



Presidents' Day Oration

By

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Our Forgotten Presidents

Masons pay tribute to the thirteen Presidents known to be members of the Craft, particularly George Washington. But there were fourteen Presidents before Washington who receive little attention. Our forgotten Presidents served under the most difficult circumstances - the years of conflict with Great Britain for independence and then the years trying to unite the colonies into one nation.

These men were heroes and patriots. All pledged their lives, their fortunes and their property for the cause of liberation. All were declared traitors and were to be hanged for treason if caught by the British. This was no idle threat. It prompted Benjamin Franklin to say that if we do not hang together we will surely hang separately. Some indeed were imprisoned and tortured and lost their lives. Others lost their fortunes and property.

Of the fourteen Presidents, elected for one year terms, four were Masons. Our Fraternity has the distinct honor of providing two "first" Presidents, George Washington and Peyton Randolph, the first President of the Continental Congress. The other three

Masonic Presidents were: Henry Laurens, Arthur St Clair and John Hancock.

Bro. John Hancock was held in such high esteem that he was elected President three times. It was under his presidency that the war against Britain was initiated in earnest and Washington was appointed to direct it. And it was Hancock, who boldly and alone signed the Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776. It was another month before the others signed it. He signed it large enough that King George wouldn't need his glasses to read it. He was a leading Boston merchant, a Major General in the militia, and the first Governor of Massachusetts. He was made a Mason in Marchant Lodge No. 277 and affiliated in St Andrew's Lodge of Boston in 1762. Today there is a U. S. Navy guided missile frigate named after him.

Bro. Henry Laurens served as President in 1778. He was a South Carolina merchant. While on a diplomatic mission to Holland he was captured by the British and imprisoned in the Tower of London from Oct 1780 to Dec 1781. He was exchanged for Lord Cornwallis. He was thought to be the first person cremated in America. He was a member of Solomon's Lodge No. 1 in South Carolina and Grand Steward of South Carolina in 1754.

Bro. Peyton Randolph was the first President of the Continental Congress in 1774. He was the last Provincial Grand Master in Virginia.

Bro. Arthur St Clair was a Major General in the Revolutionary War and the first Governor of the Northwest Territory in 1787. He signed a request in 1791 for a charter for Lodge Nova Cesarea Harmony No. 2 in Cincinnati and is recorded as visiting many times.

John Jay also served as Plenipotentiary to Spain. At 34 he was the youngest of these Presidents. He later became Governor of New York and the Chief Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court. There is no proof that he was a Mason but he wrote the following in a letter to Washington: "The dissolution of our Government threw us into a political chaos. Time, wisdom, and perseverance will reduce it into form, and give strength,

order and harmony. In this work you are a Master Builder and God grant that you may long continue a Free and Accepted One."

The following were not Masons but will also be mentioned.

Elias Boudinot of New Jersey signed the Treaty of Peace with Great Britain in 1783. He was the first president of the American Bible Society

Richard Henry Lee was a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses and later became a U. S. Senator. He was the author of the Resolution of Independence in 1776: "these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved." He might have been the author of the Declaration of Independence but because of his illness, Thomas Jefferson was asked to write it.

One can not help but be proud of these brethren and of our Craft and belatedly recognize their enormous contribution.

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Brother George Washington

On February 22 we celebrate the birthday of the Master Builder of our Nation, Bro. George Washington. The character of America is the character of Bro. Washington and his life is an ongoing example of citizenship. He is the only President to have received all of the Electoral College ballots. Remarkably he voluntarily returned the power of the

Presidency to the Continental Congress at the end of his term. Repeatedly he was offered and refused the roles of king, dictator and President for Life. He also refused to be Grand Master of the United States.

President James Buchanan said, "when the birthday of Washington shall be forgotten, liberty will have perished from the Earth." Surely this would never happen. Consider the following: the name of the George Washington High School in New Orleans has been renamed because its critics felt that Washington and his role in our history were no longer relevant to today's students. The National Endowment for The Humanities named a group to access and update our history and the way it was being taught. Sadly the report was rife with errors and an unusual emphasis was placed on commonly taught American History. For example, only passing mention was made of Washington and his role in our history. Dr. Lynne Cheney, the chairman at that time and now our Vice President's wife, soundly and in no uncertain terms rejected and condemned the report as a travesty and a collection of half truths and a mis-emphasis of our history.