

A MASON IN MOCCASINS

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When we think of the time of the American Revolution, as Masons we often remember with pride the contributions and exploits of the members of our Fraternity who often played such noteworthy and influential roles in that glorious endeavor. We recall the wisdom and ability of Benjamin Franklin, the devotion and heroism of Revere and Warren, and the steadfast determination and inspiration of that great leader, George Washington. However, as we gratefully remember these men and their contributions to our Country and their service to the Masonic Lodge, we should not forget that there were many others, not so well known, but no less devoted to their cause and to this Brotherhood. It is one of these lesser known Brethren of that day that I speak of tonight. He never trod the corridors of power, he did not command armies or write great statements of purpose and plan. I speak of a man who lived his life as a man of the forest and the hunt. I speak tonight of a man who came from the most humble beginnings, in fact, from the depths of the forest in the wilderness of Colonial America. This man, was, my Brethren, so far as I can determine, the first American Indian who became a Freemason. Thus, the title which I have given this presentation, A Mason in Moccasins.

I first found reference to this man in a book entitled Masonic Biography, or Sketches of Eminent Free-Masons, by C. Moore, and published in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1863. I confirmed his story in Mackey's Encyclopedia of Free-Masonry where his biography was given in a much-abbreviated form. Thus, I believe we can accept the story that I relate as having a solid foundation in fact and not as mere fancy or legend.

The best information available indicates that the subject of our story, Joseph Brant, to use his English name, was the son of a Mohawk Indian mother. His father was also of the Mohawk tribe, but of a sub-tribe called "the Wolf." These tribes were members of the Six Nations, of which the leading tribe was the Iroquois. The Six Nations were made up of six Indian tribes who were centered in the northern colonies, principally in what is now western New York and Pennsylvania. The subject of this talk was born on the banks of the Ohio River, undoubtedly north and east of where we meet tonight (in Covington), in the year 1742. He was born during a trip by his parents to the great hunting grounds in the west. He was named by his parents,

“Thayendaneges,” the English interpretation of which has been given as, “two sticks of wood bound together,” or “a bundle of sticks.” Its significance in the Indian tongue may have been strength, or it may have denoted the two tribes in his parentage.

Joseph Brant, as I shall refer to him, was raised as a usual young Indian boy until his father died during his childhood. His mother then returned to the home of the Six Nations, bringing with her the little son and a daughter. Here the first reliable history of our Chieftain begins, as before we have been dealing with Indian lore. Now we start with the white man’s written history. After returning to the Six Nations, Joseph’s mother soon remarried another Indian, from whose name of Barnet, Joseph is said to have derived the name Brant, as we know him today.

The Six Nations were also known as the Confederation of the Iroquois. They had lived in New York for many years prior to the coming of the white man. Before the white man, they were the lords of the land from the Hudson River on the east to Lake Erie on the west; and from Lake Ontario on the North to the confluence of the Susquehanna and Tioga Rivers on the south. While the English ruled the eastern seaboard through their royal governors, Christian missionaries came among the Six Nations. Brant, who is said to have inherited a chieftainship from birth, was baptized in his youth and took the name Joseph. His sister was also baptized a Christian and too the name of Mary, or Molly, as she was familiarly called. We shall hear more of Moly in just a moment.

The Six Nations were allies of the English, and when the French and Indian War broke out in 1754, the English sent an expedition to fight the French in Canada. The force was led by Sir William Johnson, who at the time was the Indian Superintendent of the Six Nations. There was quite a battle at Lake George, and while we don’t know if Joseph Brant was a hero, we do know that he came to the attention of Sir William who later took him on other ventures. Joseph became a great favorite and a protégé of this influential Englishmen.

Later, when Joseph’s sister, Molly, was a beautiful girl of sixteen, she also came to the attention of Sir William in an unusual way. It was during a review of troops held before the English Commander that the girl begged a ride on the horse of one of the English officers. She cut such a dashing and exciting figure as she rode about the field that Sir William took a fancy to her and took her home with him as his wife in a manner consistent with the Indian customs. She lived with him for many years and bore him several children. Sir William married her in the English church a short time before his death so as to make these children legitimate. Many of their descendants are said to still be living in Canada today.

Due to the regard that Sir William had for Joseph, and his involvement with his sister, Joseph was sent by Sir William to an Indian charity school in New Lebanon, Connecticut. He received the rudiment of a good English education at this school which stood him in good stead in his later life. After leaving this school, Joseph returned to his home near Johnstown, New York where he worked in public affairs for Sir William and the missionaries in the area. In this way, Joseph came to learn and adopt many of the customs of his white neighbors, retaining, however, many of the habits of his native tribes which enabled him to exert a commanding influence in their councils and movements.

About that time in 1766, a new element was introduced into the Anglo-American society at Johnstown. This new element was the establishment of a Masonic Lodge. Joseph's friend and patron, Sir William, became its first Master, and many of the English army members and the missionaries became members. However, there is no evidence that Joseph Brant, or any other Indian, was ever made a Mason during this early period of the American Masonic Lodge.

It had long been the policy of the Six Nations that they were allied to the King of England in his disputes with the French in Canada. This agreement had often been ratified and confirmed by warbelts and ceremonies. Sir William was well regarded by the Indians and lived among them as the King's representative. When trouble began between the English and the American colonists, the Americans became concerned that the Indians might actively help the English and thus become very troublesome neighbors. The American colonies sent official commissioners to the Indians to say that the quarrel was not of their concern and asked the Indians to remain neutral and at peace with both.

This request for peace was not honored, and the Indians declared themselves on the side of the English. Joseph Brant was by then the war-chief of the Mohawk tribe, and he joined with those who remembered their bonds to the King. In 1775, Brant visited England and was well-received as an ally and an Indian king. He was welcomed to London by members of the nobility and remained there as an honored guest for several months. He wore European dress, but he wore it over a belt of the finest wampum and a polished tomahawk at his side.

While no written record can be found, he was apparently made a Mason while he resided in London. There was no prejudice of race in the Lodge there and men of many races met as Brothers in the Lodge in that cosmopolitan city. At any rate, Brant is

known to have been a Mason shortly after his return from London, and it is logical that he received the Degrees in the city.

After returning to his home, Brant organized and led the Mohawk warriors against the American patriots. He was fearless in battle and a worthy foe to all who opposed him and the fierce Mohawks. Interestingly, however, there are several incidents that illustrate the value which Brant placed on his association with the Masonic Lodge. Once, after the battle of the "Cedars" near Montreal, an American captive was taken prisoner and was, according to the cruel customs of the Indians, going to be tortured and burned alive. The American had been led to the stake and his feet were being tied when he, in the agony of despair, made the great appeal of a Mason in time of danger. Chieftain Brant saw the sign and managed, by virtue of his powerful position, to rescue the American from his impending fate. Later, the American was turned over to the British as a war prisoner and eventually returned to his home.

Years later, after the Revolutionary War, Joseph Brant often visited with this man and on a least one occasion went with him to a meeting of the local Lodge. This was in 1805, nearly thirty years after the incident of the rescue from a fiery death.

On yet another occasion, during the summer of 1777, Brant gathered a large force of hostile Indians on the Susquehanna River in northeastern Pennsylvania. The American general, Herkimer, moved his force in position to do battle. Prior to the battle, however, General Herkimer decided to try to dissuade Brant from causing further harm to the American cause. These two men had been neighbors before the war, and both were Masons. The day came for the meeting between the opposing armies. The Indians outnumbered the Americans but hid themselves in the surrounding forest. The meeting was held but no agreement could be reached. Brant told Herkimer that the Indians would honor their pledge to the English, and since they had fought the white men while they were united, they would certainly make war on them now that they were divided.

At the conclusion of the conference, Brant gave a signal and his warriors stepped from the shadows of the trees. The Americans became alarmed as they believed they would be killed on the spot. Brant instead told them to return home and expressed to General Herkimer that he appreciated his coming to see him, and that he might someday return the compliment. With that, he turned on his heel and disappeared into his native forest.

There are records of many other such incidents of forbearance and Masonic fraternal concern that have been recorded in history. All information that has come down to us indicates that although the Mohawks engaged in a terrible war, there is no

doubt that Joseph Brant remembered his vows at the Masonic altar and attempted to carry them out to the best of his ability.

After the war, the Indians were, of course, on the losing side and had to pay the price that comes to all such losers. The English tried to protest their Indian allies but did little for them materially other than offer them a tract of land in Canada to offset the loss of their beautiful homeland in New York. In 1785 Brant again went to England to try to adjust the claims of his nation upon the British Crown. Again, while in England he was treated royally, and while there he used his time wisely for the betterment of his people. He cultivated friendships with English nobility and politicians to help them politically, and he translated the Book of St. Mark and the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer into the Mohawk language to assist their moral and religious life. Having done all he could to assist the Six Nations to recover from the losses sustained in the War, he returned to his home in Canada.

He often visited the United States to see old friends and to work with the tribes that were under pressure from the federal government. The Americans wanted to divide and remove the tribes and Brant often fought that battle as ably as he had earlier done during the war. It was during one of these trips to New York State that he appeared as a visitor to the Lodge in Hudson, New York to which we referred earlier. His residence after the war and until his death in 1807 was near the head of Lake Ontario on the Canadian side. He died there at the age of 64 and was buried in Grand Rivers, Ontario, near the church which he himself helped erect. Thus, closed the life of Thayendanege, the Mohawk Chieftain and the first American Indian Mason.

What can we say of the life of this man who shared in the Brotherhood of Fraternity at our altar? He was, and basically remained, a man of the forest who could be a ferocious Indian warrior with all that meant for the inhabitants of the American frontier of his day. Yet, he was also a man of honor, who recognized and abided by his obligations as a Chief allied with the English. He fought well, but he tempered the cruel customs of his people whenever possible to the Brothers of the Masonic Lodge. Thus, he honored his obligations as a Mason under difficult conditions and in unusual circumstances. He was a leader who could discourse at a council fire or in a parlor at high tea in London. He was a religious man who assisted in building a church for his people and who translated portions of the Bible for their inspiration and edification. He was a hunter, a warrior, but always an upright man who remembered his vows and tried to live his life thus circumscribed. Can we ask for more? I submit to you, Brethren, that he was an exceptionally good choice to have been given the honor of having been the first Indian raised to that distinction of being a Master Mason.