

The Chapel in the Tower

By
Sir Knight Mark A. Tabbert

In their long distinguished history, the Knights Templar have worshipped in many churches and chapels. Yet how many Knights have worshipped in a chapel owned by every Knight in America? Indeed, how many Knights are aware of that chapel high in the tower of the George Washington Masonic Memorial?

The Memorial was conceived, built, and is owned by all Freemasons in America; therefore, it is your Memorial and your Chapel. The Memorial honors the memory of the Father of our Country. It also stands as a perpetual reminder to all Freemasons of his virtues and how we ought to live both as Masons and as citizens. Begun in 1922, its exterior was completed during the Great Depression. The interior spaces began to take shape immediately following World War II, beginning on the first floor with an exhibit from the Shrine in 1946. The Grotto then assumed responsibility for the third floor in 1948.

Most important, and with much fan-fare, Memorial Hall was dedicated by President and Past Grand Master Harry S. Truman when he unveiled the monumental bronze statue of Washington donated by DeMolay International in 1950.

Work in the upper Memorial's tower, however, was prohibited due to a lack of elevators. In 1947, a contract was awarded to the Otis

Elevator Company to design a lift that could operate in the 7.5 degree-angled shaft. The first elevator was installed in the south shaft in 1950 but remained reserved for construction workers only. The second and north elevator was not installed until 1956. With its completion, regular public access was possible from the fourth floor through the observation deck on the ninth floor.



After the Grotto's renovation of the third floor, the Royal Arch Masons undertook the fifth floor. Soon after, the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania sponsored the creation of the Louis A. Watres Library on the sixth floor. The two Scottish Rite Supreme Councils took charge of the fourth floor George Washington Museum.

The Grand Encampment of Knights Templar considered sponsoring the seventh floor in 1954. It had a large floor space but lacked

windows. By the 1955 Triennial Conclave (the same year it established the Eye Foundation), the Grand Encampment decided on the eighth floor. (The General Grand Council Cryptic Masons later renovated the seventh floor.) Although a much smaller floor, as the tower's top tier, the Knights saw a unique opportunity to transform the space into something special with its four walls of windows more than 30 feet high.

The Memorial Association approved the Grand Encampment's request to take charge of the eighth floor in 1955. To fund the renovation, the Grand Encampment requested 15 cents per Knight per Grand Commandery. The first contribution came from the Grand Commandery of Iowa for \$1,487 (\$11,400 in today's dollars).

Unlike the other participating Masonic bodies, the Knights Templar chose not to create a replica ritual space. Instead, under the leadership of Grand Master Walter DeLamater, they created a place of prayer and meditation; a chapel with an atmosphere reflective of the Middle Ages where a Knight aspirant would prepare for service.

With such a vision before them, money was quickly raised and the work began in earnest. The Chapel was decorated with a paved floor, marble altar, wood paneling, wood benches, and seating niches. Two suits of armor, a medieval sword, and other chivalric items completed the furnishings.

The chapel is gloried by four beautiful stained-glass windows. The north window shows Jesus preaching the Sermon on the Mount. The south window shows Jesus heal-

ing the blind (a reference to the Templar Eye Foundation). In the east is the crucifixion of our Lord, and in the west, above the altar, is the ascension of Jesus Christ.

The chapel was completed on April 20, 1957, the Saturday before Easter. Vice President Richard M. Nixon and Secretary of the Army Wilber M. Bruecker joined Grand Master DeLamater and the officers of the Grand Encampment in the dedication and consecration of the chapel to God and to the Craft.

At the Memorial's 1958 annual meeting, Secretary-Treasurer Frederick F. Schondau stated: "It is fitting that the room that suggests prayer and meditation should find a place in the Memorial dedicated to George Washington who prayed at Valley Forge."

For fifty years, generations of visitors, Knights Templar, and the occasional wedding party have found inspiration and comfort in the chapel. Today, a new generation of visitors and Masons tour the Memorial and visit the eighth floor. They are equally impressed with its beauty and want more information on the order. They want to know of the Templars' good works, purposes, history, and regalia.

Is it not the time for us Knights to rededicate ourselves and our history to our chapel? Perhaps it is time for our chapel to tell the story of the order and the countless Sir Knights who dedicated themselves to serve God and the Craft.

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