

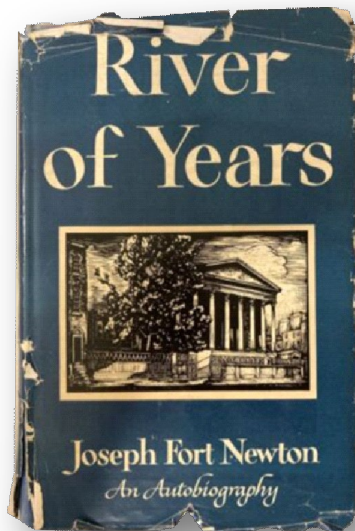
RIVER OF YEARS

Joseph Fort Newton

Reviewed by Dan M. Kemble, Past Master,
William O. Ware Lodge of Research

From 1914 to 1928, a span of roughly fifteen years, the Rev. Joseph Fort Newton produced some of the most lasting literary works on Freemasonry.

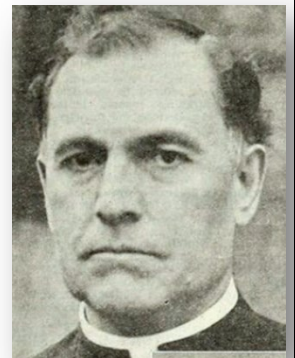
In 1946, Newton published his autobiography, *River of Years*. It is easy to conclude, after reading his autobiography, that if any man could be said to have Freemasonry hard-wired into his being, that man would surely be Joseph Fort Newton.



Written in chronological fashion, *River of Years* provides deep and clear insights into Newton's development as a man, a Mason and a theologian.

Newton was born on July 21, 1876, in Decatur, Texas. (His year of birth is often erroneously reported as being 1880.) His father was Lee Newton, and his mother was Sue Battle Green Newton. Lee Newton served as a Confederate soldier in the Civil War. Taken captive during the War, Lee Newton became gravely ill while interned in a Union prison camp. Upon learning that Lee Newton was a Mason, the commanding officer of the camp ordered the apparently dying soldier removed from the prison and transferred to his own quarters. In more comfortable surroundings, and benefiting from effective medical care, Lee Newton recovered his health. At the end of the War, the camp commander furnished the elder Newton with the funds necessary to return to his Texas home.

In *River of Years*, Joseph Fort Newton wrote of how, as a boy, he would listen as if mesmerized to the story of his father's illness and recovery while a prisoner of war. Always, the point of the story was the heroic action of a Brother-Mason who acted to save his father's life.



Sadly, in 1883, Lee Newton died at a relatively young age, and the image of Masons gathered around his father's open grave was burned deeply into six-year-old Joseph's mind. Joseph

WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

April 2023 Book Review

later recounted how the local Masons quietly rendered aid to his widowed mother following Lee Newton's death.

Lee Newton had been a Baptist minister but left the ministry and became a lawyer. In 1890, fourteen-year-old Joseph also felt the call of the divine, and, in 1895, at the age of nineteen, was ordained as a Baptist minister. Newton recounts feeling conflicted at the time of his ordination, due to his inability to accept Baptist doctrine as being authentically scriptural. Immediately after his ordination, he accepted the pastorate of a small, rural Baptist Church. He quickly came into conflict with members of his congregation for not being, in his words, a "damnationist."

In examining Newton's later career as a Freemason, it is important to remember this example of Newton's general outlook. Newton's orientation was one of conciliation and reconciliation. He viewed Freemasonry as a vehicle to promote friendship among men; or, if you will, the restoration of friendship among men. That attitude was replicated in the theological course that he followed.

As Newton tells his life story in *River of Years*, the threads of his theological journey, as well as the threads of his Masonic journey, become inseparably interwoven.

He relates that although he had little formal schooling, in 1895, at the age of 19, he enrolled as a student in Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Four things occurred while Newton was at Southern that had profound effect on his life.

First, and most obviously, he met his future wife, Jennie Mai Deatherage, of Sanders, Kentucky (to whom he referred as "Lady Brown-Eyes").

Next, he served as an associate chaplain for a state prison in Indiana, just across the Ohio River from Louisville. This was Newton's first intimate exposure to men convicted of criminal behavior. No bleeding heart, Newton described the prisoners as being "not immoral, but amoral," and as being exactly where they needed to be.

Third, he worked for a brief period of time for the "Courier-Journal," the Louisville newspaper edited by the renowned Henry Watterson. Newton was the paper's reporter for religious news. He recounted several conversations that he had with Watterson, and credited Watterson with helping him develop his style of writing and speaking. Watterson told him, "A minister is often content to get ideas out of his own mind. A journalist must them into the minds of others."

Finally, as a result of theological disagreement between a faculty member and the administration at Southern, Newton began to seriously question his own understanding of God, and started on the path that would eventually re-define his own theological beliefs.

In 1897, Newton left Southern Seminary without having graduated, and made his way back to Paris, Texas, where he became pastor of First Baptist Church. His theological differences

WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

April 2023 Book Review

with rigidly sectarian Baptist doctrine finally became too much, and in 1899, he resigned his pastorate, left the Baptist Church, and moved to St. Louis where he became affiliated with the Non-Sectarian Church of St. Louis. He maintained a long-distance romance with Jennie, and the two of them were married in Louisville on June 14, 1900.

After serving for a brief period of time as an itinerant preacher in New England, Newton and Jennie headed for Dixon, Illinois, where in 1902 he became pastor of People's Church. As pastor of People's Church, Newton distinguished himself.

He began a series of Sunday night talks called "Great Men and Great Books." These proved to be very popular and attracted large crowds to People's Church. Newton was clearly nurturing what would prove to be his life-long love for the written word.

While in Dixon, Newton became a somewhat controversial figure when he was denounced by evangelist Billy Sunday, who came to town for a revival. Sunday announced that there was one pastor in Dixon for whom he would not pray, and went on to say, "The doctrine of the universal Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man is an infernal lie." This was a contradiction and a condemnation of the core of Newton's religious beliefs. Newton wrote that Sunday's pulpit theatrics were "a ghastly caricature of religion." While in Dixon, Newton became a Mason, being initiated passed, and raised in Friendship Lodge No. 7.

In 1908, Newton moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where he became pastor of Liberal Christian Church (Universalist). While in Cedar Rapids, he affiliated with Mt. Hermon Lodge No. 263.

In Cedar Rapids, Newton published his first two books. The first of these was a biography of Chicago preacher David Swing (1909). The second was the product of Newton's tremendous admiration for Abraham Lincoln. Newton was able to make the acquaintance of the personal physician for William Herndon, Lincoln's former law partner. The young pastor was able to obtain original source documents related to Lincoln and his early law practice. Newton's book, *Lincoln and Herndon*, was published in 1910.

The success of these two books, coupled with Newton's growing notoriety as a preacher, indirectly led to his next book, *The Builders, A Story and Study of Masonry*, which, although published in 1914, is still considered a classic Masonic text.

Newton told the story of how he began to ruminate on whether there was a "little book" that newly made Masons could be given to help acquaint them with the history and philosophy of the Order. Hearing Newton's questions about such a book, Iowa Grand Master Louis Block suggested that Newton, himself, was the right man to write such a book.

In 1915, Newton became the first editor of "The Builder" magazine, widely believed to be the best Masonic publication of all-time. His editorship of "The Builder" was short lived,

WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

April 2023 Book Review

however, because in 1916 he accepted the pastorate of City Temple in London (Anglican, Non-Conformist). Newton was the first American to be called to the pastorate of the church.

Newton went to London in the midst of the horrors of World War I. In ***River of Years***, he recounts his experiences as a wartime pastor, and as an American sojourning in Europe.

While pastoring in London, the call of Freemasonry continued to prove irresistible to Newton. Upon the invitation of Scots Mason, Andrew Sommerville MacBride, Newton went to speak to Lodge Progress in Glasgow. Although Newton and MacBride likely met in person only the one time, MacBride's influence on Newton was significant. MacBride had recently published his renowned work, ***Speculative Masonry***. Newton later caused it to be reprinted in the United States (he wrote the Foreword for the American version) and frequently referred to MacBride in his later writings.

While in England, he wrote ***Modern Masonry***, published in 1917. ***Modern Masonry*** was a very brief restatement of the salient facts as set forth in ***The Builders***. ***Modern Masonry*** was published as a part of The Masonic Service Association's "Little Library Series."

In 1919, following the end of World War I, Newton, returned to the United States to become pastor of the Church of the Divine Paternity (Universalist) in New York City.

His Masonic writing continued during this time, as he published ***The Men's House (1923)*** and ***The Great Light in Masonry (1924)***.

In 1925, Newton moved to Philadelphia to become pastor of Memorial Church St. Paul (Episcopal). He would spend the remainder of his life in Philadelphia.

In 1926, Newton was ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church.

Newton's writing was not limited to Freemasonry. He published several volumes of his own sermons and edited various editions of ***Best Sermons of the Year***. His personal notoriety increased when he was named as one of the top five protestant preachers in America.

His Masonic writing continued apace, with the publication of ***The Religion of Masonry*** in 1927, and ***Short Talks on Masonry*** in 1928.

In 1930 he became the rector of St. James Church in Philadelphia, where he remained for five years.

From 1935 to 1938, he was a Special Preacher to the Associated Churches of Philadelphia.

WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

April 2023 Book Review

In 1938 he accepted the rectorship of the Church of St. Luke and the Epiphany in Philadelphia. He remained in this position until his death from a heart attack on January 24, 1950, at the age of 73 ½ years.

Among the many interesting aspects of ***River of Years*** are Newton's sketches of leaders and prominent figures of his time with whom he had contact. Occasionally revealing a very dry wit, and always urbane, his writing is filled with references to both classical and modern literary works.

The story of the Reverend Joseph Fort Newton is especially compelling when considered in context. His professional career began on the eve of World War I, continued through the great depression and World War II and ended in the early years of the atomic era. Through tragedy, horror and upheaval, Newton never lost the confidence and joy of his faith, nor did his positive and optimistic outlook waver.

River of Years is a rare glimpse into the spirit of a man who believed in the goodness of God, the brotherhood of man and the usefulness of Freemasonry to promote conciliation and friendship among men throughout the world. In this respect, his theology and his understanding of Freemasonry were mirror images of each other.

River of Years, originally published in 1946 by J. P. Lippincott Co., remains available from online booksellers.