

The William O. Ware Lodge of Research

THE J. N. SAUNDERS MANUSCRIPT

James Newton “J. N.” Saunders, a distinguished Lincoln County, Kentucky, attorney, who was noted for his expertise in the field of bankruptcy law, served as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky from October 19, 1916, to October 18, 1917.

Saunders was born on April 2, 1864, in Washington County, Kentucky. His father was the Rev. Miles Saunders, a renowned Presbyterian minister and missionary, and his mother was Margaret Booker Sanders.

Saunders was educated at the Covington Institute in Springfield, Kentucky. He attended college at Central University, in Richmond, Kentucky, and Westminster College, in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania. He received his law degree from the prestigious University of Michigan College of Law.

Upon being admitted to the Kentucky Bar in 1887, he established his law practice in Springfield, Kentucky. In September of 1893, he was nominated by the Democrats of Washington County to represent the Forty-second legislative district in the Kentucky House of Representatives. He won the general election in November and took his place in the legislature when the House of Representatives convened in January of 1894. While a legislator, Saunders received several influential committee assignments.

Saunders became a Mason in Springfield Lodge No. 50, taking his Entered Apprentice Degree on May 18, 1889. He received his Fellow Craft Degree on June 15, 1889, and was raised to the Sublime Degree of Master Mason on July 13, 1889. He immediately became a leader in Springfield Lodge, serving as Junior Warden in 1890, Senior Warden in 1891 and Master in 1892, 1893 and 1894.

For a time, Saunders was editor and publisher of The News, a local newspaper published at Springfield. In 1895, he gave up his seat in the General Assembly and moved to Stanford, Kentucky, where he again established a legal practice. Upon his move to Lincoln County, he demitted from Springfield Lodge No. 50 and affiliated with Lincoln Lodge No. 60. Once again, he immediately became a part of the Lodge’s leadership, serving as Senior Warden in 1896, and as Master in 1897, 1898 and 1899.

While living in Stanford, Saunders was appointed to the position of referee in federal bankruptcy court. After serving fourteen years in this post, he subsequently served in various capacities as a special circuit judge appointed by the governor to hear cases in courts where there was a vacancy of office, or where the sitting officials were recused from service.

A man of considerable literary talents, Saunders authored a Masonic Monitor, published in 1911 and offered to the Grand Lodge of Kentucky for adoption. There is some uncertainty as to the disposition of the Saunders Monitor by the Grand Lodge. The proceedings of the Grand Lodge for 1911 indicate that the Monitor was received with glowing accolades by Grand Master Robert R. Burnam and referred to the Committee on Work. The Committee reported as follows:

“We, the undersigned, having been appointed by the Most Worshipful Grand Master to examine the Manual of Monitorial Ceremonies and Instruction prepared by J. N. Saunders. Past Master, report:

“We find same to be a splendid exposition and interpretation of the lessons and ceremonies presented, and the presentation of them made in the attractive, [s]cholarly way that rendersthe compilation a valuable one for the use of the Craft.

“We further recommend this report be received and adopted as the expression of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, Free and Accepted Masons.

Signed,
Henry P. Barrett
Chas. N. Smith
Sam K. Veatch”

The proceedings note that the report of the Committee “was not concurred in.” A reasonable interpretation of the proceedings would lead one to believe that the Saunders Monitor was not adopted by the Grand Lodge of Kentucky. Yet, following Saunders’s death in 1934, the “Masonic Home Journal” (November 15, 1934) and the proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky for 1934, state that the Saunders Monitor had been adopted by the Grand Lodge in 1911.

Whether or not the Saunders Monitor was ever officially adopted, it did not gain wide popularity among the Craft, and copies of it are now quite rare.

In 1913, Saunders was elected Grand Junior Warden of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky.

At the 1913 annual Grand Lodge communication, Saunders offered a resolution calling upon the Grand Master to appoint a committee of three persons who were charged to gather “the facts of interest relating to each of the active and defunct lodges of Kentucky and present same in typewritten manuscript to this Grand Lodge at its next meeting.” The resolution was adopted, and the then-serving Grand Master, Joe H. Ewalt, appointed Saunders, W. C. McChord of Lincoln Lodge No. 50 and George B. Winslow of Carrollton Lodge No. 134 to the committee. McChord and Winslow swiftly delegated their responsibilities to Saunders, and the collection of the information about Kentucky Lodges fell into his hands, solely.

Completion of the project took longer than Saunders had anticipated. His plan was to ask active Kentucky Lodges to forward to him the information that would comprise the history of each

respective Lodge. Saunders planned to use the information held at the Grand Lodge office to complete the entries related to defunct Lodges.

The Grand Lodge proceedings from 1914 indicate that 347 active Lodges had not responded to Saunders's request for information. The proceedings of 1915 reflect that one year later, there were still 316 Lodges that had not provided the requested materials to Saunders. By 1916, the proceedings reflect that 312 Lodges had not furnished any history of their respective Lodges. The 1916 proceedings indicate that the Committee decided to publish its work by the time of the 1917 annual communication, regardless of the number of Lodges that had failed to participate in the project.

At the 1917 annual communication of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, Grand Master Saunders presented the finished work to the Craft. In the instance of Lodges that had failed to provide the requested information, the entries for those Lodges merely reflect the Lodge's name, number, location, the date on which they were chartered and their reported membership as of 1916.

The entries for the Lodges that did respond should not be considered an actual "history" of each Lodge. They are, rather, a snapshot of what each responding Lodge believed to be important to them at the time that they responded. While that does not necessarily diminish the information contained in the manuscript, it does provide some important context with respect to how to interpret the entries.

The Saunders Manuscripts were typed on a manual typewriter and are contained in large document binders, as one might expect to find holding deeds and mortgages in county courthouses. Saunders was, after all, an attorney, and he used the tools with which he was familiar to record his work. The typewritten pages have an obvious flaw. As the use of the typewriter ribbon progressed, the visibility of the typed words became fainter and fainter. Some pages are barely legible, at best. It is easy to tell when the typist decided to change the ribbon on the typewriter, because the words in the manuscripts suddenly become easy to read again.

Despite being somewhat difficult to read, and while not being a comprehensive history of the Lodges chartered by the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, the Saunders Manuscripts offer a valuable glimpse into Kentucky Freemasonry as of the time of their publication. The manuscripts offer two things: first, they identify what Kentucky Masons thought were the important historical aspects of their Lodges as of the early 20th Century; and, second, they illustrate just how difficult it was to persuade Kentucky Freemasons to participate in a project devoted to the preservation of their individual Lodge histories.

The Saunders Manuscripts, now over a century old, were never published. They were held in the offices of the Grand Lodge and used on an occasional basis to provide historical information to

Lodges or Masons upon request. The manuscripts were made available to William O. Ware Lodge of Research in 2020, and the copies that appear on this website were prepared at that time. The copies contain all of the flaws and limitations previously described, but, apart from the original documents, afford the best access to the information contained therein.

In a perfect world, the manuscripts would be re-imaged and digitized, thereby restoring their original legibility and preserving them for future generations. Such a project would necessitate the employment of professional services, and would, in all likelihood, be an expensive undertaking. Perhaps, at some future time, our Grand Lodge will allocate the financial resources needed to sustain such a project.

The life of Past Grand Master Saunders was cut tragically short when he was struck by an automobile on October 31, 1934, while crossing the street near his Stanford home during a rain and windstorm. Newspaper accounts reported that Saunders had walked directly into the path of the oncoming car. Taken to a hospital in Danville, Kentucky, he died there on November 7 from pneumonia. He was survived by his wife, Annie Alcorn Saunders, and a daughter, Mrs. W. C. Ames.

James Newton Saunders ranks among the most literate of men who ever held the office of Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky. The proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Iowa for 1918 described him as follows, “He is that rare combination – an able lawyer with the temperament of a poet.” His education, both religious and public, along with his legal training and his legislative service all served to equip him with a command of the language rare among men. It is not surprising that he turned his literary skills to good use in Freemasonry.

Saunders served as Grand Master at a time when questions of Masonic Law were submitted to Grand Masters for rulings. Those rulings, or “decisions,” had the force of law until subsequently approved or disapproved by the Grand Lodge. The decisions that Saunders authored are written clearly and without ambiguity. They reveal the depth of his understanding of Masonic Law, and his ability to effectively communicate his thoughts in regard to it.

A curiosity exists with respect to The Saunders Manuscripts. As previously noted, Saunders died in 1934. The last Lodges profiled in the original Manuscripts were two military Lodges that were set to work under dispensation at the time the United States entered World War I – W. R. Colston Army Lodge and Kentucky Rifle Lodge. Neither Lodge was ever chartered, and both were dissolved after the war ended. Kentucky Rifle Lodge became known, albeit briefly, as James N. Saunders Army Lodge.

After Saunders’s term as Grand Master, someone, presumably Saunders, continued to add entries for Lodges chartered after 1917. The last Lodge added during Saunders’s lifetime was South

Portsmouth Lodge No. 937 chartered in South Shore, Kentucky (Greenup County) on October 27, 1930.

Following the death of Saunders, the Grand Lodge of Kentucky continued to charter constituent Lodges, and most of the Lodges so chartered have entries in the Saunders Manuscripts. The last Lodge added was Stone City Lodge No. 963, chartered on October 18, 1973, in Garrison, Kentucky (Lewis County). Who authored those entries? We may, perhaps, never know the answer to that question, but someone at the Grand Lodge, at least in part, continued the work begun by Past Grand Master Saunders.