



Monroe, James

Mason, Soldier, Statesman

by Gilbert H. Hill

The pages of American history highlight names of character, purpose, courage and accomplishment - bright stars in the firmament of a life span of leadership. Our fifth president, James Monroe, last of the Revolutionary War generation of White House executives, was a Mason, an excellent soldier, a man of superior qualities, unquestioned honesty, impressive energy and compelling firmness.

A member of the Virginia Dynasty of eight presidents coming from "The Old Dominion State," whose motto reads: "Sic Semper Tyrannis" (Thus Always to Tyrants), Monroe exemplified the tradition of Williamsburg. No other place was better known as the "rebels' roost" by the British and their designing Loyalist friends. Monroe's theme of word and act seems always to have been that America must be independent of all political foreign influences.

Descended from Captain Monroe, who had been a soldier in the army of Charles I of England and later emigrated to Virginia, it was natural for the future President to honor the family name by joining a Virginia regiment in 1776 as a Lieutenant under Washington's command. He left William and Mary College at 18 to do so.

Christmas night of that very year, Washington in a surprise maneuver crossed the Delaware in a blinding snowstorm and drifting ice with 2,400 men and captured 1,000 Hessian mercenaries commanding an outpost at Trenton, New Jersey. Monroe was wounded, but he had taken part in a major blow from which the British never fully recovered.

One of the difficulties of mobilizing an army to meet the critical needs was the reluctance of the rural and village population to serve for any lengthy army period. A two-year enlistment seems to have been the normal tenure, causing a constant need for drilling and training raw troops.

After the terrible winter of privation at Valley Forge in 1778, Monroe's term expired, having gained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. In 1780 he began the study of law with Thomas Jefferson, then Governor of Virginia. The association and friendship with Jefferson, 15 years his senior, was a most fortunate asset for a young politician aligning himself against the Federalists, advocates of centralized government.

Jefferson was a man to be admired: tall, square-shouldered, straight, a graceful dancer, with an excellent education in the languages, higher mathematics, and the sciences. Never called handsome, yet he was dignified, even though he never wore a wig, an essential compliment to VIPs in his day. Monroe, too, was tall, over six feet, well-formed, slightly stooped, with a manner and bearing of quiet dignity. Both were alumni of William and Mary College and brother Virginians. Monroe's conservative nature is best illustrated by the fact that he never changed from the Colonial fashion of wearing knee britches. Perhaps his studious nature caught the impact of the old saying, "Be not the first by whom the new is tried..."

Eight years after Paul Revere's ride in 1775, the end of the war was proclaimed, April 19, 1783, and in September the treaty of peace was signed in Paris. Monroe then began three years of service in the Congress of the Confederation. It was while serving in the Continental Congress that he met Elizabeth Kartwright, belle of New York, who later became Mrs. Monroe in the years of law practice in Fredricksburg which followed. In 1790 he became a member of the Senate.

Williamsburg was no longer the capital in 1780. The legislators had moved to Richmond, the present capital, to escape British warships occupying points on the James River. Although in the Senate Monroe opposed the Washington administration strongly, the President nominated him Minister to France in 1794. The representation of the American colonial democracy in France after the storming of the Bastille in 1789, with the resulting reign of terror and the fall of Robespierre, was a difficult and touchy role. However, Washington had rightly appraised the abilities of both Jefferson and Monroe as clear, keen, and defined thinking.

In Jefferson's administration Monroe was again assigned to assist Minister to France, Robert R. Livingston, and to secure negotiations for the Louisiana Purchase

in 1803. The \$15,000,000 purchase price has been estimated by good authority to be a bargain at 2 and 1/2 cents per acre.

In 1811 President Madison chose Monroe for Secretary of State and during the War of 1812 he served for a part of a year as Secretary of War. His two terms as President were from 1817 to 1825. He died on the 55th anniversary of the birth of the nation, July 4th, 1831, in New York, at the age of 73. He was survived by two daughters. Mrs. Monroe had passed away in 1830.

To get the full impact of the character of this great son of a great epoch in western civilization, one should journey to Williamsburg, where Colonial America lives again. By the untiring efforts and means provided by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., on a project covering a period of over 40 years, Williamsburg in almost its entirety has been restored. Even the Sir Christopher Wren building on the campus of William and Mary College has the appearance of the original structure. It is the oldest academic edifice still in use in the United States.

The British invaded and burned Washington in 1812. Congress was homeless for five years, meeting here and there in structures still standing after that staggering blow dealt by the mother country. Reconstructed, the Monroes opened the White House on New Year's Day 1818 with a great fete and celebration.

The elegant taste of the Monroes is on display today in the Green Room of the executive mansion. The charming Italian mantel was purchased by them. In the Monroe Room, established by Mrs. Herbert Hoover, are copies of all the Monroe furniture. To his was added, in the Eisenhowers' tenancy, an original sofa. On a wall facing an entrance hang splendid portraits of James and Elizabeth Monroe. It was the Monroes who started the supreme White House gold collection in French flatware for the dinner set.

Monroe, having served in the administrations of Washington, Jefferson and Madison, only once encountered a lack of confidence in his ability to ably represent the interests of his country. The Jay Treaty was unpopular both in France and the United States and was grudgingly adopted by a bare two-thirds majority, largely at Washington's insistence.

Monroe had "promised" the French that Congress would not accept it. The outcry in France was such that Monroe was recalled. Upon his return, he published a 500-page treatise in defense of his policy. It is said Washington never forgave him for this.

Monroe's two elections to the Presidency were easily won victories. In fact, the 1820 election was the only one since Washington's in which there was no opposing candidate. This period in American politics came to be known as the "Era of Good Feeling."

Having helped settle disputes between America, France, Spain and England, and thereby reducing the danger of hostilities and conflict, it was natural that American foreign policy should bear his name, and the rest of the world began to understand the western hemisphere was not open to conquest and domination.

The annual message to Congress, December 1823, carried the gist of the doctrine which has since born his name: "The American Continents ...are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers."

The first inaugural address, March 4, 1817, contained this statement: "National honor is national property of the highest value." When Britain, then "mistress of the waves," suggested that the United States join her in a "hands-off" proclamation as to Latin America, Monroe chose the advice of John Quincy Adams, his Secretary of State, and warned that not only Latin America must be left alone but Russia must not encroach southward on the Pacific Coast.

Monroe sided with the South on the slavery issue, but he made no effort to influence Congress. The Missouri Compromise settled largely by Henry Clay resolved temporarily the clash between the North and South. Discarding sectional bias of previous years, Monroe appointed Calhoun, a Southerner, for Secretary of War, and Northerner Adams, Secretary of State. According to the John A. Hertel Masonic Bible and Encyclopedia,

1951 Edition, the records of Williamsburg Lodge No. 6 provide the information that James Monroe's petition for membership in the Fraternity was favorably received November 6, 1775. On November 9 of the same year he was accepted an Entered Apprentice. This would indicate that the first Degree in Masonry was conferred before he was quite 18 years of age. At that time the stipulation of the minimum age of 21 years had not become a rigid regulation. Since no record has survived indicating that the Sublime Degree of a Master Mason was ever conferred upon him in Lodge No. 6, it is generally accepted that the additional degrees were received in a military Lodge during the Revolution. Records of the Williamsburg Lodge indicate that payments of dues were made through October 1780. At one time Monroe held membership in the Kilwinning Cross Lodge No. 2 of Port Royal, Virginia. This record was discovered by George W. Baird.

While Monroe was President, he visited Cumberland Lodge No. 8, of Nashville, Tennessee, and was extended the honor of a private reception by the Lodge. He was greeted by Worshipful Master Wilkins Tannehill, who headed the procession to receive him. Tannehill later became Grand Master of Tennessee.

Memorial services were held by Randolph Lodge No. 19 when death brought an end to this great patriot and loyal Mason. Surrounded by an influence of Masonic Brotherhood in the military Lodges of the Revolutionary War and working with such personalities as Washington, John Marshall, General Lafayette, Robert Livingston, all Grand Masters except Washington, must have been an experience unparalleled in sober and wise guidance. One may also fancy the potency of the

philosophy of Benjamin Franklin; inventor, scientist, statesman and Provincial Grand Master of Pennsylvania under the English Constitution.

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