

## HARBOR PILOT WAS SAVED BY MASONIC SIGN

There are times a story comes along that has to be shared. This is one of those stories.

Right Worshipful Brother Joe Wells shared this event that took place in Charleston, South Carolina in 1847. It involved two brother Masons and the obligation one owed to the other. The original story was printed in the Charleston Mercury, sometime after 1859.

The port of Charleston was one of the busiest in the South, mainly because of the export of cotton. The harbor at Charleston, on the other hand, presented a challenge. There was an everchanging sand bar towards the mouth, requiring the need for a harbor pilot, to safely guide ships in and out of the harbor. Back then, being a harbor pilot, was a self-employed craft. At about three to five miles out, incoming ships would signal, by flag, that they wanted a pilot boat. Using telescopes, the harbor pilots, seeing the sign, would rush to their pilot boats. It was then every man for himself. The first one who got there, got the job. This, then was the life of a harbor pilot.

Our story begins with Captain John H. Burk in the year 1847. He was a member of Solomon's Lodge Number 1, one of the oldest in the country, having been chartered in 1735. Captain Burk was hired by a Spanish vessel as their harbor pilot to safely get them out to sea. We can only surmise that there was a storm that took a turn for the worse or for some other reason they could not get him off the ship. The Spanish captain then concluded they would keep him on the ship and take him to Spain. After a few days out, however, the captain and most of the crew, decided the extra man could be a great expense to them and the owner. The only practical thought they had was to get rid of him by making him "walk the plank." As they were getting ready to carry out the act, Captain Burk, realizing the grave danger he was in, gave the sign of a Mason in sheer desperation. As fate would have it, the First Mate, who was also a Mason, stopped the crew from carrying out the act. Captain Burk was then safely taken to Barcelona, where he was paid his full wage. He then booked return passage back to Charleston and renewed his vocation as a harbor pilot.

The article goes on to tell, that in 1857, Captain Burk built the pilot boat, "Courier," the fastest boat for her size in America at that time. Captain Burk passed away on September 21, 1860, at the age of 54. He is buried in the 1<sup>st</sup> Baptist Churchyard in Charleston. Of course, the real hero of this story is the Spanish First Mate who saved Captain Burk's life. Though he is someone we will never know, true to his obligations, he rushed in at a moment of crisis and saved the life of a brother.

As a side light, the story to the newspaper was given as a letter to the editor by Brother C. Jaason Relyes, also a member of Solomon's Lodge number 1. The paper printed the story in bold headlines captioned, "Pilot was saved by Masonic Sign."