

Cornerstones; Simple to Sublime

By: S. Brent Morris

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An Impossible Dream

In 1881, East Cambridge, Maryland, was a small fishing village on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay. Its streets were paved with oyster shells and were trod by the lamplighter each evening as he made his rounds. Rev. George Quitman Bacchus became convinced that the little town of Cambridge needed to erect a house of worship, and he set about to convince the Church Extension Society of the Methodist Protestant Church of this need. The Society was unwilling to support such a major undertaking because they thought East Cambridge was not developed enough to support its own church.

Rev. Bacchus was unwilling to hear that his dream was "impossible," so he turned to another source for support-the Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free, and Accepted Masons of Maryland. The Grand Lodge heard his presentation and authorized a loan for the building of a small wooden church. It had an "amen corner" for the elders, a small steeple, and grounds enclosed by a neat white picket fence-everything a small community like East Cambridge needed to enhance their worship of God.

On June 24, 1881, St. John's Day, the Grand Lodge of Maryland chartered a steamboat and arrived at the newly built St. Paul's Church. They not only laid the cornerstone in proper Masonic form, but also surprised the congregation by erasing their mortgage and presenting them with a debt-free church. The comments by M.W. John S. Tyson, Grand Master of Maryland in 1881, are timeless in describing the motives of the Masons of Maryland, or elsewhere, in their zeal to help their citizens.

"It is especially honorable to the fraternity to be called upon to lay the cornerstone of a church, and it affords a favorable opportunity for the illustration of that principle of toleration and liberality of opinion which is one of the most attractive features of our institution. So on this occasion, Masons of different denominations of Christians, and Masons of Hebrew race and

religion, joined in laying the cornerstone of a Methodist Protestant church, because all recognized that it was to be an edifice for the worship of God, and it would have been equally ready to perform the same ceremony for any church or synagogue."

*Edward T. Schultz, History of Freemasonry in Maryland, 4 vols. (Baltimore: J. H. Medairy & Co., 1888), Vol. 4, pp. 265-266.

This inspiring story of Rev. Bacchus's impossible dream and the generous, unexpected support offered by Masons could stop here, but there is more to the tale. In 1912 St. Paul's Church had outgrown its humble wooden-framed beginning on an oyster-shell paved street, and replaced its original structure with a stone building. By 1981 the congregation had grown and expanded further to a splendid stone and stained-glass illuminated house of God. The congregation was ready to lay the cornerstone of their new fellowship hall and had not forgotten those who had so generously helped them get started.

On June 21, 1981, the Grand Lodge of Maryland was once again formally invited to worship at St. Paul's church and to lay another important cornerstone for the parish. Once again "Masons of different denominations of Christians, and Masons of Hebrew race and religion" joined in testing the cornerstone of St. Paul's fellowship hall, in declaring it well formed, true, and trusty, and, as they did 100 years before, in helping to dedicate yet another building to the worship of God and to the service of their fellow citizens.

The Washington National Cathedral

Gothic cathedrals have been described as music frozen in the air, and the awe-inspiring beauty of the Washington National Cathedral confirms the truth of this observation. Formally known as the Cathedral Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, the church was conceived when Congress granted a charter to the Protestant Episcopal Cathedral Foundation of the District of Columbia on January 6, 1893. Fourteen years later a crowd of 10,000 gathered to witness the foundation stone laying at Mount St. Albans on September 29, 1907.(1)

Freemasonry does not favor any religion, nor does it permit religion (or politics) to be discussed in its Lodges. It strongly admonishes its members, however, to worship God as they best understand Him. Thus it is with particular pleasure that our gentle craft helps erect houses of worship. Whether a simple church or synagogue or a sublime masterpiece of architectural genius like the Washington National Cathedral, they share a common purpose of glorifying the Grand Architect of the Universe. It was with the humble intention of glorifying God that the Masons joined the ceremonies on Mount St. Albans that day.

Laying the Foundation Stone

As the cathedral choir sang, the foundation stone was slowly lowered to its final resting place beneath the altar. A procession left the platform consisting of the Bishop Henry Yates Satterlee,

the Canons of the Cathedral, the architect bearing the Cathedral trowel, and Lemuel Towers, Jr., Master of Potomac Lodge No. 5, FAAM accompanied by three Brothers bearing the George Washington gavel. In the great pit dug for the foundation, Bishop Satterlee laid the mortar beneath the stone and struck it three times with the Washington gavel. After the procession returned to the platform, President and Brother Theodore Roosevelt delivered an address.(2)

Bishop Satterlee could not have known it, but his project started in 1907 on fifty-seven acres on Mount St. Albans became the longest-running construction site of our nation's capital. Construction halted from 1919-1921 during World War I, slowed during the great depression, and halted again from 1942-1948 during World War II. A shortage of funds stopped construction from 1977-1980, after which the final work towards completion began. Then on September 29, 1990, eighty-three years to the day after the first stone was laid, the final stone of this house of worship was set in place. President George Bush, like President Roosevelt before him, delivered the address.(3)

The Washington Bay

At the western end of the south outer aisle of the Washington National Cathedral is the Washington Bay, dedicated to the father of our country. There stands in splendid isolation a seven foot six inch statue of Washington, carved of pure white Vermont marble. Inscribed on the statue's octagonal pedestal are reminders of Washington's contributions: "First Citizen – Churchman – President – Statesman – Farmer – Soldier – Patriot – Freemason." It was a gift in 1947 from the Supreme Council, 33^o, Southern Jurisdiction, which declared:

"It was fitting – and indeed it was necessary – that here, in this hallowed place, which is set upon a hill within the city that bears his name, there should be raised a monument to the Father of his Country. For while the whole American land is his monument, it is an inspiring duty to make visible his presence"(4)

Washington's lifelong love of Freemasonry is emphasized by three plaques cut into the stone of the Cathedral's walls. The left plaque commemorates Washington's initiation into Freemasonry in 1752. It shows the Holy Bible, Square, Compasses, and the words "Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4, 1752." The center plaque celebrates the year he became Master of Alexandria Lodge No. 22 in 1782. The carving has an exact replica of Washington's Past Master's Jewel and the words – "Alexandria Lodge No. 22, 1782." The third plaque, located on the right, has two small cornerstones. One is dated 1793 and is surmounted by the dome of the U.S. Capitol; the other is dated 1907 and is surmounted by a carving of the Washington National Cathedral.

More than 600,000 people visit or attend services at the cathedral each year. It has served important functions of state: funeral services for President Eisenhower were held here, and the inaugural prayers for Presidents Reagan and Bush were offered here. Martin Luther King, Jr.

preached his last Sunday Sermon in the Cathedral's Canterbury pulpit a few days before he was assassinated.

It has indeed achieved the purpose envisioned by Bishop Satterlee nearly a century ago:

"..a house of prayer for all people means a spiritual home to which men of every class, rich and poor, statesman, tradesman, and laborer, may come without money and without price, with the consciousness that it is their common Father's house."(5)

Footnotes

(1)Dan Stone, "A Great Church for National Purposes," Cathedral Age, Fall 1990, pp. 10-15.

(2)Claudy, Carl H. Your Masonic Capital City, revised ed. (Silver Spring, Md.: Masonic Service Association, 1988), pp. 43-44.

(4)John W. Boettjer, "The Washington Bay," The Scottish Rite Journal, Vol. XCVIII, No. 2, p. 1 (pp. 1-3).

(5)Dan Stone, p. 14.

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