

FREEMASONRY AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The month of July is special to all Americans because we celebrate the birth of our nation on the fourth of July. On that date in the year 1776, representatives of the thirteen American colonies, assembled at what is now known as Independence Hall in Philadelphia, adopted a manifesto asserting their political independence from the British crown. We know that document as the American Declaration of Independence.

According to this well researched and documented work, proof of Masonic membership can be found for only 8 of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence. They are:

- Benjamin Franklin, of the Tun Tavern Lodge at Philadelphia;
- John Hancock, of St. Andrew's Lodge in Boston;
- Joseph Hewes, who was recorded as a Masonic visitor to Unanimity Lodge No. 7, Edenton, North Carolina, in December 1776;
- William Hooper, of Hanover Lodge, Masonborough, North Carolina;
- Robert Treat Payne, present at Grand Lodge at Roxbury, Massachusetts, in June 1759;
- Richard Stockton, charter Master of St. John's Lodge, Princeton, Massachusetts in 1765;
- George Walton, of Solomon's Lodge No. 1, Savannah, Georgia; and
- William Whipple, of St. John's Lodge, Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

As for the Masonic membership among Washington's generals, it is true that many were members of the fraternity, but many were not. When examining the participation of Freemasons in the American Revolution we should first remember the Ancient Charges of a Freemason, and especially that charge concerning "the Civil Magistrates, Supreme and Subordinate," which enjoins the Mason to be "a peaceable subject to the Civil Powers" and "never to be concern'd in plots and conspiracies against the peace and welfare of the nation." This charge was listed as the second of those contained in the Constitutions adopted by the Premier Grand Lodge at London in 1723, long before the American Revolution. How then can we justify the participation of American Freemasons in their rebellion against the King?

The answer can be given in two parts. First, the Masonic fraternity in the American colonies took no part in the Revolution, following Masonic tradition by taking no official stance. However, the fraternity's official neutrality may have owed as much to the divided loyalties of its leadership as it did to Masonic tradition. Many Masons were Loyalists. And second, rebellion against the state, whether justified or unjustified, is not a Masonic offense. The Old Charges state clearly "if a Brother should be a Rebel against the State, ... if convicted of no other Crime, ... they cannot expel him from the Lodge, and his

Relation to it remains infeasible.” This simply means that, in the case of the American Revolution, many brethren, feeling that the actions of the crown warranted revolution and independence, were justified in following their consciences without fear of violating their Masonic obligations or any Masonic law.

As the charge concerning the Civil Magistrates reminds us, “Masonry hath been always injured by War, Bloodshed, and Confusion,” the fraternity was indeed injured by the war. General Joseph Warren, Grand Master of the Ancient’s Provincial Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, lost his life at the Battle of Bunker Hill in June 1775 and his body was thrown into an unmarked grave. While he had led the American troops during that battle, his lodge brother, Dr. John Jeffries assisted the British troops. Nearly a year later, his body was exhumed and identified by another Lodge brother, Paul Revere.

Even before the Declaration of Independence, colonial Masonry suffered from the disruptions of the war, and the division of loyalties among its members. Many lodges found it difficult to meet regularly, and others ceased to meet at all. Many lodges were disbanded as occupying British forces prohibited private assemblies, and loyalist Masons fled the country or joined the British forces.

Although the Masonic fraternity played no part in the Revolutionary War, it can easily be shown that in many ways the revolutionary ideals of equality, freedom, and democracy were espoused by the Masonic fraternity long before the American colonies began to complain about the injustices of British taxation. The revolutionary ideals expressed in the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, and the writings of Thomas Paine, were ideals that had come to fruition over a century before in the early speculative lodges of the 17th and 18th centuries, where men sat as equals, governed themselves by a Constitution, and elected their own leaders from their midst. In many ways, the self-governing Masonic lodges of the previous centuries had been learning laboratories for the concept of self-government.

SMIB