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FREEMASONS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

NEIL L. YORK

A HALF-CENTURY AGO, some historians connected Freemasonry with American independence because a few leaders of the Revolutionary generation—most notably Benjamin Franklin and George Washington—were Freemasons. Bernard Faÿ, a French historian who exposed Masons to the Nazis in occupied France during World War II, made emphatic claims for Freemasonry's importance to eighteenth-century revolutionary movements in France and the American colonies. Faÿ saw Freemasonry as the "main instigator of the intellectual revolution" of that age and "the spiritual father of its political revolutions." According to Faÿ, Freemasons engendered among "a limited but very prominent class of people a feeling of American unity without which American liberty could not have developed—without which there would have been no United States."[1]

Faÿ relied heavily on one Masonic writer in the United States, Sidney Morse, for his conclusions about Revolutionary America. Morse was convinced that "Masonry brought together in secret and trustful conference the patriot leaders" who led their country in a "fight for freedom." Morse saw Freemasons everywhere he looked: they sank the revenue schooner *Gaspee* in 1772; they orchestrated the Boston Tea Party a year and a half later; and they dominated committees of correspondence, committees of safety, provincial conventions, and the Continental Congress. Based only on hearsay, Morse wrote that "Washington, according to La Fayette, it is said, never willingly gave independent command to officers who were not Freemasons." Morse followed in the footsteps of other patriotic Masons. For example, a zealous Masonic orator had eulogized Washington soon after his death:

> A single institution [Masonry] brought men to the level of equality; he wished to understand its principles, he wished to become one of

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[1] Bernard Faÿ, *Revolution and Freemasonry, 1600–1800* (Boston, 1935), 230, 310. Faÿ's postwar trial and life sentence for collaboration are noted in the *New York Times*, 26 November and 6 December 1946.

> its members. His soul expanded with the pure flame of charity; and, I have the pride to believe, that, the first step which he made in the [Masonic] temple of truth, had an influence on the fate of this empire, and on the improvements in the systems of other governments.[2]

For years Masonic writers repeated the sentiments expressed by Washington's enthusiastic Masonic contemporary, albeit without any proof to substantiate their claims. Masonic lodges left skimpy records, and Masons rarely mentioned such ties in their correspondence. More vexing still for the historian, they virtually never linked their Masonic association to their political views. On the contrary, they had vowed not to involve Masonry in political disputes. Forced into performing logical and stylistic gymnastics as a result, one later Mason wrote, "What influence Freemasonry may have had on the life and character of BENJAMIN FRANKLIN can only be conjecture, but that it did influence him and his contemporaries in the great struggle for American independence seems beyond doubt."[3]

Masonic enthusiasts and Faÿ notwithstanding, most historians have had little interest in the subject. Crane Brinton tipped his hat to Masonic involvement in the French Revolution but had nothing to say about Freemasons and the American Revolution. R. R. Palmer concluded that even in France, Masons were politically "innocuous if not ridiculous" and did not act as a group. Bernard Bailyn passed over Freemasons in Revolutionary America altogether. Recently several historians have done detailed studies of eighteenth-century Masonry, but they have assiduously avoided making a causal link between Masonry and the American Revolution.[4]

[2] Sidney Morse, *Freemasonry and the Drums of "Seventy-Five"* (Detroit, 1927), 5; idem, *Freemasonry in the American Revolution* (Washington, D.C., 1924), ix; Simon Chaudron, *Funeral Oration on Brother George Washington* (Philadephia, 1800), 6–7. Morse was careful to point out that "the Masonic Lodge shunned politics" and that lodge politics were "confined to training in leadership, to the cementing of friendly relations and confidence, and to the teaching of the principles of the Craft." Hugo Tatsch was even more cautious. See Hugo Tatsch, *Freemasonry in the Thirteen Colonies* (New York, 1929), 14.

[3] James Brown, *Bi-Centenary of the Birth of Right Worshipful Past Grand Master Brother Benjamin Franklin* (Philadephia, 1906), 181. See Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), 132, 656.

[4] For studies that have largely ignored Masonry, see Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York, 1959), 40–41; R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution* (Princeton, 1959, 1964), 2:53; Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1967). For studies that have included Masonry, see Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London, 1981);

George Washington as a Freemason, 1870

Biblical and Masonic ritual themes abound in this portrait of Washington beneath the shining "G," emblematic of geometry and the presence of God. Washington holds a trowel in one hand, laying the foundation for the capitol, and a gavel of authority in the other. His apron displays the all-seeing eye, the square, and compass. Below the marquis de Lafayette are Jacob's ladder, the Virgin Mary in mourning, and the figure of Time; below Andrew Jackson are the Good Samaritan and the Masonic virtues. The representations at the bottom are the Masonic altar, the casket and spade (death), the evergreen (immortality), and an allusion to the placement of Masonic lodges and heavenly bodies.

Masonic writers themselves have become more circumspect. One succinctly stated, "all patriots were not Freemasons and all Freemasons were not patriots." Another studied 241 "Founding Fathers" and determined that only 68 were Masons, not all of them active members. Still another had been reluctant to write a new biography of George Washington, since he knew that Washington was not very involved in the Brotherhood. Thus, in a sense, the Masonic view and the opinions of professional historians have been reconciled.[5]

The first official history of the Brotherhood was *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* written by James Anderson. First published in 1723 and revised and enlarged in 1738, Anderson's version reigned supreme until the 1880s, when Robert Freke Gould took Anderson to task in his multivolume work. Others have since done the same or deferred to Gould. Contrary to Anderson, who carried Freemasonry back to antiquity, even linking it with the biblical creation story, Gould traced Freemasonry—as distinct from stonemasonry—to the Middle Ages. Later writers have argued that Freemasonry only developed in the seventeenth century, or even later, in Anderson's own lifetime. These newer Freemasons gradually eclipsed older masonic craft guilds, which were absorbed into the new lodges or withered away and disappeared. For Gould and those like him, that was the real history; what Anderson wrote was either his own invention or based on legends, not empirical evidence.[6]

Even so, in the eighteenth century Anderson was widely respected. As an authoritative statement about Masonic ideas, his *Constitutions* served as a

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idem, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in 18th-Century Europe* (New York, 1991); Wayne A. Huss, *The Master Builders*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1986–1989); Steven Conrad Bullock, "The Ancient and Honorable Society: Freemasonry in America, 1730–1830" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1986); idem, "A Pure and Sublime System: The Appeal of Post-Revolutionary Freemasonry," *Journal of the Early Republic* 9 (1989): 359–373; idem, "The Revolutionary Transformation of American Freemasonry, 1752–1792," *William and Mary Quarterly* 57 (1990): 347–369.

[5] Henry Wilson Coil, *A Comprehensive View of Freemasonry* (1954; reprint, Richmond, Va., 1973), 144, 149. Ronald E. Heaton, *Masonic Membership of the Founding Fathers* (Washington, D.C., 1965); Allen E. Roberts, *Washington: Master Mason* (Richmond, Va., 1976); idem, *Freemasonry in American History* (Richmond, Va., 1985).

[6] James Anderson, *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (London, 1723; reprint, Philadelphia, 1734); James Anderson, *The New Book of the Constitutions of the Ancient and Honourable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons* (London, 1738), 7, 12–13, 15. See Robert Freke Gould, *The Concise History of Freemasonry*, rev. ed. (London, 1920). For the emergence of Freemasonry, see Douglas Knoop and G. P. Jones, *The Genesis of Freemasonry* (Manchester, 1947); David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry* (Cambridge, 1988); John J. Robinson, *Born in Blood* (New York, 1989). For a recent critique of Anderson, see John Hamill, *The Craft* (Wellingborough, 1986), 11–27.

handbook for Masonic lodges and members. If eighteenth-century Masons doubted the truth of Anderson's genealogy, they still could have accepted Masonry as embodying universal truths that were both logical and scientific. Anderson remains the best source for Masonic doctrine in Revolutionary America.

Anderson characterized himself as the editor and collator of the *Constitutions*, drawing his information from "ancient Records" and the "faithful TRADITIONS of many Ages." He started the Masonic story with the "Year of the World," 4003 B.C., when God, Supreme Architect of the Universe, created Adam in his own image. With Adam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden the basic skills of Masonry—geometry and the "mechanical arts"—helped reduce humankind's burdens. Adam passed along the craft to his progeny and "since the Fall, we find the Principles of it in the Hearts of his Offspring." Old Testament prophets handed down Masonry from one generation to the next. Through Abraham "God did wisely over-rule" his chosen people "in order to make them good Masons before they possess'd the promis'd land." Under Moses, their "Grand Master," the children of Israel rose as "a whole *Kingdom* of Masons" after fleeing Egypt. The architectural culmination of their achievement came with Solomon's great temple in Jerusalem, which stood for over four hundred years. Some 183,600 masons labored under Hiram Abif, "the most accomplish'd Mason upon earth."[7]

According to Anderson the Israelites were ultimately defeated and scattered and Solomon's temple was destroyed, but Masonry survived because it was "under the immediate Care and Direction of Heaven." Masonry spread throughout the Mediterranean basin and into the hinterlands of northern Europe and India as "this liberal Art" was taught to "*free born* Sons of eminent Persons." In the British Isles the Angles and Saxons became Christians and a "free people" and began to restore the lost skills of Masonry. Prince Edwin, youngest son of King Athelstan, formed the first grand lodge at York in the tenth century. English Masonry was strengthened with the arrival of the Normans, who had preserved Masonic traditions in their culture. Britain thereafter rose to greatness, marked by magnificent edifices that were Mason designed and built, including Westminster Abbey and Saint Paul's Cathedral in London.[8]

Anderson was a transplanted Scot who lived in London and rubbed shoulders with leading Freemasons of his generation, including Frederick, Prince of Wales. Anderson wrote that Freemasonry had been embraced by the great men of history and was at heart moral and ethical. Witness,

[7] Anderson, *Constitutions*; idem, *New Book of the Constitutions*, 7, 12–13, 15.

[8] Anderson, *New Book of the Constitutions*, 18.

Anderson advised, the Tower of Babel and Nebuchadnezzar's foolish efforts to surpass the glory of Solomon's temple. As Anderson explained it, Freemasonry blended mystical and rational, sacred history with the rise of Western civilization, and a message of universal brotherhood with the growing grandeur of Britain.[9]

Writers in the next generation of British Masons added to Anderson. Distinguishing between simple masonry and the ideals of Freemasonry, one Mason wrote:

> Masonry passes and is understood under two denominations: it is operative and speculative. By the former, we allude to the useful rules of architecture, whence a structure derives figure, strength, and beauty, and whence results a due proportion and just correspondence in all its parts. By the latter, we learn to subdue the passions, act upon the square, keep a tongue of good report, maintain secrecy, and practice charity.

Another eighteenth-century Masonic author explained that Masonry "never suffered the liberal arts and sciences to be taught to any but the free-born." If later Masonic writers differed with Anderson over some details, they still maintained his tone and linked Masonry with progress. One Mason rhapsodized, "In the dark periods of antiquity, when literature was in a low state, and the rude manners of our forefathers withheld from them the knowledge we now so amply share, Masonry began to diffuse her influence." The result was beneficial to all: "The mysteries of this science unveiled, arts instantly arose, civilization took place, and the progress of knowledge and philosophy gradually dispelled the gloom of ignorance and barbarism."[10]

In colonial America, prospective Masons had to be nominated for membership, approved unanimously, and, before being exposed to the rituals and secrets of the art, had to agree to abide by the "Charges" set forth in Anderson's *Constitutions*. No Mason could be "a stupid Atheist, nor an irreligious *Libertine*." All members had to be "good and true Men, free-born, and of mature and discreet Age, no Bondmen, no Women, no immoral or scandalous Men, but of good report." Masons were equal as brothers within the lodge, although "Masonry takes no Honour from a Man that he had before." Those of a higher social station often held the

[9] Ibid., 29–36

[10] William Preston, *Illustrations of Masonry*, 2nd ed. (1772; reprint, London, 1775), 14–15, 17–18. Wellins Calcott, *A Candid Disquisition of the Principles and Practices of the Most Ancient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons* (London, 1769; reprint, Boston, 1772), 77. See also William Hutchinson, *The Spirit of Masonry* (London, 1775).

most prestigious Masonic offices, but Masons were to promote charity for all. At the same time they were "to prefer a poor *Brother,* that is a *good Man* and *true,* before any other poor People in the same Circumstances." They were not to discuss religion and politics in the lodge, and they were expected to resolve disputes amicably, bringing suit in court only as a last resort.[11]

Freemasonry was unable to stand above the din of the eighteenth century. Disharmony appeared within Britain's Masonic ranks and led to the founding of a new set of lodges affiliated under a rival grand lodge by 1751. Those with deistic leanings preferred the 1723 edition of Anderson's *Constitutions* (Moderns), while those who were more orthodox Christians looked to the 1738 edition (Ancients).Ancients were obliged to obey Christian precepts regardless of where they lived; Moderns abided by the prevailing religious belief of their homeland. Apparently some who became Ancients resented the power of London's grand lodge and looked to the older grand lodge in York or others that had sprung up by the middle of the eighteenth century. They may have also resented the domination of London and wanted to appeal more to the middle classes when recruiting new members.[12]

Whatever the cause of their differences, the rift between Ancients and Moderns in Britain was not mended until 1813. In retrospect the differences separating them appear to have been minor. Disagreements were between individuals, not disputes over key principles. Ancients and Moderns disagreed about the role of Masonry during antiquity—such as the relative importance of Solomon's temple—but both sides claimed to go back to the beginning of time and defined their raison d'être as a quest to establish moral and ethical principles essential to human happiness and social progress. Ancients were expected to abide by the same general code of conduct in promoting virtue and combating vice as were Moderns. Every Mason, Ancient or Modern, was bound to practice charity and to avoid any reference to politics or religion within the lodge. Their rituals may have varied, but Ancients and Moderns passed members through the same three degrees of apprentice, fellow craft, and master mason. They used the same organization of lodges linked together under a grand lodge with masters, wardens, and other officers to preside over their affairs. They observed the same ceremonial days, such as 24 June to celebrate John

[11] [Anderson], *Constitutions,* 49–50, 55, 56.

[12] Gould, *Concise History,* 242–243; Hamill, *The Craft,* 45–48.

the Baptist as patron saint of masons, and 27 December to commemorate St. John the Evangelist.[13]

By the 1730s, Masonic lodges affiliated with the grand lodge of London had sprung up in North America. Lodges formed there received approval from London after they had been organized, so they were more or less autonomous. Eventually the Modern and Ancient dispute in Britain reached the colonies. For example, some Pennsylvania Moderns turned to Ancient lodges, and Pennsylvania's Modern lodges had all but disappeared by the Revolutionary War. The Ancient versus Modern struggle in Pennsylvania, like that across the Atlantic, may have reflected class divisions, with ambitious mechanics and farmers pitted against merchants and wealthier landowners. However, this can be exaggerated since the divisions that split them did not carry over into the Revolutionary crisis. Members of Ancient and Modern lodges in Pennsylvania were in both patriot and Loyalist ranks.[14]

The situation was different in Massachusetts, where Ancients were much more likely than Moderns to be patriots. Boston provides the best example for claiming Freemasonry's connection to the drive for independence. The Brotherhood made its formal Massachusetts debut on 30 July 1733, when a handful of Masons met at the Bunch of Grapes tavern in Boston. The acting grand master for New England, under a warrant from the grand master of England, formed the grand lodge of St. John's. At least three regular lodges took shape in Boston and over twenty were organized elsewhere in New England, all nominally presided over by Boston's grand lodge of St. John.

Jeremiah Gridley held the office of grand master when, in 1761, the Modern-Ancient rivalry spilled into Boston. That year a new grand lodge of St. Andrew was formed in Boston under a commission from the grand master of Scottish lodges with an Ancient tie. As far as members of St. Andrew's lodge were concerned this action was no infringement on Gridley's authority because his warrant came from London, not Edinburgh, and from a grand master of Moderns, not Ancients.

The Bostonians who founded St. Andrew's had been denied admission to St. John's or the lodges affiliated with it. Nonetheless they extended their hands in a conciliatory gesture and wrote, "the Lodge of St. Andrew being assembled for the purposes of promoting Brotherly Love and Unity

[13] Laurence Dermott, *Ahiman Rezon: Or A Help to all that are, or would be Free and Accepted Masons*, 3d ed. (1756; reprint, London, 1778). The handbook of the Ancients was not all that different from Anderson's *Constitutions*.

[14] Julius F. Sachse, *Old Masonic Lodges of Pennsylvania: Moderns and Ancients, 1730–1800*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1912–13) is an antiquarian's delight, although Sachse showed both the scarcity of records beyond mere membership lists and brief meeting notices, and the relative weakness of some lodges.

have unanimously voted [for] a happy Coalition." St. John's responded that the Scottish grand master had interfered where he did not belong. Some who had organized the new lodge were not accredited Masons, and St. John's considered the new lodge "irregular." St. Andrew's retorted that St. John's attitude was "subversive of the Principles of Masonry."[15]

The grand lodges in Britain did not get involved in the dispute in Massachusetts since they were trying to work out their own problems and did not want to stir the waters. Nor did Massachusetts Ancients and Moderns press matters. Although the rival lodges did not merge until 1792—twenty-one years before British Ancients and Moderns would do the same—they settled into a relatively peaceful coexistence. Lodge members from both sides even bought copies of Wellins Calcott's *Candid Disquisition*, an updated version of Anderson's handbook.[16]

The Revolutionary crisis did not noticeably widen divisions in Massachusetts, although there were more Loyalist members of St. John's and more patriot members of St. Andrew's. Leading Boston radicals—Paul Revere, John Hancock, and William Molineux—attended St. Andrew's lodge where Dr. Joseph Warren had been made lodge master in 1768. The next year Warren was named grand master of a new grand lodge for the Ancients; in the reorganization St. Andrew's became one of the lodges under its jurisdiction. James Otis was one of the few men from St. John's to have spoken or written against imperial policy and by the late 1760s he did so less often—and more and more erratically.[17]

St. Andrew's lodge owned the Green Dragon tavern. "More Revolutionary eggs were hatched in this dragon's nest," quipped Esther Forbes, "than in any other spot in Boston." The North End Caucus, led by Warren, met there, as did the members of St. Andrew's. Some assert that the Boston Tea Party was planned at the Green Dragon and that the men behind it were Freemasons. "This Boston body, like most ancient lodges, was dominated by men active in the revolutionary movement and had a more democratic membership than the older lodge of Boston," proclaimed John Cary, Warren's biographer.

[15] *Proceedings in Masonry: St. John's Grand Lodge, 1733–1792: Massachusetts Grand Lodge, 1769–1792* (Boston, 1895), 102, 105.

[16] Calcott, *Candid Disquisition*, listed over 230 subscribers for the 1775 Boston edition, including men from both Ancient and Modern lodges.

[17] William Tudor, *The Life of James Otis* (Boston, 1823). Tudor, who warned that "mere fragments" survived from Otis' personal life, did not discuss Otis' Freemasonry.

> The official meeting was often preceded or followed by supper and refreshments. Gathering about the fireplace in the long room, they lighted pipes and cemented the bonds of brotherhood with hot punch, port, and madeira.... It was here, more than in the meetings, that talk turned to politics, and to the members of St. Andrew's such talk was congenial indeed.

In tracing Revere's role in the Tea Party, Forbes made a similar connection. She noted that Revere was active in the North End Caucus and St. Andrew's lodge and that both groups were known to have had a hand dumping tea into Boston harbor.[18]

Although Cary's and Forbes' sources were vague, they drew firm conclusions. Cary was convinced that the "Liberty Party" in and around Boston that led the protest against imperial policy was linked to St. Andrew's lodge: "The building of political sentiment among members of this powerful society was the work of years and was closely associated with masonic social activities." According to Cary, St. Andrew's deserved to be included on the same patriotic list as the North End Caucus, the Monday Night Club, and the Sons of Liberty. Nevertheless, Cary also confessed that the "membership and exact role of each of these groups is still obscure." Furthermore, Warren's personal life, including his involvement in those groups and in political agitation before 1775, was difficult to reconstruct because so little survived.[19]

Forbes' picture of Revere is also problematic. Forbes quoted from lodge minutes on the night of the first tea ship's arrival, which stated only that those assembled "adjourned on account of few Brothers present. N. B. Consignees of Tea took the Brethren's time." Records for the night of the Tea Party itself are as terse: "Lodge closed on account of few members present." Forbes assumed the importance of Freemasonry to Revere's politics and referred readers to an earlier biography that emphasized Revere's joining and rise to grand master in 1794, but that study offered no insight as to why Revere became a Mason or what Masonic affiliation meant to him.[20]

Perhaps Cary and Forbes fell into the same inferential trap as Masonic enthusiasts like Sidney Morse. They read too much into a spotty, fragmentary record. By contrast, historian Benjamin Labaree was much more

[18] Esther Forbes, *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In* (1942; reprint, Boston, 1969), 197; John Cary, *Joseph Warren: Physician, Politician, Patriot* (Urbana, 1961), 55, 57.

[19] Cary, *Joseph Warren*, ix, 55.

[20] Forbes, *Paul Revere*, 197; Elbridge Goss, *The Life of Colonel Paul Revere*, (Boston, 1891), 1:121–122, 127; 2:465–495. See also Edith J. Steblecki, *Paul Revere and Masonry* (Boston, 1985).

guarded in his later study of the Tea Party. He observed that many members of the Boston Committee of Correspondence "also belonged to other groups—the North End Caucus, the Long Room Club, and the Grand Lodge of Masons—which *may* have had a role in the planning as well." Reluctant to establish a strong connection, Labaree qualified his conclusion.[21]

The evidence for Masonic involvement in the Boston Tea Party and other Revolutionary events is at best inconclusive. Although Morse believed that members of the Providence Masonic lodge sank the *Gaspee* in June 1772, he had no proof to substantiate his assertion. Moreover, a once commonly held assumption that the Great Seal of the United States reflects Masonic influence, particularly with its all-seeing eye suspended above an incomplete pyramid, has now been challenged. According to the most exhaustive, painstaking account, "it seems likely that the designers of the Great Seal and the Masons took their symbols from parallel sources, and unlikely that seal designers consciously copied Masonic symbols with the intention of incorporating Masonic symbolism into the national coat of arms."[22]

Neither did Freemasonry act as a unique unifying force. Massachusetts Ancients and Moderns finally joined hands at the end of the Revolutionary era but a move during the Revolutionary War to combine all Masons under George Washington as national grand master failed, never to be revived. To this day Masonic lodges in the United States, with their three million or so members—more than anywhere else in the world—are organized under state grand lodges, not a centralized, national organization.[23]

It is doubtful whether Freemasons *qua* Freemasons played a significant role in the American Revolution, even as their members joined the Revolutionary movement or stayed loyal to Britain. Masonry as an institution did not figure in the eventual revolt; even so, the ideas and values of Masons may have played a role, along with other beliefs that historians have traditionally linked to the Revolutionary cause.

Instead of searching for something unique in Freemasonry or focusing on the peculiarities of Masonic doctrine, it might prove more useful to see how certain aspects of Masonry reinforced attitudes that were not peculiar to the Brotherhood. Masonry might have been distinctive, a society unto

[21] Benjamin Woods Labaree, *The Boston Tea Party* (Oxford, 1964), 142, emphasis added.

[22] For the continuing mystery surrounding the fate of the *Gaspee*, see Neil York, "The Uses of Law and the *Gaspee* Affair," *Rhode Island History* (forthcoming). Richard S. Patterson and Richardson Dougall, *The Eagle and the Shield* (Washington, D.C., 1976), 532.

[23] For estimates of American Masonry membership, see Henry Wilson Coil, *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1961), 39; Bobby J. Demott, *Freemasonry in American Culture and Society* (Lanham, Md., 1986).

itself, but it was also part of Anglo-American culture. Perhaps Masonry contributed to the American revolutionary impulse more indirectly. Masonry as an indirect influence offers a middle ground between the extremes of claiming too much and ignoring the subject altogether.[24]

For example, Joseph Warren, a leading Revolutionary and Mason, became a Freemason in 1761 but was not very active until 1765. Warren's Masonic rise to lodge master in 1768 and, a year later, to grand master of the Ancients paralleled his politicization: he emerged simultaneously as a spokesman for the "Liberty Party" decried by Francis Bernard and Thomas Hutchinson. Cary believed there was a connection, claiming that Warren's "activities in this society were closely related to his political interests." Lodge records are only comparatively full because the North End Caucus, Monday Night Club, and even the Boston Sons of Liberty left virtually none. Lodge records say nothing about Revolutionary sympathies or actions. Warren either never committed to paper his reasons for being a Mason or that personal testament has not survived. In short, there is no traceable, direct connection between his Freemasonry and his Revolutionary politics. The same is true of Otis and Revere.[25]

In Warren's case, an indirect approach yields more. In 1775, Warren was slain during the fighting on Breed's Hill and the British dumped his body into a simple grave after the battle. Local patriots exhumed and reinterred the remains in 1776. Perez Morton, master mason and Warren's political ally from earlier years, delivered an address to mark the event. Morton lauded Warren as a virtuous, "matchless Patriot" in his public life and as a "Pattern for Mankind" in his private affairs. "What a bright example he set [as grand master] to live within Compass, and act upon the Square." Of all Warren's associations, Morton averred, "on none did he place so high a Value" as Masonry. Morton did not state that Masonry was the source of Warren's patriotism or assert that Masons had led the protest against imperial policy, much less that Masons had been behind the Boston Tea Party or any other Revolutionary act.[26]

But Morton did link the virtues of Masonry with the virtues of the American cause. He felt that Warren had been more noble in death than General James Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham in 1759 because Wolfe "died

[24] Robert Hieronimus, *America's Sacred Destiny* (Rochester, Vt., 1989).

[25] Cary, *Joseph Warren*, 55.

[26] Perez Morton, *An Oration* (Boston, 1776), 7, 9.

contending for a single Country" while Warren "fell to the Cause of Virtue and Mankind." By paraphrasing Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* to make the war something more than a colonial revolt, Morton implicitly tied Masonry and the American cause together. Morton implored his listeners that only by fighting for their independence would they honor Warren's sacrifice and ensure that a patriot's blood had not been shed in vain.[27]

A few months before his death, Warren delivered the fourth annual Boston Massacre oration and proclaimed that "personal freedom is the natural right of every man; and that property or an exclusive right to dispose of what he has honestly acquired by his own labor, necessarily arises therefrom, are truths which common sense has placed beyond the reach of contradiction." Dozens of patriot orators who were not Masons expounded similarly. Yet perhaps Warren's Masonic tie, with its emphasis on the right of freemen to associate voluntarily, strengthened his attachment to such widely held notions.[28]

Masonry also could have helped convince Warren that the colonists were victims in a plot to undermine their liberties. Like other patriots, Warren viewed British actions as conspiratorial as well as tyrannical and thereby "repugnant to every principle of reason and natural justice." In 1775, he reiterated sentiments that he had expressed three years previously in his first oration, when he had condemned "base" British "designs" and "repeated attacks made upon our freedom." For Warren the Revolutionary American susceptibility to conspiratorial fears may have been underscored by Masonic beliefs. In his eulogy Morton lamented that it was Warren's fate, "like the great Master builder of the Temple of old, to fall by the Hands of Ruffians, and be again raised in Honor and Authority." This was a veiled allusion to an essential part of Masonic ritual: master masons were expected to be able to recite how Hiram Abif, master mason of Solomon's temple, was murdered by three "ruffians"—who may have been unscrupulous colleagues. They wanted to know Hiram's secrets and when he refused to tell them, they killed him and hid the body. Hiram was soon discovered by his friends and reburied with great honor. Every time Warren had passed through lodge rituals he heard this tale of a world filled with conspiracy and corruption.[29]

[27] Ibid., 11.

[28] Joseph Warren, *An Oration* (Boston, 1775), 6.

[29] Ibid., 12–13, 14; Morton, *An Oration*, 8. Since Freemasons in the eighteenth century did not publish the texts of their ceremonies for public consumption, outsiders learned of Hiram's fate, as related in the master mason's ritual, in Samuel Prichard, *Masonry Dissected* (London, 1730), 32–36, and *Jachin and Boaz* (London, 1762; reprint, New York, 1796), 29–33.

Masons pledged to be dutiful citizens who would play no part in such evil doings. "A *Mason* is a peaceable Subject to the Civil Powers, wherever he resides or works," preached Anderson in his *Constitutions*, "and is never to be concern'd in Plots and Conspiracies against the Peace and Welfare of the Nation." Masons had been encouraged, even protected, by rulers over the centuries and they owed fealty to their benefactors.

> So that if a Brother should be a Rebel Against the State, he is not to be countenanc'd in his Rebellion, however he may be pitied as an unhappy Man; and if convicted of no other Crime, though the loyal Brotherhood must and ought to disown his Rebellion, and give no Umbrage or Ground of political Jealousy to the Government for the time being; they cannot expel him from the *Lodge*, and his Relation to it remains indefeasible.[30]

Rebellion was hateful but, taken alone, it was not reason enough to expel a member. Masonic commitment to virtue and benevolence, as well as to loyalty derived from comity and government based on consent, could ultimately have pushed Warren and other Masons into rebellion. Within Masonic lodges the leaders were expected to defer to majority will under the threat of removal as were the grand lodge officers in their dealings with lodges under them. Masonic teaching and protocol did not require unquestioning support of authority inside the lodge or out. "Government, therefore, in some Form or other, must be the Will and Appointment of God," declared one Mason in 1755, so colonists should respect the British constitution and the "just authority" of the king. "The Submission of Individuals must be a most sacred Duty," yet good government "is founded on Consent, and a View to public Good." Resistance to bad government was a last resort, but the "Doctrine of *non-resistance* is now sufficiently exploded, and may it be eternally treated with that sovereign Contempt which it deserves among a wise and virtuous people."[31]

Therefore, when American Revolutionaries eventually fought for independence after first rising to defend their rights under the British constitution, it made perfect sense for Freemasons like Warren to be among

[30] Anderson, *Constitutions*, 48, 49. The "Charges" in Dermott's *Ahiman Rezon* were similar, an illustration of the fact that Ancients and Moderns agreed on most fundamental issues. See also the "short Charge" in Calcott, *Candid Disquisition*, appendix, 190–192.

[31] Smith, *Sermon*, 16–17. Smith edited the first American print of *Ahiman Rezon* in 1783. Though Smith "abridged and digested" it, he kept intact the "Charges" of the original edition.

them. In choosing between loyalty to an empire that required subordination to the Crown and Parliament, on the one hand, or a defense of political autonomy and natural rights, on the other, Masonic doctrine may have helped simplify the choice. For Morton and Warren, Masonry may have strengthened their attachment to a radical Whig political ideology laced with revolutionary undertones. As Morton told his listeners, the American cause and patriotism—like Masonry—were virtuous. Not surprisingly, by the war's end some patriotic Masons even strayed across the line that kept the Brotherhood apolitical, as they linked national independence with the spread of Masonic ideals.[32]

Not every Mason became a Revolutionary, and some became or remained Loyalists. Similarly, not every Anglican espoused Loyalism, nor did every Congregationalist fight for independence. A simple institutional explanation for political affiliation is not enough. Nevertheless, it is worth considering how an institutional association might have affected individuals. Freemasonry appealed to thousands of men in eighteenth-century America and thousands more in Britain. Those who became Masons did so for a variety of reasons, including status enhancement, social mobility, camaraderie, civic-mindedness, the satisfaction of mastering a ritual, or curiosity about the occult. Few Masons recorded why they chose to join. That Freemasonry played a part, however indirectly and inadvertently, in the coming of the American Revolution seems plausible. Among those who became Revolutionaries, Masonry could have heightened their fear of a conspiracy against their liberties. If the Revolutionary generation was concerned with the role of virtue in society, as recent historians have stressed, Masonry could have deepened that concern, as well as a sense of community responsibility and filial obligation among those who joined and led the Revolutionary movement. At the same time, Masonry could also have pushed others into Loyalism—men who had their sensibilities heightened by Masonic involvement but for their own reasons chose the other side of the political contest.

Freemasonry should be included as a variation on the ideological and institutional themes that have caught the attention of recent historians. Yet much remains unknown and unknowable. Historians are obliged to draw inferences from incomplete records, a difficult task made even more difficult when dealing with Freemasonry. Did those Masons who became Revolutionaries—or Loyalists—do so because they were already inclined, before they entered the Brotherhood, to think and act a certain way? Or

[32] See, for example, James M. Varnum, *An Oration* (Providence, n.d.), delivered on 27 December 1782 to Masons assembled in Providence, Rhode Island.

did their Masonic association accentuate tendencies that would otherwise have lain dormant? Historians can infer and they can surmise, but they may not be able to explain fully the influence of Freemasonry.