

Masons Came to Pittsboro Early

by Fred J. Vatter

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There is a lot of local history preserved in objects, photos, books, and writings stored away in attics and closets of our good citizens. When shared with others, these items often reveal fascinating stories about life and events in our county, state and nation in times gone by.

This is exactly what happened on January 3, 2006 when the Chatham County Historical Association was presented with a Masonic apron that was once in the possession of Thomas Henry Foushee. It was offered by Nancy Simard, a great, great-granddaughter of Thomas Henry Foushee, at the suggestion of Roger B. Foushee, a family member and Durham historian. The Foushee homestead was a few miles south of Bynum in the area of Hamlets Chapel Road and Moore Mountain, but is no longer standing.

The ornate apron is believed to be the Master's apron from the now defunct Taylor Lodge No. 144 at Mt. Pleasant inasmuch as Thomas Henry Foushee would have been buried in his plain white apron in accordance with Masonic tradition. The Taylor Lodge stood where the Mt. Pleasant Methodist Church cemetery is located in North Chatham. Mr. J. N. Mann was senior warden of Taylor Lodge. Thomas Henry Foushee married Miss Kerenhappuch (Happy) Mann in 1852 which may explain how the apron came into the Foushee family.

The donated apron has several stains on its reverse side. In 1984 Grace Harris, another family member who had the apron in safekeeping at that time, related an interesting story about the stains to *The Durham Morning Herald* (7/27/84). Family tradition claims that during or just after the Civil War, a group of foraging soldiers from General Sherman's army approached the family homestead. Knowing that there were numerous Masons both north and south of the Mason-Dixon Line, family members waved the apron from their front porch in the hope of preventing the destruction of their house. A member of the troop, who had a bleeding hand wound, took the banner to examine it, staining it with his blood. Fortunately, the leaders of the troop were Masons and out of respect for the banner did not take anything from the house.

The "Encyclopedia of Southern Culture" indicates that Freemasonry "preaches the universal virtues of friendship, morality, truth, charity and prudence. It does not permit discussions of religion and politics within its temples. Consequently it has surmounted many difficulties associated with those topics, even during the period of American fratricide strife in the 1860s."

Freemasonry came to America in the colonial era, with provincial Grand Lodges attached to mother lodges in England and Scotland. The first provincial Grand Lodge was established in Virginia in 1729 and a local lodge was established in Wilmington, N.C. in 1755. Provincial Grand Lodges became independent of their English and Scots mother lodges after the Revolution. Grand Lodges in each state had authority over local

lodges in their own state, but newly formed states beyond the Atlantic seaboard could have daughter lodges established by existing Grand Lodges, so that Grand Lodges of North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and Georgia helped spread Freemasonry throughout the South.

Early prominent Masons included George Washington who used a Masonic Bible at his inauguration and a Masonic trowel to lay the Capitol's cornerstone and Chief Justice John Marshall. Over the years the Freemasonry order included brothers from many prominent Chatham families, including Meroney, Foushee, Hanks, Sugg, Riddle, London, Merritt, McClenahan, Reves, Brooks, Mann, Eubanks, Manly, McIver, Oldham, Dunlap, Vestal, Barbee, Womble, Moring, Lane, Waddell and Griffin.

In November 1788 Independence Lodge (1788-1799) was the first organized in Pittsborough. Patrick St. Lawrence, whose yellow home still stands on South Street, eventually became a Mark Mason in that lodge. Members of this lodge participated in the cornerstone laying at Old East Building on the UNC campus. Social Lodge No. 46 (1804-1812) and Columbus Lodge 102 (1837-1878 and 1891 to date) were the two other lodges founded in Pittsborough, and Columbus is active to date. The Columbus Lodge's earliest section was built by Martin Hanks, who also designed St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church. The building entry apparently faced east according to Masonic tradition until 1849, when an expansion and the addition of four massive square columns supporting an overhang moved the door to the south. Its building still stands on East Street (Business Rt. 64) and is on the National Register of Historic Places. The cost of its construction was apparently burdensome but minutes indicate that in August 1845 "Brother Foushee" loaned the Lodge the balance of the money needed to pay off the building debt. The upper floor was kept strictly private for Masonic functions, but the lower room in the building was occasionally rented out for church services, a school room, a photo studio, plays and concerts. A group of lawyers who gathered in Charles Manley's little law office to exchange banter after business hours, rented out the first floor of the Lodge to present plays during Court Week, when the town had many visitors.

A number of other lodges were formed in Chatham, some of which went out of existence or merged with neighboring units. Mt. Vernon Lodge, now located in Bonlee, had absorbed Bonlee Lodge which had previously consolidated with Flat Creek Lodge. Catherine Sweet Babington, associated with Mt. Vernon Lodge in the 1860's, was the only woman in the United States to become a Blue Lodge Mason. As a young girl she used to hide in a lodge room near her grandfather's home in Kentucky. Through her eavesdropping, Catherine learned the catechism of the first three degrees of Masonry. The lodge members decided the only thing that could be done was to obligate her, the regular way, and risk the consequences. She never again was in a Masonic Lodge when it was at work, but she and her husband moved to Ore Hill in Chatham, and he became master of the Mt. Vernon Lodge. Mrs. Babington apparently honored her obligations to uphold her Masonic confidentiality.

Fred J. Vatter is a past president of the Chatham Historical Society, an organization for which he has also served as a board member and museum curator.