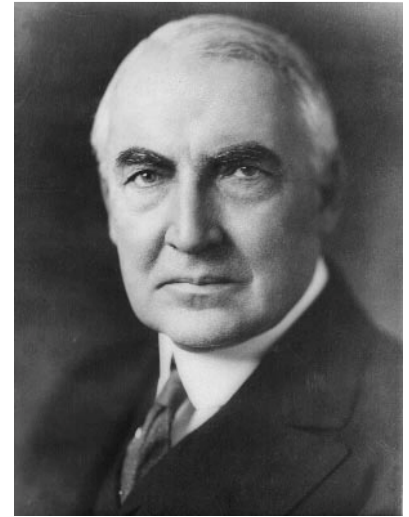


Brother, President Warren G. Harding

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Fourteen presidents have been Master Masons. The first and most famous Mason in America was, of course, our founding father, George Washington. The last was President Gerald R. Ford. In between, there have been some great Masonic Presidents and, regrettably, there have been some Masonic Presidents that have been rather lackluster.

With so many well known and interesting presidents who have received the light, one may ask, why Warren G. Harding? President Harding was one of our Masonic presidents who, while president and for a period after his death, was hailed as one of our greatest presidents. Unfortunately a different President Harding emerged after his death and his administration is now considered a failure, replete with scandals, infidelity and corruption. He also had an interesting Masonic career, not the least of which includes the last three days of his life.

Warren Gamaliel Harding was born on November 2, 1865 in the family farmhouse in Blooming Grove, Ohio. Harding was very bright as a young boy, entering his first oratorical contest at age 4. He completed his studies in small rural schools and then entered Ohio Central College in Iberia at the tender age of 14. Calling on his love of words and his oratorical skills, he excelled in debate and writing. Harding graduated from the Ohio Central College in 1882 at the age of 17.

Upon graduation Harding did not know what he wanted to do with his life and, having few options, he became a teacher. He taught grade school in a small one room school house just north of Marion. He hated it. He only taught for one term and was quoted as saying *“How often it is that ones most arduous toils are without appreciation! I will never teach again without better wages and advanced school.”*

Harding was an excellent musician and desperate to make some money, he formed a band, where he played the alto horn. The Marion Citizens Band performed locally and around the state of Ohio, gaining some notoriety. When not performing, he was an insurance salesman, selling casualty insurance.

In 1884 Harding had saved just enough money and purchased a small newspaper in Marion called the Marion Star. He would own this newspaper for 39 years.

As the newspaper's editor, Harding attended the GOP Convention in June of 1884. While at the convention he rubbed elbows with the likes of President Chester Arthur and up-and-coming politician Theodore Roosevelt. But the most significant event that occurred while at the convention was that Warren G. Harding saw up close the pageantry, debate, passion and conflict that happen when choosing a new president - and he liked it.

On July 8, 1891, Harding married Florence "Flossie" Kling in Marion, Ohio. Flossie's father, a very prominent and popular businessman in Marion, hated Harding with such a passion that he actually began a rumor that Harding was part Negro. Harding had a dark complexion, but there was no proof that any of Harding's relatives were African-American. This rumor, however, would plague him right up to his election as President of the United States, and as it turns out, would have a profound impact on Harding's Masonic career.

In 1899 Harding was elected to the Ohio State Senate. It was during his second year as an Ohio State Senator that Harding began what he hoped to be a long and successful Masonic career. No official record exists as to why Harding was interested in becoming a Mason. However, one does not have to look very far to discover that he was friends with, and campaigned for, Brother William McKinley. McKinley was from Ohio and during his campaign for President in 1896 enlisted Harding to campaign for him around the state. President McKinley was an active Mason while in the White House, and I am sure this had some affect on the young politician from Ohio.

In January 1901 Harding petitioned Marion Lodge #70 in Marion, Ohio. He was blackballed on the first ballot. There are two historically documented versions of why he was blackballed. The first is that the "negro" rumor had once again raised its ugly head. Harding had been fighting this rumor almost constantly since 1891 and had not been able to shake it. Harding's father-in-law, who was not a Mason, made sure that the other community members, who were Masons, were aware of Harding's rumored heritage. The second, an even a bigger black-eye on our Fraternity was that Ohio, especially Marion, was solidly democratic. Unfortunately, some of the very influential Brothers in the Lodge did the unthinkable and brought politics into the Lodge room. Harding was blackballed because he was a republican.

The Grand Lodge of Ohio regulations at the time allowed a blackballed candidate to resubmit his petition every thirty days and Harding did in fact re-submit his petition several times. Finally, in May, 1901, the initial objections had either been settled, or, as is

more likely, the objectors were absent from the meeting. In either case, he was approved, and on June 28 Harding was initiated an Entered Apprentice, but his advancement to that of a Fellow Craft was not to be. The Brothers of the Lodge again objected to his membership, so Harding abandoned his journey through the Craft, and continued his focus on politics. In 1904 our young Entered Apprentice was elected as Lieutenant Governor of Ohio.

In 1905 Harding resigned from the Lieutenant Governorship and withdrew from political life because of his wife's ill health. It was at this time that Harding began an affair with his friend Carrie Phillips. Their clandestine relationship lasted for 15 years and was kept a complete secret. It was only after Harding's death in 1923 that the affair became public.

In 1911 he was once again thrust into the limelight when President William Howard Taft asked Harding to nominate him at the GOP convention in Chicago. Harding became so well known after that speech that he was convinced to run for an open United States Senate seat in 1914. Harding was easily elected to the United States Senate, and although his term in the Senate was lackluster, he was asked to be the key-note speaker at the Republican National Convention in Chicago in 1916. The speech given by Harding during the convention made him so popular that people began talking about him running for president in 1920, which he did.

Harding's campaign to be nominated president, and the nomination itself, was nothing short of chaotic. He participated in only three primaries, and came in last place in two of them, winning only his home state of Ohio. During the Republic National Convention in June Harding was never seriously considered a candidate. Only after the top three candidates could not garner enough votes for the nomination did Harding's name get brought up. It took four days, ten ballots, and some very famous back room dealings in smoky hotel rooms, before Harding finally received enough votes to get nominated.

Harding's campaign strategy was simple. He stayed in Marion, Ohio and campaigned from his front porch, literally. Between July and September more than 600,000 people came to Marion to hear Harding speak from his front porch. It was during this period that Harding finally decided to continue his Masonic career. The persistent rumor of Harding's heritage was finally put to rest. His father-in-law was long dead, and every newspaper in the country refused to print a single word about the outlandish accusation. Harding, as the presidential nominee, probably squelched any democratic backlash as well. Also, Harding's personal secretary, George Christian, was a Master Mason. He was very influential with Harding and undoubtedly pressed Harding to finish his Masonic journey.

On Friday, August 13, 1920, 19 years, one month and 16 days after becoming an Entered Apprentice, Harding was passed to the degree of a Fellow Craft. Just two weeks later, on Friday, August 27, he was raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason. Harding is only the second President to become a Master Mason while running for the presidency.

On November 2, 1920, Harding's 55th birthday, he was elected the 29th President of the United States by a startling margin, garnering more than 7 million more votes than his democratic challenger. Two important firsts occurred during this election. Harding was the first sitting United States Senator to be elected president, and secondly, his was the first election where women could vote. Flossie Harding took advantage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution ratified in August and became the first wife to ever vote for her husband for president.

Having been elected president, Harding began a very busy Masonic schedule. On January 11th and 13th, Brother Harding received the degrees and became a Royal Arch Mason of Marion Chapter #62. Later in January of 1921, he had his 32nd degree conferred in the Valley of Columbus. On September 22, 1922 Harding was elected to receive his 33rd degree, the only sitting President to ever receive such an honor. Unfortunately, he could not attend the Supreme Council session in 1922 to receive the honor because of his wife's illness. Harding died before the 1923 session.

On January 7, 1921, the Aladdin Temple of the Shrine of Columbus, Ohio made Harding a Noble, which made Harding the first President to become a Shriner. And finally on March 1, just three days before his inauguration, Companion Harding received his degrees for the Knights Templar in Marion Commandery #36 and was knighted Sir Knight Warren G. Harding.

On his inauguration day President-elect Harding took the oath of office for President on the same Bible as was used by Brother George Washington when he took his oath of office. This Bible is the alter Bible for St. Johns Lodge #1 in New York City. Harding was also the first president in history to ride to his inauguration in an automobile.

Harding's presidency was deemed successful at the time. He accomplished many of his campaign promises, and never had any controversy or adversity until the end of his presidency. Some of the more notable highlights from his presidency include his opening the grounds of the White House to the public, passing strict new immigration laws, creating the General Accounting Office and the Bureau of the Budget, vetoing a very

popular Veterans bonus bill, and negotiating with the hugely powerful steel industry to end the 12 hour, seven day a week work days (Steel workers would now work 6 days a week for 8 hours per day). He also oversaw major disarmament treaties with many European countries. Harding made several nominations to the Supreme Court, one of which is historically significant. Only one time in this nation's history has an ex-president been nominated to the Supreme Court, and that occurred when Harding nominated President William Howard Taft to be the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. He was approved and is considered to be one of the nation's best chief Justices.

Also, one of our nation's most enduring symbols was erected during Harding's presidency. On November 11, 1921, then known as Armistices Day, (today its known as Veterans Day), President Harding officiated at the interment ceremonies in Arlington National Cemetery for an Unknown Soldier. The soldier, "Known but to God", as the inscription reads, was from WWI and laid to rest in a white marble sarcophagus in the plaza of the new Memorial Amphitheater. The marble for the Tomb of the Unknowns was furnished by the Vermont Marble Company of Danby, VT.

While president, Harding took every opportunity to speak for Masonry and attend Lodge meetings when he could. On May 9, 1921, two months after taking office, Harding reviewed a Shriner's parade in Washington DC and afterwards gave a wonderful speech. In August of that same year he officiated at the laying of the cornerstone for the new Masonic Temple in Birmingham, Alabama.

In March of 1923, while convalescing in Florida, he visited the Scottish Rite Bodies of St. Augustine, Florida. Near the end of that trip, Harding became very ill and his doctors diagnosed him with the flu. Years later medical experts believe that Harding had been misdiagnosed. Instead of having the flu, they believe he experienced a mild heart attack.

In the summer of 1923, Harding experienced both the highest highs and the lowest lows of his presidency. He was about to embark on an historical trip that would take him across the country and then to Alaska, where he would be the very first president to visit that territory. For Harding, it was the trip of a lifetime, and it would certainly ensure his re-election in 1924. However, it was just about this time that the conspiracies and corruptions of Harding's administration began to surface.

First to appear was the fleecing of the Veterans Bureau by its head, Charles Forbes. While Forbes was Director of the newly formed Veterans Bureau (now known as the Veterans Administration) he started selling tons of supplies left over from WWI to private buyers and pocketing the money. An investigation in 1924 uncovered that through theft, bribery, and corrupt contracts with VA Hospital contractors, Forbes had looted

more than 200 million dollars from the Veterans Bureau over a three year period. In today's currency this would be equivalent to more than 2 billion dollars! He was indicted for bribery and corruption in 1925 and sentenced to two years in the Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary.

During the early days of the summer of 1923, the very first whiffs of what would become the country's biggest scandal, before Watergate, were just beginning to surface. It would be known as the Teapot Dome Scandal and, in the years following Harding's death, would be as captivating to the country as Watergate was in the 1970's. Teapot Dome was an oil field located in Wyoming which was leased to private oil companies between 1921 and 1923 by Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall. When a Senate investigation looked into the leasing of the Teapot Dome oil fields, it was discovered that Secretary Fall had accepted several interest free loans from the CEO's of oil companies totaling more than \$500,000. Fall resigned as Secretary of the Interior in the summer of 1923, but it was too late. He was sentenced to one year in federal prison for fraud, and became the first former Cabinet member in US history to be sentenced to jail.

During both of these investigations Harding was never found to have been involved with, or have any knowledge of any of the corruption or bribery, but that did not save his reputation.

Harding departed for his history making trip out west on July 1, 1923. Throngs of people gathered at every stop to hear the president; however, the scandals, the speeches, and the wearisome travel on the train were starting to take its toll as Harding's health was failing fast. On July 8th, While in Ketchikan, Alaska, Harding officiated at the laying of the cornerstone of Ketchikan Lodge #159. On July 18th, he toured Seward Lodge #219 and visited with the Brethren. It was the last Masonic event that Harding would ever attend.

On his way south from Alaska, Harding stopped in Vancouver, British Columbia to give a speech. He was the first United States President to ever give a speech on Canadian soil. After Harding's train left Canada the President started to become very ill. Harding gave a speech at the University of Washington in Seattle on July 26 despite his illness. It would prove to be his last public appearance. On July 27 Harding was on board his train getting ready to head to San Francisco when H.L. Quigley, the Worshipful Master of Lafayette Lodge #241 of Seattle, handed a very large Bible to the President's personal secretary, George Christian, and asked if the President could sign it. Christian took the Bible into the car where Harding signed his name and the date. It would be the last time that President Harding would ever sign his name.

Harding arrived in San Francisco on Monday, July 30 and went immediately to the Palace Hotel. On Wednesday, Harding met with his secretary, George Christian, and asked him to travel to Hollywood, California and deliver an address to the Hollywood Commandery #56 and deliver to them on behalf of his home Commandery the Traveling Banner. Christian arrived in Hollywood on Thursday at 6:00pm and delivered Harding's speech to the Hollywood Commandery. It was the last speech ever written for Harding and his last address to the public. One hour after the speech, on August 2, 1923 at 7:20pm, President Warren G. Harding died quietly in his hotel room.

The official cause of death was listed as "apoplexy stroke", a term sometimes used to describe a heart attack. When news of the President's death was announced it stunned the nation; no president had been more beloved and more popular at the time than Warren Harding. Vice President Calvin Coolidge was at his home in Plymouth, Vermont when he was informed of the President's death. He was sworn in to be the 30th President of the United States by his father, who was a Justice of the Peace and a notary public.

Harding's body was carried on board his train across the nation back to Washington DC. This trip, reported in every newspaper in the nation, resulted in a public outpouring of sentiment the likes of which had not been seen since the death of President Abraham Lincoln. An estimated nine million people appeared along the railroad tracks to pay their respects. Veterans of the Civil War and World War I honored their Commander in Chief with a final salute. On August 8th, Harding's body arrived back in Washington DC where he was conducted from the White House to the Capital with six Commanderies of Knights Templar begging in the funeral Cortège. Harding's casket was a gift from the Boumi Shrine of Baltimore, Maryland.

On Friday, August 10th, 1923, Warren Gamaliel Harding, Master Mason, Royal Arch Mason, Sir Knight, Noble, Profit, Sojourner, Tall Cedar and 32 degree Mason was laid to rest with full Masonic funeral rites that were performed by Marion Lodge #70.

As the months passed after Harding's death, the scandals and conspiracies grew. The Teapot Dome scandal was in full vigor and Harding's affair with Carrie Phillips became public. In 1927 another mistress wrote a book about their affair called the "*President's Daughter*". Nan Britton claimed that she and Harding began an affair that started in 1916 and continued right up until his death. According to Britton, they would have their trysts in a closet right outside the Oval Office where a Secret Service Agent would stand guard. Britton stated that a daughter, Elizabeth Ann, was born as a result of the affair but that Harding had never met her. None of her accusations were ever authenticated.

Years after Harding's death, because of the scandals, corruption, and indiscretions, his administration was labeled one of the most corrupt in US history due almost entirely because of the people in Harding's cabinet. One of Harding's most famous quotes sums up the people that surrounded his presidency; "*I have no trouble with my enemies. I can take care of my enemies in a fight. But my friends, my damned friends, they're the ones who keep me walking the floor at nights!*"

Within two years of Harding's death, more than six Lodges around the United States changed their name to some variation of "Warren Harding Lodge".

In closing I will leave you with a part of President Harding's speech to the Aladdin Shrine on May 9th, 1921;

"There is an honest, righteous, and just fraternal life in America. It embraces millions of men and women, and a hundred fraternal organizations extend their influence to more than a third of our American homes, and make ours a better Republic for their influences. Fraternity is inherent in man. It is our obligation to make the most of it for human betterment."

John R. Tester

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