

Freemasonry And Democracy

Its Evolution in North America

Allen E. Roberts

Just prior to his death Allen E. Roberts completed Part I of his book entitled "Freemasonry and Democracy. " Part II has been written by a Canadian Mason, Wallace McLeod.

This digest traces the evolution of Democracy in both the United States and Canada and will be available in June of 1997.

Freemasons played prominent roles in helping to form democratic governments in both countries, a legacy of which every Freemason should be proud!

This STB is a prelude to the digest and describes the events leading up to the American Revolution which set in motion the chain of events leading to Democracy! – Editor

What the world knows as "The Constitutional Convention" of the United States had a long prelude. Much of this was tragic. It was made possible by events long forgotten, if ever really considered. It took brave and unselfish men and women to bring it to reality.

A national holiday commemorates the discovery in 1492 of a "new Land." What isn't celebrated are the early attempts to colonize this new world. The first known attempt was in 1585 when Sir Walter Raleigh founded a colony at Roanoke Island. What happened to the settlers is still unknown.

In May 1607, 105 passengers of four ships from England landed at what became known as "Jamestown" in a colony called "Virginia." These colonists were led by Captain John Smith. Their luck proved better than their predecessors'. They survived and prospered. So much so that on July 30, 1619, representatives from each of the eleven settlements met in the first representative assembly in the new world. It adopted statutes based on English common law. Later in 1619 they and their progeny celebrated a day of Thanksgiving at Berkeley Plantations along the James River.

With this success another group of settlers set out from England for Virginia in 1620. They missed their destination and landed in what became known as "Plymouth" in what would become the colony of "Massachusetts."

For over 150 years these settlers continued their close ties with England. They even adopted and followed laws they had considered repressive when they fled their mother country. Actually, some of their leaders became even more audacious than were those they had left behind. (This continues to the present day!) Many more empathic leaders took those who would follow them to other areas and formed new colonies. One of the most notable of these was Roger William's who founded the colony of Rhode Island. This became the first colony to keep the political forces in a state from determining which religion should be practiced.

Even as the thirteen original colonies came into being, England kept a firm grip on them. The citizens of this new world appeared to be evenly divided in their allegiance to the government overseas and to their leaders who were advocating more freedom from England's rule. In spite of their feelings, however, the colonists fought along side the British during the French and Indian Wars.

It was during this period, 1670-1759, that Freemasonry seriously came to North America. English, Irish and Scottish Military Lodges brought it with them. Its concepts slowly caught on with the thinking men in the colonies. Its firm belief in the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God found fertile ground in those who believed in the freedom of man. This would become evident within the next several years. The philosophies of the various colonies and their leadership became more varied as the years went by. In each of them there was a faction that considered the acts of the King and Parliament in England repressive. This group argued for independence; the other wanted things to continue as they were.

This loyalty to England was particularly true of many in the New England colonies. They had become an important and prosperous trading center. The ports in New England thrived because all shipping had to be handled in English vessels. In addition, the colonists were forbidden by England to do any manufacturing. Raw goods had to be shipped to Britain for this purpose.

These restrictive acts were accepted, although in many cases, reluctantly, by the colonies. But, England, deeply in debt, demanded more and more from the struggling colonists. The restraints on manufacturing were tightened, and taxes were increased. When a "Writ of Assistance" was enacted by Parliament in 1761, rebellion was imminent. This writ gave the Crown the "right" to search any home or business in the colonies.

James Otis, the General Advocate of Massachusetts, a member of St. John's Lodge, refused to enforce the Writ. In Faneuil Hall in Boston, he encouraged the colonists to "breast any storm of ministerial vengeance that their resistance might cause." He concluded his five-hour speech by saying: "To my dying day will I oppose with all the power and faculties God has given me, all such instruments of slavery on the one hand, and villainy on the other." He then handed the General Advocate his resignation.

British troops were sent to Massachusetts to enforce the taxes. Along with them came a "Quartering Act," forcing the inhabitants to provide housing for the soldiers. Then came the

"Stamp Act" in 1765. This caused several reactions. The group known as the "Sons Liberty" was born; many ladies in Rhode Island determined to ignore the intentions of any man supporting the Stamp Act; Virginia adopted the "Virginia Resolves."

The circulation of the "Resolves" brought mixed reactions. New Yorkers considered them too treasonous to publish; New Englanders were pleasantly surprised because they had considered Virginia the most loyal of the Loyalist colonies.

Parliament quickly dissolved the Stamp Act, not because of sympathy for the colonists, but because of the English merchants. Their business declined drastically.

The King fired the Prime Minister, and through a series of events Charles Townshend became the power in the government. The acts he forced into enactment in 1767 enraged the colonists.

His action in forcing through these laws along with previous suppressive acts, and others that would follow, would be vividly recalled twenty years later in Philadelphia.

All the soldiers from Britain weren't advocates of the acts of their politicians. In 1768 Dr. Joseph Warren, Master of St. Andrew's Lodge in Boston, worked with three Military Lodges in the British forces to form a Grand Lodge for the "Antients" in Massachusetts. Warren was appointed Provincial Grand Master by the Grand Lodge of Scotland on May 30, 1769.

The Townshend Acts were partially abolished in 1770. The crisis was diminished. Then in June 1772 the British custom schooner *Gaspee* ran aground near Providence. About 150 Rhode Islanders boarded her and burned her to the water line. It would no longer interfere with the smuggling trade. But taxes and repression grew worse; among them was a threepenny tax placed on tea by the short-sighted Crown.

Tempers flared, especially in Boston. They reached a crescendo on the night of December 16, 1773. From the Green Dragon Tavern, home of St. Andrew's Masonic Lodge, and the Sons of Liberty, and other places, "Mohawk Indians" tramped. They boarded the East India ships, tossing 342 chests overboard, turning the harbor into a giant teapot.

(It has been highly publicized that the minutes of St. Andrew's Lodge ended with a large 'T', and it didn't hold a meeting because not enough members were present. Actually, the minutes ended with a scroll mark, in no way distinguishable as any letter of a known alphabet.) The port of Boston was closed by the British. The news of "the Boston Tea Party" and the repression by England spread throughout the colonies. They began to train for war in earnest. A group of volunteers called the "Minute Men" was born. Men were chosen to meet in what would be called the "First Continental Congress."

This Congress began its meetings in Philadelphia on September 5, 1774, with Peyton Randolph, a Virginia Freemason, as its president. In England, Edmund Burke, a Freemason, pleaded with the Parliament to stop its repressive taxation, and work for a peaceful settlement. He was ignored.

Lord Dunsmore suspended the Virginia Assembly and it moved to Richmond where it met in St. John's Church on March 23, 1775. There Patrick Henry (not a Freemason) made his "give me liberty, or give me death" speech. A provincial congress in Massachusetts adopted 53 articles of war on April 5, 1775.

The British General Thomas Gage marched on Concord to destroy what his spies informed him was a large store of military supplies. Bostonians were expecting some such move. When it was made a signal was flashed from the Old North Church by a Freemason. This sent Paul Revere, a member of St. Andrew's Lodge, and others, to warn the citizens.

At dawn on April 19, 1775, the British force of 700 troops arrived at Lexington where they found a band of militia blocking their passage. Someone fired, but who is still unknown. Ten Minute Men were killed; the British marched to Concord. War had begun.

Volunteers arrived in Boston to form a ring around the town. Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold, a Freemason, with a force of militia seized the British forts at Ticonderoga and Crown Point.

The Second Continental Congress began meeting on May 10, 1775, in Philadelphia. On July 15, George Washington, a Freemason from Virginia, was elected Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Forces. Without question, he was the logical man for the position. Events would prove this beyond a doubt. He immediately left for Boston, where the Battle of Bunker Hill (really Breed's Hill) was fought, and where Joseph Warren was killed fighting for the Patriots.

What happened next has been covered at length. But problems with the Congresses had, and have, often been glossed over. The Articles of Confederation proved ineffective. It was clear that these had to be revised if the United States was to survive. Wisely, for a change, the Congress called for a convention to propose necessary changes.

STB - June 1997