of its defenders. But while Masons, as individuals are acting in harmony with their personal views, Freemasonry is a silent, unimpassioned, abstract observer of events. Brethren, we, with you, deplore the present unnatural and deeply distressing condition of our national affairs. But if this whirlwind threatens to overwhelm us, the still small voice of Masonic faith will be uttered and heard saying, 'Brethren, there is help at hand in this time of need.'**

**Surely your God is our God; your faith our faith; your landmarks our landmarks; your joy our joy. Then let us work together for the**

**preservation and perpetuity of a common inheritance.**

**If discord, dissension, and disruption, shall mark the decline and fall of the most wise and wonderful of the governments of mankind, let the Masonic temple, in all States, kingdoms, lands, peoples or confederacies, be common refuge of an indestructible Masonic fraternity."**

The sentiments in this letter were echoed by virtually all of the other Grand Lodges at one point or another during this time period. Nobody wanted war; negotiation was overwhelmingly the preferred option. However, if an extended war were to occur, Masons hoped and believed that the Fraternity would be able to survive the conflict.

But why? What was so special about Masonry that set it apart from other organizations?

One distinguishing fact was that there were, and still are, certain Masonic taboos that exist within the Lodge. While it is true that the Lodge is designed to be an open forum for members to express their opinions and to debate matters of importance, there were certain subjects that were not to be discussed: religion and politics. One of the essential purposes of the Lodge was to encourage a state of harmony among the Brethren. Our Masonic forefathers deemed the subjects to be too divisive and too destructive of Masonic harmony, and, therefore, banned them from discussion within the Lodge.

Another important point is that our Masonic brotherhood is founded on three basic principles or tenets that we use as a moral guideline for our lives – Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth.

These concepts seem simple enough. Brotherly love teaches us that we should love and respect all of the Brethren of the earth, whether they are members of the Craft or not. Relief teaches that we should do all that we reasonably can to help those who need our assistance. Truth teaches us that we should always seek the light of knowledge, for only in knowledge can we find truth and be truly free.

Of course, living up to these principles is anything but simple, but during the Civil War, Masons on both sides had opportunities to display those virtues, and the story of Generals Armistead and Hancock is just one of hundreds of examples that can be related about Masonic brotherhood overcoming the hatred and animosity of war.

When the shooting war ended, the division between the North and South remained. If anything, the antagonism was more bitter than it had been during the war, and it was Freemasonry that was most directly responsible for easing the pangs of hatred. Mutual kindness and respect shown by Masons to former foes became a key link in rebuilding the chain of unity for America.

I would conclude this presentation by suggesting that if we take these lessons and apply them to our actions and attitudes today, we too can promote that harmony and fellowship that should continue to define our Fraternity, and contribute also to a better and more moral world.

---

---

*Acknowledgement:*

Many of the historical accounts in this presentation were excerpted from a book written by Right Worshipful Allen Roberts entitled, "House Undivided: The Story of Freemasonry and the Civil War"