

THE OLD PAST MASTER MASONRY AND THE CONSTITUTION

Several Freemasons participated in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, and later, the United States Constitution. Some 8 or 9 signers of the Declaration appear to have been Masons, and of the signers of the Constitution, perhaps 13 were or would later become Masons. It is notable that some 5 Masons refused to sign the Constitution as presented. Clearly, when you listen to the Declaration, it certainly echoes Masonic thought.

Listen to the stirring words of the introduction to the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness — That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..."

After the recitation of the King's wrongdoing, it closes with an appeal "to the Supreme Judge of the World" for the Rectitude of their intentions, and declares Independence! At this time, Kings ruled by divine right, there was no separation of Church and State in Europe, and very little in the New World, and equality before the law or in the marketplace was a joke. There was only one place where Men did meet upon the level and act upon the square, where they had individual religious freedom and mutual respect and tolerance — in the Masonic Lodges.

Masonry in its current form has been said to be a child of the Age of Enlightenment. Possibly because since 1717, Masonic thinking publically expressed the doctrines of the Enlightenment — individual freedom, truth, tolerance and brotherhood; however, those ideas had long been part of private Masonic life and thinking. Masonry became a banner under which those "new" values could publically march forward. These ideas permeate the Declaration of Independence. This thought, Masonic thought, caught fire in the American Colonies, France, Italy and South America. The great revolutionary leaders, George Washington, Garibaldi, Simón Bolívar, to name just a few, were Freemasons, who spread the torch of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" around the world.

At the Constitutional Convention, the drafting of the Constitution was a long and painful process. Achieving consensus was a problem which taxed the abilities of George Washington, Samuel Adams, Ben Franklin, Alexander Hamilton and John Hancock -- for openers. What was the nature of the instrument that was signed in 1787 — that blueprint for American Government that begins with the beautiful Preamble: "We, the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

When you examine it, we find the parameters of a strong, representative form of government, with the Legislative, Executive and Judicial branches set out with their checks and balances, but few of the rights of Man that were the ringing battle cry of the Declaration of Independence. To be sure, a form of elective government was set out, titles of nobility were abolished, the right of habeas corpus was preserved, and the right to trial by jury, but the new document was primarily concerned with the operation of the new federal government and protection to the several States. As a consequence, the right to Amend the Constitution becomes very important — this is what

THE OLD PAST MASTER

allows it to be a "organic" document, responsive to the needs of a changing society — ever grounded on truth, justice and individual liberty.

Now let us turn to the five Masons who refused to sign it. Why didn't they? Well, that very paucity of individual freedoms became the straw that almost broke the camel's back. Edmund Randolph, Grand Master in Virginia in 1787, James McClurg [Virginia], Oliver Ellsworth [New Jersey], William Pierce and William Houston [both of Georgia], all refused to sign.

The concern of these and other delegates over the paucity of the individual freedoms caused the Constitution to almost be stillborn. The separation of Church and State, guaranteeing individual freedom of religion, was a key issue. As Masons, we are familiar with the great change made in 1723 when the Masonic Constitution of the new Grand Lodge of England did away with the requirement that a Mason be of the Religion of the Country or Nation in which he found himself — generally Catholic or Anglican — and required only that he be a good man and true, leaving his individual worship of the Supreme Being up to his own conscience.

Virginia had written this Masonic thinking into its Bill of Rights in 1776. Section XVI of that document provides [Masonically]: "That religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love and charity towards each other."

No wonder they were adamant. Their concerns echoed those of other States. An agreement regarding the rights of Man so dear to Masons and those others imbued with the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment had to be reached.

After much discussion, John Hancock proposed that the Constitution be ratified and that the Convention suggest amendments containing a Bill of Rights, to be thereafter proposed to the several States for approval. Sam Adams, of Massachusetts, who was the prime mover of that State, which was the swing vote in ratification, heartily supported Hancock's plan, and within a week Massachusetts had entered the Union. On September 17, 1791, the Constitution of the United States was signed, and a new form of government was born. The new Congress met after the adoption of the Constitution and in 1789 offered a group of amendments to the States, ten of which were ratified by a three-fourths majority of the States as our "Bill of rights" on December 15, 1791. These amendments provided for religious liberty, freedom of speech and the press, the right of peaceable assembly, the right to bear arms, the right to a speedy and public trial by an impartial jury of the state and district, the right to be informed of the nature of an accusation, to be confronted with witnesses and to have the assistance of counsel and to have the right to compel witnesses to testify in defense. They further provide for no unreasonable search and seizure, no double jeopardy, no deprivation of life, liberty or property without due process, and no cruel and unusual punishment.

They provide the basis for equality before the law and personal rights that, as a form of government, first saw the light of day here in America. Masons may not have actually drafted these in their entirety, but Masonic thinking, including Justice an individual freedom, is

THE OLD PAST MASTER

inseparable from it. We now had a government "of the people, by the people and for the people." The noble experiment had begun!

When the Constitutional Convention was closing, after ratification of the Constitution, Ben Franklin, pointing to the sun carved on the back of the presiding officer's chair, remarked; "Throughout the days we have been laboring here, I have observed that sun, and wondered whether it was a rising sun or a setting sun. Now I know it was a rising sun." He seems to say to the Craft that this was a truly Masonic piece of work, and that it was "good work, true work, square work" that a Mason could be proud of— in fulfillment of the promises made in the Declaration of Independence,

FRATERNALLY AND FONDLY,
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