

# interpreter

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## Freemasonry in Williamsburg

*Linda Pearson, historical interpreter, traces the origins of Freemasonry and shows what an important role it played in the community of Williamsburg.*

Freemasonry, both in the eighteenth century and now, can best be described as a fraternal organization with three main tenets as its cornerstone: fellowship, philanthropy, and truth. As interpretations of brotherly love, generosity, and truth change over time, so too do our perceptions of those organizations whose foundations they are. Since its first organization into a Grand Lodge composed of four of the London Masonic Lodges in 1717, Freemasonry has evolved and changed. To understand what it meant to eighteenth-century members, it is necessary to examine its medieval origins.

For centuries "masonic lodges" were guilds of craftsmen who traveled throughout Europe working on cathedrals. Secret signs helped one member of the guild recognize another and prevented poorly trained workmen from invading the ranks of guild members. These guilds, or lodges, required working masons to progress through a three-level hierarchy of skill, training, and development: apprentice, journeyman (or "fellowcraft"), and master craftsman. Lodge rules sought to protect the interest of all parties to a building project: the person for whom the building was undertaken, the master in charge of it, the journeyman working on it, and the apprentice learning the trade. Great emphasis was placed on the proper teaching of apprentices.

By the late seventeenth century, many of the operating guilds had become more social and began accepting members who had never been stoneworkers. This transition changed lodges from "operative" groups of active building masons to "speculative" groups of gentlemen who used the rules and tools of the trade as symbols to teach and practice a moral code that stressed benevolence. New members entered as apprentices and could progress

through the Masonic grades to fellowcraft and master. Like the working apprentice, the Freemason apprentice was to be educated in the arts and mysteries of the craft, was not to divulge the secrets of the master, and was to lead an exemplary life—or at least try to.

Charity and fellowship are the two qualities we perceive as Freemasonry's strongest threads, but allegorical stories of life and how to live it are just as important to a Mason. Even though the concepts are symbolic and not to be shared outside the lodge room, their main ideas are designed to help the master Mason live a better life, whatever his profession. These stories have basic ideas from different religions inherent in them, but they lean most heavily on Christianity. Masons looked to the Bible for its teachings, although Masonic expressions like "Great Architect of the Universe" demonstrate that Enlightenment philosophy had a considerable impact on modern Freemasonry as it developed in the eighteenth century.

By the turn of the eighteenth century, there was a growing number of lodges in London,  
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## Bruton Parish Church

Williamsburg's mid-eighteenth-century residents had many opportunities and locations for communal activities—social, commercial, fraternal, recreational, legal, political, spiritual. There was probably no more frequent or regular gathering than the Sunday service at Bruton Parish Church. Parishioners arrived early and lingered after the service to exchange pleasantries, news, opinions, and invitations. With no telephones to simplify weekday communications, they may even have conducted some business in the churchyard.

The church bell summoned everyone inside: residents, students, slaves, and visitors to the town. The minister walked down the aisle informally, possibly stopping to greet in-  
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and in 1717 four of them joined together to form a Grand Lodge. The number of English lodges grew rapidly to 126 in 1733. In addition, a Grand Lodge had been established in Ireland by 1729, and one was in Scotland in 1736. By this time the majority of these lodges were speculative with few or no operative members. In other words, they used the laws of craftsmanship as principles to live by.

Freemasonry came to the English colonies in the eighteenth century, and lodges appeared in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New York, and Virginia by the 1730s. The first known Virginia lodge was founded in Norfolk in 1733, followed by Fredericksburg in 1752, and Kilwinning Cross, Blandford, and Yorktown in 1755.

Articles on Freemasonry appeared in the *Virginia Gazette* as early as the 1730s, and in 1751 William Hunter, printer, published an essay on the "Most Ancient Confraternity of the Universe." There is no positive evidence of the existence of Williamsburg Lodge No. 6, however, until its treasurer's book dated 1762–1763. Continuous minutes and treasurer's reports are extant from 1773 into the 1780s. These minutes were taken from Williamsburg during the War between the States to the Library of Congress via Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Acts of the U. S. Congress in 1916 and 1939 were required to return them to the Williamsburg Masonic Lodge.

During the 1760s the Williamsburg lodge met in the Crown Tavern, across the street from the Printing Office on Duke of Gloucester Street. George E. Kidd tells us much of the lodge's history in *Early Freemasonry in Williamsburg, Virginia*. Peyton Randolph was listed as Grand Master with other members including John Blair, Jr., Charles Carter (son of Robert "King" Carter), Dr. Peter Hay, Peter Randolph (Peyton Randolph's cousin), and Nathaniel Walthoe.

The lodge meeting place had moved to the corner of Queen and Francis streets by the 1770s. It was described as the "New Lodge Room" and rented to the lodge by Brother Gabriel Maupin, tavern keeper and harness maker.

Peyton Randolph, attorney, civic leader, and Speaker of the House of Burgesses, continued as Grand Master of Virginia Masons. Other officers over the years included: Edward Charlton, wigmaker; John Minson Galt, apothecary and visiting physician to the Public Hospital; William Waddill, silversmith and engraver; George Reid, merchant; Peter Pelham, gaoler, musician, and clerk of the

governor's office; James Madison, president of the College of William and Mary; and Benjamin Bucktrout, cabinetmaker.

The general membership reflects the same social differences found among the officers. William Rind, William Hunter, Jr., and Alexander Purdie, printers; James Southall and Richard Charlton, tavern keepers; John Crump and Edmund Dickinson, cabinetmakers; Humphrey Harwood, builder; Robey Coke, armorer; St. George Tucker, Edmund Randolph, John Blair, Jr., and James Monroe, attorneys and politicians; and a variety of others were all listed as members during the 1770s and 1780s.

The diversity of membership representing different levels of society was characteristically American—individual English lodges in the eighteenth century tended to represent only one strata of society. Masonic fraternity provided a bond for at least eight and possibly as many as thirty-two signers of the Declaration of Independence, according to *Masonic Membership of the Founding Fathers* by Ronald E. Heaton. George Washington was the first of seventeen United States presidents who were Masons. So Freemasonry, a European invention, was to contribute to a young America a measure of tradition—one that advanced fraternal unity even as it embraced vocational and social diversity among its members.

Masonic traditions influenced the early Republic in a visual way as well. The catalog for a 1980–81 exhibit in Utica, New York, entitled *The Masonic Tradition in the Decorative Arts*, tells us that the tools of the mason's craft were used as symbols to teach the moral philosophy of the organization. For example, Masons were taught to use the trowel "for the more noble and glorious purpose of spreading the cement of BROTHERLY LOVE." In addition, "the square is the emblem of virtue, the level symbolizes equality, and the plumb rule represents uprightness."

These emblems and many others were used not only on ceremonial Masonic pieces such as Colonial Williamsburg's Bucktrout chair, but they were found on dining ware in taverns where lodge members met and even in domestic decorative arts. Look for the All-Seeing Eye on the Great Seal of the United States (printed on the back of the one-dollar bill). Americans, seeking symbols to represent ideas of the new Republic, turned to these designs among others that spoke eloquently to them of strength of character, brotherly love, enlightened thinking, and other attributes becoming a generation of patriots.

### Bruton Parish Church, *continued*

dividuals as he made his way to the rector's pew, where he donned a white flowing garment called a surplice over his cassock (a close-fitting garment with sleeves, fastened up to the neck and reaching to the heels) before beginning the service. Perhaps the burgesses and councillors waited until the governor arrived so that the whole group made a sort of ceremonial—albeit informal—entrance and sat in the prominent pews reserved for them.

By mid-century assigned seats for officials (and customs for processioning into the church) were well-fixed habits of the congregation, but it had not always been so. Williamsburg's "court church" had evolved from a simple rural parish. Anglican canons and traditions, reinforced by Virginia laws, dictated the liturgical proceedings, but after Williamsburg became the capital of Virginia, Bruton's leaders had to respond to its growing responsibilities with decisions designed to lend ceremonial dignity and signal rank among those in attendance. New forms of protocol accompanied improved physical facilities.

Bruton Parish had a fifteen-year-old brick church on its grounds when Middle Plantation became Williamsburg, the capital, in 1699. Many repairs had been necessary from the beginning of its use, so as early as 1706 an apparently exasperated vestry contemplated replacing it with a new building rather than continue expensive and futile repairs. The vestry hoped that the Virginia Assembly would contribute funds so that the new building would be large enough to seat the governor, councillors, and burgesses. Governor Spotswood's architectural plan, submitted in December 1710 with a promise of financial assistance for a building that the vestry described as commodious and convenient, must have delighted them. Also Spotswood's continued involvement in helping "to beat down the extravagant prices of workmen" was undoubtedly appreciated by tithe-paying townspeople.

The new church was handsome but not as imposing as it is now because it did not have a tower, the heavy brick wall, or tall trees in the churchyard. It was also twenty-five feet shorter from east to west for many years. But the classical balance of its cruciform plan, its mathematical proportions, as well as fine furnishings in the chancel probably impressed and pleased the small early eighteenth-century congregation.

Terse instructions in the vestry minutes of

1716 informed everyone who sat where, and in a deferential society, that was reassuring: Mr. Commissary Blair, the representative of the Bishop of London, head of the church in Virginia, and Bruton's rector for thirty-two years, was to sit "in the head pew in the Church." A special pew was designated for the governor and council; members of the House of Burgesses sat in the transepts with their speaker in the gallery over the south transept. The parishioners occupied pews in the main body of the church. (It was not uncommon for vestries to designate pews for prominent families, although in the eighteenth century pews were not rented; however, some families paid to have galleries built for their use after securing the vestry's permission.) Eventually space was reserved for the "College youth" in part of the west gallery. Once slaves were assigned to the north gallery with its separate entrance, one sees a virtual diagram of the society, its hierarchy visible to and understood by all.

In "Anglican Virginia, The Established Church of the Old Dominion 1607-1786," Arthur Pierce Middleton tells us that the typical Sunday service, read from the Book of Common Prayer, consisted of "mattins" (today called Morning Prayer) including readings from the Old Testament and the New Testament. Then came the litany (a series of supplications in which the clergy lead and the people repeat the same response for several clauses), and Holy Communion or, on most Sundays, the first part of it called the Antecommunion. This was followed by a sermon described by Canon Middleton as "generally very long, heavily freighted with quotations and citations from Holy Scripture and the early Fathers of the Church, and usually read verbatim from carefully prepared notes."

Possibly we have been misled by Fithian's reference to twenty-minute sermons as a generalization. The quote is part of a long letter he wrote to a young man about to come from Princeton to take Fithian's place as tutor for the children of Robert Carter III. Fithian warned his friend of the tendency to "condemn all before you without any meaning or distinction what seems in your Judgment disagreeable at first view." He illustrated his point by alluding to the socializing that occurred before and after church in Virginia and "prays read over in haste, a Sermon seldom under & never over twenty minutes, but always made up of sound morality, or deep studied Metaphysicks." In any case, he was probably not talking about the church in Williamsburg. (continued page 4)

## Bruton Parish Church, *continued*

It's impossible to gauge the depth of parishioners' religious convictions from church records. Certainly both rational philosophy and revival thinking were influencing, in one way or another, the clergy and the congregations committed to their charge. Comments about heavy attendance are not very revealing either, when minimum participation was required by law. Nonetheless it seems that attendance at Bruton increased over the colonial period.

Williamsburg's and Bruton's growth are chronicled by complaints of overcrowding and by additions of various galleries—several more than are in the building now—across the north and south walls of the main body of the church. The length of the building was extended by twenty-five feet in 1750–51, the same period of time that additions were going up on structures all over Williamsburg after the assembly's decision to keep the capital here. Even after galleries were added and the chancel enlarged, there were still references to the church's being too small for the number of people who came to services on special occasions, such as one held when news reached Williamsburg that Parliament had passed the Stamp Act.

By 1755 Bruton had its "noble organ" and within fifteen years a distinctive tower and the brick wall around its grounds. It was a fitting setting for official services such as the funerals of British colonial governors. Moreover, not only governors received special honors. The *Virginia Gazette* helps up visualize the dignity and hierarchical ceremony that characterized the August 1776 funeral of William Rind, printer:

His remains were interred last Saturday Afternoon in the Church of the Parish of Bruton; and being one of the ancient and honorable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons, the Worshipful and Master, Wardens and other Officers, and Brethren of the Lodge of this City, met at their Lodge at 3 o'clock, to prepare themselves for expressing a proper Respect to the Memory of their deceased Brother, from whence they soon after proceeded in the Order and with the Formalities usual on such occasions, to the House of the Deceased, and [later] . . . they went in Procession to the Church before the Corpse each Brother being ranked agreeable to his Advancement in the Royal Art. The Corpse was followed by the Relatives,

and some other respectable Inhabitants of the City. The service in the Church and at the Grave, was performed by the Rev. John Dixon, one of the Brethren and Professor in William and Mary College, and a solemn Dirge, suitable to the occasion, was performed on the Organ, by Mr. Peter Pelham, a Brother likewise.

Minutes of Bruton's eighteenth-century vestry meetings come to us secondhand. They were borrowed in the nineteenth-century by John McCabe who wrote a series of articles on colonial churches for the *American Church Review and Ecclesiastical Register*. His article on Bruton Parish was printed in 1855. McCabe's house in Norfolk burned before he returned the minutes, so it is presumed that they were destroyed in that fire or possibly later during the Civil War. What survives are the excerpts from the minutes that he included in his article on Bruton. Mary Frances Goodwin, Dr. W. A. R. Goodwin's cousin, revised his *Record of Bruton Parish Church* in 1941, and that edition included a transcription of the McCabe article as well as records of baptisms and deaths from the Parish Register, 1730–1797. A recent addition to books on Virginia's churches is Dell Upton's *Holy Things and Profane: Anglican Parish Churches in Colonial Virginia*.

In many ways Bruton Parish Church was at its peak in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, but it would not last. Various political issues, the Great Awakening, and America's independence from England weakened the established church in Virginia. By 1786 its lay leaders, serving in the House of Delegates and believing in religious freedom, voted to separate church and state. The complicated legal and financial results of the disestablishment caused the newly autonomous Episcopal Church great hardships, and it would have to endure a long and difficult recovery. But that's another story from another century.

—BB

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