

DELAWARE'S MASONIC GOVERNORS

In 1984, Senator Roger A. Martin, a teacher and historian, published an excellent book titled "A History of Delaware Through Its Governors". The book has been acclaimed by Professor John A. Munroe for its detail and accuracy. The work provides a short biography of each Governor and simultaneously describes the Governor's administration and the tenor of events at that time in the state and nation. Some 67 men have occupied the office of Chief Executive as Governor or Acting Governor since the convening of the first General Assembly in 1777 after the Declaration of Independence. Brother Charles E. Green and Past Grand Master James H. Hutchins have reviewed them and determined that 18 were Masons. I shall endeavor to discuss briefly each of the 18.

The first Masonic Governor was David Hall, a Democrat and native of Lewes, who served as Governor from 1802-1805. He was an attorney. When the Revolutionary War commenced, he joined the Sussex Militia and served under Colonel Haslet of the Delaware Regiment. At the death of Colonel Haslet, he succeeded him as Commanding Officer of the Regiment. Hall was raised in Lodge No. 18 on May 18, 1776, and served as Worshipful Master of Hiram's Delaware Regimental Lodge under the Provincial Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. He was the Charter Master of Lodge No. 63 in Lewes chartered by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania on May 28, 1794, as well as a Charter Member of Lodge No. 10 at Georgetown chartered by the Grand Lodge of Maryland. While he was Master of Lodge No. 63, two of its members, James Wiley and Dr. Theodore Wilson, created quite an uproar in Lewes when Wiley killed Wilson, probably at a lodge meeting for advances to his wife. This is recounted in an article by Senator Martin in the 1983 Winter/Spring issue of the Delaware Lawyer. After he was Governor, he served as Judge of the Court of Common Pleas in Sussex County.

Hall was succeeded in office by another Mason, Nathaniel Mitchell of Laurel, who served as Governor from 1805-1808. He saw service in the Revolutionary War and served as Brigade Major and Inspector on General Muhlenberg's Staff. He was captured by the British near the close of the War. A Federalist, he allegedly lived in Georgetown while he served as Governor. He is buried in Laurel and a great-great-great grandson still survives. Mitchell was a member of Lodges No. 10 at Georgetown and No. 31 at Laurel chartered by the Grand Lodge of Maryland. He was Secretary of Lodge No. 10.

The next Masonic Governor was John Clark of Northern Irish descent who lived north of Smyrna in New Castle County. He was a Federalist and served as Governor from 1817-1820. Clark was a member of Lodge No. 44 at Duck Creek Crossroads. His estate today is part of the grounds of the Delaware Correctional Center.

Governor Clark was succeeded by another member of Lodge No. 44, Jacob Stout, a Federalist, who became Acting Governor when Henry Rolleston, III, Clark's successor, died a little more than a month after his election. Stout was a tanner whose ancestors settled near Leipsic and he himself was one of the founders of Leipsic. When he left office, he was named a Lay Judge of the Court of Common Pleas.

Caleb Bennett was Governor from 1833-1836, a Democrat and Quaker from New Castle. At 74, he was the oldest Governor to be inaugurated. Despite the fact that he was a Quaker, he participated in almost every battle of the Revolutionary War as an artillery man. He died while in office at the age of 78 years and is buried at the cemetery of the Friends Meeting House on Fourth Street in Wilmington. He was a member of Lafayette Lodge No. 14.

Thomas Stockton entered office in 1845 and served for a period of 14 months. He was a Whig from New Castle, a graduate of Princeton, and served in the Delaware Militia during the War of 1812 and helped General Winfield Scott storm Fort George on Lake Erie. He married the daughter of Chancellor Kensey Johns and lived in the famous Kensey Johns-VanDyke House in New Castle. His father owned the property where the Lord DeLaWarr Motel is located today. Stockton was a member of Lafayette No.14.

Milford claimed the next Governor, William Burton, a member of one of the oldest families in Delaware, the Burtons of Indian River Hundred. With limited schooling, he practiced medicine first in Lewes and then in Milford. A Democrat, he served as Governor during a turbulent period in Delaware when the state was divided by the War Between the States. One of his descendants was Ann Marvel who married A. Felix DuPont. Governor Burton served two years as Junior Grand Warden and three years, 1845-1847, as Deputy Grand Master. While Governor he resided at the Parson Thorne House in Milford.

The next Masonic Governor, James Ponder, a Democrat, also served as a Deputy Grand Master in 1861 and 1862. I do not know his original lodge, but he was among the petitioners with nine other Masons for the charter of Endeavor Lodge No. 17 at Milton in 1848. This lodge had originally been at Frederica. The charter was granted and he became Charter Worshipful Master. His home in Milton today is the funeral home owned by Past Master William M. Short, Sr., of Endeavor Lodge. Ponder served as Governor from 1871 to 1875. Ponder married into the Saulsbury family and appointed his brother, Willard Saulsbury, Chancellor upon a pledge that Saulsbury would control his drinking and he kept it. Ponder was an extremely successful businessman in Sussex and was President of the Farmers Bank both at Georgetown and Wilmington. He lived to be 78 and died in 1897. His tombstone carries the phrase "His Word His Bond".

The next Masonic Governor, Charles C. Stockley, a Democrat, was also from Sussex County and the community of Stockley bears the family name. Governor Stockley was elected in 1883 and served to 1887. His family was kin to and interwoven by marriage with the Killocks, an old Sussex County family, the Rodneys, Governor Paynter and Governor Ross. Governor Stockley was a member of Franklin Lodge No. 12. After he left office, Stockley served as Register of Wills of Sussex County for five years.

Thirty years passed before another Mason was elected Governor and again from Sussex County, John G. Townsend, Jr., a Republican, of Selbyville, who served as Governor from 1917 to 1921. His administration is considered to be one of the most progressive in Delaware history. He was elected to the Senate in 1928 where he served until 1940. Subsequently, he was a

delegate to the London Conference of the United Nations. He was a member of Franklin Lodge No. 12 of Georgetown. Governor Townsend is a recognized pioneer in the broiler industry and every phase of agriculture in Sussex County. His legacy remains today with the ventures which he commenced still flourishing. He died in 1964.

Governor Townsend was succeeded by William D. Denney, a Republican of Dover who served as Governor from 1921-1925. A businessman in Dover, he was a Past Master of Union Lodge No. 7. He died in 1953 at the age of 80.

Richard C. McMullen, a Democrat, was elected Governor in 1937 and served until 1941. A native of New Castle County, he was a leather executive and his home was on North Rodney Street in Wilmington. He was a member of Washington Lodge No. 1. When he completed his term, he was in ill health and died in 1944.

Governor McMullen's successor, Walter W. Bacon, a Republican, was the only Governor to serve as Grand Master and the first to be coroneted a 33° Mason. Retiring at the age of 51 from General Motors, he took residence in the Mayfair Apartments on North Harrison Street and entered politics. He served three terms as Mayor of Wilmington before being elected Governor in 1940, the only Republican to win a major post in the state that year. He bears the distinction of being Delaware's first full time Governor. A Past Master of St. John's Lodge No. 2, he was elected Junior Grand Warden in 1913, Deputy Grand Master in 1914 and Grand Master in 1915. He died in 1962.

In 1949, Governor Bacon was succeeded by Elbert N. Carvel of Laurel who had served as Lieutenant Governor during the last term of Governor Bacon. Governor Carvel was the only Governor to serve two four year terms which were not consecutive. He was defeated after his first term, ran again eight years later and was elected to another term.

Governor Carvel, our senior living Governor, is a member of Hope Lodge No.4 and served as its Worshipful Master in 1964 when he was Governor. Later he served as Potentate of Nur Temple. He is a 33° Mason.

J.Caleb Bogus, was the next Governor and is no doubt one of the most successful and popular politicians in Delaware history. Before being elected Governor in 1952, he served six years in the U.S. House of Representatives. Upon the completion of his second term as Governor, he was elected to the United States Senate where he served two terms. He is an active member of Eureka Lodge No. 23 and is a 33° Mason.

Governor Boggs resigned before the end of his term so that he might be sworn in early as a United States Senator. He was succeeded by David P. Buckson who was Acting Governor for 18 days. A colorful figure in Delaware politics, he was a Judge of the Court of Common Pleas in Kent County, served as Lieutenant Governor under Governor Boggs, served two terms as Attorney General, ran for Governor and was defeated by Governor Charles L. Terry, Jr., and was

instrumental in the defeat of Governor Russell W. Peterson in 1973 for re-election. He is now a Judge of Family Court and is a member of Union Lodge No. 5 which he strongly supports.

In 1968, Russell W. Peterson, was elected Governor. While he was Governor, he was raised to the sublime degree by the Grand Master at a Special Communication of Brandywine Lodge No. 33 held in Mt. Pleasant High School. Today he is president of the Audubon Society.

The last Governor who was a Mason was Sherman W. Tribbitt who succeeded Governor Peterson in 1973 and served one term. Long active in Democratic politics, Governor Tribbitt is a Past Master of Union Lodge No. 5 and served as Senior Grand Warden in 1962. Still active in business and politics, he continues to support the Craft.

John Dickinson, who served as Governor from 1781 to 1782, is noted in Brother Green's "History of the Grand Lodge of Delaware" as being a Mason. He notes that he was raised on January 11, 1780, in Lodge No. 18 in Dover. However, Brother Green concluded before his death that Dickinson was not a Mason. The brother mentioned was John Dickson, not Dickinson.

Brother Green also suggests that Governor Peter F. Causey of Milford was a member of Temple Lodge No. 9 and Governor Benjamin T. Biggs of Middletown was a member of Union Lodge No. 5. The Grand Lodge proceedings of the period when each was Governor do not support the claim.

Of the 18, one was a Whig, 3 Federalists, 6 Republicans, and 8 Democrats. Two came from Kent County, 7 from Sussex, and 9 from New Castle. Only three were practicing attorneys. All served their state well as Governor. At least 7 served as Worshipful Master of their lodge with 2 being Charter Masters. Four served as officers of Grand Lodge with Governor Bacon being the sole Grand Master. 18 of 68 amounts to about 26%--indeed an impressive showing. In fact during the last 50 years, eleven men have served as Governor, and seven have been Masons.

Presented by:

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