

## **‘A Deserving Brother’ Review: First in the Hearts of His Brethren**

Among the lesser-known offices held by the father of our country was charter master of Masonic Lodge No. 22, Alexandria, Va.

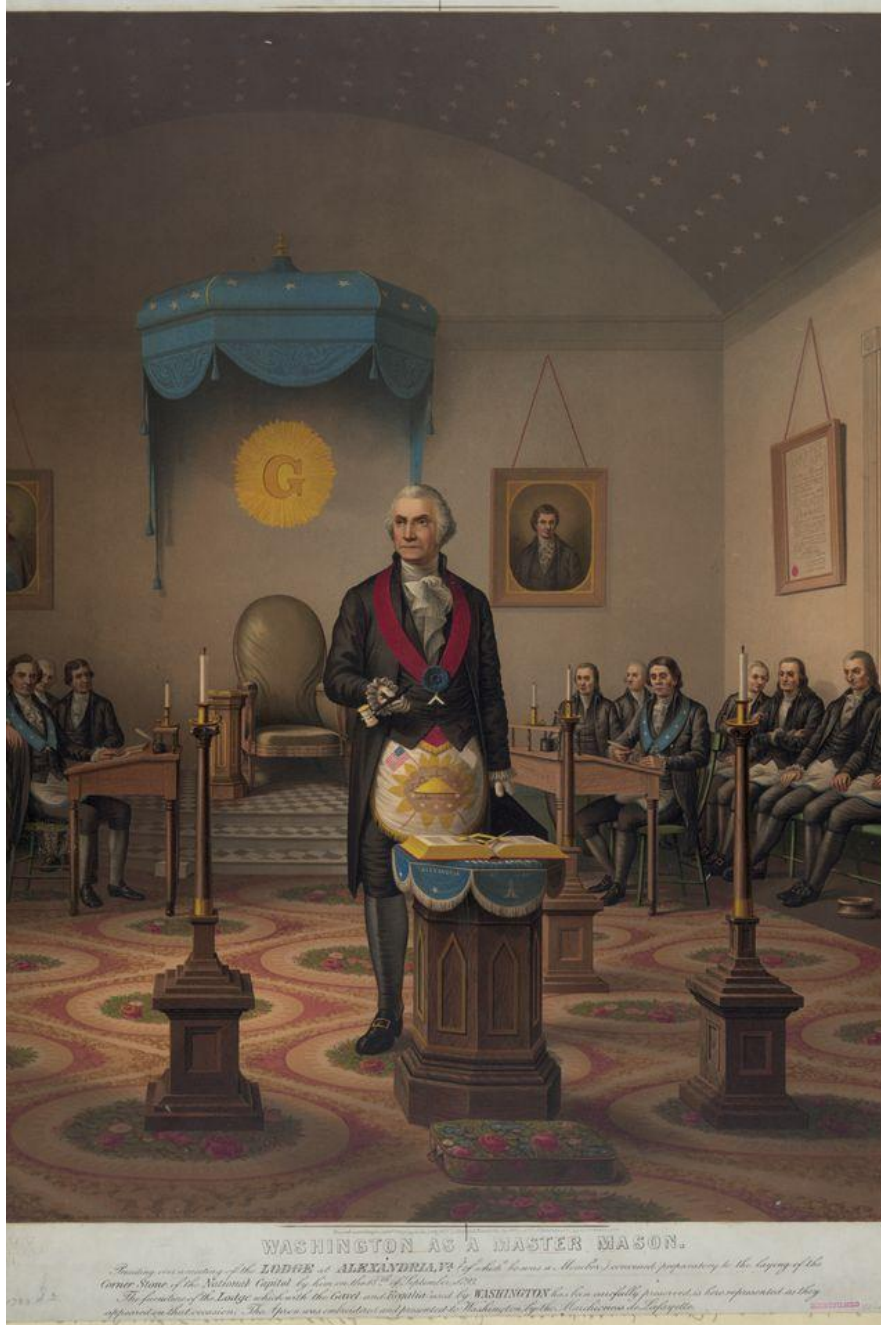
*By*

*Priscilla Montgomery Jensen*

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For generations, residents of Alexandria, Va., have taken their bearings from the imposing, stepped “lighthouse” modeled after the original in their namesake Egyptian city. It’s high on Shuter’s Hill, not far from the Potomac; everyone in the area agrees it’s the best place for sledding after a decent snowfall. But while many are aware that the structure commemorates Virginia’s most famous son, fewer know it as the George Washington Masonic National Memorial, a “temple” dedicated to enshrining Washington’s association with Freemasonry *in memoriam perpetuam*, and to promoting the Masons’ shared values of “liberty, justice, equality, and charity.”

Preparing for the Memorial's 2023 centenary, its director of archives and exhibits, Mark A. Tabbert, realized that, despite a significant survival of Masonic Washingtoniana—even the minutes of his 1755 induction survive—“no comprehensive analysis” of his relationship with Masonry had yet been written. At the suggestion of a colleague, Mr. Tabbert set about assembling one. His intent, he says in the preface to “A Deserving Brother: George Washington and Freemasonry,” is “to present all known physical evidence of George Washington’s membership in, and lifelong support of, Freemasonry.”



*Washington at a meeting of Freemasons.*

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Mr. Tabbert is thorough and assiduous, and careful with the facts if occasionally speculative about their meaning. He is at pains to note that his book “includes only the documents and artifacts that provide a record,” even though some anecdotes and stories are temptingly “believable . . . or oft repeated.”

The author has an unenviable task for a historian, navigating around some mighty big holes: Washington fell off the Masonic map soon after he joined the Fredericksburg, Va., lodge, and doesn't reappear in Masonic records until the Revolution. “For a man who, so far as is known, never initiated any Masonic activity or a letter after 1755, Washington had a complicated Masonic life,” Mr. Tabbert observes. Certainly the Masons were keen to claim him: When he died in 1799, he was eulogized by Masons around the country; a lock of his hair was “preserved with the jewels of the society” by a Boston lodge, in a golden urn cast by no less than Paul Revere.

Masonic practice, at least in the United States, mirrors and parallels religious rites, which has raised eyebrows at some points and riots at others. When a group of Masons laid the cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol building in 1793, President Washington solemnly set an engraved silver plaque upon it. The cornerstone was blessed with libations of wine, corn and oil (“symbolizing health, peace, and plenty,” Mr. Tabbert tells us) and the “Freemasons ‘chanted’ as Washington stepped out of the trench.” “It is possible,” adds our guide, that “all attending brethren made appropriate hand signs or hand-claps between each motion” as the stone was laid. The occasion culminated, encouragingly, in a barbecue, ending in what Washington's friend and fellow Mason, Lafayette, might have called a *plus ça change* moment, in which the participants, including the president, bought promising lots of land in the new District of Columbia.

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“A Deserving Brother” offers a refresher for the Masonic amateur and a useful primer of sorts for the entirely unfamiliar. The organization's dedication to brotherhood and honesty—its symbols of the plumb of rectitude, the compass of moderation, the square of virtue and the level of equality—resonate with the democratic traditions of the United States from its founding to the present. Its rites and organization illuminate the human need for ceremony and hierarchy—if we don't have ritual, we tend to create it.

Masonic adjacency to religious observation is reflected in the curiously High Church phenomenon of the feasts of St. John the Baptist and St. John the

Evangelist—observed, in Washington’s day at least, in Episcopal and other churches of the new country, where a minister’s sermon took place after various Masonic processions. The sermons were subsequently printed and used to raise money for the poor.

Formal religious involvement was complicated and contradictory. Washington’s funeral was conducted both by a minister and with the ceremonials of his brother Masons. Constitutional Convention delegate and District of Columbia commissioner Daniel Carroll, of the great Maryland Catholic family, was a Mason, instrumental in the cornerstone-laying ceremony at the new Capitol. Most American Catholics, now at least, are acutely aware that membership in the Masons is forbidden by the Church; this was a direct catalyst in the creation and rise of the Knights of Columbus and other Catholic civic organizations.

Mr. Tabbert rejects a shorthand interpretation of Washington’s—and early American—Freemasonry as part of some strain of Voltairean deism and freethinking, and briefly addresses the “Dan Brown effect” early in this century, when a “torrent” of sensational conspiracism inundated the public with assertions about “Washington the Masonic Satanist,” “Washington the Rosicrucian” and “Washington the Illuminati President.” The author is correct to relate this spasm of gnostic Scooby-van investigation to many previous anti-Masonic eruptions, but perhaps lacks a bit of self-awareness. Claiming your organization is the repository of the ancient secrets of Solomon’s temple is apt to give people ideas.

Whatever you’re building—a Capitol, an argument, a history—won’t stand up if it’s not laid true. Mr. Tabbert’s book, a catalogue raisonné of Washington as Freemason, establishes a firm basis for further exploration. He says he intends for his work to “spur more extensive scholarship into an unexplored aspect of Washington’s life”; it will be interesting to see if his conscientious assembly inspires new analysis of the cultural and political thought behind the Founding.

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