

WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

BOOK REVIEW – July 2020

How & Why Freemasonry Came to Kentucky: The Backstory

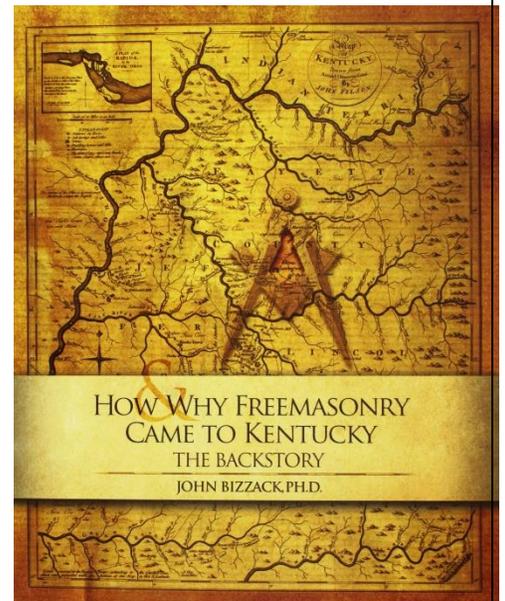
Author: John W. Bizzack, Ph.D.

Reviewed by Michael Bronner, William O. Ware Lodge of Research

Whatever its imprecise and intriguing meaning, history begins where you want it to and John Bizzack's account of Freemasonry's establishment in Kentucky is a delightful read, full of historical commentary, good research, and many fresh insights. And like a good story, there are many twists and turns that the reader can ponder along the way. Bizzack (Past Master Lexington Lodge No. 1, William O. Ware Research Fellow) is a prolific Masonic author and accordingly knows his subject well.

This brief book of about 60 pages is divided into four parts including an Introduction and Prologue. Part I provides the orientation and context as well as the background of 'When Did Kentucky Become Kentucky?' Part II discusses the role of the Craft as Kentucky moved toward statehood with the first officially constituted Lodge. Part III focuses on the interesting role that Major John Belli played during this early period. Part IV provides illustrations and lists prominent Masons of this period and those more recently. Conclusions and an Epilogue summarize the text materials at the end of Parts II and III.

Bizzack begins by describing an early hunting expedition in June of 1775, consisting of a 'small group of men, most of who were Masons' (p. 15), which explored the territory and at one camping site, led to the establishment of the village of McConnell Springs, named for one of the hunting party. The name of the area around McConnell Springs later evolved into Lexington; however, the recounting of this early history is not without some confusion as various publications did not agree on either the rationale or the name, or the individuals involved in establishing it, or even the precise dates involved. Such is the case of many early history reviews. The author cites a range of plausible research and identifies members of this



hunting party as Masons, and one member, John Maxwell (also called Maxell), was earlier credited with providing the name, 'Lexington.'

Since the present-day Kentucky was actually a western part of the State of Virginia in 1772—extending west all the way to the Mississippi River—the territory evolved and in 1776 became Kentucky County and 16 years later, in 1792, became a state, now divided into 120 counties, the fourth most numerous in the current U. S. At that point it was called the District of Kentucky, running through various other distinctions prior to statehood.

Responding to a felt need for men to gather and discuss subjects of interest, a Political Club was formed in Danville in 1786 consisting of 35 'distinguished men,' predating the first Kentucky Masonic Lodge. Twelve of these men were known to be Freemasons who had become members earlier through their military and/or political associations. The club served, according to Bizzack, as a 'training ground' for the State's future leadership requirements. While apparently not intentional, little written notice was taken of those individuals and their meetings, which existed from 1786 to 1878, a remarkably long period of time. This lack of documentation may have been intentional or accidental but since one of the many topics discussed involved Spain's interest in becoming an ally of a Kentucky secession, a low-key approach would have been critical.

Earlier in 1773 in Williamsburg, Virginia a 'philosophical society' had been formed, which provided a similar function later adopted by the Danville Political Club. Such a society had been organized by Benjamin Franklin as early as 1743 in the form of The American Philosophical Society, and a number of the membership of both organizations were similar. It was noted by Bizzack that John Adams and John Hancock were among the founding members of the Massachusetts branch in 1748.

The alumni of the Danville Political Club and at least a dozen relatives served in highly placed political and influential positions during this period and as later noted, at least half of their members were Freemasons. Indeed, the Political Club served as a 'training ground' for future Masonic lodge officers and political leaders.

The Political Club of Danville operated in association with The Kentucky Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge. This society largely mirrored the membership of the former and often debated the same subjects. It was organized in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1773 with the Political Club following by 13 years. Benjamin Franklin was credited with the concept and the formation of the group—the called the American Philosophical Society—as early as 1748. The organization moved from Virginia to New York City and in 1780 gravitated to Massachusetts.

Members of one society also found homes with another like-minded group and similar organizations cropped up with many having common membership and overlapping agendas. Many discussions focused on similar issues of the associated groups. When the

Philosophic Society moved from Williamsburg to Philadelphia and merged with the Political Club, among others, Franklin became the president of the combined societies, serving until his death in 1790. However that may be, Kentucky still did not have a dedicated Lodge.

While assembling a Masonic Lodge in Kentucky could only be granted by a petition to the Grand Lodge in Virginia, which allowed it to be recognized by other duly constituted lodges, work had to be done. And since the closest lodge in Virginia was more than 250 miles from Kentucky, the need was obvious and Lexington, being in the center of the new State was another obvious choice.

Thus, a formal petition to establish a Kentucky Lodge was created with well-connected leaders including Richard Anderson, Green Clay and John Fowler. These three men, while not comprising the entire list of signers of the petition carried to Richmond, were all Freemasons, and all had military backgrounds. Bizzack credits them as being the prime movers for the establishment of the first Grand Lodge in Kentucky, called Lexington Lodge No. 25. Lexington was the geographic center of the territory and had an expanding business center as well. All three men were well known in Virginia and all three served as early Kentucky Lodge Masters once their petition had been accepted by the Virginia Grand Lodge. Clay, however, was the only one present at Richmond's petition review. An interesting side note was that there was no agreement that these three men ever travelled together to serve the petition in Virginia, so Clay was the only one of the three present at that time. The territory/terrain and harsh environment were certainly sufficient to create the many hazards serving to make their combined trek extremely difficult.

Bizzack continued to expand on Lexington Lodge No. 25's contributions and encouragement of other chartered lodges, notably in Paris, Georgetown, Frankfort and Shelbyville. He also confirmed that Lexington Lodge No. 25 was named as the result that it was the 25th such lodge chartered in Virginia; however, a dozen years later, in 1800 when the Lodge finally received its charter in Kentucky, it was redesignated and renamed Lexington Lodge No. 1, an important distinction today.

In his Conclusions section Bizzack suggests that 'The importance and role Freemasonry played in the lives of early colonialists cannot be discounted.' (p. 35) and further relates that '. . . when history is examined in context with the times and facts are gathered to support the non-romantic versions offered by early historians, it is clear that Masons in Kentucky without a lodge to attend, the Danville Political Club and the Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge both played key roles, albeit behind the scenes, which led to the charter of Lexington Lodge No. 25 in 1788.' (p. 36)

Finally, Bizzack provides an interesting Addendum to his book, a section entitled the 'Enigmatic Life of Major John Belli.' Only a snippet is included here; however, it was evident that this European-born patrician and 'gentleman from the old school, and 'of

broad intelligence and of great influence' was a 'man of much learning and very influential in Masonic circles.' (p. 41) It is also interesting to note that Belli was deeply involved in the Political Club as well as the Society, writing the former's constitution and by-laws and serving as a member of the ten constitutional conventions held in Danville, leading to Kentucky statehood. There is evidence that Belli was a Freemason and a 'charter member' of Lexington Lodge No. 25, which was formed in 1788. Belli arrived in Virginia in 1783 from France; he held English, Dutch, and U.S. citizenship and was well recommended to George Washington, Henry Knox and John Jay—among others, most likely through letters through his profitable mercantile business dealings and by influential people in Europe.

Belli was also in service as an 'agent' (some say 'spy') for George Washington and Secretary of War, Henry Knox, serving as a Quartermaster and Paymaster respectively in Ohio. During the era of Indian uprisings, Belli served under Washington's 'confidential mission' assignment leading to the Battle of Fallen Timbers in mid-1794 against the Western Indian Confederacy of the Ohio Valley under General ('Mad') Anthony Wayne.

The issue of Spain's involvement and intent in Kentucky politics was of great concern at the time and it was hard to dismiss what might have been a potential alliance with Spain, which controlled land on both sides of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. This effectively separated Kentucky from the existing states, possibly forever. Fortunately, the efforts and resolve of the new territory and the effort required changed Spain's mind and she departed the scene without new territory in hand or on the table.

Belli's work was effectively done in Kentucky and he demitted from Lexington Lodge No. 25 in 1796 and appeared to drop out of Masonic life. He retired to his large Ohio estate where he died in 1809. And as Bizzack wryly noted, 'Belli arrived in Kentucky with little fanfare. He left the same way.' (p. 42)

Bizzack also includes another story of an intriguing Freemason, General James Wilkinson, who was an active participant in two Danville conventions calling for statehood as well as closer ties with Spain. Wilkinson was not well treated in historical records, citing his 'lack of moral character' and who 'remained a paid secret agent of the Spanish government, a devious, untrustworthy, and corrupt man' (p. 43) Certainly not a friend of Kentucky!

Finally, in conclusion and to provide helpful illustrations to his book, Bizzack included a section called Images for Posterity, which included the names and dates of the Masters of Lexington Lodges Nos. 25 and 1; a map of lodge locations and early Masonic Temple sites; the names of prominent and pioneer Masons; accomplished members and officers; the current lodge room; and the 2015 Officers. In all Bizzack provides a very interesting book, a fascinating read, and a review of the complex history of the early Freemasons in Kentucky.

You'll enjoy it!

Other related books by the author include *Discovering Freemasonry in Context*; *For the Good of the Order*; *Where History Fails, Legend Prevails*; and *Taking Issue*. An author's biography and a page of acknowledgements are also included.

Review by Michael Bronner

(Boone-Union Lodge 304 – Union, KY; Composite Lodge 819 – NYC; Scottish Rite – Valley of New York; Mecca Shrine – NYC; American Lodge of Research – NYC; William O. Ware Lodge of Research – KY)

NB: The writer is a newcomer to Kentucky, having spent most of his professional life teaching at New York University in Manhattan. The review of Bizzack's book was, thus, truly a learning experience, and any faults, errors, or omissions are mine alone. Michael Bronner