

NV Grand Lodge Short Lecture Series

GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THE U.S. CAPITOL CORNERSTONE

Researched by R. Montana Williams, PM

This month our lecture covers George Washington and his role in laying the cornerstone during construction of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, DC. The cornerstone was laid on Wednesday, September 18, 1793, during the first large public event staged in the federal city. A Georgetown newspaper accounted the event, citing a rather large procession of Maryland and Virginia masons led by George Washington marched from President's Square in Washington DC until they reached the location of the capital. Once there they formed a circle around President George Washington, who, wearing the Masonic apron (made for him by the wife of his fellow American Revolution General Lafayette), was served as one of the honorary leaders over the ceremonies.



A silver plaque, fashioned by Georgetown silversmith Caleb Bentley, was handed to Washington, who stepped into the foundation trench and placed the plaque, whereupon the cornerstone was lowered. The plaque was inscribed the following: *This South East corner stone, of the Capitol of the United States of America in the City of Washington, was laid on the 18th day of September, in the thirteenth year*

of American Independence, in the first year of the second term of the Presidency of George Washington, whose virtues in the civil administration of his country have been as conspicuous and beneficial, also his military valor and prudence have been useful in establishing liberties, this is place here in the year of Masonry 5793, by the Grand Lodge of Maryland and Lodge 22, from Alexandria, Virginia.

Washington accompanied the Most Worshipful Joseph Clark, Grand Master of Mason in Maryland and by three Worshipful Masters who carried corn, wine, and oil, then struck the stone three times with a gavel, as prescribed by Masonic custom. Washington exited the trench to ritual chanting by the assembled Masons and a 15-gun salute (one gun for each U.S. state) from the Alexandria Volunteer Artillery. Most Worshipful Clark then delivered a short invocation, after which a 500 pounds (230 kg) ox was slaughtered and roasted. Though some anti-masons would

later deny the event as ever occurring, it was document and witness by many observers and reporters.

The Missing Cornerstone

Today, we do not know exactly which southeast corner is being described by report accounts of the event, whether that meant the southeast corner of the Senate wing, the first section of the building to be completed, or the southeast corner of the whole building as intended, which would locate it over on the House side. More than two centuries later, the Architect of the Capitol is still searching for that cornerstone. Metal detectors have failed to locate the silver plate.

Regardless of where the cornerstone may be found, the significance of masonry's role in America, was apparent in the personal interest that George Washington and other federal leaders took in this building and proclaiming such an event to all, and they were conscious of creating a republic amid a world of monarchies, and they turned to the ancient Roman republic as a model.

In addition, the federal leadership renamed Jenkins Hill as Capitoline Hill—soon shortened to Capitol Hill. On the draft plans for the city, Thomas Jefferson also crossed out “Congress Hall”—as the meeting place for Congress was called in Philadelphia—and wrote “Capitol” instead. At the time, the federal government was situated in Philadelphia, a city of brick, but Washington wanted a classical style for the new capital city that would be named for him, with buildings constructed in stone.

REFERENCES

Alexandria Gazette. (1793, Sep 25). Laying of the Cornerstone of the Capitol. Washington, D.C.:

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Architect of the Capitol. N.D.) The First Cornerstone. Retrieved from <https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/buildings-grounds/capitol-building/first-cornerstone>.