

Freemasonry In The Canal Zone

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R. W. Howard W. Osborn, Past District Grand Master of the District Lodge of A.F.&A.M. of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, prepared this manuscript for use as a Short Talk Bulletin. We thank him for sharing with us this valuable chapter of Masonic History. – Editor

Many years before the Pilgrim Fathers landed on the bleak shores of New England, four logical routes were already recognized for a Canal across the Isthmus between North and South America and surveys had been made with the idea in view of creating a man-made channel between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Vasco Nunez de Balboa, discoverer of the Pacific, is believed to have been the first to conceive the idea of uniting the two oceans by a canal. In 1529 Alvaro de Saavedra completed plans for the building of an interoceanic waterway, but died before his plans could be submitted to his king. In 1534 Charles V ordered the Governor of the Region of Panama to make surveys of a route following the Chagres River, which is more or less the course of the present Panama Canal. This was done but the Governor reported that no monarch could hope to accomplish such a feat as joining the two oceans.

Nothing much was done for nearly two centuries until near the end of the 18th century, Baron Von Humboldt, the famous geographer, visited the Isthmus and became much interested in the matter. His writings were widely read in England, France, Spain, and the United States. In 1814 the Spaniard Cortez adopted a formal decree for the construction of the Isthmian Canal and authorized the formation of a company to undertake the work. Within a decade all of Spain's colonies in Central and South America established their independence and the possibility of Spain taking part in the great project faded away.

The first comprehensive survey by the French was made in 1843 by Napoleon Garella. He favored the Panama Route and submitted plans to utilize the waters of the Chagres River. He proposed a ship tunnel through the continental divide and a canal with 34 locks on the Atlantic slope and 16 on the Pacific. He estimated the cost of the canal with a tunnel at \$25,000,000 and at \$28,000,000 with an open cut.

Soon after numerous other explorations were made by the Government and private companies of the United States, Great Britain and France. Among the countless proposals made, none was

more fanciful, considering present day ship traffic, than the ship railway proposed in 1881, by James B. Eads, capable of transporting, in a specially built ship cradle, ocean-going vessels of up to 5000 tons.

The first definite step toward the actual construction of the Panama Canal was taken on the morning of May 15, 1879, when there met in Paris a distinguished group of men of several nationalities to discuss and decide where and how the canal might be constructed. The movement to assemble this group was initiated by Count Ferdinand de Lesseps, the famed builder of the Suez Canal. A sea level canal was decided upon and the Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interocenique was formed with de Lesseps as President.

In January 1881, the first detachment of workers was sent out. Between 1882 and 1888 the work went forward with dispatch and much was accomplished, but at great cost of human lives and money. After seven years of work, it was found that a sea level canal was not feasible and a provisional change of plans was made which provided for a high level canal with a system of locks. Needless to say the work failed. The State of Panama revolted and declared its independence from Colombia on November 3, 1903. A treaty was negotiated between Panama and the United States and on May 4, 1904, Lt. Mark Brooke, Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army, acting in accordance with instructions received from the Secretary of War, went to the headquarters of the French Canal Company and accepted, in the name of the United States, the transfer of its properties for the sum of \$40,000,000.

You are all familiar with the problems that the United States encountered so there is no need to go into details except to say that on August 15, 1914 the Canal was opened to traffic.

With that bit of background, let us get back to the main subject.

Masonry in the Canal Zone had its beginnings in 1898 when Sojourners Lodge No. 874 was founded in Colon, Republic of Panama, under the Grand Lodge of Scotland. As more and more Americans arrived on the Isthmus to work for the Panama Railroad and the Canal, they began to apply to Sojourners Lodge as affiliated members or as candidates for the degrees. Over a period of years the membership in Sojourners Lodge became predominantly American. The long delays in communications between Scotland and the desire for closer ties with their homeland, led the members to seek a connection with a Grand Lodge in the United States. One of the Grand Lodges contacted was the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts and on September 11, 1912, Most Worshipful Everett C. Benton, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, announced in the regular Quarterly Communication that "I have granted two dispensations for new lodges – one at the Canal Zone, Panama, called 'Sojourners Lodge'" At the Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge held December 11, 1912, the Committee on Charters and By-laws recommended that a Charter be issued. This recommendation was unanimously approved by the Grand Lodge and Sojourners Lodge became the senior lodge on the Canal Zone.

On September 11, 1912, forty-three Masons submitted a prayer for dispensation to form Canal Zone Lodge on the Pacific side. The dispensation was issued on December 10, 1913. Prior to this the only lodge was on the Atlantic side which entailed travel across the Isthmus by railroad and a very long night.

Early in January, 1913, Most Worshipful Benton, accompanied by the Deputy Grand Master, Right Worshipful Herbert E. Fletcher and the Recording Grand Secretary, Right Worshipful Thomas W. Davis, journeyed to the Canal Zone and on January 18 opened a Special Communication of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts for the purpose of constituting Sojourners Lodge and installing the officers. It is recorded that there were present Masons from forty states, two dependencies and four foreign countries. There were 190 charter members in the lodge.

The following day, January 19, 1913, Most Worshipful Benton opened another Special Communication of the Grand Lodge at Ancon, Canal Zone, to pay a fraternal visit to Canal Zone Lodge at its first meeting under dispensation.

The following year, Right Worshipful Herbert Fletcher, now a Past Deputy Grand Master, returned to the Isthmus to open a Deputy Grand Lodge for the purpose of constituting Canal Zone Lodge and installing its officers on February 21, 1914.

During the forenoon of November 23, 1914, the USAT Buford docked at Pier 8, Cristobal, with the 5th U.S. Infantry on board. Among her passengers were 1st Lt. George W. Edgerly and many other Masons, both officers and enlisted men. The 5th Infantry was to be stationed at Camp Empire about midway of the Isthmus making attendance at either Sojourners or Canal Zone Lodges very inconvenient. As there were many Masons in this area, Brother Edgerly took it upon himself to call a meeting on April 27th for interested members of the Craft. Thirty-two Brethren attended and a petition was drawn up. It was voted to call themselves Army Lodge. The signatures of fifty Brethren were obtained and the petition forwarded. On June 8, 1915 the Grand Master, Most Worshipful Melvin M. Johnson, granted the dispensation and appointed Brother Edgerly to be the first Master. On March 8, 1916 the Charter was granted but the formal ceremony of constitution was not held until May 20, 1916 at which time Worshipful John B. Fields, acting on a commission as proxy for the Grand Master, presided. More than three hundred Masons attended the affair.

In the latter part of 1915 a group of old-fashioned Masons, who had a desire for good fellowship and brotherhood, banded together to organize the "Twin City Masonic Club." The meetings of this Masonic Club were held regularly each month until May 4, 1917. In the latter part of 1916, they originated a Petition for a Dispensation to erect a Blue Lodge. This petition with fifty signatures was forwarded to the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge. Their prayer was answered by permission to form Isthmian Lodge and met regularly under dispensation until May 31, 1918 at which time it was constituted.

In 1918 the Panama Canal moved the Lodge Building from Pariso to Pedro Miguel. In those days it was customary for the Canal Zone Government to furnish, for a nominal fee, a Lodge Hall in each community for meeting places for employee groups, unions, community and lodge meetings, etc.

Masonry continued to prosper and grow so that early in 1917, eighty-eight Master Masons signed a petition for a dispensation to start a lodge to be called Darien Lodge in Balboa. This was granted on May 16, 1917. At a Special Communication held on August 8, 1918 the lodge was constituted in full form according to the Ancient usages of the Craft. It was reported in the Communication of December 11, 1918, that a Special Warrant had been issued on December 6 to Worshipful Francis M. Easton and forty-three others to form Sibert Lodge (under dispensation) at Gatun, Canal Zone. The Charter for Sibert Lodge was approved by Grand Lodge on September 10, 1919 and the lodge was constituted by Right Worshipful Ralph Osborn, District Grand Master, on February 2, 1920.

The last lodge to be erected in the Canal Zone was Chagres Lodge which was warranted under dispensation on March 8, 1921. The Charter was approved on December 14, 1921 by Grand Lodge and the lodge constituted at a Special Communication of the District Grand Lodge, February 6, 1922, by Worshipful Clinton G. Garty acting as District Grand Master.

Seven lodges were constituted in the period 1912 through 1922. Masonry had expanded to the point where a close tie with the Grand Lodge was needed to expedite and handle the affairs in the Canal Zone.

In February of 1916 the Board of Directors of the Grand Lodge gave the Grand Master authority to send someone to the Canal Zone to give attention to such matters connected with the lodges there as were demanding early consideration. During 1916 the Grand Master was unable to prevail upon anyone of suitable rank to undertake the trip to the Canal Zone. A petition for a dispensation for a new lodge at Pariso required careful deliberation and intimate knowledge of local conditions to assure a wise decision. Late in the year, the newly-formed Grand Lodge of Panama asked for recognition of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts.

Accordingly, Most Worshipful Leon M. Abbott, immediately on being installed as Grand Master, prevailed upon Most Worshipful Melvin M. Johnson, his predecessor, to undertake the trip to the Canal Zone and issued, on January 4, 1917, a commission containing the following seven points: (1) To open a Deputy Grand Lodge for the purpose of the appointment and installation of a District Grand Master for the Canal Zone; (2) To deliver a dispensation to certain Brethren in Pariso, Canal Zone, who have petitioned to be formed into a lodge; (3) To hold one or more Lodges of Instruction or Exemplification of the work and ritual; (4) To make inquiry concerning the newly organized Grand Lodge of Panama and report to the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Massachusetts upon the advisability of recognizing the said Grand Lodge of Panama; (5) To negotiate the terms of a Treaty and execute a Protocol with the said

Grand Lodge of Panama regarding the relations of the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Massachusetts with said Grand Lodge of Panama, such Treaty to have no force or effect until the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Massachusetts shall extend Masonic recognition to the Grand Lodge of Panama and shall ratify such Treaty. Said Protocol may establish such relations temporarily and until such Treaty shall be ratified by both of said Grand Lodges or shall be rejected by either of them; (6) To do and perform all these acts for the good of the Craft in the Canal Zone as I should myself have power to do if personally present; (7) In all these matters our Special Deputy is to have power to act or refrain from action in the exercise of his discretion.

Most Worshipful Johnson set sail from New York on January 13, 1917 and after a stop in Cuba where he was entertained by officials of the Grand Lodge of Cuba, he arrived in Cristobal on January 21 where he was met by Captain Ralph Osborn, later to become District Grand Master. There ensued a number of meetings with local Craftsmen and sightseeing to an extent that Brother Stanley Ford recorded in the Canal Zone Orient that "Never in the history of the Panama Canal has any party seen more of the Canal Zone and the Canal in so short a space of time than did Mr. and Mrs. Melvin M. Johnson and their son, Maynard, Jr., and Mr. and Mrs. William H. L. Odell during their eleven days' stay with us."

On January 30, 1917 Most Worshipful Johnson met with the Grand Lodge of Panama and signed the Treaty which is still in effect after sixty years. This Treaty governs the relationships between the lodges of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts and the Grand Lodge of Panama.

On January 31, 1917 Most Worshipful Johnson opened a Deputy Grand Lodge at Cristobal, Canal Zone, at which his commission from the Grand Master was read in the presence of about three hundred Masons. Right Worshipful Herbert A. White was installed as the first District Grand Master of the Canal Zone Masonic District, the officers of Sojourners Lodge were installed, and the dispensation for Isthmian Lodge was presented to the committee of that lodge. Right Worshipful White was Judge Advocate for the Canal Zone, a Major in the Army, a Past Master of Army Lodge at Empire and of Hancock Lodge No. 311, Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. The evening ended with the exemplification of the second section of the third degree.

The term of Right Worshipful White was short, lasting only about one year as he was called by military duties to another theater of the World War. The report of the Grand Master on December 11, 1918 that Right Worshipful White had left the Canal Zone stated that his term in office was brief, "but his service most important. He had charge of affairs in the Canal Zone at a vital and critical period in the development of our work there and by his wisdom, sound judgement, and active as well as powerful personality, he was enabled to discharge the duties of his office with signal success, to his own honor and the advancement of the Fraternity. It is a cause for regret that conditions were such that he could not be at liberty longer to serve the Fraternity in this important position."

In a Special Communication of the District Grand Lodge held Friday, May 31, 1918 at Cristobal, Right Worshipful Ralph Osborn was installed (in English) by Most Worshipful Guillermo Andreve, Grand Master of Panama, and the officers of the Grand Lodge of Panama. The Grand Master reported that "The occasion was a very delightful one and marked another step in the development and strengthening of the cordial relations which exist between the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts and the Grand Lodge of Panama." On this same night Right Worshipful Osborn and the District Grand Lodge constituted Isthmian Lodge and installed its officers. On Thursday, August 8, 1918 a Special Communication of the District Grand Lodge was opened at Balboa to constitute Darien Lodge and install its officers.

In the early days of the District Grand Lodge, because of the relatively few lodges and numbers of Past Masters available to serve as officers in the District Grand Lodge, officers often served several years in the same office. From 1917 to 1954, a period of thirty years, there were only four District Grand Masters, two of whom served sixteen and fifteen years respectively. In 1954 after Most Worshipful Whitfield Johnson had made his visit to the Canal Zone, he reported to Grand Lodge that ". . . Although upon my election as Grand Master, I had no first-hand knowledge, after conferring with those who did, and after carefully weighing the various points of view, it seemed to me that there was a sufficient number of competent and qualified Brethren in the office of District Grand Master analogous to our Constitutional limitation of three years for the Grand Master".

It has been the custom for each Grand Master to make an extended visit to the Canal Zone, ten to fourteen days, once during his term of office, generally during the second year. These visits have taken the form of visiting two or three lodge groups in joint communication at which a degree would be conferred, visitation to the District Master's Reception for all Masons on the Isthmus and their wives, to meet the Grand Master and his official party. The visits have included meeting certain high officials of the Panama Canal and military, sightseeing in both the Canal Zone and the Republic of Panama.

In 1913 at the end of the Masonic year, September 30, there was a membership of 239. This continued to grow to a peak of 4,036 in 1962 and as of September 30, 1977, the membership stood at 3,542. The busiest years were during the period of 1943 to 1948, when a total of 2,127 were initiated. These were the years during and just after World War II.

York Rite Masonry was introduced as early as 1910 when a dispensation was issued for Canal Zone Chapter No. 1, Royal Arch Masons, located on the Pacific side, and on October 30, 1916, one was issued for Canal Zone Chapter No. 2 located on the Atlantic side. Canal Zone Commandery No. 1, K. T. and Canal Zone Council No. 1, R. & S.M. followed in due time.

Scottish Rite, under the Southern Jurisdiction, followed along with the Shrine. Abou Saad Temple, A.A.N.O.M.S. has one of the largest Jurisdictions of any Temple, as it includes Central and South America as well as Puerto Rico.

There are now four Chapters of the Order of the Eastern Star, two Chapters of DeMolay, and three Chapters of Rainbow for Girls. Two Chapters of National Sojourners and a Conclave of the Red Cross of Constantine.

Masonry is still strong on the Isthmus but with the increased use of Panamanians in the Canal Organization and the resulting retirement of many Americans, attendance has decreased, resulting in the consolidation of Canal Zone and Isthmian Lodges into Canal Zone Isthmian Lodge in September, 1977.

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