

“To the God-like Brother”

John Parke’s Ode to Masonry and George Washington, 1779

Shawn Eyer on the earliest Masonic song to celebrate Brother Washington

ON DECEMBER 3, 1778, the Brethren of Philadelphia’s Lodge N^o 2 tiled a meeting. It was—like most of the surviving lodges of the city—an Antients lodge. It had not started that way. Founded in 1757 as the fourth lodge of the Moderns in Philadelphia—a lodge for artisans and others not deemed of sufficient social standing to occupy the older three—it had quickly adopted the style of the Antients. When the Provincial Grand Lodge, whose most influential brother was no less than Benjamin Franklin, demanded they stop, they resolutely persisted, “determined never to forsake the good old way,”¹ and sought a new alignment with the more ritualistically tolerant and socially egalitarian Antients Grand Lodge of England. In the early 1760s, what started as the Moderns’ Lodge N^o 4 had transformed into two entities: a new Provincial Grand Lodge for the Antients in America, and its loyal lodge N^o 2. By 1778, the three Moderns lodges in Philadelphia were at a low level of activity, if they still existed at all, and Lodge N^o 2 of the Antients effectively set the pace for Freemasonry

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in the city of Brotherly Love, and far beyond.² Their leader, and first Grand Master, was William Ball (1729–1810), a prominent goldsmith who was at times considered a relative of George Washington through his mother, Mary Ball.³

The minutes of this early December meeting record that the lodge was solicited by two other Antients lodges in Philadelphia to restore the Feast of Saint John the Evangelist, which had been interrupted by the American Revolution and the British occupation of the city:

Bros. William Straker and Matthew Whitehead from Lodge No 3 and No 4 waited upon Lodge No 2, and requested that a Committe from our Lodge be appointed to join them with them in the necessity and happy work of procuring a sermon to be preached to us on the ensuing St John’s Day, at which time the Brethren are expected to proceed in Procession, and a Sermon founded upon the Principles of the Institution, to wit (Charity and Benevolence) to be delivered to us by such Person and at such place as the said Committe shall or may appoint for that purpose⁴

FACING: Constantino Brumidi’s fresco, *The Apotheosis of Washington* (1865), adorns the oculus of the U.S. Capitol.



This led to a planning session in the form of an untiled meeting of Masons from lodges N^o 2, N^o 3, and N^o 4 gathered by Grand Master William Ball, on December 15, 1778, at the public house of Bro. Alexander Boyle. Details of this meeting were, thankfully, recorded in the minutes of Lodge N^o 3. It is clear from a review of this record that between these two meetings, the committee had selected Rev. William Smith, Provost of the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania) to deliver the sermon. He is referred to as “our Revd Br Dr. Smith,”⁵ and it was further decided that the procession was to gather at the College—likely at Smith’s suggestion.

The exigency of the moment was significantly amplified by the sudden arrival of George Washington in Philadelphia on the night of the 22nd. Although it was not yet common knowledge outside the fraternity that Washington was a Freemason, the Philadelphia brethren were aware of his status as a brother, and appointed a committee to invite him to the celebrations.⁶ The December 25, 1778, minutes of Lodge N^o 4 record the success of this committee: “The Committee appointed by Lodges N^o 2 & 3,—to wait upon Excelency General Washington in the name of all the Lodges in the city in order to walk in Procession on St John’s day, report his Excellency was pleased to express ‘a grateful satisfaction and consent thereto.’”⁷

The speaker for what was quickly turning out to be an historic St. John’s Day, William Smith, had risen quickly to Masonic fame twenty-three years prior, when he delivered the St. John’s Day sermon for the dedication of Philadelphia’s “Lodge House,” the first purpose-built Masonic temple of the Grand Lodge era. As Smith was a Modern Mason who had not yet been healed or converted, a special Grand Lodge was held in which he was

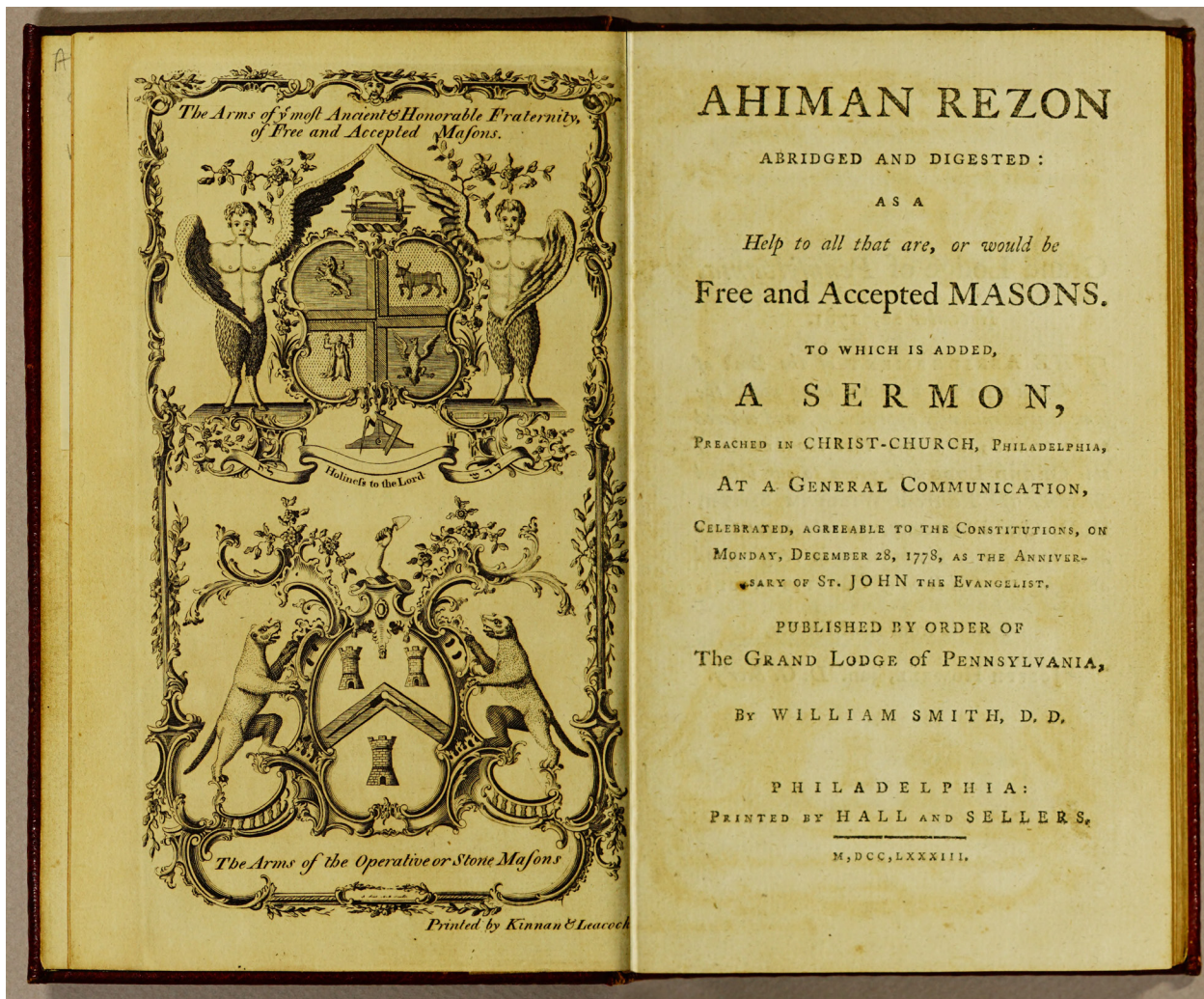
passed and raised in a manner acceptable to the Antients, just thirty-six hours before the procession was to gather.⁸

On Monday, December 28, 1778, the procession marched from the College to Christ Church. With three hundred brethren participating, it was the largest Masonic gathering to date in North America. Smith gave a rousing sermon which made clear the revolutionary spirit of the Antients of Philadelphia, calling attention to Washington’s presence and praising him as America’s Cincinnatus. It was a defining moment for the American Fraternity, and has been immortalized in an outstanding mural by Allyn Cox at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial in Alexandria, Virginia.

The event’s inspiration upon one Philadelphian in particular, John Parke, is a subject of interest. Brother Parke (1754–1789) was educated under Smith at the College of Philadelphia,⁹ and had apparently been made a Mason in 1774 in Lodge No. 5, Ancient York Masons, at the approximate age of twenty. This lodge was based at Cantwell’s Bridge (now Odessa), Delaware, and it operated under the Grand Lodge’s first warrant extended outside the Philadelphia area.¹⁰ Later in Philadelphia, Parke affiliated with Lodge N^o 2, applying on December 8, 1778, and being elected on February 9, 1779.¹¹ Parke was, then, becoming involved in the Craft in Philadelphia during the planning and celebration of the 1778 St. John’s Day that featured George Washington.

Parke was, in fact, one of General Washington’s men,¹² and had personally corresponded with the General.¹³ As one of the soldiers serving under Washington, he was all the more inspired by his Commander’s significant presence at Smith’s sermon in Christ Church.

On being elected to membership in Lodge N^o 2,



George Washington’s personal copy of William Smith’s 1783 *Ahiman Rezon Abridged and Digested*, containing Smith’s dedication to Washington, the 1778 St. John’s Day sermon Washington attended, and Parke’s Ode.

he presented the lodge with “An Ode on Masonry,” composed as a result of the St. John’s Day sermon. The Ode is dedicated to Col. Thomas Proctor (1739–1806), another of Washington’s men. Proctor was an eminent member of Lodge N^o 2, and was Master of the lodge at the February 17, 1779, meeting, at which the Ode was first “composed [set to music] and sung by the Brethren.”¹⁴ As published, the Ode is prefaced by lines from Horace: *ab ipso ducit opes animumque ferro*,¹⁵ “he draws might and courage from the very steel”—a revolutionary sentiment

if ever there was one. The chorus of this hymn introduces a theme that would soon become a staple of Masonic rhetoric in the early Republic—the image of George Washington as a semi-divine figure embodying Masonry’s teachings:

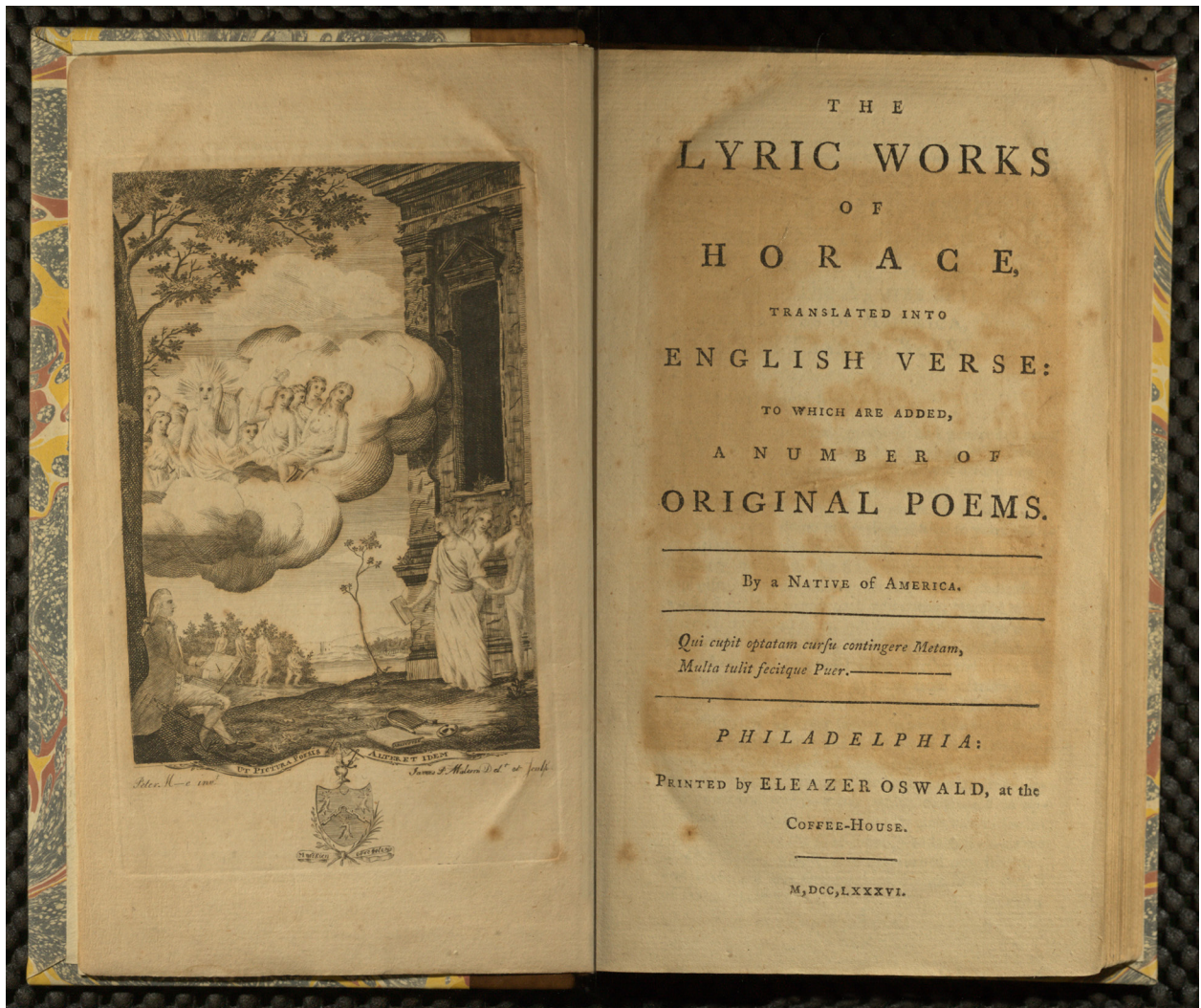
HAIL! cœlestial Masonry,
Craft that makes us wise and free!
Heav’n-born cherub! bring along
The tuneful band, the patriot song;
See WASHINGTON, he leads the train,

'Tis he commands the grateful strain;
See ev'ry crafted son obeys,
And to the god-like brother homage pays.

Within the poetic world of Parke's Ode, the American Revolution (though still at that point far from victory) was ordained by Providence and was perceived as ample grounds to:

Wake from the tomb the souls of martyrs Free,
To view this hemisphere of liberty.
Let them with ravish'd eyes look down upon
The glorious work perform'd
by WASHINGTON.

The work merited inclusion in the first edition of the Pennsylvania Grand Lodge's *Ahiman Rezon*,



John Parke's translation of Horace, containing his dedication to Washington and numerous original works—including "An Ode on Masonry." Many of the individual translations are addressed to his mentors and Masonic brethren, such as William Smith, Samuel Magaw, James Davidson, Thomas Proctor, and the Marquis de Lafayette. The frontispiece was by James Peller Malcolm after a design by Peter Markoe, and presents an allegorical image of the poet being inspired by Apollo and the Muses.



An ODE on Masonry.

By Brother Lieutenant Colonel John Park, A. M. P. M.
Addressed to Brother Colonel Procter, K. T.

— Ab ipso

Ducit opes, animumque ferro.

HOR.

FULL CHORUS.

HAIL! cœlestial Masonry,
Craft that makes us wise and free!
Heav'n-born cherub! bring along
The tuneful band, the patriot song;
See WASHINGTON, he leads the train,
'Tis he commands the grateful strain;
See ev'ry crafted son obeys,

And to the god-like brother
homage pays.

SONG.

Then give to merit what is due.
And twine the *mystic bays*;
In joyful strains his deeds renew.
And ring the hero's praise.

RECITATIVE.

While time brings mortal honours to decay,
'Tis freedom gives, what time
 can't steal away:

SONG.

Unbend his brow from martial care.
And give the patriot rest;
Who nobly brav'd the storms of war,
To make his country blest.

RECITATIVE.

Wake from the tomb the souls
 of martyrs Free,
To view this hemisphere of liberty.
Let them with ravish'd eyes look down upon
The glorious work perform'd
 by WASHINGTON.

SONG.

Then brethren to my lays attend,
And hail our father and our friend;
Let fame resound him thro' the land.
And echo "*'Tis our Master Grand.*"

RECITATIVE.

Begin, ye sons of Solomon,
Prepare the wreath for WASHINGTON:
'Tis he our ancient craft shall sway,
Whilst we with *three times three* obey.

SONG.

When evening's solemn hours pervade,
We choose the still masonic shade;
With hearts sincere, our *hands upon*,
We bless the *widow's mystic son*.

RECITATIVE.

For you, my friend, the inspired muses sing,
Thou firm opposer of a tyrant king;
Go imitate in fact our glorious head,
And in the Lodge, O PROCTER, take the lead.

AIR.

I.

Support the Craft with honest pride;
When in the field, our foes confound,
Display your iron thunders wide,
And strew the bleeding courses round.

II.

Let patriot fire strain ev'ry nerve.
For WASHINGTON upon you smiles;
With him 'tis more than fame to serve,
'Tis fame with him to share his toils.

GRAND CHORUS.

Hail cœlestial Masonry!
Craft that makes us wise and free;
Heav'n-born cherub! bring along,
The tuneful band, the patriot song;
See WASHINGTON, he leads the train,
'Tis he commands the grateful strain;
See ev'ry crafted son obeys,
And to the god-like brother
 homage pays.

February 7, 1779.

J. P.

Reprinted from William Smith, *Ahiman Rezon Abridged and Digested* (Philadelphia: Hall & Sellers, 1783), 139–41. The spelling of the names of John Parke and Thomas Proctor, which often varied, are as given in that source.



edited by William Smith—the first American book of Masonic constitutions since Benjamin Franklin’s reprint of Anderson’s *Constitutions* in 1734.¹⁶

In 1786, Parke published a book which also included the ode: *The Lyric Works of Horace, Translated into English Verse: To Which Are Added a Number of Original Poems*. It was dedicated to George Washington, who was pleased with the honor from his former soldier, and responded: “I always wish to give every possible encouragement to those works of Genius which are the production of an American.”¹⁷ The knowledge of classical languages on display in the work had been, of course, obtained under the aegis of the College of Philadelphia as part of William Smith’s curriculum.

It was, sadly, the final literary endeavor of Parke, for he died at age 35 in 1789.

The revolutionary fervor of the Antient Masons is fully on display in Parke’s powerful “Ode on Masonry.” United and valorized by Washington’s attendance at their St. John’s Day services, brethren like William Smith, William Ball, John Parke, and Thomas Proctor, pursued the practice of Freemasonry as a vital element of the emerging American identity. To Freemasons like them, George Washington was indeed a “god-like brother,” leading a nation into existence under the watchful eye of Providence—a new society framed and civilized by the beneficent influence of a Craft they viewed as celestial in origin and divine in practice.

Notes

1 Letter from Joseph Reed to William, Earl of Blessington, dated January 10, 1758. See Norris S. Barratt & Julius F. Sachse, *Freemasonry in Pennsylvania, 1727–1907, as Shown by the Records of Lodge No. 2, F. and A.M. of Philadelphia, from the Year A.L. 5757, A.D. 1757; Compiled from Original Sources* (Philadelphia: The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, 1908–1919), 20–21.

- 2 See Shawn Eyer, “William Smith: Priest, Educator, and Masonic Leader of Colonial and Revolutionary America,” a paper delivered at the 2018 Quatuor Coronati Conference: Freemasons in the Transatlantic World in the Eighteenth Century. September 15, 2018. The George Washington Masonic National Memorial, Alexandria, Virginia, USA. Available at <https://harvard.academia.edu/ShawnEyer>.
- 3 Wayne A. Huss, *The Master Builders* (Philadelphia: The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, 1986), 3:39–40.
- 4 Barratt & Sachse, *Freemasonry in Pennsylvania*, 1:318.
- 5 Barratt & Sachse, *Freemasonry in Pennsylvania*, 1:297.
- 6 Barratt & Sachse, *Freemasonry in Pennsylvania*, 1:300.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania MSS., Vol. 164, p. 50, as cited in Julius F. Sachse, *Old Masonic Lodges of Pennsylvania, “Moderns” and “Ancients,” 1730–1800* (Philadelphia: The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, 1913), 1:201.
- 9 Evert Augustus Duyckinck and George Long Duyckinck, “John Parke,” in *Cyclopædia of American Literature* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1856), 1:304–308.
- 10 Sachse, *Old Masonic Lodges*, 167–88.
- 11 Barratt & Sachse, *Freemasonry in Pennsylvania*, 1:320, 330.
- 12 “Orders and Instructions for John Parke, 3 April 1776,” Founders Online, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-04-02-0024>.
- 13 See “To George Washington from Lieutenant Colonel John Parke, 10 April 1778,” Founders Online, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0434>, and “From George Washington to Lieutenant Colonel John Parke, 11 April 1778,” Founders Online, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-14-02-0447>.
- 14 Horace, *Odes* 4.4.59–60.
- 15 Barratt & Sachse, *Freemasonry in Pennsylvania*, 1:332.
- 16 William Smith, *Ahiman Rezon Abridged and Digested: As a Help to All that Are, or Would Be Free and Accepted Masons* (Philadelphia: Hall & Sellers, 1783), 139–41.
- 17 “From George Washington to John Parke, 23 March 1787,” Founders Online, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-05-02-0100>.