

From the Archives: Celebrating 225 Years of the White House Cornerstone Ceremony

From the Archives highlights interesting stories of past D.C. Freemasons and other hidden historical gems found in archives of the Grand Lodge of D.C. - ed.

By 1792, the fledgling District of Columbia was still more forest than capitol. Tracts of land now housing federal buildings, museums, and rowhouses were filled with trees, creeks, and rolling hills. Though, Georgetown had developed into a busy commercial port and the first group of residents were moving into the District to begin the process of building the capitol.

On October 13th of that year, Freemasons from around the area met at Suter's Tavern, the meeting place of Lodge No. 9 of Maryland (now Potomac Lodge No.5), for the purpose of laying the White House cornerstone. They formed in a traditional Masonic procession and marched to the site of the executive mansion on Pennsylvania Avenue. Once there, the Master of Potomac, Peter Casanave, laid the cornerstone and, after rousing speech, the procession returned to Suter's where an elegant dinner was held.

There are two things that are particularly interesting about this event. First, it was a relatively quiet affair. Compared to the U.S. Capitol cornerstone ceremony a year later, which had bands playing, military parades, large crowds, and a President laying the cornerstone, the White House ceremony felt a bit more reserved. So much so, that we have no record of the event recorded in local newspapers. Second, up until the Truman administration, we didn't even know when or how it happened!!

Here's the only known record of the ceremony. It was discovered during the Truman White House renovations and serves as our only link to this important Masonic event. The record was published in the Charleston Gazette on November 15, 1792. It was printed from a letter to an unknown Charleston man from his friend in Philadelphia. The letter provides a very detailed summary of the 16 toasts given during the dinner. Several toasts were made to prominent leaders and intellectuals of the time including the Marquis de La Fayette and Thomas Paine, who

received the honor of toast no. 10, "The Rights of Man and the author of Common Sense."

Several clues help us confirm that this is, in fact, an authentic account of the White House ceremony. By 1792, the only Freemason lodge east of the Potomac River met in Georgetown and operated out of John Suter's Tavern, the Fountain Inn. Records also confirm that Peter Casanave was a Freemason and prominent civic leader. (He served as Georgetown's fourth Mayor) While there is no record of George Washington attending the ceremony, James Hoban and Collin Williamson most likely did. Both men were active Freemasons, regular visitors to the lodge, and were



granted a dispensation one year later to charter a new lodge in the City of Washington, which eventually would become Federal Lodge No.1 of D.C. (Georgetown was considered a separate entity at the time.)

The reasons surrounding the quiet nature of the event are also a bit of a mystery. But, when considering the year, it is most likely due to the fact that the White House had yet to achieve the prominence and historical relevance it has today. More attention was given to the U.S. Capitol, as it represented the aspirational height of the American experiment.

Nevertheless, as we celebrate the building's 225th anniversary today, Freemasons from across the Jurisdiction and world should take a moment to reflect on the history and providence of the White House, a home that had been truly planned, laid, and built by masonic hands. ▲

CHARLESTON,
THURSDAY, November 15, 1792.

Extrait of a letter from a gentleman in Philadelphia, to his friend in Charleston, dated October 20, 1792.

"On Saturday the 13th inst. the first stone was laid in the south-west corner of the president's house, in the city of Washington, by the Free Masons of Georgetown and its vicinity, who assembled on the occasion. The procession was formed at the Fountain Inn, Georgetown, in the following order, viz.

1. The Free Masons, in masonic order.
2. The commissioners of the fed. building.
3. Gentlemen of the town & neighborhood.
4. The different artificers, &c.

They proceeded in procession to the president's square. The ceremony was performed by brother Casanave, master of the lodge, who delivered an oration well adapted to the occasion. Under the stone was laid a plate of polished brass, with the following inscription :

"This first Stone of the President's House was laid the 13th Day of October, 1792, and in the 17th Year of the Independence of the United States of America.

George Washington, President.
Thomas Johnson,
Doctor Stewart, } Commissioners.
Daniel Carroll,
James Hoban, Architect.
Collen Williamson, Master-Mason.
Vivat Respublica."

After the ceremony was performed they returned, in regular order, to Mr. Sutter's Fountain Inn, where an elegant dinner was provided, and the following toasts given in honor of the day :

1. The fifteen United States.
2. The President of the United States.
3. Our worthy brothers.
4. District of Columbia : may it flourish as the centre of the political and commercial interests of America.
5. The city of Washington : may time render it worthy of the name it bears.
6. Constitutional liberties of the people of the United States of America.
7. The French nation : a happy issue to their struggles for liberty and justice.
8. Marquis de la Fayette.
9. The masonic brethren throughout the universe.
10. The Rights of Man and the author of Common Sense.
11. The fair daughters of America.
12. The memory of those who have bled in the cause of liberty.
13. General Wayne and the western army : may their efforts be crowned by a speedy and honorable peace.
14. The governor and state of Maryland.
15. The governor and state of Virginia.
16. May peace, liberty and order extend from pole to pole.

The whole concluded with the greatest harmony and order."

Article from the Charleston Gazette, Nov. 15, 1792.

Photo: Chris Ruli