



**Robert Enoch Withers**  
**Thirteenth Grand Master**  
**1883-1886**

Twelfth in a series on our Grand Masters  
by George L. Marshall, Jr., PGC

Robert Enoch Withers (September 18, 1821 - September 21, 1907) was an American physician, Confederate military officer, newspaperman, politician, diplomat, and freemason.

He represented Virginia in the United States Senate and served as United States Consul in Hong Kong. He served as the thirteenth grand master of the Grand Encampment during the twenty-second triennium from 1883-1886. He was a distant relative of figures such as George Washington and Robert E Lee, as well as a direct descendant of Nicolas Martiau, founder of Yorktown, Virginia.

He authored a most detailed and interesting autobiography (Source 1) from which much of this article was composed, and this book is highly recommended for an informative and entertaining account of his life and times.

He was born the second child and oldest son of Robert Walter Withers, M.D. (1795-1881) and Susan Dabney Alexander (1799-1882) near Lynchburg in Campbell County, Virginia, on September 18, 1821. Robert W. Withers received his medical training at the University of Pennsylvania and married Susan Alexander on February 26, 1819, in Campbell County. Robert E. Withers attended private elementary schools and in the fall of 1837 was sent to Woodburne Classical School in Pittsylvania County, Virginia, which was a large boarding school for boys and had a well-established reputation. Returning home from Woodburne School in 1839, he followed in his father's footsteps and began to study medicine under his father's instruction in preparation for entrance into the medical department of the University of Virginia. In September of 1840, he successfully matriculated at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville and while there was elected

to the editorial board of the student literary magazine, the Collegian. At that time, there was no time limit required to become a doctor as long as one could pass the required examinations, and so he graduated from the medical department of the University of Virginia at Charlottesville with the degree of Doctor of Medicine in July of 1841.

While in practice for less than a year, he received an appointment as one of the resident physicians at the Baltimore Almshouse Hospital. This institution was an almshouse as well as a hospital, and the drunk and disorderly of Baltimore, unable to pay their fines, were required to "work out" the imposed penalties either on the farm or in some of the shops on the place. After spending nearly a year here, Withers left to return to Campbell County and set up practice as a country doctor.

In his autobiography, Withers admits that his fondness for sport often lured him from his professional duties and gives an account of his hunting and fishing outings and activities. Also, having been influenced by his father's practice of temperance at an early age, during this period he joined the Sons of Temperance, substituting hot coffee for liquor. He also joined a cavalry troop of local militia known as the Brookneal Troop and was elected a lieutenant, and within two years he became its captain. The military skills he acquired while a member of this unit would be used in the future as a line officer in the Confederate Army.



In December of 1845, he was invited by a close friend to serve as a groomsman at the friend's wedding to be held a few days before Christmas in Lynchburg. While there, he met his future wife, Miss Mary Virginia Royall (1827-1901), who was serving as a bridesmaid at the same wedding. After a whirlwind courtship, the two were united in marriage on February 3, 1846. To this union were born twelve children, ten of whom survived to adulthood.

Over the next several years, he continued his practice in the Campbell County Lynchburg area, he and Mary had more children, and he began his Masonic journey. He was raised a Master Mason in Marshall Lodge 39 in Lynchburg on February 1, 1851, and was worshipful master of Mackey Lodge 69 in nearby Rustburg during 1854-57. He was exalted to the degree of Royal Arch Mason in Eureka (now Lynchburg) Royal Arch Chapter 10 in November of 1852 and later joined Euclid Chapter 15 in Danville. He was knighted in De Molay Commandery 4 at Lynchburg on January 25, 1856. At a later period he received the degrees in the Scottish Rite and achieved the 32°. He was later a member of Roman Eagle Lodge 122 in Danville, Virginia, but about 1866, he re-affiliated with Marshall Lodge. About 1855 he also joined and became active in a local Division (Division 159) of the Sons of Temperance, giving speeches and holding office in that organization. About this time he also joined the semi-secret, nativist political faction known as the American Party or "Know-Nothings" as they were more commonly called and became a public advocate and defender of its proposed reforms but did not approve of the use of absolute secrecy with regard to all its operations.

In the summer of 1858, after a visit from his cousin, physician Dr. Edward D. Withers of Danville, Virginia, and owing to the fact that his children had lost their school teacher, Robert Withers moved from Campbell County to Danville, bought a house there, and entered into practice with his cousin. They soon established a thriving and financially rewarding partnership. In 1859, following John Brown's attempted October seizure of the United States Arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, Southern slave owners feared other abolitionists would emulate Brown and attempt to lead slave rebellions. Therefore, the South reorganized the decrepit militia system. These militias, well established by 1861, became a ready made Confederate army, making the South better prepared for the Civil War yet to come. In Danville two militia companies were formed, the Danville Blues and the Danville Greys. Because of his previous militia experience, Robert Withers was offered the captaincy of the Greys, to which he reluctantly assented. A cavalry company was also formed near Danville, and the three companies were formed into a battalion of which he was elected a major. Thus, when the Civil War began and Virginia joined the Confederacy, due to his service and training with infantry and cavalry units, Withers declined a commission in the Medical Department of the Confederate Army and entered the service as a line officer.

In April of 1861, Withers and his battalion were mustered into service at Richmond where his battalion and others were organized into the 18th Virginia Regiment, and Governor Letcher commissioned him a colonel. He took part in numerous battles which space does not permit describing in this article. His autobiography gives a thorough and most remarkable account of his activities as a Confederate officer.

One interesting thing he relates is that while at Manassas, word came to him of a wounded colonel of New York Zouaves lying in a woods, whom he caused to be brought to his camp. The colonel had been shot through the hips and was disabled with a high fever. As Withers then states, "As he bore on his bosom the insignia of high Masonic degree, I determined to give him a better chance for life than he was likely to have in the crowded [Confederate] field hospital at Manassas. So I gave up my tent to him...." He also arranged to have the colonel's regimental surgeon who was a prisoner and also an orderly to attend to him. The bullet was successfully removed, and he stayed in Withers' tent for three weeks of recovery, being fed from his own mess, along with the surgeon and the orderly. Another instance of brotherly love in action during the Civil War.

At the Battle of Gaines's Mill, some times known as the First Battle of Cold Harbor or the Battle of Chickahominy River, which took place on June 27, 1862, Withers was seriously wounded while rallying his regiment. First he was shot through the right arm, then a few minutes later was shot through the right lung, which knocked him off his horse. As he was being assisted off the field to the rear, a third bullet struck him just to the left of the spine, which paralyzed his lower limbs. After reaching the field hospital, where his wounds were deemed mortal, he was sent by ambulance to Richmond while being dosed with brandy and morphine. He was carried to the home of his wife's uncle, and after surgery to remove the bullets in his body, convalesced under the care of his wife and his cousin and former partner, Dr. Edward Withers. These wounds signaled the end of his field duty, and he was appointed to command the Confederate military post and prison at Danville, an administrative position he held until the close of the war. Because of his exemplary and humane conduct in this position, he was one of the few commandants of prisons who was not arrested and imprisoned after Lee's surrender.

After the war, his prospects in Danville were bleak, and upon going on some business to Lynchburg, he met a lawyer friend on his return to the train station who informed him that he and a friend intended to start a third newspaper in the town and asked Withers' opinion. After stating that he didn't think it a good idea, and after further conversation, the lawyer asked him to be the editor. Withers replied he would do so if they could meet his salary needs of \$2500 a year. He then returned to Danville and after a couple of weeks, received a letter and two telegrams accepting his offer. Thus, in December of 1865, Withers sold his house and property in Danville, settled his affairs there, and moved with his family to Lynchburg. The first issue of the Lynchburg Daily and Semi-Weekly News, devoted to the interests of the Conservative Party, made its appearance on January 15, 1866.

In 1868 he was a delegate to the Conservative Party convention in Richmond, where he was nominated for Governor of Virginia by that party but withdrew from the race due to his disgust with political maneuvering and coercion to create and support a "Liberal Republicans" ticket to facilitate the re-admission of Virginia into the Union. In 1870 he became the agent of the University Publishing Company based in New York City, which was seeking to introduce a series of school books into the public schools of Virginia. This job required him to be on or near a railroad for traveling, so he moved his family to Wytheville, Virginia. Because the books to be used were chosen by the County Board of Trustees of the public schools, he travelled extensively throughout the state and secured the adoption of the University series in nearly every county. Due to his success, in 1871 he became general agent and supervisor for the company for the southern states and was kept almost constantly on the road.

He was a presidential elector on the Democratic ticket in 1872. In 1873 he was elected the 11th lieutenant governor of Virginia and was chosen as United States senator by the legislature of that year. He took his seat as a Democrat in the United States Senate on March 4, 1875, and served until March 4, 1881.

He served as the chairman of the Committee on Pensions in the forty-sixth Congress. Withers was an unsuccessful candidate for re-election in 1881, losing to former Civil War general, William Mahone, of the Readjuster Party.

Returning now to his Masonic activity, he was elected grand master of the Grand Lodge, A. F. & A. M., of Virginia in 1871 and re-elected in 1872. In 1871 he was also elected grand high priest of the Grand Chapter of Virginia. He had entered the Grand Commandery of Virginia as a representative from De Molay Commandery 4 in 1856 and was elected grand warder the same year. Because of the Civil War and his activities afterward, he was at last elected grand commander in 1875, serving in that office for three years. He was elected grand senior warden of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar in 1877; in 1880 he was elected deputy grand master; and in 1883 he was elected grand master.

He was appointed by President Grover Cleveland to replace John Mosby, the "Gray Ghost" of the Confederacy, as the United States consul at Hong Kong, China. Here Withers served from 1885- 89 when he resigned. He served for the greater part of the triennium from 1883 to 1886, although for a time, because of his absence from the country, the duties of his office devolved upon the deputy grand master. In September of 1886, the Grand Encampment held its Twenty-third Triennial Conclave at St. Louis, Missouri, and was called to order by Deputy Grand Master Charles Roome. Grand

Master Withers, who had made the journey from his post as United States Consul in Hong Kong to St. Louis in order to attend the Conclave, was after all this sacrifice, prevented by illness (he was afflicted with a severe case of dysentery on the voyage back to the United States) from presiding except for the brief time necessary to induct his successor-elect, Sir Knight Roome, into office.

One incident of Grand Master Withers' administration deserves special mention. It was his absence in China which caused Sir Knight Stephen Berry of Maine to think of him and send him greetings on Christmas Day. This "novel and pleasing episode" is the origin of the present universal custom of pledging the Grand Master at Christmas time.

Between 1883 and 1886, only one state had instituted a Grand Commandery; in this case it was Dakota (now South Dakota), which organized in 1884.



Upon returning from Hong Kong, he went to Virginia and settled in Wytheville where he became president of a banking and insurance company for a short time. In October of 1889, he attended the Grand Encampment Triennial Conclave held in Washington, D.C. After retirement, he lived quietly at home, taking little part in political or other public matters. He did attend national triennial conventions of his church (Episcopal) in 1892 in Baltimore and in 1895 in Minneapolis. In 1896 he and his wife celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary which was attended by family and friends. In 1898 he and his wife attended a church triennial convention in Washington, D.C. and the Triennial Conclave of the Grand Encampment in Pittsburg. The photo above shows Withers at this period of his life.

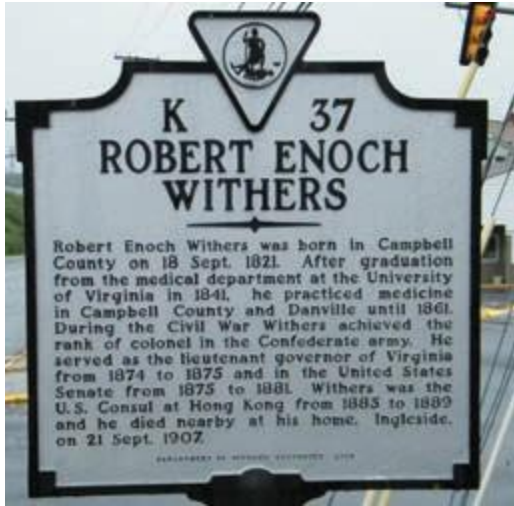
In 1901, shortly after celebrating their 55th wedding anniversary, his beloved wife caught a cold which subsequently developed into bronchitis, and she died on March 2nd. She was buried in the East End Cemetery in Wytheville. In August of 1901, at the urging of several Sir Knights from his home town, he attended the Grand Encampment Triennial Conclave held in Louisville, Kentucky. In October of 1901, he traveled to San Francisco for the triennial convention of the Episcopal Church. In 1902, he began comprising his personal auto- biography, *Memoirs of an Octogenarian*.

Withers died at his home in Wytheville on September 21, 1907. He was buried in the



East End Cemetery beside his wife. His grave marker is shown at right. In 2002, Withers was honored with a historical marker erected by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (Marker Number K-37). The marker is in Wytheville,

Virginia, in Wythe County. It is at the intersection of East Main Street (U.S. 11) and Withers Road and Cassell Road, on the left on East Main Street. A photo of this marker is shown below.



## SOURCES

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