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Founding Freemasons: “Ancient” and “Modern” Masons in the Founding Era of America
with Particular Emphasis on Masons Benjamin Franklin and George Washington

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Abstract

From its inception in 1733, American freemasonry represented a fair portion of American society. However, though there would be groups of freemasons during this time whose ideals and morals could be traced to a Christian belief system, not all American freemasons considered themselves Christians. Though his book is full of excellent research, David Barton, founder of the Christian heritage research group Wallbuilders, generalized American freemasonry as being entirely Christian in his recent publication *The Question of Freemasonry and the Founding Fathers*. Though there were undoubtedly Christian groups of freemasons during this time period, the assertion that all masons were Christians is not entirely true and needs to be corrected. The non-Christian masons during this time period, known as “Modern” masons, never claimed a Christian heritage but instead had set up lodges that promoted values other than those espoused in Christianity.

In order to correct Barton’s partially incorrect analysis of American masons during this era, evidence will be given to convince the reader of both the reality of anti-Christian freemasons and their feud with their Christian counterparts. The definition of both “Ancient” and “Modern” American freemasonry will be documented, the formation of and struggle between the two groups will be detailed, and the Enlightenment ideals that represented many of the beliefs of American “Modern” freemasons will be explained. Further, as examples of men who did *not* adhere to Christian values in the Craft, short biographies of Masons Benjamin Franklin and George Washington’s involvement with secular freemasonry will also be given.

Founding Freemasons: “Ancient” and “Modern” Masons in the Founding Era of America
with Particular Emphasis on Masons Benjamin Franklin and George Washington

The belief that American freemasonry within the founding era (1750-1789) had a distinctly Christian basis, recently published within the book *The Question of Freemasonry and the Founding Fathers* by prominent historian of the American Founding Era, David Barton, is a generalization that is not entirely true.¹ Though his book is full of excellent research, and his premise is correct as Christian freemasonry would overcome many of the American freemason groups, immediately before and during the founding era, there was within freemasonry a division. This division, first defined by some British and American masons in 1751, split the brotherhood into two groups, labeled “Ancient” and “Modern” freemasonry, one known for their Christian emphasis, the other for its connection to humanistic, Enlightenment oriented values. Unfortunately, Barton never mentions “Modern” freemasonry or the feud between the two groups. However, this feud must be understood to comprehend a more accurate picture of the true basis of American Freemasonry.

Early American freemasonry claimed a British heritage. However, in order to comprehend either British or American freemasonry, one must understand the origin of Masonry. Freemasons profess several different origins for their group. Though varied and even sometimes bordering on the mystical, the different accounts as to the origin of the

¹ David Barton, *The Question of Freemasonry and the Founding Fathers*, (Aledo, TX: Wallbuilders Press, 2005), 44.

Masons seem to only bolster their already secretive identity as an organization. All the different arguments for the Freemasons' beginning, however, can be narrowed down to five distinct theories. Though it is not necessary for the purpose of the topic of American freemasonry to define each of these, there is one theory in particular that demands explanation and is most likely the true origin for both British and American freemasonry.²

This theory, which is also the most commonly accepted one, is that of the official organization of freemasonry by three men in the Goose and Gridiron Tavern in London in 1717. The "Big Bang" Theory, as it is called, denotes the official creation of a Grand Lodge in England, composed of lodges of men who, though they were not stonemasons by trade, used the same terms and even practices of initiation as the stonemasons of Scotland used in their guilds and lodges. This idea of a Grand Lodge in England was conceived of rather suddenly by the three English gentlemen, James Anderson, George Payne, and Theophilus Desaguliers, in the abovementioned London tavern.³ The Grand Lodge these men proposed actually combined four small lodges that had recently begun in England and placed them under the control of "Grand Master" Anthony Sayer.⁴

Historians do note that it is during this time that the English lodges began what is known as a "speculative" or an idealistic form of freemasonry. This form denotes that the English lodges, unlike the Scottish ones, were not made up of actual stonemasons.

² Robert L.D Cooper, *Cracking the Freemasons Code: The Truth about Solomon's Key and the Brotherhood* (New York: Atria Publishing, 2007),

³ George Mather and Larry Nichols, *Masonic Lodge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 1995), 8.

⁴ Stephen Knight, *The Brotherhood* (Los Altos, CA: Acacia Press, Inc., 1984), 25.

Sayer has traditionally been held to be a morally weak man and bad leader; Payne and Desaguliers would later replace Sayer as "Grand Master".

Instead the stonemasons began to accept people who were not such by trade; in fact, beginning in the early 17th century, stonemasons began to allow so many “acceptance” or “cowan” (two terms for non-masons) to join their guilds and lodges that the majority of the population of the lodges were not members of the vocation. Though there is no clear explanation as to why non-masons suddenly wished to join the lodges, one author asserts the possibility that due to the very secretive nature of the lodges, those of nobility wished to use the lodges as places of secret council, and therefore became the first of many non-masons to join the lodges.⁵ This transition from a craft guild, called “operative freemasonry” since it consisted of those who practiced the actual craft, to a guild labeled “Speculative Freemasonry” as it was composed of members holding to the *ideas* of the stonemasons was rapid and permanent; beginning in the early 1700s, many masons were no longer stonemasons at all.

These “Speculative” freemasons had, however, adopted many of the traditions and symbols of the stonemason craft, particularly in seven key areas. First, they kept three of the labels of the stonemasons, “apprentice”, “fellow/journeyman”, and “Master”, and used them to categorize their members. Second, they kept and used the term “lodge” to describe the building in which they met. Third, they claimed and treated as sacred the history of the origins of the group. Fourth, they purposed to maintain the feeling of fraternity and benevolence between members. Fifth, they fostered a spirit of secrecy among the group, convincing members to keep quiet about certain subjects discussed or done in their assembly. Sixth, the secret “password”, supposedly the word “mahabone”, masons used to identify each other would still be used. Finally, this new order of masons

⁵ John Robinson, *Proofs of a Conspiracy* (Boston: Western Islands, 1967), 12.

wished to maintain a Christian foundation for their group; however, the group would adhere to a Roman Catholic view of the faith.⁶

A reoccurring topic throughout literature written about the Craft is the definition of freemasonry. Though the definitions seem to vary from lodge to lodge, they all culminate into one overarching description. To Mason and Non-mason researchers alike Freemasonry seems to be a fraternity which promotes brotherhood among all, going out of its way to avoid political or religious overtones, in hopes that none will be offended but instead will join together to be a force for good. However, the beliefs of freemasonry are static and few, as there are only three main doctrines. The one requirement given for new members is a belief in God; whether that God be Allah, Jehovah, or the Christian God does not matter. In fact, within the Craft, the idea of God, is, at best, ambiguous, as the name “God” is not even used, rather, the term “The Great Architect of the Universe” (TGAOTU) is the name used to refer to a supreme being that is an impersonal Guiding Force.⁷ Second, there is a firm belief in the brotherhood of all men. This belief dictates that under God all are equal and so all men should treat each other as equals regardless of status, race, or gender. The third and final of the core beliefs is the immortality of the soul.⁸ Though this concept is, undoubtedly, a natural consequence of the Masonic belief in TGAOTU and His creation of all human beings, it is still considered a distinctive and essential doctrine of the Masons.

⁶ Knight, 20-21.

⁷ Robert L.D. Cooper, *Cracking the Freemasons Code: The Truth about Solomon’s Key and the Brotherhood* (New York: Atria Publishing, 2007), 117.

⁸ Carl H. Claudy, *Introduction to Freemasonry-Entered Apprentice*, (Morristown, NJ: The Temple Publishers, 1931), 29.

It is no surprise, then, that such a fascinating and secret guild would soon spread to many countries including America. Interestingly, American freemasonry began even before the official establishment date of London's Grand Lodge of 1717. In 1682, a mason from the Scottish Old Aberdeen Lodge, John Skene, immigrated to Burlington, New Jersey. Skene would become deputy governor of West Jersey from 1685-1690.⁹ Another mason holding the position of a royal governor was Jonathan Belcher of the Massachusetts and New Hampshire colonies. Belcher is considered to be the first American-born mason, though his initiation as a mason would take place in London in 1704. Belcher would be appointed Governor over both Massachusetts and New Hampshire in 1730. Yet, according to Mark Tabbert, author of *American Freemasonry*, the Masonic influence in America would not be truly recognizable until the 1730s. Tabbert asserts that this influence had truly been foundationally British, since "expansion of British immigration to and trade with the colonies played a key role in establishing colonial Masonic lodges."¹⁰

It was during this time that three major lodges began in Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Massachusetts. Though there is controversy as to which lodge is the oldest, the first chartered lodge in the 1733 register of the Grand Lodge of London is St. John's Lodge in Boston, Massachusetts,. Though Pennsylvania still claims it had the oldest lodge, as evidenced by an article about one of their lodges in a 1730 edition of Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette*, St. John's was the first lodge granted an official charter by the Grand Master Mason of all North America, Henry Price. Price, a British immigrant to Boston in 1723, was a successful tailor and storekeeper before having the

⁹ Mark Tabbert, *American Freemasons* (Lexington, Mass: National Heritage Museum, 2005), 33.

¹⁰ Ibid, 33.

title of “Provincial Grand Master” bestowed upon him by the London Grand Lodge in 1733. After claiming this title, Price would grant charters to his fellow Bostonian masons first, giving St. John’s lodge the endorsement it needed to claim the title as the first official lodge of America.¹¹

By the time of the Founding Era that is the focus of this study (1750-1789) the masons already had a solid position in the new American culture, having both an American heritage of over seventy five years and established lodges that were a little less than thirty years old. Americans were attracted by the masons; it offered a fraternity where all different types of people could come to know each other on a common basis. Tabbert, discussing the early masons of the nation, claimed that the early Americans were attracted because the fraternity “attracted the social and political elite, entrepreneurs, artisans farmers and even free African-Americans...Masons...adapted the fraternity to fit different locales...through revolution, war and the establishment of the new republic, Freemasonry was transformed into a forum for equality, liberty, enterprise, and civic virtue.”¹²

However, during the founding era Freemasonry in both America and England split, forming the “Ancient” (sometimes referred to as “Antient”) and “Modern” freemason groups. In 1751, a group of Irishman living in London questioned the authority of the Grand Lodge of England. By this time, the Grand Lodge had seemingly become “Modern” in their belief system¹³, and the Irishmen asserted that the Lodge and its member lodges had left the original, more moral basis of freemasonry. Their

¹¹ Ibid, 34.

¹² Tabbert, 4.

¹³ Margaret Jacobs, *Living the Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991),

applications for membership to freemasonry had been repeatedly rejected by the Lodge, and in protest, the Irishmen set up their own Grand Lodge. Five years later, Laurence Dermott, one of the Irishmen, published a set of Constitutions for this new Lodge entitled *Ahiman Rezon: or A Help to a Brother*, in which he stated that he believed these masons were made up of aristocrats, who did not grant charters for new lodges as they should and were not creative in their rituals or symbols.

This new lodge was soon successful in reaching out to and attracting the poor men of the city who, like themselves, sought a way to be more prosperous in English society. They also remedied the need for new rituals and symbols, adding an extra degree to the freemason system, the rite of the Royal Arch, and issued charters to any group of Masons that asked to start a new lodge. This new lodge proudly labeled themselves “Ancients”, representing their belief that they were ascribing to the old ways of freemasonry that the Enlightened, aristocratic leaders of the Grand Lodge of England had distorted.¹⁴

In America, this same divide would be reflected in the “Ancient” American freemason movement that would begin almost exactly at the same time as its European counterpart. American “Ancient” freemasonry drew heavily upon their Irish predecessors and were able to attract many of the less affluent of the American colonial culture. However, unlike the European Ancient freemason philosophy, the American “Ancients” put forth Christian values as the basis for their group, and would soon grow, threatening

¹⁴ Tabbert, 26-27.

the membership and survival of the modern lodges, including the lodge in Pennsylvania where Benjamin Franklin was a member.¹⁵

According to Knight, the Ancients “...who had not formed part of the Grand Lodge of 1717, created in 1751 a rival Grand Lodge...which stood for the link with Christianity and certain other aspects of the old tradition which the ‘Moderns’, loyal to the 1717 Grand Lodge, had tampered with.”¹⁶ The men who set up this new Grand Lodge in Boston, Massachusetts, calling it “St. John’s Grand Lodge” (probably after the first American mason lodge already established there), “really believed the Grand Lodge of England to be a body of Modern Masons, departing from the Ancient landmarks of the Craft.”¹⁷ Bullock, too explores the feud in America, and makes the observation that the Ancients eventual success in establishing a more Christian basis for American freemasonry was simply an indicator of the emerging pre-revolutionary, anti-British, American spirit.¹⁸ The Ancient freemasons’ split with the Moderns in both Europe and America reflected their obvious disagreement with both the organization and beliefs of the Modern movement.

Though the group has traditionally been linked to the Biblical account of King Solomon’s Temple and has indeed incorporated some Christian ideas within its core set of beliefs, Mark A. Tabbert and other authors of Masonic studies such as Steven Bullock and Stephen Knight all claim that both the influence of the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th century and the eventual but obvious avoidance of Christian freemasonry

¹⁵ Bullock, 85-86.

¹⁶ Knight, 28.

¹⁷ J.W.S. Mitchell, M.D., *The History of Masonry* (Griffin, GA: 1871), 485-486.

¹⁸ Bullock, 86-87.

cannot be ignored.¹⁹ All three men write about the importance of a feud that took place during the years of 1751-1813 between two groups of Masons: The “Ancients” and the “Moderns”.

Thomas Paine makes the interesting point, in his essay on freemasonry, that there was evidence that the earliest forms of freemasonry were a religion totally unconnected to Christianity.²⁰ However, it seems that it was from the early 1700s and onward that freemasonry slowly became a group publically promoting naturalism and deism.²¹ Modern freemasons could even be said to have been putting into practice the principles of the Enlightenment.²² Jon Butler, author of *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776*, agrees with Jacob and states that colonial freemasonry (meaning Modern Masonry, as the official organization of the Ancients had not occurred yet) “emphasized mystical as well as rational sources of human knowledge and an ethics that transcended traditional Christianity.”²³ However, a recognized scholar on Masonry in America, William Whalen, notes that this Modern Masonry movement was not simply confined to its European borders. Some Pre-Revolutionary, Colonial American Freemasons, in loyalty to the Grand Lodge of England, would also adopt these principles. Whalen even goes so far as to state that all American freemasonry, from its very inception, was anti-Christian and that in order to “get a solid footing in a professedly Christian nation” it had to adopt a

¹⁹ Tabbert, 16; Knight, 27; Bullock, 26.

²⁰ Thomas Paine. “The Origins of Freemasonry”, in *Writings of Thomas Paine* by Moncure Daniels Conway (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1896).

²¹ William J. Whalen, *Christianity and American Freemasonry* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1958), 16.

²² Steven C. Bullock, “Remapping Masonry: A Comment,” *Eighteenth-century Studies* 33, no.2 (2000): 275.

²³ Jon Butler, *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 179

“Christian disguise.”²⁴ Whether this disguise for some modern masons came in the form of “Ancient” masonry or not, we cannot say, but one important point is clear however: “Modern” freemasonry, as it originated at London’s Grand Lodge in 1717, would be more useful in propagating the ideas of the Enlightenment than the values of Christianity.²⁵

The Enlightenment, according to one scholar on the subject, was a movement consisting of people who believed that their “present age (was) more enlightened than the past” and were convinced that people could “understand nature and man best through the use of our natural faculties.”²⁶ These beliefs can easily be seen in the concepts of the Modern Freemason movement, the beliefs of which are rationalistic in nature.²⁷ The definition goes on to assert another interesting concept of the Enlightenment that parallels a concept in Modern Masonry. According to the definition, this Movement was the foundation of the thinking that led many to a deistic faith. Diests of the Enlightenment believed in a few core ideas: “the existence of one God, often conceived of as architect or mechanican...and the obligation of men to virtue and piety.”²⁸ According to another source, these ideas are foundational to two revolutionary concepts that were introduced into the European world at the time of the American founding. These concepts, the “social contract” and “tolerance”, would eventually be the established norm for today’s masons, but even in the Founding Era, made some influence upon the members of the “Modern” American groups. The “social contract” concept, which originated with the

²⁴ Whalen, 3-4.

²⁵ Richard Brookhiser, *Rediscovering George Washington Founding Father* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1996), 149.

²⁶ Henry F. May. *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), xiv.

²⁷ Whalen, 19.

²⁸ Ibid.

17th century intellectual Thomas Hobbes, is a belief stating that all natural phenomena (including a human's emotions and actions) can be understood through the use of the principles of geometry and that all human actions are driven by either the fear of death or the desire for power. According to Hobbes (who was not a Mason), humans naturally kept their harmful actions in check by agreeing to an unspoken "contract" with each other that required that the general public cede all their power to one person or small group of people who would be responsible to keep them from harming themselves or each other.²⁹ Masons ascribe to the similar idea as the "social contract" but entitle it "brotherly love" or "fraternal connection".³⁰ Similarly, they also proudly peruse geometric principles and shapes as symbols of the ideas of freemasonry. Geometry is even considered to have been very essential in the way in which both English and American Freemasons were to understand "enlightened" concepts and thoughts in the eighteenth century.³¹ Geometry, they believed, was a "universal language, unbounded by national borders and religious doctrine."³² The next concept, "tolerance", is mainly manifested within the freemasons concerning the ideas of religion. As clearly implied in Dr. James Anderson's famous 1723 *Constitution* for the freemasons, tolerance for all monotheistic religions is evident when he said, "...oblige them [Freemasons] to that religion to which all men agree, leaving their particular views to themselves."³³ According to this author, "the religion to which all men agree" is simply a belief in God, not an explicit belief in Christianity.

²⁹ Richard Hooker, "Social Contract," *The European Enlightenment Glossary*, available from <http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/GLOSSARY/SOCCON.HTM>. Internet; accessed January 29, 2008.

³⁰ Bullock, 105.

³¹ *Ibid*, 37.

³² Butler, 179.

³³ Horace Sykes, "Ancient Religious Traditions and Symbols in Freemasonry." Pp. 3: In St. John's Boston Lodge Masonic E-Book Collection [database online]; accessed January 20, 2008.

In *The Enlightenment in America*, Henry F. May, asserts that “When one looks at the eighteenth century in America...one finds two main clusters of ideas. One of these consists of the doctrines of Protestantism and particularly Calvinistic Protestantism...The other cluster of ideas is drawn from the Enlightenment of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe.”³⁴ Though the main venue through which the Enlightenment seemed to influence the general colonial public was Enlightenment-based literature, “Modern” Freemasonry, with its devotion to Enlightenment ideals, also played a unique role in strengthening the grip of the Movement upon many in early America. Indeed another author even mentions that freemasonry was the popular society of the colonial day, attracting only the most contemporary of the young colonial men. The author goes on to state that these young men did not promote religion at all but would only promote ideas of “enlightenment and good-will”.³⁵ These ideas and the men who promoted them, however, were powerful, and eventually the groups of freemasonry formed the “most important (social) intercolonial network” in America, and could even boast the entire American press was under mason influence.³⁶

However, this major influence would be drastically reduced during the Founding Era. It was just prior to this time that Ancient American freemasonry would be initiated with the establishment of their own St. John’s Grand Lodge in 1751, a deliberate affront to the Grand Lodge of England. Yet during the Founding Era, the Ancients’ usurpation of freemasonry began when they aggressively started to take over the lodges of the United

³⁴ May, xi, xii.

³⁵ Bernard Fay, *George Washington: Republican Aristocrat*. Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1931), 64.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

States and forced Modern Masons to apply to their Grand Lodge for membership.³⁷ In fact, the Ancients were almost successful in their conversion of all of the Modern Lodges, giving the illusion of a distinctly Christian American freemasonry. But the Modern Masons would survive the Founding Era and eventually, after the Founding, again become a distinct type of freemasonry.

It was because of this survival of Modern Masonry that, after the Founding Era, the American freemasons, felt that *both* types of masonry had to officially be recognized and united. The two different types of lodges began to merge into the freemasonry we have today with the culmination of the merger being in 1813. During this time, an agreement was reached in England between the Grand Master of the Ancients (the Duke of Kent) and the Grand Master of the Moderns (the Duke of Sussex) to compromise and become one group again in an effort to no longer divide the brotherhood of masonry. The Moderns gave in and accepted (much to their chagrin) the fourth degree which the Ancients had added to Masonic membership process. The Ancients, in return, had to de-Christianize their group, thereby making all of Freemasonry an official deistic movement.³⁸ American freemasonry, therefore, had to once again abide under the rules of the Grand Lodge of England and the Ancients had to give up their Christian values. This de-Christianization is further evidenced by the new rules about religion that were included within a Mason handbook by Albert Pike entitled *Morals and Dogma*, which marked the permanent transition that established today's freemasonry in America. He states, "Masonry neither usurps the place of, nor apes religion...".³⁹ It, then, is not

³⁷ Bullock, 85-86.

³⁸ Knight, 29.

³⁹ Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma* (Charleston: Charleston Southern Jurisdiction, 1919), 7.

completely correct to assume that Founding Era American freemasonry has always had a strictly Christian basis; rather, the lack of a Christian basis in American freemasonry necessitated the need for an “Ancient” movement within an already established, modern craft!

As examples of Americans who were deeply involved in the Founding Era but also held to tenets of Modern Masonry, the lives of two of the most famous Patriots of the American Cause can be examined. Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, two men who were devoted to the making of the American Republic and the securing of her liberties, were also high ranking masons. However, they were not a part of Ancient Lodges but rather Modern Masonry. Though their perspective lodges in no way dictated their internal beliefs, the lodges did represent some of the values of Franklin and Washington that did not necessarily have a Christian basis.

A long time printer, editor and publisher of his own newspaper, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, Benjamin Franklin would also succeed as an inventor, writer, and statesman. Pennsylvania’s selection of him as one of their delegates to the First Continental Congress was hardly surprising; his stirring pre-Revolutionary War pamphlets helped many in the nation understand the importance of the independence movement currently being waged against Great Britain. He would also play a key role after the Revolution when he was part of the 1787 Philadelphia Constitutional Convention. His amazing intellect was also known across the colonies, as he had been the man to invent the lightning rod, bifocals, and the Franklin stove as well as start the first American fire insurance company.

But Franklin could also include another title to his already impressive resume- Provincial Grand Master of the “Modern” Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. In 1734, Franklin, who had just recently joined the group of freemasons in 1731⁴⁰, was appointed to the office of Grand Master. With his publication of the first Masonic book (Anderson’s *Masonic Constitutions*) in America in 1734, as well as his election to the office of Grand Master and known dedication to the freemasons as a whole, Franklin’s status as a leading Mason in Philadelphia was secured. Obviously from his own writings as well is Franklin’s dedication to the “Modern” masons and, indirectly the enlightenment teachings that this type of masonry advocated. Writing to Henry Price, the aforementioned “Father of American Freemasonry”, Franklin expressed his disgust upon learning of a plot by the “Ancient” masons to form a Grand Lodge independent of the one in England (an accomplishment which the Ancients were able to achieve in 1751). He writes, “I beg leave...to inform you, that some false and rebel Brethren, who are foreigners, being about to set up a distinct Lodge in opposition to the old and true Brethren here, pretending to make Masons for a bowl of punch, and the Craft is like to come into disesteem among us unless the true Brethren are countenanced and distinguished by some such special authority as herein desired.”⁴¹ Franklin was obviously angry with the disagreement the Ancients had with the changes the Modern control of freemasonry had made to the Craft.

⁴⁰ Phoenixmasonry Masonic Museum. “Ben Franklin: American Freemason and Freemason FDC.” Available from http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/benjamin_franklin_fdc.htm. Internet; accessed January 30, 2008.

⁴¹ Benjamin Franklin. “Letter to Henry Price: Nov. 28, 1734.” *Franklin Papers*, Vol. 1. *The Packard Humanities Institute*. Database online; accessed January 30, 2008.

Yet this would not be the only problem Franklin would encounter with Masonry during his time as Grand Master. He would soon be involved in a scandal with his lodge for which, as the then-current Grand Master, he would be held accountable. On the night of June 13, 1737, the Grand Lodge of Philadelphia began to initiate a certain young, mentally disabled man named Daniel Rees. Rees had long requested the Philadelphia Brethren be made a part of their group but had been denied initiation until, finally, the Brethren relented and agreed to allow him to join. According to *Proceedings of the Right Worshipful Grand Lodge*, the official minutes of a meeting given in 1906 at the Philadelphia Lodge of which Franklin was a member, the evidence given in the trial following the Rees incident was reexamined by the Masonic members. Within this book, the events of the night are explained in detail. Daniel Rees was taken down into an unidentified cellar where, as a part of his initiation ceremony, a “burning Spirit” (according to records the “Spirit” was brandy) was either thrown or spilt on Rees’ chest, resulting in injuries from which he would soon die. Though Franklin would appear in the trial that followed the murder of Rees, Franklin would not be found guilty of the murder, as he was able to establish his alibi of being absent from that particular meeting; however, it was alleged that he had known such a method of initiation was going to be used that night and willingly did not tell Mr. Rees.⁴² However, Franklin himself had written that though he had known the method of initiation that was to be used upon Rees, he had in fact at one point even followed him out of the tavern at Market Street in Philadelphia where the two had met two days before Rees’ death. However, Franklin

⁴² *Proceedings of the Right Worshipful Grand Lodge* by Freemasons Philadelphia
<http://books.google.com/books?id=WraEAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA118&lpg=PA118&dq=ben+franklin+daniel+rees&source=web&ots=4ophodt020&sig=nUqU1Nm54jmYGR5N31qan33m27E#PPR3,M1>, pp. 115-117.

claims that before he got a chance to tell Rees, the young man had “gone out of sight and I never saw him afterwards.”⁴³ It was never revealed to what purpose burning spirits were in light of freemasons’ goals of improving the person through knowledge, reason, and relationships with the fellow brethren and the Great Architect.

Possibly as a result of this incident, or perhaps for some other undiscovered reason, Franklin would lose interest in the group until 1776,⁴⁴ when, after contributing greatly to the content as well as signing the Declaration of Independence, he would be sent to France as Ambassador in order to garner King Louis XVI’s favor towards the United States.⁴⁵ During his time in France, Franklin realized that one way in which he could gain favor in the Enlightenment-influenced French society was through Freemasonry. Soon, Franklin joined yet another “modern” lodge, known as the “Lodge of the Nine Sisters”, becoming a master of the European lodge, and directing the initiation of another famous member, Voltaire.⁴⁶ Voltaire, a French aristocrat, was widely known for his role as a symbol of the French Enlightenment, his deistic beliefs and reliance on Reason as man’s only hope for improvement.⁴⁷ It is most likely because his beliefs were so alike the ones espoused by modern freemasonry that Voltaire became a Mason. According to one source, the initiation would become legendary as it revealed the great

⁴³ Benjamin Franklin. “A Defense of Conduct: Printed in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 15, 1737/8.” *Franklin Papers*, Vol. 1. *The Packard Humanities Institute*. Database online; accessed January 30, 2008. <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedMorgan.jsp>.

⁴⁴ Tabbert, 35.

⁴⁵ US History.org. “The Electric Ben Franklin”; available from <http://www.ushistory.org/Franklin/info>; Internet; accessed January 30, 2008.

⁴⁶ George E Maine. *Desaguilers and the March of Militant History*. (1939) In St. John’s Boston Lodge Masonic E-Book Collection. Database online; accessed January 30, 2008. Pp. 9. http://stjohnsboston1733.org/Desaguilers_and_the_March_of_Militant_Masonry.pdf

⁴⁷ Paul Brians. “The Enlightenment”; available from http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/hum_303/enlightenment.html; Internet; accessed January 29, 2008.

amount of respect both men had for each other. After the initiation, both men “...overcome with emotion, embraced each other. This made such a profound impression that... whenever they appeared together they were requested to embrace again.”⁴⁸

However his homecoming would not be an entirely pleasant one, as it is historically noted that the “Ancient”/ “Modern” feud would continue to be a factor in Franklin’s life and would even affect him after he died. During Franklin’s funeral procession in Philadelphia, one group of people were conspicuously absent from the twenty thousand that had come to mourn the loss of one of the nation’s founders- the Philadelphia Lodges of Freemasons. At this time, the Ancients (of whom Franklin had been so critical in his 1734 letter to Henry Price) had finally “taken over” the Modern Lodges of the city, resulting in a divide so sharp the new Ancient Philadelphia Masons would not even recognize that one of the most famous of the Masonic brethren had died.⁴⁹ Though Franklin’s great influence on America’s founding is unquestionable, his Enlightenment ideas and the reality and continual presence of the modern freemasonry he endorsed caused him to be an outcast among the Christian Ancient American freemasons.

Another freemason of American historical significance is George Washington. Washington, who has been called by biographer John Alden, “the principal begetter of (the) rights” of Americans, and the “one man essential to the triumph of the Patriots in the War of Independence, the creation of the American union...”.⁵⁰ Washington’s relatively lower class upbringing as the son of Virginia planter coupled with the untimely

⁴⁸ Maine, 9.

⁴⁹ Bullock, 85.

⁵⁰ John Richard Alden, *George Washington: A Biography* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 1.

death of his father when Washington was only eleven years old, caused young George to have to stay home with and help support his mother. Through hard work and diligence, Washington was able to acquire a job as a land surveyor, a vocation that would prove very profitable and rewarding.⁵¹ From his job as surveyor, Washington would soon move on to the army, apparently either out of a need to be popular in society or out of simple restlessness with his job as surveyor. Washington would then take the job as soldier and would soon be appointed a Lieutenant Colonel in charge of keeping Virginia's fortress near the Ohio River from being taken by the invading French in the French and Indian War.⁵² His experience in this war would serve him well and gain him the status as an American military hero before the Revolutionary War, where he would be asked to be Commander-in-Chief of the American forces against the British. Washington, though a proven and very effective military hero, also delved into early American politics, and would reside over the Constitutional Convention in 1787 (where fellow mason Benjamin Franklin was the oldest candidate, aged 81 years). Though his writings in his diaries as well as his brief comments to friends during the Convention suggest he was not as greatly interested in the making of the Constitution as he probably should have been, Washington apparently agreed completely with the final draft and gave his complete endorsement to it.⁵³ Washington's next and final public role would also be his best remembered- that of the first President of the United States. Informed of his unanimous election to the office

⁵¹ Ibid., 4-5.

⁵² John E. Ferling, *The First of Men: A Life of George Washington* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 25-25.

⁵³ Brookhiser, 69-70.

on April 14, 1789, Washington would hold the position for two terms and retire in 1787.⁵⁴

Though in no way as deeply involved as Benjamin Franklin, George Washington would be influenced by the Masons and their teachings. A young, twenty-one year old, newly appointed Adjutant-General over the armies of Virginia, Washington would join the Masons for the first time in 1753. His home lodge, the Masonic lodge of Fredericksburg, Virginia, seemed to like their affable new member; he was promoted to the degree of Master Mason the same year.⁵⁵ Though there is speculation as to how deeply involved Washington was in masonry, as he wrote to a clergyman in 1798 that he “...preside(d) over none [of the Lodges], nor have I been in one more than once or twice within the last thirty years...”⁵⁶ he would still be involved to a certain level with the masons.⁵⁷ However, one major evidence that Washington’s link may have been more than a passing interest is his involvement with the Masonic ceremony surrounding the laying of the cornerstone of the Capital building in Washington, DC. According to a Georgetown newspaper account dated September 21, 1793, Washington was very much involved with the ceremony, showing some respect for the Masons. On September 18, 1793, a rather large procession (made up of Maryland and Virginian masons) marched from the President’s Square in Washington DC until they reached the location of the capital. Once there they formed a circle around President George Washington, who, wearing the Masonic apron (made for him by the wife of his fellow American Revolution

⁵⁴ Ibid., 73,103.

⁵⁵ Fay, 64.

⁵⁶ George Washington, *Writings (1941)*, Vol. 36, pp. 452-453, letter to Rev. G.W. Snyder on September 25, 1798.

⁵⁷ J. Hugo Tatsch, *The Facts about George Washington as a Freemason* (New York: Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Co., 1931), 7-24.

General Lafayette), was serving as one of the honorary leaders over the ceremonies. Soon afterward, a silver plaque with an inscription bearing descriptions of the parade, the Lodges (which included one of Washington's "home" lodges, Alexandria Lodge No. 22) represented in it, and the location and date of the laying of the cornerstone was given to Washington. After the presentation of the plaque and the firing of a volley from the attending artillery, the Mason leaders and the President laid the plaque on the cornerstone which was then covered with corn, wine, and oil. All the masons attending then proceeded to give "Masonic chanting honors" and, after a speech by the Grand Master, the ceremony ended in prayer and another round of Masonic chants.⁵⁸ Though some anti-masons would later deny the event as ever occurring, one author claims that this event actually proves that George Washington had more than a passing interest in the Craft. Richard Brookheiser, a biographer of Washington's, asserts that many claim the future first President simply joined the Freemasons as he was interested only in being a member of a seemingly virtuous club rather than being an active member. However, Brookheiser goes on to state that "...in 1793, when Washington laid the cornerstone of the Capitol, Lodge 22 of Alexandria organized the parade, with Washington...wearing a Masonic apron knitted for him by Madame Lafayette, whose husband belonged to the lodge of Sait Jean de la Candeur. This would seem to go beyond the requirements of 'joining.'"⁵⁹

Another notable aspect of Washington's life is the influence the Enlightenment had on his personal life. It even seems that the Enlightenment may have had somewhat of an effect on Washington's Christianity. Though there is a plethora of evidence proving that Washington was devoted to the faith of Christianity (i.e. his many acts of charity to

⁵⁸ Ibid., 24-25.

⁵⁹ Brookheiser, 149.

the poor, his attendance at several churches during his life time, and even some of his own writings)⁶⁰ there are other opinions about his true religious beliefs. Thomas Jefferson even admitted once (in a conversation with Surgeon General of the Continental Army Benjamin Rush) that Gouverneur Morris, Washington's fellow soldier in the Revolutionary War at the time, mentioned that "General Washington believed no more of that system [Christianity] than he himself (meaning Morris) did."⁶¹ There is further evidence of Washington's rejection of Christ's death and resurrection; he even thought that Christ did not truly die but rather was buried alive in the tomb.⁶² Washington also very rarely used the name of Christ in his writings, and instead referred to God as "the great disposer of human events"⁶³ or, in the Masonic tradition, "The Great (or Supreme) Architect of the Universe."⁶⁴

However, he was very familiar with the teachings of Christ through his worship at the Anglican Church and would identify himself repeatedly as a Christian and never as a deist.⁶⁵ Yet the evidence that is the most convincing for Peter Lillback, a scholar on the subject of Washington's personal beliefs, is a letter written by Nelly Custis, a ward of George and Martha Washington. Custis along with her brother, George Washington Parke Custis, would come to live with the Washingtons after their father (Martha's son from a first marriage) died. In 1833, Nelly would describe Washington's personal beliefs

⁶⁰ Verna M. Hall, eds. *George Washington: The Character and Influence of One Man* (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1999) 159, 172-253.

⁶¹ Kenneth Umbreit, *Founding Fathers: Men Who Shaped our Tradition*. (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1941) , 326-327.

⁶² Joseph Ellis, *His Excellency* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 269.

⁶³ Gordon Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What made the Founding Fathers Different* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 35.

⁶⁴ Tatsch, 19, 21.

⁶⁵ Peter Lillback, *George Washington's Sacred Fire* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Providence Forum Press, 2006), 57, 718.

to historian Jared Sparks in a written testimony. Filled with her memories of Washington and his wife, Custis concluded with her strong conviction that her adopted father was a follower of Christ.⁶⁶

It is clear, however, that Washington was attracted by the Enlightenment. Lillback asserts that though Washington was definitely influenced by the Enlightenment, there were two different Enlightenments (one led by Voltaire and the other by John Locke) happening at the same time and that the one Washington was influenced by had definite Christian undertones.⁶⁷ However, another author, denying the existence of “two Enlightenments”, calls Washington “a child of the Enlightenment”, while stating that though Washington was not as devoted to its values as Franklin or Jefferson, he was “conventionally liberal on matters of religion.”⁶⁸ Though it is not clear that Washington received his introduction to this Movement through his involvement with various Masonic Lodges, it can be reasonably assumed that some of the various lodges’ Enlightenment based teachings only supported Washington’s struggle with Christianity.

However, there is an interesting variable in discerning whether Washington was indeed a Modern or Ancient freemason. Although the Alexandria Lodge No. 22 (Washington’s home lodge) was founded by a “Modern” freemason who could not get the Charter from the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania to start the Alexandrian Lodge in 1783, until its Grand Master, Robert Adam, went through certain steps to be considered

⁶⁶ Ibid., 250,254.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 469.

⁶⁸ Wood, 35.

an “ancient” Mason,⁶⁹ Washington does seem to have celebrated distinctly Christian values with other lodges. The greatest example of such a celebration of Christianity within a freemason lodge is that of the St. John the Evangelist day celebration which took place in Philadelphia on December 28, 1778.

The celebration which consisted of a sermon dedicated to George Washington delivered by the Reverend William Smith, was held at Christ-Church in Philadelphia. Washington was in attendance that day and even led the procession of masons into the church. Within the sermon, masons are encouraged to believe in the “Spiritual Master” Jesus Christ who is labeled as both divine and the only One to allow them entrance to heaven.⁷⁰ Also interesting to note is Washington’s prayer book, the *Daily Sacrifice*, which contained distinctly Christian prayers, similar to those found in *Ahiman Rezon*, or the constitution of Ancient Masonry.⁷¹ Yet at the same time, Washington was involved in other Masonic ceremonies that were not “ecclesiastical” in nature.⁷² It is, then, not entirely correct to assume that George Washington was a loyal member of a “Modern” lodge who ascribed to purely Enlightenment ideals. We can, however, see him as a fine example of man who ascribed personally to Christian values that had been somewhat influenced by Enlightenment beliefs, a mixture which could possibly have been the struggle of many members of both the Ancient and Modern masons.

The members of Early American Freemasonry were Christians and Deists, Rationalists and moralists, aristocrats and commoners. In other words, the craft

⁶⁹ R.W. Claude Harris. “Robert Adam- Our Founding Father” ; available from Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22 website; http://www.aw22.org/documents/Anecdote4_Robert_Adam.pdf; accessed February 3, 2008.

⁷⁰ Hall, 273, 278.

⁷¹ Gary North, *Political Polytheism* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), 425.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 294.

accurately portrayed the various men of American society and inevitably, their ideas and beliefs as well. Though Ancient and Modern Freemasonry can be said to simply have been categories of the Craft apparent on both the American and European continents, the divide of Masonry is a fact of history that must be realized in order to get a better understanding of the culture of the Founding Era. Not all Founding Era Freemasonry was Christian and should not be generalized as such. Modern masonry and its Enlightenment based concepts was as much a reality as the feud it created.

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