

JAMES BUCHANAN

Fratres, during the month of February each year we honor those who have served this great nation as its President. Since George Washington was inaugurated as our first President on April 30 1789, forty-two men have had this distinction. Nearly half of whom have been Freemasons. This is an astonishing fact, as Masons have never constituted more than 2% of the male population. It speaks well of the fraternity, as the principles that are exemplified in Masons are also essential in one who would lead our country well.

Not all of our Presidents were of equal greatness and fame. Everyone speaks with great pride of George Washington, our first Masonic President; but many would not know that James Buchanan, our 15th President was also a Brother. Tonight I would like to share a few facts with you about Brother Buchanan's life.

He was born on April 23, 1791, in a log cabin, on a farm at Stoney Batter, located near the village of Cove Gap near Mercersburg, Franklin County, Pennsylvania. That log cabin is on display at the present time on the grounds of Mercersburg Academy. His parents were of Scotch-Irish descent. His father emigrated from County Donegal in Northern Ireland in 1783. His mother was Elizabeth Speer who lived in South Mountain, Adams county before her marriage. His parents were of the Presbyterian faith. James was the second of eleven surviving children and was the only boy in that family for fourteen years. His parents doted upon him; and, as a small boy, he wandered around the farm with a bell tied around his neck so that his mother could hear where he was at all times!

James Buchanan was educated in the local schools and later attended Dickinson College. While at Dickinson, to gain acceptance by his schoolmates, he admitted: "I engaged in every sort of extravagance and mischief!" Once the college expelled him for disorderly conduct but on his promise to behave, he was readmitted. To the great admiration of his parents and school officials, he graduated with the highest honors in 1809, when he was only eighteen years old. Two years after becoming a lawyer, he moved to Lancaster. In 1814 he was elected as a Federalist to the Lower House of the Pennsylvania State Legislature.

At that time he became engaged to a Miss Ann Coleman, daughter of a well-to-do Lancaster family of English descent. Her family did not approve of the young lawyer; therefore they broke off the engagement and sent her to live with relatives in Philadelphia. Within about six weeks she died, - it is said of a broken heart. Buchanan remained a bachelor all of his life.

In 1820 Buchanan was elected as a United States Congressman and served in that capacity for ten years. He was politically ambitious and was appointed as Ambassador to Russia by Andrew Jackson, serving in that capacity for the years 1832 and 1833. In 1834, he was elected to the United States Senate and rendered valuable service until March 1845. By this time Buchanan had become a political power in the Democratic Party of Pennsylvania. In the convention of 1844 he actively supported James Polk for President. Not surprisingly he was appointed as Secretary of State by President Polk in 1845, serving in this capacity with distinction until March 1849. As Polk's Secretary of State, he won an enviable reputation for developing a firm and vigorous foreign policy, which among other things, opposed European encroachment in Central America; in 1852 he sought the nomination for President but was defeated on the 49th ballot by Franklin Pierce. In 1853, President Pierce appointed Buchanan to be the Ambassador to Great Britain where he was highly praised by Queen Victoria. He returned from England in 1856 and was nominated and elected as the fifteenth President of our great country. Buchanan is Pennsylvania's only native son to occupy the White House. He was the only President with a military background who did not hold an officer's commission. He fought in the War of 1812 as an enlisted man.

Many histories have been written about Buchanan's presidency, some of the stories are factual, some are unfair and untrue. James Buchanan is generally regarded as an incompetent, timid, fumbling and spineless leader whose lack of courage and woeful confusion led to the Civil

War and almost destroyed the Union during his lame duck period. It is unfortunate that these criticisms found many believers. It should be noted that brother Buchanan entered the Presidency with the soundest credentials. Not only did he serve with honor in both Houses of Congress, but he served ably as Secretary of State and as Ambassador to Russia and Great Britain.

Historian Bruce Catton observed: "This President was not, after all, quite as weak as he looked; he had committed himself to a policy which Abraham Lincoln would continue when he reached the White House." Historian Thomas Bailey noted: "As for the supposedly spineless Buchanan, how could he have prevented the Civil War - by starting a Civil War. No one has yet come up with a satisfactory answer." Interestingly, after hearing Lincoln's Inaugural speech, a certain newspaper editor concluded: "So far as coercion is concerned. Mr. Lincoln occupied the very ground previously occupied by Mr. Buchanan

President Buchanan's top priority was to resolve the seething sectional dispute without resorting to war. Although his efforts did not prove successful, to blame him for their failure is unfair! Brother Buchanan's general program and strategy were very sound! He would observe his presidential oath and act according to the law; and, of first importance was his determination to avoid initiating a war. He would take no provocative action; and would apply force only to repel a military assault on the government! Buchanan strove for peace yet the Nation was on the threshold of war. Why did he not resort to force? To begin with he was 'wedded to the Constitution.' He could find no authority in the Constitution for stopping the South with guns. On October 21, 1865, James Buchanan wrote: "I pursued a settled, consistent line of policy, and I do not recollect a single important measure which I should desire to recall. Under this conviction, I have enjoyed a tranquil and cheerful mind, notwithstanding the abuse I have received, in full confidence that my countrymen would eventually do justice."

It is true that his tenure as President experienced unusual trials and tribulations during which it has never been denied that his industry was incessant and untiring. A fitting tribute to our distinguished brother is noted in a letter written by General Joseph Holt, then the Secretary of War. "I", he wrote, "could not close this communication without bearing emphatic testimony to the loyalty of President Buchanan throughout the troubled and trying scenes which marked the last months of his administration!

And now, let's say something about his Masonic endeavors: Buchanan was entered a Mason in Lodge No. 43, Lancaster, on December 11, 1816; Crafted and Raised to the Sublime Degree of Master Mason on January 24, 1817. He served as Junior Warden of his Lodge in 1821; Senior Warden in 1822; and was Worshipful Master in 1823. In 1824, brother Buchanan was appointed District Deputy Grand Master of the First Masonic District of Pennsylvania, comprising at that time Lancaster, Lebanon and York Counties! He was unable to attend his Lodge due to his absence from Lancaster, while engaged in Diplomatic, Legislative, and presidential duties. He did make his final visit on May 15, 1865 when he was seventy-four years old. Brother Buchanan enjoyed his Masonic affiliation, and demonstrated his adherence to its principles by his love and devotion to his God, his country, his church, his family (brother William, sister Jane, nephews and nieces, especially Harriet and Hetty) and the brothers of our Fraternity.

On February 22, 1860, the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, accompanied by its guests, the members of brother George Washington's Lodge, No. 4, of Fredericksburg, Virginia, and a large attendance of the craft proceeded under the escort of the Washington Commander, Knights Templar, to the Washington Circle and conducted the ceremony of dedicating the equestrian statue of Brother George Washington. At this event, President Buchanan was an active participant in the exercises and delivered the dedicatory address.

After assisting in the inauguration of President Lincoln, Buchanan returned to Wheatland, his homestead in Lancaster. He rejoiced to be free from the cares of a long and responsible public life. He was welcomed home to Lancaster by an immense gathering of his friends and citizens. Here he lived for seven more years, taking a lively interest in public affairs,

and supporting, with his influence as a private citizen the war for the restoration of the Union.

Brother Buchanan passed to his final rest on Monday, June 1, 1868, at the age of seventy-seven. The Minutes of his Lodge recorded the following: "A Special Meeting of A.F.& A.M. Lodge, No 43, was held this day, Thursday, June 4th, 1868, for the purpose of attending the funeral of our Brother."

Skilled in the noble science of the royal art, true and trustworthy, Brother James Buchanan discharged his duties with fidelity; leaving, when he retired from his honorable status, a trestleboard which would bear the most critical inspection. His accomplishments as a man, a Mason, a patriot and a citizen illumine a page in American history.

These remarks are extracted from a paper prepared by Ernest T. Shaw, Perseverance Lodge, No. 21 Harrisburg Pa, which was presented in 1991 as part of the Education program of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania honoring James Buchanan on the 200th anniversary of his birth.

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