

History as the Inspiration to the Future

Actions of Patriots

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This paper is based on a presentation that RW Gary Burgess asked me to give on October 14th, 2008 at his District Meeting in Bennington. He initially wanted me to take 10 minutes to explain the Sword of Bunker Hill, which would have taken all of two minutes. So, I chose to broaden my talk to give what I felt was the importance of history as an inspiration to us as citizens and Masons.

Most of us underestimate the importance of history in our lives and how much it affects the actions of society and governments around the world. History is as old as human beings themselves since the days when the cavemen hunters would sit around the camp fire to regale each other of tall tales about their exploits in hunting the prehistoric game of their time. This was the start of oral history that not only explained the evolution of early man but also gave birth to our myths and legends. History explains where we came from, and in the case of the United States it explains how our ideals and principles as a nation were formed, inspiring future generations to perform acts of patriotism that will insure the future of our democracy.

Traditions are passed on to us from our ancestors, and reflect the heritage they provided for us because of their struggles, and the requirement we have to be stewards of what they have passed on to us. History tells us how this has come about and gives us the reasons why we must contribute to the continuity of what was started before us.

To me it is like what Abraham Lincoln once said, "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Many of us have studied Homer's Iliad and the siege of Troy in high school or maybe college. However, before Homer wrote his epic poem the story had been passed to him orally as a part of Greek folklore. For many years the story recounted by Homer was considered just a legend until Heinrich Schliemann discovered the ruins of the city of Troy on the coast of Turkey. The truth is most history is oral history until someone takes the time to write it down, and then the historian comes along to study it further in an effort to make sure it is recorded accurately and can also be authenticated.

For many of us our family history is passed on to us orally at family social gatherings or reunions as different members recall special highlights of the family chronicles that they may have experienced or were communicated to them by their parents who received family stories from their parents before them.

My Great Great Great Grandfather on my father's side was Azariah Wright, who lived in Westminster, Vermont in the 1700s. He was a farmer and also owned a saw mill. He had been a Captain in the Westminster militia and was a veteran of the French and Indian War.

In my family story he took to taking his rifle to church, supposedly to protect the congregation from errant Indians or wandering bears. However, because the minister was a Tory and subject to praising the Crown in his sermons, Azariah would make his rifle apparent to the minister in an effort to discourage him from pursuing this topic.

The concept of oral history can be imparted during the mentoring of candidates for the degrees of masonry when explaining to the candidate the origins of the craft and its ritual among medieval stonemasons.

Once when talking to Bro. Mike Hebert about his experiences as a Marine he mentioned that as part of the training he went through they were given lectures on the origins of the Corps and the Marines in history that were its heroes. This provided inspiration to the young "boots" to live up to the ideals of the Marines. Incidentally, the first officer to be commissioned in

the United States Marine Corps in 1775 was Samuel Nichols a Freemason, who later served as Commandant.

As Freemasons as well as Vermonters we may not all be cognizant of the impact Vermont has had on the rest of the nation. When heading to Canton, NY to visit our daughter at St. Lawrence University, we would travel over Rt. 11 that runs north of the Adirondacks and parallel to the St. Lawrence River. We discovered, when reading brochures found at information centers in towns along the route, that many of the towns on Route 11 were established by Vermonters heading west in the 1800s.

When I was serving as National Vice President of the US Junior Chamber of Commerce (Jaycees) I discovered when visiting the States of Indiana, Illinois and Ohio that many of the towns, particularly in the northern part of those states, had been founded by Vermonters. Alonzo Taft who had been born in Townshend, Vermont moved to Ohio after he graduated from Yale. He not only served as a Judge, but was a US Attorney General and Secretary of War. During the course of his career he became a Freemason and fathered future President and Supreme Court Chief Justice William Howard Taft. President Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio's father was from Vermont and had owned the Hayes Tavern and Inn in West Brattleboro. Wild Bill Hickock's forbears came from Arlington, Vermont.

An ancestral cousin of my wife's Stephen A. Douglas was born in Brandon, Vermont and spent his life there to his mid teens before going to Illinois where he made his name in politics. As a Freemason he served as Grand Orator for the Grand Lodge of Illinois.

In Howard Coffin's book, "Full Duty" about Vermont's involvement in the Civil War he pointed out how each village in Vermont continued to have town militias from the Revolution to the time of the Civil War, and the men who went to war from Vermont were already well drilled, as well as being crack shots. Vermonters were considered formidable troops by their Confederate adversaries.

Fairground Road where Brattleboro Union High School now exists was once the county fairgrounds, but before then it was military camp ground where Vermonters would go from around the state to be mustered in and prepared to join the various Vermont regiments that would be going south to fight. Once trained the Vermont soldiers would march down Canal Street to the railroad station to get on the train that would take them to Washington. During the four years of war Columbian Lodge, that existed in the town before Brattleboro Lodge, would receive requests from various other lodges around Vermont asking them to present the degrees of masonry to candidates or Brothers who had not finished and who were encamped at the south of town.

Vermont has the dubious distinction of being the location of the northern most military incident of the Civil War when a contingent of Confederates came in from Canada to raid banks in St. Albans.

While the Civil War occurred 144 years ago, only 90 years before then the American Revolution took place.

While the Battle of Saratoga is considered by historians to be the turning point of the Revolution, and the victory there over the British encouraged the alliance with France that helped to bring victory to the colonists, it was the Battle of Bennington that helped to lay the ground for the victory at Saratoga. Two thousand American troops made up of both New Hampshire men and Vermont militia were commanded by General John Stark and Colonel Seth Warner engaged 1200 Prussians, Canadians and Indians at Walloomsac, New York under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Friedrich Baum. The battle caused Bourgoyne's troops at Saratoga to be reduced by a 1000 men. It discouraged the Indian contingents in his army to give up their support, as well as depriving him of the supplies he sent Baum and his men to Bennington to obtain.

Consistent with the influence Vermont has had on history it was a Vermonter and Freemason who started the Order of the Sword of Bunker Hill. His name was Frank Taylor who was born in Middletown, Vermont on May 19th 1878, later dying in Saratoga, New York on July 21, 1949. As a young man he moved to Oregon, Illinois where he rose through the ranks as a teacher to serve

as Superintendent of Schools there. He became a member of Oregon Lodge #420 A F & A M on March 11 1908. He was member of the York Rite and was later knighted in Vermont. Although he lived in Illinois he would vacation every summer in Vermont. He later retired back to Vermont in 1942 where he affiliated with a lodge there. Inspired by the poem "The Sword of Bunker Hill," which was used as a camp song by Union soldiers during the Civil War, he created the order of the Sword of Bunker Hill in 1912.

The purpose of the order is to promote the interest of Masonry by encouraging a more regular attendance at its meetings; to perpetuate the principles of American Liberty; to instill into the minds of each generation the sacrifices our Masonic forefathers made when forming our republic; To inspire patriotism among the members of the order, as well as good clean fun in its fellowship among the members; To support Masonic Charities, especially the youth programs of the International Order of Rainbow for Girls and the Order of DeMolay for boys.

The poem the "Sword of Bunker Hill" pays homage to the hero of the Battle of Bunker Hill, Dr. Joseph Warren.

THE SWORD
OF
BUNKER-HILL.

He lay upon his dying bed,
His eye was growing dim,
When with a feeble voice he called
His weeping son to him:
--Weep not, my boy, the veteran said,
I bow to Heaven's high will,
But quickly from yon antlers bring
The sword of Bunker Hill.--

Repeat

The sword was brought, the soldier's eye
Lit with a sudden flame;
And as he grasped the ancient blade,
He murmured Warren's name;
Then said: -- My boy, I leave you gold,

But what is richer still:
I leave you, mark me, mark me, now,
The Sword of Bunker Hill.--

Repeat.

--'Twas on that dread, immortal day,
I dared the Briton's band,
A Captain raised this blade on me,
I tore it from his hand:
And while the glorious battle raged,
It lightened Freedom's will;
For, boy, the God of Freedom blessed
The Sword of Bunker Hill.--

Repeat

--Oh! keep the sword...--his accents broke,
A smile, and he was dead...
But his wrinkled hand still grasped the blade,
Upon that dying bed.
The son remains, the sword remains,
Its glory growing still,
And twenty millions bless the sire
And Sword of Bunker Hill.

Repeat.

He was the son of a wealthy Massachusetts Farmer who graduated from Harvard where he studied to be a physician. He was raised a Master Mason in St. Andrews Lodge in 1761 and later became the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of the Ancients in Massachusetts. Under that title he visited other Grand Lodges in the colonies, as well as the military lodges of the different British regiments stationed here. In that way he became familiar with their complement.

Dr. Warren was a member of the Sons of Liberty along with men like Paul Revere, John Hancock, and Samuel Adams, two of whom were Freemasons. In serving that organization he was the Chairman of the Committee of Correspondence, which was

responsible for keeping in touch with other similar groups throughout the colonies.

He also conceived the idea of the midnight ride that sent Paul Revere and William Dawes to every middlesex, county and farm to alert the militia that the "Red Coats" were coming. With William Heath he led the colonial militia at Lexington and Concord and chased the red coats back to Boston, eventually setting up the siege of Boston that surrounded the British forces there.

During the course of these events Warren was waiting to hear word from the Provincial Congress if he would be receiving a commission as a Major General in charge of the Massachusetts militia.

Upon receiving word that colonial troops were gathered at Breed's Hill, north of Boston, to defend that position against British forces, he rushed to join them. After his arrival General Israel Putnam and Col. William Prescott offered him command. Because he had not received official word about his commission yet he declined and instead chose to stand with the men in the front line who knew full well who he was and did not want to let him down and would do everything possible to hold their position.

After two assaults by the British the colonists had suffered close to 400 casualties, but the British had over 1200 casualties at the hands of the colonials. However, the colonial militia would not be able to withstand another attack as their ammunition was almost gone. In conference between Putnam, Prescott, and Warren it was agreed that they would withdraw from the hill that Warren and his men would cover the retreat during the next attack.

By this time the commander of the British forces had recognized Warren as being one of the prominent leaders of the American rebellion, and at the outset of the next attack assigned a sniper to take Warren out. During the attack the sniper found his mark and Warren fell dead.

It was a tragic loss for the Americans of so fine and outstanding leader. Six days after Warren's death word was received that he was granted his commission as a general in the Massachusetts militia. Three days before his death he celebrated his 34th birthday. As you can see, he was a young Mason!