

Was George Washington a Knight Templar?

by Sir Knight **Mark A. Tabbert**

Director of Collections George Washington Masonic Memorial

Was George Washington a Masonic Knight Templar? Occasionally, a young visitor to the George Washington Masonic Memorial will pose this question. Simply and literally, the answer is "no," but it can become complicated by Royal Arch history and Washington's early military career.

It is a fact that the first recorded evidence of a Royal Arch degree conferral occurred in Fredericksburg Lodge, Virginia, in 1753, only a few months after young Washington was raised to the third degree. It is, therefore, possible that Washington might have received those degrees later in his life. And if the Royal Arch, why could he not have received the Order of the Temple? The first Knights Templar Commandery in Pennsylvania was organized in Philadelphia during Washington's presidency. So the story could go.

Outside the Lodge, young Washington's greatest aspiration was a king's commission in the English army. Had the young Washington distinguished himself during his six years of active military service, he might have been knighted in "The Most Honourable Military Order of the Bath," not the Masonic Order of the Temple!

Such conjecture about Sir George Washington, KGB, disappears when he joins the Rebellion in 1775. Independence from Great Britain in 1783 brought an end to American aristocracy, and the U.S. Constitution established a democratic republic with no monarchy. With such egalitarian aspirations, it becomes highly unlikely that Washington would be a Royal Arch Mason. How could he explain belonging to a Chapter presided over by a High Priest, King, and Scribe? Furthermore, how could Washington accept Knights Templar's spurs, if he had already refused a crown?

That Washington would not be king in the 1780s begs the question how could any American presume to be a knight-let alone a member of an order based on the medieval order of Catholic monks? Yet there existed Commanderies during Washington's life. Within three years of Washington's death, Knights Templar Commanderies at Providence, Rhode Island; Boston; and Newburyport, Massachusetts, formed the first Grand Encampment in 1802.

From these local beginnings and despite the anti-Masonic period and the Civil War, the Knights Templar was the most successful Masonic organization in the 19th century. Rising from an estimated 100 Knights in 1808, there were nearly 200,000 Knights in over 1,200 local Commanderies in 1908.

Such success was largely because America in the 19th century lived in an age of adventures and crusades. From Stephen Decatur on the Barbary Coast to Theodore Roosevelt on San Juan Hill, America was "manifest destiny," abolition, temperance, "rags to riches," muscular Christianity, and the Wild West. The Knights Templar served

two primary needs in those times. First, Knights Templar parades were demonstrative of the Christian piety that marked the Victorian Age. Second, Knights Templar, like many other paramilitary fraternal orders, provided security in an age of labor strikes and riots, social upheaval, and economic misfortunes.

What then separates us in 2008 from the Templars of 1808 or 1908? Simply, it is the machine slaughter of World War I, the brutality of the Great Depression, and the scientific mass murder of World War II. It is the difference between a cavalry charge and a laserguided missile, a melodramatic General MacArthur and a logistical General Eisenhower. It is the difference between 1870s "Onward, Christian Soldiers" and 1970s "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?".

Now that we are in the Digital Age, Victorian piety is gone, but also gone is lifetime employment with one corporation. In this age of instant information and communication, social mobility, and job jumping; is there still hope for the Poor Knights, the virtuous Washington, or even the Widow's Son? Take a good look through the Internet; the popular video games, the hit movies, and the best selling books; and you will see a younger generation obsessed with Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter and National Treasure movies. You will see a popular culture focused on adventure and honor. Lo and behold! The grandsons of 1950s engineers and the sons of 1970s cynics dream of becoming Jedi, Knights of Gondor, members of the Order of the Phoenix, and seekers of the lost Templar treasure. These are the generations who are leading and fighting the war on terror.

These younger men are romantics. Unlike past generations, they are not motivated by piety or conformity but by discipline directed toward honor and sacrifice. They were raised with instant gratification but desire stability. They want the morality of Freemasonry, the chivalry of the Knights Templar, and the virtues of Washington, but they do not want to simply maintain the status quo or play as historic reenactors. They are eager to rejuvenate old traditions while building something uniquely their own.

Across the country this younger generation is beginning to join Freemasonry - in numbers not seen in 40 years. Inspired, in part, by Washington's membership, these young Freemasons are now asking if Washington was also a Knight Templar. Our answer should not simply be "no."

How we greet these Knight aspirants will determine the future of the order. Are we as Sir Knights living testaments of our obligations? Are we leading lives dedicated to God and chivalry? Are we properly trained to reverently confer the Orders? Are we initiating young Freemasons with the finest regalia and polished silver? And are we bestowing on these young Knights a sharpened sword or the same old dusty rules and regulations? Are we indeed building an order ready for a young George Washington to join?

Sir Knight Mark A. Tabbert is the Director of Collections at the George Washington Masonic Memorial, Alexandria, Virginia, and a member of Boston Commandery No. 2, Boston, Massachusetts. He can be contacted at the George Washington Masonic

Memorial at 101 Callahan Drive, Alexandria, VA 22301-2751; or e-mail at: mtabbert@gwmemorial.org

Update: July 21, 2014

Knight Templar Magazine Index - ARCHIVE of ARTICLES

HOME	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------

[Top](#)