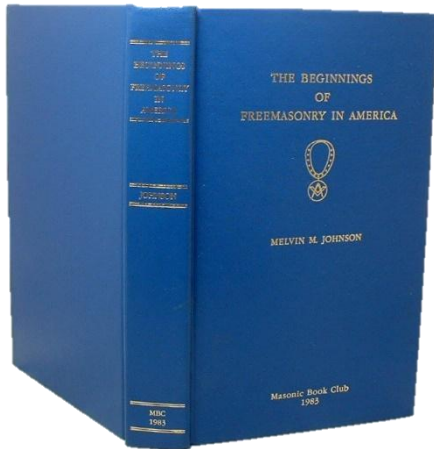


# WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

## BOOK REVIEW

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### THE BEGINNINGS OF FREEMASONRY IN AMERICA

Containing a Reference to all that is known of  
Freemasonry in the Western Hemisphere prior to 1750,  
and short sketches of the lives of some  
of the Provincial Grand Masters

Melvin M. Johnson

Review by

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American history and the history of Freemasonry in America are virtually parallel paths. In *The Beginnings of Freemasonry in America*, M. W. Bro. Melvin M. Johnson, PGM of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, provided what is perhaps the first scholarly treatment of when and where Freemasonry came to America, along with who constituted its early leadership.

M. W. Bro. Johnson begins with reviewing the earliest evidences of Freemasons having arrived on the North American continent. In Johnson's account, Jonathan Belcher, a Boston merchant who was made a Mason in England in 1705, became the first Freemason in America. Belcher was appointed to serve as Governor of Massachusetts and New Hampshire and served in that office from 1730 to 1741. In 1730, the Grand Lodge of England claimed jurisdiction over the American colonies. The Grand Master serving at that time, the Duke of Norfolk, appointed Daniel Coxe as Provincial Grand Master for New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Despite his appointment, Coxe, apparently, never actually served as Provincial Grand Master,

and in 1733 a new Grand Master, the Duke of Montague, appointed Henry Price as Provincial Grand Master for "New England, the Dominions and the Territories belonging thereto."

M. W. Bro. Johnson identifies Price as "the founder of Freemasonry" in America.

M. W. Bro. Johnson's narrative begins in earnest, however, with the formation of the first lodges. He reviews the claims of the lodges in Philadelphia and Boston as to which is actually oldest. He points to the existence of a ledger book designated "Lieber B," which appears to substantiate the claim that the lodge in Philadelphia may have been meeting as a "time immemorial" lodge in its earliest period. The Lodge established in Boston, which Johnson refers to as, "First Lodge," was the first American Lodge formally chartered by the Grand Lodge of England.

The Boston Lodge adopted its first set of by-laws in October of 1733. It may be amusing for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Masons to see that much of the first set of by-laws was devoted to the payment of dues and the

necessity of collecting the appropriate fees from newly made Masons before their admittance into the lodge. M. W. Bro. Johnson also recounts the example of the first instance of an American lodge establishing a charity fund to be used for the relief of its members.

Taking the period from 1733 to 1750 on a year-by-year basis, M. W. Bro. Johnson recounts Benjamin Franklin's printing of *Anderson's Constitutions* in 1734, marking the first printing of Masonic material on American soil. In the same year, Henry Price's authority was extended to include all of North America. Freemasonry rapidly found footholds in Georgia (a lodge in Savannah "meeting according to the old customs" in 1734) and South Carolina (1735).

By the middle 1730s, colonial newspapers were regularly reporting accounts of Masonic meetings and publishing articles of particular interest to Masons. One such article appeared in the "Boston Evening Post" in 1736, which reported the persecution of Freemasons in Holland.

Freemasonry's ability to attract ridicule and derision was apparent in the colonies as early as 1738. In that year, the "Boston Evening Post" published two accounts in that reveal the extent to which the Fraternity generated antipathy. The first article was reprinted from a London magazine. It was a parody of a Masonic procession by a group calling themselves "Scald Miserable Masons."

The second article was far more tragic in nature. Apparently, a young Philadelphian, identified only as, "D. R.," desired to become a Freemason. Apprenticed in a Philadelphia shop, he informed his master of his wishes. His master, who was not a Freemason, falsely told "D. R." that he was a Mason and that he would arrange for his entry into the Fraternity. Intending to play a practical joke on his apprentice, the Masonic imposter organized an "initiation" that consisted of hazing and rude jokes. "D. R.," who was blindfolded during the ceremony, had a pan of "burning spirits (alcohol)" thrown on him. The burns were severe and "D. R." subsequently died from them. The imposter and his companions were later tried, but not convicted for "D. R.'s" death. For a time, at least, sympathy was aroused on behalf of the Fraternity.

Included in *The Beginnings of Freemasonry in America* are several sketches of the lives of prominent Americans who were active in Freemasonry and who were early leaders of the Craft in America. Jonathan Belcher, Henry Price, Thomas Oxnard, Robert Tomlinson and Richard Gridley are among the notable Americans whose biographies are included.

When reading *The Beginnings of Freemasonry in America*, one cannot help but come to an appreciation of the extent to which the development of American Freemasonry was a significant part of the development of American communities. Masons met, processed, prayed and dined; and did so all under the watchful gaze of the public eye. The American public, at the time, was quite aware of the existence of Freemasonry, and, generally, approved of its presence. While detractors were, in fact, present, the institution of Freemasonry was generally appealing to the upwardly mobile men of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Its attractiveness brought to it the men who were colonial leaders, and who would go on to become leaders in the fledgling nation.

Written in almost a diary format, *The Beginnings of Freemasonry in America* follows a very linear path in describing the events that occurred in Freemasonry in the years between 1730 and 1750. M. W. Bro. Johnson meticulously researched and reviewed the records available to him at the time of his writing, and organized the information contained therein in a very logical and easy to follow fashion. The result is a very scholarly work, whose sources and citations are carefully noted. In short, this is a very reliable addition to the field of Masonic research.

For the Mason, or other historian, who wants an accurate and accessible study in the origins of American Freemasonry, ***The Beginnings of Freemasonry in America*** is an excellent place to start.

Throughout his heralded Masonic career, Melvin M. Johnson contributed to the advancement of Freemasonry in almost every way imaginable. A noted Boston attorney, and later the Dean of Boston University's College of Law, Johnson was a friend and colleague of noted jurist Roscoe Pound. M. W. Bro. Johnson served as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts in 1914, 1915, and 1916. He served as Sovereign Grand Commander, Supreme Council, A. A. S. R., Northern Jurisdiction, from 1933 to 1953.

***The Beginnings of Freemasonry*** in America was first published in 1924 by Southern Publishers, Inc., Masonic Publications Division. ***The Beginnings of Freemasonry in America***, though long out of print, is available from online booksellers. While an original copy may occasionally be found, it is largely available in print on demand editions.