



LAFAYETTE and the KNIGHTS TEMPLAR

by James R. Case

On his fourth and farewell visit to the United States in 1824-1825, Lafayette, as guest of the nation, made a triumphal tour of the country, one without precedent or parallel. In all the states then organized east of the Mississippi River, he was recognized as a Mason and greeted by Lodges, Chapters, Commanderies, Grand and Scottish Rite Bodies. He and his son were given degrees gratis, and he himself was accorded many honorary memberships and titles.

He first came to America in May 1777, offered his services to Congress, and served as a Major General under Washington until November 1778 when he returned to France and solicited aid from the King for the cause of American independence. He came again in April 1780 and stayed until December 1781, shortly after victory was won at Yorktown. During those visits there is no record of any Masonic activity although, according to his own statement, he was a Mason before he came to America.

Home interests kept Lafayette in France until he again visited this country for four months in 1784 to clear up his military status and to secure a settlement in land grants for his services. During that visit he presented to George Washington a handsomely embroidered Masonic apron. But there is no record of Lodge visits or any Masonic activity during that stay. From New York to Boston, the party traveled

over the lower post road, being received in all the shore towns by local committees and greeted along the way by enthusiastic crowds. The son was awarded an honorary MA degree at Harvard, where the father had been given an honorary LL.D. in 1784.

After a side trip to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, an overland ride by coach and carriage as far as Hartford followed, and from there a steamboat trip back to New York, arriving on September 5. Until the party left for the South about two weeks later, the Lafayettes were kept busy every morning, afternoon, and evening.

According to the Commercial Advertiser, on Saturday morning, September 11, at 9 o'clock, General Lafayette, escorted by some of his Masonic Brethren, attended a meeting at St. John's Hall of Jerusalem Chapter of Royal Arch Masons and Morton Encampment of Knights Templar, in which respective bodies he was Exalted and received as a member. Lafayette's secretary wrote in his diary that the General and his son were present at a Masonic celebration of the Knights Templar, who conferred on them the highest dignities and gave them richly wrought insignia. It appears from other references that Morton and Columbian Encampments, now Commanderies, joined forces on the occasion.

On September 22, 1824, during a meeting of the Cerneau Consistory at the residence of Elias Hicks, the distinguished Brother General Lafayette and his son received the several degrees of the Scottish Rite up to and including the 32°. At some undetermined time and place, the General received the 33°. DeWitt Clinton was the titular head of this body in 1825, also General Grand High Priest of Royal Arch Masons, Grand Master of Knights Templar, and a Past Grand Master of Masons in New York. He had been Governor (1817-1822) and would again be elected in 1825. However, in all the newspaper accounts of Lafayette's trips around New York state, DeWitt Clinton is only mentioned once, when he was in a party which accompanied Lafayette for a short canal boat ride on "Clinton's Ditch."

When Lafayette visited Charleston, South Carolina, some problems of protocol arose. Not only was there unhappy dissension in Masonic circles and among the leaders, the city had been invaded by a Cerneau Scottish Rite group. Now the Knights Templar came to the rescue.

Pleading a lack of time, Lafayette advisedly declined invitations from both the Grand Lodge and the Cerneau Consistory. He did, however, welcome to his quarters a delegation from South Carolina Encampment and the newly formed Lafayette Encampment. In that group, among others, was Moses Holbrook, soon to become Sovereign Grand Commander of the Mother Supreme Council, A.A.S.R. Newspapers and diaries make no further mention of the Knights Templar until June 17, 1825, when Lafayette assisted in the cornerstone laying ceremony at the Bunker Hill Monument, fifty years after the battle was fought.

In the mammoth military, civic, and Masonic procession an estimated 5,000 Masons marched. There were only a few hundred Knights Templar in all New

England, but each of the six states had one or more Commanderies and delegations were there from all. Under leadership of Sir Knight Henry Fowle, Deputy Grand Master, the lines were formed six abreast. Behind standard bearers with lances, on the points of which were white pennants with the names of the New England states; the officers and Sir Knights marched in full dress, whatever that might have been at the time. Led by the Boston Brigade Band, they made a brave sight in serried ranks behind the splendid banners of the Knights Templar and Knights of the Red Cross.

Lafayette was an American citizen by virtue of an Act of Congress, the rights being accorded him and his male descendants. Several states likewise honored him. He had expressed his intention to be buried in American soil, and this was accomplished by shipment of a ton of clay, or "mother earth," taken to France and placed around his coffin when he was interred. At his death in 1834 he was the last surviving general officer of the Continental Army.

Among those generals there were very few who enjoyed the complete and enduring confidence of Washington, but Lafayette was as close as any. It could only have been under the mystic tie that such a friendship was formed and such a connection established and continued.

A full account of Lafayette's Masonic career may be found in Volume II of the Transactions of the American Lodge of Research. The author is Sir Knight Harold V. B. Voorhis, P.C., who also compiled and printed a separate publication on the genealogy of the Lafayette family.
Reprinted from Masonic Americana, 1976, pages 59-61 The General from France...

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