

Freemasonry in the Evolution of Democracy in Canada

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(This STB was extracted from the book Freemasonry & Democracy: Its Evolution in North America. See page 8 for information on how to order) --Editor

There is a vast field of research called "Constitutional History," which, among other things, lets us trace the steps leading to democracy in the English-speaking world. These include such items as the Great Charter (1215), which asserted the supremacy of the law, even over the chief of state; the Petition of Right (1628), which prohibited taxation without Parliament's consent; the Habeas Corpus Act (1679), which prevented imprisonment without due cause; the Declaration of Liberty of Conscience (1687), which gave freedom to all religious denominations; and the Bill of Rights (1689), which made it illegal to make or suspend any law without the consent of Parliament. These all antedate the formation of modern Freemasonry, but in one form or another, they were all brought to North America by British settlers even though the power of such laws may have been diluted by the fact that the people were no longer in the homeland.

It is possible that the Freemasons may have had some effect on the growth of democracy. In the first book of The Constitutions of the Free-Masons, published in 1723, James Anderson gives "The Charges of a FreeMason, extracted from The ancient Records of Lodges," and there we read that "all Masons are as Brethren upon the same level' (page 55). This has sometimes been interpreted as expressing the idea that all men are created equal. A few pages later, Anderson also quotes the General Regulations, as they were approved by Grand Lodge in 1721. one rule runs as follows. "All Matters are to be determin'd in the Grand Lodge by a Majority of Votes, each Member having one Vote, and the Grand Master having two Votes" (page 61).

This regulation explicitly specifies equal votes for all members (except the presiding officer), and to that extent it embodies the principle of equality. And being promulgated in the Freemasons' law-code of 1721, it long antedated any notion of universal suffrage in the politics of the "profane" world. One might well imagine that, over the course of time, those who belonged to Masonic organizations with rules like this would assimilate, and perhaps generalize, such an ideal. This might affect their attitude to authoritarian actions on the part of government. But we know that, from time to time, particularly in the colonies, the British Parliament seems to have imposed certain measures that were not supported by the people. In the circumstances, it might be tempting to conclude that the Freemasons would be leaders in the struggle for democracy.

In fact, we have seen their role in the Constitutional Conference that was held in Philadelphia in 1787. But further north, in Canada, over the course of time they were also associated with similar changes, even though there was never any such constitutional conference. (One must remember that the area now called Canada consisted of a number of separate British colonies until 1867).

On March 13, 1738, Major Erasmus James Philipps was warranted from Boston as the first Provincial Grand Master of Nova Scotia; he was the nephew of the Governor of the colony, Colonel Richard Philipps. The first lodge in what is now Canada was instituted at Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, in June 1738, under the authority of the Provincial Grand Master.

Quebec became British with the Battle on the Plains of Abraham on September 13, 1759, when the French were defeated by an army under the command of General James Wolfe; and, as W. R. Denslow notes, "it is claimed that Wolfe was a member of Minden Military Lodge." A scant ten weeks after the battle, on November 28, the Provincial Grand Lodge of Quebec was formed, by six military lodges in Wolfe's army. It eventually began to institute civilian lodges in the area under its jurisdiction. This Provincial Grand Lodge and its successors were the chief agents that helped Masonry to expand to the west.

Of course in the American War of Independence there were Masons on both sides. The earliest Masonic record in what is now Ontario is the certificate, dated February 11, 1780, of Henry Nelles, a New Yorker, who was initiated in the lodge in the 8th or King's Own Regiment of Foot, No 5 on the Provincial Register of Quebec. After the Revolution many of those on the losing side migrated north to Canada. More than 30,000 moved to the Atlantic colonies, 2000 settled in Quebec, and 7500 came to what is now Ontario.

These Loyalists included many Freemasons who had fought on the British side. Thomas Merritt (1759-1842), "comet of cavalry" in the Queen's Rangers, and eventually Sheriff of Lincoln County, was first Master of St George's, No 27, St Catharines, in 1816. Colonel John Butler (1725-1796), who organized Butler's Rangers during the Revolution, was Provincial Grand Senior Warden in 1795. Major James Rogers (1726?-1792), of Rogers' Rangers, is on record as Master of St James', No 14, at Cataraqui (Kingston) in 1781. Major Edward Jessup Jr (1735-1816), commander of the Loyal Rangers or Jessup's Corps, was first Senior Warden of Lodge No 13, Elizabethtown (near Brockville), in 1799. Major Peter Van Alstine ( 1747/1811), of Cuyler's Corps, led the refugees who settled at Adolphustown in 1784; he was Master of St James', No 7, Fredericksburg, in 1797.

Stephen Jarvis ( 1756-1840), a Loyalist from Connecticut who eventually became Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod in the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada, was a charter member of St Andrew's, No I, York (Toronto) in 1822. (Perhaps we should add here that Upper Canada is the old name for Ontario, and Lower Canada corresponds to what is now the Province of Quebec.) Colonel Joseph Ryerson (1761-1854), who fought in the Prince of Wales Regiment, was Master of Lodge No 22, Charlotteville (Long Point), when it was organized in 1803. Joseph Brant, or Thayendanegea (1742-1807), Principal Chief of the Six Nations Indians, had been initiated in Lodge No 417 on the English Register (Moderns), which met at "The Falcon," Princes Street, Leicester Fields, London, in 1776, and served as the first Master of Lodge No 11, Mohawk Village (near Brantford), in 1798. And these are but a sample. About each of them, a lot more could obviously be said. People such as these will have played a pivotal role in the continued evolution of democracy.

Canada still honors a group of men known as the Fathers of Confederation. They met several times in 1864, and carried out the negotiations that eventually led to the British North America Act. By its terms, the Dominion of Canada came into existence on July 1, 1867, as a self governing country in the British Commonwealth of Nations. (Strange to relate, its Constitution still remained in Britain until 1982, even though the British government was not permitted to amend it.) Only two of the original Fathers of Confederation have so far been identified as Freemasons: Sir John A. Macdonald ( 1815-1891 ), the first Prime Minister of Canada, and Sir Alexander Campbell ( 1822-1892), Commissioner of Crown Lands, who eventually became Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario. By a curious coincidence, both of them had been initiated in St John's Lodge, No 5, Kingston, in the same year, 1844. (In 1948 Newfoundland became a part of Canada. The man responsible for this is sometimes called the last Father of Confederation. He was Joseph R. Smallwood [1900/1991] , a member of Northcliffe Lodge, No 1086 under the Scottish Constitution, Grand Falls, Newfoundland.)

In 1870, during Bro. Macdonald's leadership, the great North-West became a part of Canada. In order to preserve order, a military force was sent from Ontario to Winnipeg, and on November 21, 1870, nine of these soldiers received a dispensation to form the oldest surviving lodge in Manitoba. As settlement progressed westward across the prairies, Freemasonry reached Saskatchewan in 1879, and Alberta in

1882.

On February 15, 1965, after prolonged debate, a distinctively Canadian flag, with the Maple Leaf, was adopted, to take the place of the so-called Red Ensign. The prime mover in this discussion was the Honorable John Ross Matheson, who had been initiated in Queen's Lodge, No 578, Kingston, in 1940.

From its very inception, modern Freemasonry has fostered an atmosphere of freedom and equality. In short we find, as we have found elsewhere, that even though the history of the evolution of democracy was quite different in Canada, Freemasons did play a substantial part in that evolution.