

House Undivided

HOUSE UNDIVIDED

By Allen E. Roberts

Reviewed by Michael Adam Neulander

Since I have retired to Tennessee two years ago I have “strengthened my bonds with Freemasonry” and have become active again in “working in the quarries” by attending meetings, and learning new ritual work; not just the Blue Lodge, but in several appendant bodies as well. Thus, as Veterans Day approached in 2019, a re-awakening took place in my mind that that caused me to remember an earlier time in my life when I examined a unique aspect of American history; the countless actions of “friendship and Brotherly love” that Freemasons committed during the Civil War. Thus, on November 11th, 2019, I have put the finishing touches on this book review of Right Worshipful Brother Allen E. Roberts (1917-1997), very popular and informative history book *House Undivided: the Story of Freemasonry and the Civil War*.

As a history professor at Old Dominion University I noticed that the history of the Civil War was one of the most popular topics of American history for our students. I believe the Civil War’s popularity was primarily due to the attention it received when the film maker Ken Burns’ documentary *The Civil War*, first aired on the Public Broadcasting System channel in 1990. This critically acclaimed film had such a visceral effect on Americans, it caused them to focus once again on the overwhelming moral question of slavery which was a key cause of the war. In addition, it created an interest in Americans for conducting genealogical research to find out if any of their ancestors fought in the Civil War. I noticed that this phenomenon even took place within Masonic circles; thus, the Civil War received renewed attention among its membership. Soon after the documentary aired over 100 Freemasons from around the country were discussing the desire to create a Civil War Masonic Research Lodge. Considering that over 90 percent of all Civil War battles were fought in Virginia, and Right Worshipful Brother Allen E. Roberts received much praise and acclamation for his very popular book *House Undivided* about Freemasonry’s participation in the Civil War; it made perfect sense for the first Masonic Research Lodge in America devoted to the study of the Civil War and Freemasons who participated in it would find its home in Virginia. Thus, on November 14th, 1995, Roberts became the Charter Master of Civil War Lodge of Research No. 1865, of the Grand Lodge of Virginia. Because of my lifelong interest in history I was very eager to see this worthwhile project come to fruition and I am immensely proud to say that I am a charter member of the Lodge as well. I also cherish the memories of my friendship with Allen, a man who I can honestly say was a most influential mentor to me for over ten years. Soon after I was posted to my last duty station in the U.S. Army at Fort Eustis, Va. In 1986; I realized that I had arrived in the back yard of the Civil War. I was born and raised in Florida, and I do not have any ancestors who fought in the Civil War; therefore, I was not the Civil War “buff” that I found so prevalent among men in Virginia. However, after I affiliated with Transportation Lodge #337, I came to find out that there was a rich history of Masonic connections to the war and many Brothers recommended my reading Roberts book *House Undivided* which I thoroughly enjoyed. It was highly informative and a comprehensive look at both

the actions of the Grand Lodges and individual members during a dark time in our nation's history. The book awoke a new interest in me both as an Army officer, a historian, and a Freemason. My particular interest was in learning more about how foes in time of war could maintain a "civil" attitude towards each other because of their affiliation to Freemasonry. These men on both sides of the Civil War took their obligations to uphold "friendship and brotherly love" to a whole new level and in this book review I will write about some of the stories that exemplify their obligations.

Soon after moving to Virginia, I started to travel to nearby lodges. One of the first that I visited was St. Tammany Lodge #5 in Hampton, Virginia, originally chartered by the Grand Lodge of England in 1759. They were still in possession of their lodge jewels and furniture and they had an incredible story of brotherly that Roberts told so movingly in his book. During the entire time of the Civil War, Fortress Monroe remained a Union Army enclave in the heart of the Confederacy; specifically, in Hampton Virginia. Since the Union Navy controlled the Chesapeake Bay and the James River the Confederate army could not capture and occupy the fortress in the same way it successfully did at Ft. Sumpter South Carolina. Thus, many of the inhabitants deserted the city which made all the personal property easy "pickings" for the slaves who remained and marauding Union soldiers. Upon hearing of the wanton looting going on in the city, Lieutenant J. H. Chase, Quartermaster of the 3rd New York Volunteers Regiment, and P.M. of Temple Lodge No. 14, Albany, New York decided to take action to safeguard the Masonic Lodge in Hampton and its contents. Chase personally asked Major General Benjamin F. Butler, a member of Pentucket Lodge in Massachusetts, to intercede to ensure that the Lodge and its contents could be safeguarded. Butler issued an order to 3rd New York Regimental commander, Colonel S. M. Alford, to send an armed detachment to safeguard the Lodge and its contents. Col. Alford ordered the following officers to accompany the detachment. "Captain John E. Mulford, W.M. Mystic Lodge, No. 131, N.Y., Capt. John G. Butler, Central City Lodge, No. 315, Syracuse, N.Y., and Lieutenant William E. Blake, S.W. Excelsior Lodge, No. 195, N.Y. accompanied the detachment."[\[1\]](#) These men were extremely pleased to find that the contents of the Lodge had not been disturbed. They crated all the contents and delivered them to Chase. Chase realized that the contents needed to be stored safely until the end of hostilities. Therefore, he sent the crates with a letter dated November 25th, 1861, describing this act of "Brotherly love" to M.W. John S. Berry, Grand Master of Masons of Maryland. The last paragraph of Chase's letter is emblematic of the "true heart" beating in the breast of this Freemason. "When this property shall be returned to our brethren in Virginia, please convey to them our fraternal regards, and say although we come in defense of our just rights-as we honestly believe-still we come not to wage war upon an Order expressly founded to inculcate the exercise of *Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth*."[\[2\]](#)

Armistead Avenue is one of the city of Hampton's major roads, and coincidentally is located not too far from St. Tammany Lodge. The street's namesake was Brigadier General C.S.A., Lewis A. Armistead, member of Alexandria Lodge No. 22, Virginia, and charter member of Union Lodge No. 7, Ft. Riley Kansas. He fought and died in the battle of Gettysburg, the most significant battle of the Civil War. For Freemason's Armistead's death is a "bittersweet" story of the strong bonds between two lifelong friends, who happened to also be Masonic brothers, but unfortunately found themselves as foes in the most famous bayonet charge in military history. On July 3rd, 1863, Armistead led his

men on what will forever be known as the ill-fated Pickett's charge up Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg battlefield. The Confederates poured over 12,000 men into the charge which covered almost a mile in distance. The ravaging hail of artillery and gunfire from Major General Winfield Scott Hancock's forces turned the charge into a suicide mission. Amazingly, Armistead made it to the stonewall defense of the Union forces and even personally captured a Union artillery piece. However, he was shot soon after, and it is at this point that he became a part of Masonic lore. "As he fell, he called out 'I am a widow's son'"[3] While lying on the battlefield mortally wounded, he asked for his old friend and Masonic Brother Hancock. Both men had served together in the Mexican American War in 1848 and had been friends ever since. Unbeknownst to Armistead, Hancock was also wounded and could not come to his side. However, when Hancock heard that Armistead was asking for him, he sent Colonel Henry H. Bingham, another Freemason and member of Chartiers Lodge #297, Canonsburg, Pennsylvania to provide relief and succor to Armistead, his old friend and Brother. When Bingham arrived to help Armistead, the mortally wounded Armistead handed over to Bingham several letters and his pocket watch to be delivered to Hancock so that his effects could be delivered to family and friends after the war. Armistead died the next morning, he was one of the 6,000 casualties of the bloody charge. At the end of the war Hancock personally delivered Armistead's pocket watch to his widow.[4] This vignette of history depicting the act of "Brotherly love" between Brother's Armistead and Bingham has been memorialized with the placement of a beautiful statue known as the "Friend to Friend Masonic Memorial" at Gettysburg National Cemetery.

The last story that I write about in this book review made a great impression on me from the very first time that I read it. It serves as a personal reminder that when a man takes on the obligations of Freemasonry he must act and serve as an example to not only his friends and family, but to all mankind. Once people know that you are a Freemason, they wind up judging the entire fraternity based on your actions and reputation. This last story serves as an example of how the virtuous actions of a Freemason impressed another man so much, that he asked to join the fraternity. That man was Captain William McKinley, who would later become the 25th President of the United States. Winchester, Virginia, happened to be a town at the center of a major crossroad; thus, it literally changed hands throughout the war over seventy times. The last time Winchester fell to the Union Army near the end of the war in 1864, several members of Hiram Lodge No. 21 implored General Phillip Sheridan to allow them to hold Lodge meetings. Sheridan was not a Freemason and their pleas fell on deaf ears. Obviously, Sheridan was fearful that these men might plot some type of nefarious action against their occupiers. However, Dr. C. H. Allen, assured the general that he would attend all the meetings and report back if he observed any wrongful acts. With Dr. Allen's assurance General Sheridan allowed the Lodge members to meet.[5] William R. Denslow writes in his book *10,000 Famous Freemasons*, a very useful book for Masonic researchers, that it was soon after the Lodge started meeting again that McKinley observed Dr. Allen giving money to certain wounded Confederate soldiers. When McKinley asked Dr. Allen the reason for his action, Dr. Allen told McKinley that he was living up to his obligation, as a Freemason, of giving charity to "a Brother in need." [6] Roberts wrote that McKinley greatly admired Dr. Allen's acts of human kindness and asked him if he could join the fraternity. "McKinley petitioned Masonry because he had been greatly impressed by the many Masonic episodes of brotherly love and affection he had witnessed throughout the war." [7] Many Union soldiers followed his example. Roberts reports that 231 Union soldiers were "raised" in that grand old southern lodge.

As a retired Army officer and an adjunct professor of history, I can attest to the fact that warfare can unfortunately bring out the baser instincts in people. Wartime stories of soldiers committing unspeakable criminal acts as well as lesser base acts such as robbery abound throughout history. One only has to look back about seventy-five years to the unspeakable atrocities committed in World War II to serve as an example of the baseness and depravity that mankind can slip into. Thus, when one reads the many stories in Roberts' book about the virtuous acts of Freemasons during this nation's bloodiest war, one cannot but feel that Freemasonry was a force for good in the nations "darkest hours." I am still in awe when I think about how in this time of desperation for our nation, the Masonic compass' "circumscribed their members desires, and kept them within due bounds towards all mankind, especially their Brothers."

In conclusion, the story of Freemasons helping Brothers in time of need are never more compelling than when you hear of stories of "Brother helping Brother" in time of war. I can honestly say that Allen E. Roberts book *House Undivided: The Story of Freemasonry and the Civil War*, awoke in me a whole new way to understand my obligations towards helping a "Brother in his time of need." Simply put, Roberts book made me a better Freemason! I recommend Roberts book to all Freemasons, regardless of their interest in the Civil War, because the plethora of stories of "true" Brotherly love displayed during war time will make all of us better men in our communities and better Freemasons to our own Brothers.

1. Allen E. Roberts, *House Undivided: The Story of Freemasonry and the Civil War*, (1961: repr., New York: Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Co., 1964), 72.
2. Ibid, 72.
3. Ibid, 163.
4. Ibid, 163-164.
5. Ibid, 258-259.
6. William R. Denslow, *10,000 Famous Freemasons*, Vol. III, (Richmond: Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Co., 1959), 176-177.
7. Roberts, 259.