

The History of Masonry in Florida

Courtesy of Grand Lodge of Florida

The History of Masonry in Florida cannot be traced properly until the source from which it derived its authority has been firmly established. Inasmuch as Masonry in Florida and in the various States of the Union was established by authority from Masonry in the British Isles, a brief review of the early Masonic activities there should be reported.

The historical records of Freemasonry in Florida were for many years hidden from the world, lying dormant in unmarked and forgotten files. Historians made various attempts to report the early Masonic activities on this territory. Their efforts were in vain. In 1898, the first authoritative record of Masonry in Florida came to light. This record was a rare and very old copy of "Preston's Illustration" which was presented to the Grand Lodge of Florida by Doctor F. F. Bond of Thorncliff, Brighthouse, England. On the title page of the prized gift, the following words were inscribed: "The Gift of James Murray to St. Andrews Lodge No. 1, West Florida, June 27, 1776." This was the first reliable information that a Masonic Lodge had existed in Florida at such an early date and was the spark that kindled the interest to search for the history of Masonry in the Grand Jurisdiction of Florida. M. W. James M. Hilliard, Grand Master in 1898, appointed R. W. Silas B. Wright, Deputy Grand Master, to search for any additional information that might have a bearing on the history of Florida Masonry and to make a written report of his findings to the next Grand Lodge. Brother Wright made two appeals, one to the Board of Editors of the "History of Ancient and Honorable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons and Concordant Orders," and the other to the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. The Board of Editors was unable to furnish any information that would be beneficial or that would support historical facts about Masonry in Florida, but the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania reported that there were documents and records in possession of that Grand Lodge that would prove the existence of Masonry in Florida during the early period of the country. The records, so the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania reported, had been found among the old records of that Grand Jurisdiction which had been boxed and placed in storage. These records were compiled by the Library Committee of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania under the title "Old Masonic Lodge of Pennsylvania, Moderns and Ancients, 1730 1800."

The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, through its Grand Secretary, made the records and documents available to R. W. Brother Wright, who studied and copied documents and papers pertinent to Florida. Authentic copies of these papers are now filed in the archives of the Grand Lodge of Florida and are a part of its St. Andrews Lodge No. 1, of West Florida, and other documents which cover portions of the period from 1768 through 1785. Brother Wright prepared and gave a detailed report on his findings which was included in the 1899 Grand Lodge Proceedings. The charter of St. Andrews Lodge No. 1 of West Florida was issued on May 3, 1771 by the "Provincial Grand Lodge of the Southern District of North America." The petitioners for this Lodge were members of Lodge No. 108 of their register of Scotland and were attached to the 31st Regiment of Foot of the British Army stationed at Pensacola.

Ten Master Masons applied for the charter and are listed as charter members. The charter was signed by James Grant, Provincial Grand Master of the Provincial Grand Lodge of the Southern District of North America, and other officials of the Provincial Grand Lodge. In addition to the certified copy of the charter of St. Andrews Lodge, there were other documents and papers relating to early Masonry in Florida. There were records and minutes of St. Andrews Lodge which revealed the plight of this Lodge and its ties with its Provincial Grand Lodge.

These historical records were definite proof of the activities of the Masonic Fraternity in Florida and further revealed that its activity had emanated from the Grand Lodge of Scotland. Brother Wright immediately wrote that Grand Lodge requesting confirmation of the authenticity of these records and any other information from the records of that Grand Jurisdiction. Their records not only confirmed the accuracy of the records found by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, but also shed light on the Provincial Grand Lodge of the Southern District of North America. The following excerpts are taken from the reply of R. W. Brother Lyon: "In searching our Grand Lodge records, I find under date of March 15, 1769. . . 'Having read a petition from James Grant, Esq., Governor of the Province of East Florida, Henry Cunningham, late Senior Warden of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, and many other brethren residing in the province aforesaid, craving a charter for holding a Lodge there by the stile and title of Grant's East Florida Lodge, and also entreating that the Grand Lodge would appoint the said Governor, James Grant, Provincial Grand Master over the lodges in the Southern District of North America, the Grand Lodge granted the desire of that petition and authorized a charter to be made out accordingly, and likewise a commission appointing Governor James Grant, Provincial Grand Master, over the lodges in the Southern District of North America'."

On March 15, 1768, a charter was issued by the Grand Lodge of Scotland to "Grant's East Florida Lodge No. 143," to be located in St. Augustine, in the Territory of Florida. This was the first Masonic Lodge to be established in what is now the State of Florida. On this same date the "Provincial Grand Lodge over Lodges in the Southern District of North America" was created and located at St. Augustine, in the Territory of Florida. Honorable James Grant, Governor of the Territory of Florida, was named Provincial Grand Master. This Grand Body functioned until 1783 when it was suppressed by the Dominican Priesthood and the Spanish Government. All records of this Grand Lodge were destroyed or were carried away and are still missing. The meager information that is available was found in the archives of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania and the Grand Lodge of Scotland.

The fate of the first Masonic Lodge, "Grant's East Florida Lodge," in the Territory of Florida, is not known, but it is assumed that it was suppressed at the same time as the Provincial Grand Lodge. The records founds in the archives of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania gave a clear picture of the operations and the fate of Florida's second Masonic Lodge, St. Andrew's Lodge of Pensacola. Pensacola and the Territory of West Florida were captured by the Spanish

in 1781. The Masonic Fraternity again was suppressed by the Dominican Priesthood and the Spanish Government and the Masons were forced to flee. Even though the Masonic Brethren faced grave dangers, they did not leave until they had obtained the charter and records which included the minutes of every communication that had been held since the Lodge was chartered. After they reached the safety of Charles Town, the plight of St. Andrews Lodge No. 1 was reported to the Provincial Grand Lodge on February 9, 1782. This report was assembled and prepared by the Worshipful Master, Thomas Underwood, the Junior Warden, H. Beaumont, and three other members, and forwarded to the Provincial Grand Master in St. Augustine. The Provincial Grand Lodge at St. Augustine acknowledged receipt of the communication, and on March 14, 1782, issued a dispensation to the Brethren of St. Andrews Lodge to work at Charles Town, South Carolina. This authorization stated: "Under your charter until it shall please God to restore you to the Ancient seat of your lodge in West Florida, provided you have the Master and a sufficient number of members of the same to form a lodge." It was signed by R. W. John Forbes, Deputy Grand Master, the Senior and the Junior Grand Wardens and the Grand Secretary.

In compliance with the Dispensation and to assure adequate and proper Masonic protection, a meeting was called and all Masters of the Ancient Lodges of Free and Accepted Masons of Charles Town were summoned. The stated business of this meeting was set forth in the call "to examine into their regularity and their right to work as Masons." A "Clear Bill of Regularity" was duly issued and signed by the Masters and Past Masters of four Lodges. This action cleared St. Andrews Lodge No. 1 of any doubt, and their labors as a regular Lodge were resumed in Charles Town, South Carolina. When the "Provincial Grand Lodge over the lodges in the Southern District of North America" was suppressed in 1783 by the Spaniards, St. Andrews Lodge No. 1 of West Florida, working under Dispensation in Charles Town, was without authority to function. A new charter from an active Grand Lodge was essential.

The Officers and members of St. Andrews Lodge No. 1 turned to the Grand Lodge of Philadelphia (Ancients), and on July 12, 1783, the Lodge was rechartered as Lodge No. 40 of Charles Town, South Carolina. There is no explanation as to why the original name was dropped, but apparently the decision was made by the Grand Lodge of Philadelphia. Lodge No. 40 of Charles Town continued to work under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Philadelphia until 1787, when it surrendered its charter, and together with four other Lodges, formed the Grand Lodge of South Carolina. The subsisting Lodge assumed the name of "St. Andrews Lodge No. 10," under the charter and jurisdiction of the new Grand Lodge of South Carolina. It continued to work until 1881 when its charter was surrendered and stricken from the rolls. It is reported that on January 17, 1859, the Grand Lodge of England (Ancients) warranted a Lodge to the 14th Regiment of Foot. The number of this Lodge is reported to be 586. This Lodge, located in St. Augustine, became dormant. On March 6, 1776, a renewal of the warrant was authorized and on March 20, 1776, it was renewed. Then, on January 3, 1778, the Grand Lodge of England (Ancients) granted a warrant to No. 204, St. Augustine in

East Florida. On January 17, 1780, this warrant was ordered returned to the Grand Secretary because the fee had not been recorded. The Grand Lodge of South Carolina (Ancients) issued warrant No. 30 to a Lodge at St. Augustine as well as a warrant to Lodge No. 56 located at Pensacola under the name of "Good Intention." Both Lodges were short lived and their exact fate is not known, but it is known that the Spanish Government suppressed all Masonic activities throughout its domain.

In 1806, St. Fernando Lodge in St. Augustine was chartered by the Grand Lodge of Georgia. This Lodge was subsequently suppressed by a mandate of the Spanish Government. Again, in 1820, the Grand Lodge of South Carolina granted a charter to Floridian Virtue Lodge No. 28, but it could not survive the political and religious hostilities of that day. During 1824, the Grand Lodge of South Carolina granted another charter to Esperanza Lodge at St. Augustine. The failure of this Lodge was attributed to the fact that practically all of its members moved to Havana, Cuba. There are reports of additional Lodges in Florida, but no records from these Lodges have been found. These are mentioned here only because some day documented evidence may be found to support their existence. Freemasonry entered Florida as a permanent institution when, on December 19, 1825, the Grand Lodge of Alabama issued a warrant to Jackson Lodge No. 23, to be located in Tallahassee, in the Territory of Florida.

A warrant was issued on December 2, 1826, to Washington Lodge No. 1 by the Grand Lodge of Georgia. This Lodge was to be located in Quincy, in the Territory of Florida. On December 8, 1829, the Grand Lodge of Georgia warranted Harmony Lodge No. 2. This Lodge was to be located in Marianna, in the Territory of Florida. The three Lodges worked under their respective Grand Lodges until 1830. At the regular meeting of May, 1830, Jackson Lodge No. 23 of Tallahassee adopted a Resolution inviting Washington Lodge No. 1 and Harmony Lodge No. 2 to join together in the organization of a Grand Lodge for the Territory of Florida. The two Lodges accepted the invitation and in due time named their delegates. On Monday, July 5, 1830, the delegates from the three Lodges met in the Masonic Temple of Jackson Lodge No. 23, Tallahassee, to decide the proper course to be taken. The meeting was called to order by Brother John P. Duval, of Jackson Lodge No. 23, the oldest Past Master in attendance. Brother Thomas Monroe, also of Jackson Lodge No. 23, was named Secretary. It was the consensus of the group to organize a Grand Lodge for the Territory of Florida. The meeting was then organized into a permanent Convention. Brother John P. Duval was elected President and Brother Thomas Monroe was elected Secretary.

The first order of business following the organization was the adoption of a Resolution stating the right and the purpose of the body to organize a Grand Lodge for the Territory of Florida. The next order of business was the appointment of a Constitution and ByLaws Committee. Named to the Committee were Brothers Thomas Brown, Robert Butler, Richard K. Call, John P. Duval, and Isham Green Searcy of Jackson Lodge No. 23; Henry Gee, John Lines and Isaac Nathans of Washington Lodge No. 1; James W. Exum, Jacob Robinson and William

J. Watson of Harmony Lodge No. 2. Brother Jacob Robinson served as Chairman. The Committee made its report to the Convention on Friday, July 9, 1830. The report was adopted as amended, enrolled, certified and signed by the Honorable John P. Duval, President of the Convention. The Convention elected Grand Lodge Officers, and the first Grand Master was M. W. John P. Duval. The Officers, both elective and appointive were duly installed. The Convention, having fulfilled its mission, was adjourned.

The Grand Lodge for the Territory of Florida was then opened in Ample Form. The rules and By Laws of the Grand Lodge of Alabama were adopted so far as they were applicable to the proceedings of this Grand Lodge; however, a Committee was appointed to make a study and prepare suitable rules and a code of By Laws for the new Grand Body. The study was made and the report was submitted during the next annual session of Grand Lodge. Warrants for the three subordinate Lodges were approved and on July 10, 1830, were issued to Jackson Lodge No. 1, Washington Lodge No. 2 and Harmony Lodge No. 3. The new warrants were exchanged for the old charters. The Grand Secretary returned the three old documents to the appropriate Grand Lodges, and with these documents went a request for fraternal recognition and the exchange of fraternal correspondence. The First Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of the Territory of Florida was closed in Ample Form to meet again on the second Monday after the annual session of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida.

In these early years of Freemasonry in Florida, it was determined that no Lodge in Florida shall be named after any living man, and no Lodge in Florida shall bear the number "8." Orion Lodge No. 8 was chartered by the Grand Lodge of Florida at Pleasant Grove, Georgia, near the Florida Line, in 1839. Two years later, without consent of either Grand Body, the Lodge moved to Decatur, now Bainbridge, Georgia. When this fact came to the attention of the Grand Lodge of Georgia, much indignation was expressed and a Resolution was adopted officially declaring Orion Lodge to be a Lodge of Clandestine Masons. Explanations followed and the matter was adjusted in a fraternal spirit of amity and good will. Florida released claim on Orion Lodge and Georgia received it in full fellowship, and to cement the bond of good will and good fellowship, Florida resolved that no other Florida Lodge should bear the number "8," and as a further gesture of good will, elected the Masters and Wardens of Orion Lodge No. 8 honorary members of the Grand Lodge of Florida in perpetuity. In the same spirit, Georgia resolved that Orion Lodge should continue to work under the charter granted by the Grand Lodge of Florida, endorsed by the Grand Lodge of Georgia. And so we see the anomaly of a Lodge of Masons working in another Grand Jurisdiction under and by virtue of authority granted by the Grand Lodge of Florida more than 145 years ago.

The Grand Lodge of Florida, under Masonic Law, has determined that newly chartered Lodges shall be numbered chronologically, the newest Lodge taking the next number above the last Lodge chartered.