

Masonic Membership of the Founding Fathers

MASONIC MEMBERSHIP OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS

By Robert E. Heaton

Reviewed by Bro. Michael Adam Neulander

Invariably, one of the first questions Freemasons and non-members alike have had is “how much influence has Freemasonry had on our country’s founding”? This has been a question that has been around ever since the country’s founding, and interest in it has “waxed and waned” throughout history up to the present day. This question has even taken on a conspiratorial like atmosphere; the first time during the “Morgan Affair” in 1826, when Freemasons were accused of murdering Cpt. William Morgan for publishing a book containing the secrets of Freemasonry. The Masonic conspiracy took on a brief “life of its own” in presidential politics culminating in the formation of the “Anti-Mason Party” of the 1830s after the Morgan Affair. In the last forty years popular culture has fed into the conspiracy of Freemasonry’s “invisible hand” working to shape and control the world throughout history. As a retired adjunct professor of history, I have found the best way to “combat” conspiracy theories regarding historical events is with solid evidence grounded in fact. I find that Ronald E. Heaton’s book *Masonic Membership of the Founding Fathers* does an excellent job in “illuminating” the facts to answer the question “how much influence has Freemasonry had on our country’s founding”?

Heaton’s goal for his book is written in his *Foreword* and states: “Its purpose is to bring to the attention of Freemasons the names of 241 individuals who played a prominent part in breaking the ties with Great Britain and setting up the present form of government, and then to establish, when possible from available records, the connection with Freemasonry.”^[1] For the purposes of Heaton’s book he classifies Founding Fathers as men who were politically active in producing and signing our founding documents such as the *Declaration of Independence*, the *Articles of Confederation*, and the *U. S. Constitution*; as well as, men who served as Generals in the Continental Army. As a historian, I found that Heaton’s well researched book relied on the very solid historical “methodology” of using primary source documentation to prove how many Founding Fathers were Freemasons. Thus, Heaton concluded in his book that a little under one third of the Founders were Freemasons. As I read his book, I picked up on a theme that I wanted to focus on in this book review that helped to “illuminate” my path towards understanding Freemasonry’s role in our nation’s founding. The theme I picked up on was the unusually high amount of early Grand Masters of Masonic jurisdictions were also Founding Fathers. Thus, it is their stories I will emphasize in this book review.

Most Masonic Grand Masters are elected by the membership of Freemasonry for their demonstrated leadership, acumen, and for their assiduous work in the “Masonic quarries.” Therefore, it should not be surprising that the leadership qualities and the “polished” oratory abilities that these men displayed not only brought them to the notice of their Brethren; but, they would also be recognized by their fellow citizens as well. Therefore, all their leadership attributes made them exemplary candidates for political and military office. Out of the original thirteen colonies, eight Founding Fathers served Freemasonry as Grand Master in five different states. Since I spent over thirty years

of my Masonic life living in Virginia it is the first colony I will write about. I also give the “old Dominion” the first place of honor since it is the only colony that can boast to having three Founding Fathers serve as Grand Master. **Peyton Randolph**, (1721-1775), started out his political career as the King’s Attorney for Virginia in 1748. He was a member of Virginia House of Burgesses from 1766-75; served as Speaker of the House of Burgesses in 1766. He was elected as the first President of the First Continental Congress; however he resigned in 1775 owing to declining health. What Heaton was able to unearth about Randolph’s Masonic career is that he served as Master of Williamsburg Lodge #6 in 1773. In 1774 he was appointed by the Grand Lodge of England as Provincial Grand Master of Virginia; he was the last man in Virginia to hold that title.[2] **Edmund Randolph** (1753-1813), was Peyton Randolph’s nephew. Edmund started out his political career in the Continental Congress from 1779-82. In 1786 he was elected Governor of Virginia; however, he resigned in 1788. He was appointed by Virginia to be a delegate to the Federal Constitutional Convention in 1787. In 1789 he became a member of President Washington’s Cabinet as his first Attorney General. In 1794 he became the Washington’s second Secretary of State, after Thomas Jefferson. Randolph resigned this post in 1796. Randolph’s Masonic career started with his initiation in 1774 in Williamsburg Lodge #6. He was the charter Master of Jerusalem Lodge #54, in Richmond Virginia, in 1797. He was elected as Virginia’s third Grand Master and served in that capacity for three years 1786-87-88.[3] **John Blair**, (1732-1800), started out his political career in the Virginia House of Burgesses from 1766-70. After Virginia declared its independence he served as a Judge of the Court of Appeals in 1777; then became Chief Justice of Virginia Supreme Court in 1780. He was then appointed by Virginia to be a delegate to the Federal Constitutional Convention in 1787. In 1789 he was appointed as one of the first Associate Justices of the Supreme Court and served until he resigned in 1796. His Masonic career started with his initiation in 1762 in an English lodge which later became Williamsburg Lodge #6. In 1774 he followed Peyton Randolph as Master of the lodge. Blair became the Grand Lodge of Virginia’s first Grand Master in 1778, serving in that capacity until 1784.[4]

One of the most famous Freemason’s in early America, as well as, one of our greatest Founding Fathers is none other than **Benjamin Franklin**, (1706-90). Franklin’s political career spans several decades; therefore I will only touch on the highpoints. He served in the Pennsylvania General assembly from 1736-54. He was a member of the Continental Congress 1775-76; subsequently was sent as a three man delegation to France where he was very successful in “charming” all Parisians; including King Louis XVI into giving monetary and military aid to the American Colonies. Without Franklin’s impassioned entreaties the cause of American liberty could have easily died an early death. He served as Governor of Pennsylvania from 1775-88. He was appointed by Pennsylvania to be a delegate to the Federal Constitutional Convention in 1787. Franklin was the oldest signer of the *Constitution*. In addition; Franklin was the most famous and prolific Freemason in early America; his Masonic career spanned six decades. In 1731 Franklin was initiated in St. John’s lodge in Philadelphia. In 1734 he was elected Grand Master of Pennsylvania. In 1749 he was the first American born Freemason to be appointed Provisional Grand Master in America. While serving as an American representative in France; Franklin “was made a member of the Nine Muses Lodge, in Paris, in 1777, and was elected Venerable (Worshipful Master) in May, 1779, and re-elected the following year.”[5] It was while he was serving as Master of the lodge that he escorted in and initiated into Freemasonry the great French philosophe Voltaire. **David Brearley**, (1745-90), started out his military career as a Captain in the New Jersey Militia in 1775. He had a “storied”

military career rapidly rising to the rank of Colonel before resigning his commission in 1779. He was appointed by New Jersey to be a delegate to the Federal Constitutional Convention in 1787. He was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of New Jersey from 1779 to 1789; afterward, he served as a U.S. District Judge until his death in 1790. His Masonic career started with his membership in Military Lodge #19 chartered in Pennsylvania, the date is unknown. Brearley became New Jersey's first Grand Master in 1786, serving in that capacity until his death in 1790.^[6] **Mordecai Gist**, (1742-1792), started out his military career as a Captain in the Maryland Militia. He ended his military career as a Brigadier General in the Continental Army in 1783. His Masonic career started with his initiation in 1775 in Lodge #16 Baltimore Maryland. He became the charter Master of Army Lodge #27 in Pennsylvania in 1780. He was elected to the office of Grand Master for the state of South Carolina in 1790 where he served for two years. An interesting Masonic fact is that: "It was General Gist who presented the petition for a National Grand Lodge with George Washington as General Grand Master, at the Morristown, New Jersey, meeting of American Union Lodge in 1779."^[7] George Washington turned this honor down much to the chagrin of many Freemasons. **Jonathan Bayard Smith**, (1742-1812), was a member of the Continental Congress from 1777-78. He devoted much of his time to promoting higher education. He served as a trustee of Princeton College 1779-1808; as well as a founder and trustee of the University of Pennsylvania 1791 until his death. His Masonic career started with his initiation in Military Lodge #3 chartered in Pennsylvania, in 1783; served as Master of the Lodge in 1784. Smith served as Grand Master of Pennsylvania for several years; he was first elected in and served from 1789-94 and then from 1798-1802.^[8] **John Sullivan**, (1740-95), was a member of the Continental Congress from 1774-75, and again from 1780-81. He received his commission as a Brigadier General to the Continental Army in 1775; was promoted to Major General in 1776. Sullivan served as Attorney General of New Hampshire from 1782-86; then he served New Hampshire as its first "President" or Governor from 1786-89. In 1789 President Washington appointed Sullivan to be a Judge to the U. S. District Court for New Hampshire. Sullivan's Masonic career started with his initiation in St. John's Lodge #1 in 1767 in 1783; served as Master of the Lodge in 1784. Sullivan was elected as Grand Master of New Hampshire in 1790; however he had to resign after five months due to ill health.^[9]

I hope that this very cursory look into Freemasons who served their country nobly as Founding Fathers has "whetted the appetite" of my Masonic Brethren to read Ronald E. Heaton's book *Masonic Membership of the Founding Fathers*. In addition; I used the unique angle of focusing just on Grand Masters who served our nation so ably in the patriotic cause of liberty as a way to "illuminate" the varied ways in which Freemasons can explore history. Finally, I hope my Masonic Brethren will use Heaton's book as a "springboard" to delve deeper into reading about Freemasonry's significant role in developing early American social and political life.

1. Ronald E. Heaton, *Masonic Membership of the Founding Fathers* (Silver Spring: The Masonic Service Association, 1965, 3rd rep. 1988), iii.
2. Ibid, 57.
3. Ibid, 56.
4. Ibid, 6.
5. Ibid, 18-19.
6. Ibid, 7.
7. Ibid, 22.
8. Ibid, 60.

9. Ibid, 65.