

“JOHN PARKE, COLONIAL POET, SOLDIER AND MASON”

John Parke was born in Dover, Delaware on April 7, 1754, the son of Thomas Parke, possibly in what is now known as the Ridgely House on the Dover Green as Dr. Charles Ridgely purchased the property from the estate of Thomas Parke in 1767. His father was a hatter as well as powderer of wigs for several sessions of the Delaware assembly and was later elected sheriff for Kent County.

After completing his studies at the Newark Academy, he attended Philadelphia College (University of Pennsylvania), receiving a bachelor's degree in 1771 as well as a master's degree in 1775. On March 31, 1774, at the age of 20, he was made a Mason in Lodge No. 5, A.Y.M., at Odessa. This entry is the only reference to John Parke in the minutes of Lodge No. 5.

In 1774 we find that John Parke of Lodge No. 5 visited Lodge No. 2 in Philadelphia on August 10, August 27 and September 14, 1774. These visits apparently occurred while he was a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania.

In addition to pursuing his graduate studies in Philadelphia, he read law for Thomas McKean. During this association, he also became acquainted with Caesar Rodney and upon their recommendation to General Washington he was appointed Quartermaster General of the Continental Army in 1775 at the age of 21. After several months of service, he returned home to Dover only to be recalled as Lt. Colonel of Artificers in 1776, where he saw service at the battles of Trenton and Princeton as well as the winter encampment of 1777-78 at Valley Forge with General Washington.

On February 16, 1776, the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts granted a warrant for American Union Lodge to a group of petitioners from a Connecticut brigade stationed in the Roxbury section of Boston. The charter officers were: Col. Joel Clark of Connecticut, W.M.; Col. John Parke of Delaware, S.W.; and Maj. Thomas Chase of Massachusetts, J.W. They met at Waterman's Tavern and during their first six weeks they held 15 meetings and initiated 30 brethren. By April 1776, they had marched on to occupy New York where they continued to meet for three months, holding 13 meetings and initiating 8 brethren. It was while stationed in New York that the first of many famous table lodges were held by this famous military lodge, American Union. On St. John's Day in June 1776, elections were held with Col. Clark continuing as W.M. as the original wardens had both been transferred to military duties elsewhere.

Col. John Parke, having served as charter S.W. of American Union Lodge, explains his serving as J.W. (pro-tem) of Lodge No. 2 when he again visited Philadelphia on both October 10 and 17, 1776, as recorded in their minutes. Almost two years were to elapse before he again visited Lodge No. 2, when on December 8, 1778, he requested membership, but having no credentials from Lodge No. 5 with him it was directed to lie over. He also visited the lodge on January 30 as well as on February 2, 1779, before he was finally balloted for and approved for membership in Lodge No. 2 on February 9, 1779. On February 17, 1779 Col. John Parke was named to a committee with Col. George North from Lodge No. 2 to meet with members of Lodges No. 3 and No. 4 of Philadelphia in regards to establishing initiation fees. Due to his absence from the lodge on both March 3 and March 9, 1779, on account of necessary business, he was replaced on this committee. On April 14, 1779, Col. Parke was present to recommend Patrick O'Flinn for membership in Lodge No. 2.

The next Masonic reference to Brother Parke is not found until Brother Lafayette visited Philadelphia between August 9-14, 1784, and then the minutes of Lodge No. 2 contain the following ode composed by Brother Parke to honor Brother Lafayette on this special occasion:

The irrevocable decree is past
And high Olympus trembles at the blast,
Which Fame triumphant bears;
Thou'rt free America! The Heavens resound
Nations rejoicing catch the swelling sound.
Thou'rt free-stern Britain hears
A Prince to human kind and Friend,
To cause Tyrannies sway to end.
To Lafayette did say:
Go, glory in that envied name,
"A passport thro" the gates of Fame."
A Soldier of America.

The first evidence of Brother John Parke's poetic ability was in 1777 when he published a series of poems commemorating Col. John Haslet, also of Dover, General Mercer, and other Revolutionary heroes. In the post-war period he became the leading poet of Delaware with publication in 1786 of a translation of the "Lyrical Works of Horace" together with his and David French's original verse. Many of Parke's poems appeared in the newspapers, and won favorable comments from the literary critics of the period.

Possibly his publication of the "Lyrical Works of Horace" in 1786 could have been financed by the Craft in-as-much as he attended a meeting of his Lodge No. 2 in Philadelphia on July 10, 1786 after an absence of seven years, and requested a loan of twenty-five guineas. The loan was granted as the result of two of the brethren guaranteeing it with their security. On September 9, 1786, he presented a book, "Use and Abuse of Freemasonry" written by Brother Capt. Smith, to the lodge. Col. John Parke, colonial poet, soldier and Mason died in Dover on December 11, 1789, at the age of 35 leaving the unanswered question, "was his loan from the lodge a use or abuse of Freemasonry?"

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