

"A Brother of Craft"
James Monroe's Ties to Freemasonry

[NOTE: This article is adapted from remarks presented by Scott H. Harris, Executive Director of UMW Museums, at a Memorial Day program in the Fredericksburg Masonic Cemetery on May 26, 2018.]

On November 6, 1775, at Williamsburg Lodge No. 6, in what was then the capital city of Virginia, a 17-year-old student at the College of William and Mary was "recommended as a fit person to be admitted a member of this lodge and the motion recorded." Three days later, November 9, 1775, the petitioner was "preferred, received and balloted for; passed and accepted and entered an apprentice."¹

The "fit person" in question was James Monroe, who at age 17 was younger than the prescribed age of 21 that later became standard practice for entry into Freemasonry. The fact that respect and acceptance by the fraternity of Masons was accorded to the young James Monroe is typical of the extraordinary times in which he lived, and the qualities evident in him so early in life.

In February 1776 Monroe was commissioned a lieutenant in the 3rd Virginia Infantry Regiment, commanded by Fredericksburg resident Col. Hugh Mercer. Six months later, the regiment left Virginia to join the Continental Army in New York. By then it was commanded by another Fredericksburger, George Weedon (onetime Worshipful Master of Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4 who is interred within the Fredericksburg Masonic Cemetery). Over the next year, the 3rd Virginia took part in most of the Continental Army's major battles—Harlem Heights, White Plains, Trenton, Brandywine, and Germantown. It was at Trenton that James Monroe, by then a captain, helped lead the army's advance guard across the Delaware River and then sustained a near-fatal wound during the ensuing battle on December 26, 1776.

Perhaps the most telling commentary on Monroe's service in the Continental Army came from its commander—a fellow Mason—George Washington. Noting "The zeal he discovered by entering the service at an early period, the character he supported in his regiment, and the manner in which he distinguished himself at Trenton, when he received a wound," Washington declared that Monroe "has, in every instance, maintained the reputation of a brave, active, and sensible officer."²

George Washington and George Weedon were not the only prominent Masons of the Revolutionary era with whom Monroe was associated during his war service and his later career. Among the best-known are:

John Marshall, his childhood friend and fellow officer in the Continental Army, who became a leading Federalist and Chief Justice of the United States when Monroe was equally active as a Democratic-Republican.

Robert Livingston, part of the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence and later Monroe's partner in negotiating the Louisiana Purchase Treaty with France.

And the **Marquis de Lafayette**, the French nobleman who rose to high command in the Continental Army and was later a key figure in the French Revolution and its aftermath. Lafayette and Monroe forged a friendship during the American Revolution that endured for the rest of their lives. It was the intercession of the latter's wife, Elizabeth Monroe, that helped spare Lafayette's wife from the guillotine in 1796.

While James Monroe's association with fellow Masons during the Revolution is evident, there is no surviving documentation of his progress from apprentice status within the brotherhood. Tradition holds that he was counseled within a military lodge during the war, and records of Williamsburg Lodge No. 6 show that his dues were paid through October 1780. Around this same time, he was enrolled as a member of Kilwinning Cross Lodge No. 2 in Port Royal, Virginia. His membership in Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4 is also assumed by tradition, probably during the period 1786 to 1789 when he lived in the city.

Whatever his eventual status within Freemasonry, Monroe's membership was recognized and celebrated at various points in his life, particularly during his presidency. On June 8, 1819, during his tour of the southern states, Monroe was welcomed to Nashville, Tennessee with a resolution from Cumberland Lodge No. 8, which read:

"Resolved, that as a small tribute of respect to Mr. Monroe, a distinguished statesman & upright man, and a brother of craft, the members of this Lodge & visiting brethren do march to the suburbs of the Town, in procession to meet him, & the Worship Master Brother W Tannehill deliver him an address congratulating his arrival in Nashville."³

The resolution was duly acted upon when the Masons, accompanied by a band, met Monroe's party at the town limits and conducted them to the mayor's house. Later that month, on June 24, the president took part in a St. John's day Masonic ceremony in Louisville, Kentucky. Also present was General—later President—Andrew Jackson, who would eventually serve as Grand Master of Tennessee Masons.⁴

The last recorded Masonic episode in Monroe's life came at the conclusion of his second presidential term in 1825, when he was made an honorary member of Washington Naval Lodge No. 4.

Apart from these documented activities, there is one tangible reminder of James Monroe's Masonic experience. That is the customary Masonic apron, presented to him either in Williamsburg or Fredericksburg. This talisman of the brotherhood was not interred with Monroe at his death, possibly because he died, on July 4, 1831, at his daughter's home in New York City. The apron, preserved and passed down within his family, is in the collection of the James Monroe Museum.



What may we make of James Monroe's ties to Freemasonry? Like many men of his era, he likely recognized the practical advantages such an affiliation offered to an ambitious young man determined on forging a career in public service. He was also surely attracted by the institution's traditions of brotherhood, patriotism, religious

faith, and community service. These virtues were repeatedly demonstrated throughout his long career as a state and local legislator, governor of Virginia, minister to three foreign countries, cabinet secretary, and president of the United States.

Perhaps Monroe had his Masonic experience in mind when he penned the following lines in his last annual message to Congress on December 7, 1824—words that served as a valedictory to his career:

“Having commenced my service in early youth, and continued it since with few and short intervals, I have witnessed the great difficulties to which our Union has been exposed, and admired the virtue and intelligence with which they have been surmounted. From the present prosperous and happy state I derive a satisfaction which I cannot express. That these blessings may be preserved and perpetuated will be the object of my fervent and unceasing prayers to the Supreme Ruler of the Universe.”⁵

Notes

¹ Records of Williamsburg Lodge No. 6, accessed at http://www.masonicworld.com/education/files/artoct02/our_masonic_presidents_short.htm.

² George Washington to Archibald Cary, 22 May 1799. Accessed from Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-20-02-0519>.

³ Daniel Preston, ed., and Marlena C. DeLong, asst. ed., *The Papers of James Monroe, Volume 1: A Documentary History of the Presidential Tours of James Monroe, 1817, 1818, 1819*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 672.

⁴ Ibid, 688.

⁵ James Monroe, annual message to Congress, 7 December 1824, quoted in Daniel Preston and Heidi Stello, *Quotations of James Monroe* (Charlottesville, VA: Ash Lawn-Highland, 2010), 55.