

WASHINGTON AND THE SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI

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Questions are often asked about the connection between Freemasonry and the Society of the Cincinnati. Actually, there is none other than that many prominent military Freemasons (particularly of that time) belonged to both organizations. Probably, a connection is made because of George Washington's influence and membership in both groups.

One of the generally unknown associations in American history is that of George Washington's connection and significant relationship with the Society of the Cincinnati.

On June 19, 1783, Washington was elected the first President-General of the Society, the office which he held until his death.

The Society of the Cincinnati was formed on May 10, 1783, by the officers of the victorious American Army at the cantonment near Newburgh, New York. The principal purposes were to "render permanent the cordial affection subsisting among the officers of our army" who had taken part in the war; and to be prepared to render assistance to the members or their families who might be in need.

The constitution of the Order, THE INSTITUTION, expressed the purposes thus, and are read at every meeting: "An incessant attention to preserve inviolate those exalted rights and liberties of human nature for which they have fought and bled, and without which the high rank of a rational being is a curse instead of a blessing." "An unalterable determination to promote and cherish, between the respective states, that union and national honor so essentially necessary to their happiness and the future dignity of the American Empire. To render permanent the cordial affection subsisting among the officers. This spirit will dictate brotherly kindness in all things, and particularly extend to the most substantial acts of beneficence, according to the ability of the society, towards those officers and their families who unfortunately may be under the necessity of receiving it."

Andre de Maricourt, in the magazine, "France--Etats-Unis", also expressed one of the objects of its formation by saying that it "sealed in a solemn manner, and in an hereditary way, the friendships of two peoples."

One of the first acts of the meeting of May 13, 1783, was to extend membership to certain grades of French officers, declaring that the "Society, deeply impressed with a sense of the generous assistance this country has received from France, and desirous of perpetuating the friendships which have been formed, and so happily subsisted, between the officers of the allied forces, in the prosecution of the War, direct that the President-General transmit, as soon as may be, to each of the characters hereafter named, a medal containing the Order of the Society,

viz.: His Excellency the Chevalier de la Luzerne Minister Plenipotentiary, His Excellency the Sieur Gerard, late Minister Plenipotentiary, Their Excellencies the Count d'Estaing, the Count de Grasse, the Count de Barras, the Chevalier des Touches, Admirals and Commanders in the Navy, His Excellency the Count de Rochambeau, Commander-in-Chief, and the Generals and Colonels of his army, and acquaint them that the Society does itself the honor to consider them members."

General Washington, who as previously mentioned, was elected the first President of the society, wrote Rochambeau this letter:

TO THE COUNT DE ROCHAMBEAU

Rocky Hill in New Jersey, 29 October 1783

The officers of the American Army, in order to perpetuate that mutual friendships which they contracted in the hour of common danger and distress, and for other purposes which are mentioned in the instrument of their association have united together in a society of Friends under the name Cincinnati; and having honored me with the office of president, it becomes a very agreeable part of my duty to inform you that the Society have done themselves the honor to consider you and the generals and officers of the army which you commanded in America as members of the society.

Major L'Enfant, who will have the honor to deliver this letter to you, will execute the Order of the Society in France, amongst which he is directed to present you with one of the first Orders that are made, and likewise with Orders for the other gentlemen of your army, which I take the liberty to request you would

present to them in the name of the Society. As soon as the diploma is made out, I will have the honor to transmit it to you.

(Archives of the General Society)

The letter was then transmitted through the Minister of War to King Louis XVI, who promptly on December 18th signified his approval, and the French Order of the Cincinnati was organized on July 4, 1784. Up to that time, the King of France had not allowed his officers to wear any foreign decorations. He immediately, however, made an exception in favor of the insignia of the Society of the Cincinnati.

Membership in the Order was so eagerly sought that it soon became one of the most coveted in Europe.

To General Henry Knox belongs the title of founder of the Cincinnati, for it appears from Thomas Jefferson's diary that in a conversation with John Adams as early as 1776, General Knox expressed "a wish for some ribbon to wear in his hat or in his button-hole, to be transmitted to his descendants as a badge and proof that he fought in defence of their liberties."

The original copy of the "Proposals" to form such an order is in Knox's handwriting and is now among the papers left in the care of the New England Historic Genealogical Society of Boston, by his grandson, Admiral Henry Knox Thatcher, who served as president of the Massachusetts branch of the Cincinnati.

The State Societies of the Cincinnati were formed on different dates. The General Society of the Cincinnati was established on May 13, 1783, at Newburgh, N.Y., the cantonment of the American Military forces, by the officers of the victorious American Army.

The name of the Society was selected from that of the illustrious Roman General, Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, who at the call of country, left his home to lead the armies of Rome to Victory, and when that victory was achieved, returned to his farm, refusing the honors usually accorded victorious leaders returning with their military forces.

One of the interesting facts in connection with the Cincinnati is that the medal or jewel of the Society was designed by Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant, of the Continental Corps of Engineers, who later planned the Capitol of this country.

The Society voted that "the bald eagle, carrying the emblems on its breast, be established as the Order of the Society, and that the ideas of Major L'Enfant respecting it and the manner of its being worn by the members, . . . be adopted." On February 24, 1784, the officers of the French Navy who had been admitted to the Order of the Cincinnati, presented General Washington, through his Excellency, the Count d'Estaing, the ranking Naval officer, the Eagle of the Cincinnati richly set in diamonds.

General Washington was so deeply touched by the gift of the Diamond Eagle by the Count d'Estaing, on the part of the officers of the French Navy, that he thenceforth wore this Eagle instead of the one he had purchased.

Thus, the diamond Eagle has been worn by each of the twenty-eight men who have held the office of President-General. It is now held for the Society by three trustees:

The President-General, the Secretary-General, and the Treasurer-General; and, is worn on such occasions as the President-General may deem proper.

At the first meeting, General Washington was unanimously chosen President-General, and held that office until his death, when he was succeeded by Major General Alexander Hamilton, who in turn remained President-General until his tragic death.

Among the great leaders of the American Revolution, who became members of the Society besides George Washington were Alexander Hamilton, the Marquis de Lafayette, Henry Knox, Nathanael Greene, Friedrich Von Steuben, Benjamin Lincoln, Charles C. Pinckney, John Paul Jones, Israel Putnam, John Schuyler, Horatio Gates, James Monroe, William Moultrie, Thaddeus Kosciuszko, Anthony Wayne, William Sullivan, "Light Horse Harry" Lee, Arthur St. Clair, and many others.

From the early issue of THE NEW YORK DIRECTORY (1786), many members of the Cincinnati are known to have been Freemasons.

Those mentioned are George Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette, General Friedrich Von Steuben, Chancellor Robert R. Livingston (Grand Master), John Paul Jones, and General Henry Knox.

Although the Society of the Cincinnati is in no way a Masonic body, nor ever was, the Society might well be considered a quasi-Masonic organization as most, if not all of the founders, were Freemasons. It is also well known that Freemasonry became active throughout the Colonies immediately after the Grand Lodge of England was instituted in 1717.

Freemasonry was brought here by human beings who sought freedom and peace in every facet of life.

Thus, Freemasonry and the Society of the Cincinnati ran akin to each other. Each complementing the other to preserve Liberty, cherish the union of the States, and maintain permanent the cordiality between officers and mutual friends.