

YORKTOWN: 1781 -- 1881 -- 1981

Allen E. Roberts

Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777

September 26, 1981

Yorktown! There are a few words that require no further description. One word tells the story, or most of the story. When we speak of the War for American Independence, often called the American Revolution, "Washington" tells us volumes. So does "Valley Forge". Then there's "Lexington"; "Revere"; "Bunker Hill".

The story of Yorktown has been told in hundreds of ways by numerous historians and writers. The siege and the storming of the British redoubts has been covered by military experts. Rarely do we learn how Yorktown actually became the turning point in the war. Rarely are we told that General George Washington outfoxed the British, the Congress, and even his own men. Even now, 200 hundred years later, few historians believe what happened.

Yorktown and George Washington are practically synonymous. What happened in that village in October, 1781, began when Washington was in his teens. As a surveyor in the wilds of the Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah Valley he rapidly became a hardy man. He had to break new ground, establish new rules, and quickly learn the attributes of a leader. When he was 20, Washington was appointed a Major placed in charge of the defense of the southeastern portion of the huge colony of Virginia. A short time later, on November 4, 1752, he received the First Degree in Freemasonry in the Lodge at Fredericksburg. On August 4, 1753, he was raised a Master Mason. Two months later he was on his way to warn the French encamped along the Ohio River to get out of Virginia.

The French treated the young man with respect, but refused to obey Governor Dinwiddie's order. They knew British troops "were too slow and dilatory," so they had nothing to fear. And they really didn't.

Washington returned to the Ohio in the spring. This time he was second in command of the "loose, idle persons" who, surprisingly, won their first skirmish with French troops. Washington's innovative leadership was responsible. He was fashioning new ways of warfare; learning from observation and "on the job training." On this campaign Washington suffered defeat. Fort Necessity at Great Meadows had been hastily thrown up by the English. It was poorly situated in a swampy hollow with high hills on one side. Superior French forces, aided by Indians, forced Washington to surrender.

The lessons learned by the young Virginian were invaluable. He never again was surrounded. Not during the balance of the Seven Year War, nor when he became Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Forces. In 1775, when the break with England finally became permanent, the American colonies had to have a military leader. There was only one American who had the background and experience for the task that was ahead. It was George Washington. He was chosen unanimously. But he said, "With the utmost sincerity, I do not think myself equal to the command I am honored with."

From June 15, 1775, the day he was appointed, until December 23, 1783 when he surrendered his commission, Washington had one goal -- victory. It didn't come easy. Tories filled the land. The war wasn't popular. Only a handful of the population of the colonies fought alongside the Commander. And they were ill-equipped, ill-clothed, ill-fed, and unpaid. It took six years for the break Washington needed to materialize. The French agreed to give him full support, but for a limited time.

Washington put to work his personally trained and excellent spy and "misdirection" teams. He had to make the British, and everyone else, believe he would be where he wasn't. He succeeded so well even today most people don't believe he had a plan in mind. He did. He knew the South would be the battle ground that would bring about the turning point -- victory for the Americans or the British. South Carolina or Virginia would be the decisive area. He would move south, but he had to make the English believe he was moving to New York. It meant not only the British had to be deceived, so did the Congress, state governments, and his own troops.

Lafayette's small army was fighting a holding battle with Cornwallis in Virginia. Nathanael Greene was whipping the British in the Carolinas. Indications pointed to the Chesapeake as the site the Commander-in-Chief was seeking. Rochambeau joined Washington at White Plains. Comte de Grasse set sail for the Chesapeake on August 13, 1781. He had 3,000 "borrowed" French soldiers who had to be returned to Santo Domingo by October 15. "Between 25 and 29 sail of the line and a considerable body of land forces" were on the way, a pleased Washington wrote to Lafayette. And he feared the British would try to escape when this armada entered the Bay, so he added: "Prevent their sudden retreat thro' North Carolina."

Secrecy was most important, Lafayette was warned. He was not to strengthen his forces "until you conceive aid from this quarter." Then Washington slipped away from the highlands along the Hudson River, leaving behind campfires and a small contingent to fool the British. Two thousand Continentals led the way on August 19, 1781. The two mile long column vividly told the story of the extreme poverty of the Americans. It was highlighted by the gleaming new uniforms of the French. On August 28, de Grasse reached the Chesapeake and landed his troops at Jamestown. Barras arrived with his fleet on September 9. Washington and Rochambeau joined Lafayette and his 5,000 men on September 14. The siege of Yorktown began two weeks later.

On October 17, 1781, "about ten o'clock the Enemy beat a parley, and Lord Cornwallis proposed a cessation of Hostilities for 24 hours, that Commissioners might meet," Washington wrote in his diary. The commissioners met. Washington insisted on total surrender. Lincoln was chosen to receive the sword of Cornwallis on the 19th. But Cornwallis was "sick". It was General O'Hara who made the formal surrender as the British band played "The World Turned Upside Down." Washington entertained Cornwallis at a dinner on October 26. The conqueror offered this toast to the British General: "England would yet have reason to be proud of so gallant an officer." And it would.

Cornwallis was just as gracious in his reply: "When the illustrious part that your Excellency has borne in this long and arduous contest becomes a matter of history, fame will gather your brightest laurels rather from the banks of the Delaware than from those of the Chesapeake." The British General knew then what many historians would never learn.

Yorktown, Virginia. That's where everything finally fell into place for Washington and his heroic men. The Commander-in-Chief and his ill-clothed, ill-fed, footsore, weary patriots were finally victorious.

- 1881 -

"I am instructed by the Joint Congressional Committee on the Yorktown Celebration, to invite the Grand Lodge of Virginia to perform the ceremony of laying the Cornerstone of the Monument to be erected at that point in October next. I am also instructed to suggest that it would be eminently proper to invite the Grand Masters of Masons of the Original Thirteen States to participate with you." This may appear to be an unimportant request today. But it certainly wasn't in 1881. It was the first time the Federal Government had ever officially recognized Freemasonry.

Other aspects make this request of January 20, 1881 of historical value. In the decade of the 1830s the Craft had been almost exterminated. A little-known man named William Morgan, born in Virginia, had been abducted from Canandaigua, New York. Freemasonry was accused of unbelievable atrocities. Anti-Masonic newspapers, critics, clergymen, and even a political party did everything possible or probable to bury Freemasonry. They were almost successful. Then came the War Between the States with Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederate States of America. The request from the Congress proved the Civil War was at last over, and Freemasonry was a viable force once more.

James Abram Garfield was President-elect when the invitation was extended. Garfield was a member of Magnolia Lodge No. 20 of Columbus, Ohio, and in 1869 he became a charter member of Pentalpha Lodge No. 23 of Washington, D.C. On July 2, 1881, he was shot and wounded by an assassin. He died on September 19. The Vice President, Chester Alan Arthur, not a Freemason, became the 21st President of the United States.

The request from the Joint Committee was evidently hand-delivered to Grand Master Peyton S. Coles, for on the same day he answered it. "We accept the invitation," he wrote, "and will endeavor to do our part as becomes the patriotic occasion." He added, "We will make our ceremonies as brief as the usages of our Institution will permit, especially in view of the other ceremonies of the day." He was agreeing with one of the committee's requests.

The Grand Master went to work immediately. He sent word to all the Lodges in Virginia about the affair planned for Yorktown. Many responded by offering special items to be used during the ceremonies. Alexandria Washington Lodge No. 22 agreed to let the Grand Master wear "the apron and sash worked by Mrs. Gen. Lafayette, and presented to, and worn by our late distinguished W. M. Gen. Geo. Washington."

Williamsburg No. 6 resolved: "That the Master's chair belonging to this Lodge, be offered to our Most Worshipful Grand Master for his use during the ceremonies of the Yorktown Centennial." It also noted the Grand Lodge was "organized in Williamsburg in 1777"; and "our first modern Most Excellent Grand Master, John Blair, presided in this chair at the first meeting of the Grand Lodge of Virginia."

Richard T. W. Duke, Jr., then Worshipful Master of the Grand Master's mother lodge, Widow's Son No. 60 of Charlottesville, made the type of address that would make him Grand Master in 1897. As he presented a special trowel to be used to spread the cement on the cornerstone, he said:

"The spot where this Trowel will be used, is one twice trampled by the bloody feet of war; the air will be thick with the suggestions of the time when three nations there met in deadly combat; and many who gather about you then will recall a time -- not distant -- when brethren of the nation whose freedom was on that place perfected, faced each other in fratricidal strife, and dyed the same green plain with brothers' blood."

"Around the spot the war flags of a thousand vessels will be unfurled; the glitter of warlike instruments will be seen; the roar of war-sounding cannon will be heard; martial music will stir the blood, and martial memories float on each breeze that drifts from the ever-warring ocean. But amidst this war-like pageantry -- amidst this scene appealing to the saddest passions of man's angry nature -- suggesting man's sorrow and man's destruction -- will appear this emblem of peaceful and creative toil, borne by a Fraternity which has taught from the earliest time, that Peace was man's highest happiness -- Love man's greatest good."

A "gavel made from one of the deck timbers of the frigate Lawrence, Commodore and Brother Perry's flagship at the battle of Lake Erie," was offered by New York. "It laid the Cornerstone of the monument at Monmouth; it laid the Cornerstone of the Egyptian Obelisk . . . and I know of no more worthy inscription to be placed there than that of laying the Cornerstone at Yorktown."

The Grand Lodge of Virginia was convened in Special Session at Yorktown on Monday, October 17, 1881. The communication was brief. The Grand Master told those present the reason for the session, and offered an apology: "It is a source of sincere regret to me that this interesting ceremony takes place of necessity in a situation so remote and comparatively so inaccessible, that we are unable to extend to our distinguished guests the courtesies and hospitalities for which the members of our Fraternity in this State are so justly celebrated." He asked the members to give the Grand Treasurer permission "to pay all bills when audited and approved." The consent was unanimous. He then called the Grand Lodge from labor to refreshment "until tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock."

Grand Masters from Massachusetts, New York, Maryland, Pennsylvania, North and South Carolina, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Delaware, and New Jersey joined the Grand Master of Masons in Virginia for the ceremonies of October 18. Each took part in laying the cornerstone of what would become Victory Monument. Three items, individually, took longer than the actual ceremony: The reading of the list of contents of the box for the cornerstone; the prayers; and the concluding oration.

At the conclusion of the actual ceremony, the highlight took place:

"His Excellency, Chester A. Arthur, President of the United States, escorted by the Most Worshipful Grand Master, the Most [sic] Worshipful Grand Master of Pennsylvania, and the Most Worshipful Grand Marshal, descended to the Foundation-stone. He pronounced

it well laid, and received the work from our hands." The events at Yorktown in 1881 proved to be Freemasonry's finest hour.

- 1981 -

One hundred years later the government of the United States again held a celebration at Yorktown. It was no longer remote. It was now accessible by many means. The accommodations were no longer primitive. Luxurious hotels were plentiful in nearby Williamsburg. The ceremonies were more elaborate in 1981 than they had been one hundred years earlier. The crowds were larger. But something had to be added that wasn't necessary in 1881: Security. Even the President of the United States, Ronald W. Reagan, not a Freemason, had to speak from behind a bulletproof enclosure.

But there was something important missing. The Grand Lodge of Virginia didn't participate in the 200th anniversary celebration. Freemasonry was absent.