The Lost Secret

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If you visit the Washington Monument, don’t take the elevator. Because if a visitor walks up or down the Washington Monument, strange Masonic stones set into it are a reminder that the city is full of unread symbols.

In fact, the symbolism all began with the foundations of the capitol building itself being marked by George Washington in his full Masonic regalia laying a cornerstone which he anointed with corn and wine and oil.

The trowel specially made for the general by the Alexandria silversmith, John Duffy, he used to tap the stone and spread the mortar, and then he gave it to the master of the Alexandria lodge. When 215 years later the new visitors center opened, they still had it and loaned it. Everything had changed, but the Masons were still in business. What matter of business?

That was a glorious day in 1793 with sword bearers, coiffered Masons sorted by their degrees, deacons with staffs and stewards with wands, and wardens with truncheons, drums beating, the discharge of cannon, and President Washington himself attaching to the stone an inscribed silver plate:

*This South East corner Stone, of the Capitol of the United States of America in the City of Washington, was laid on the 18th day of September 1793, in the thirteenth year of American Independence, in the first year of the second term of the Presidency of George Washington, whose virtues in the civil administration of his country have been as*
conspicuous and beneficial, as his Military valor and prudence have been useful in establishing her liberties, and in the year of Masonry 5793, by the Grand Lodge of Maryland, several Lodges under its jurisdiction, and Lodge No. 22, from Alexandria, Virginia. Thomas Johnson, David Steuart and Daniel Carroll, Commissioners, Joseph Clark, R.W.G.M. pro tem,, James Hobam and Stephen Hallate, Architects.” Collin Williamson, Master Mason.

A gargantuan meal followed, including a whole roasted ox.

For all that, today nobody is quite sure just where in the capitol building repose the silver plate and cornerstone. Tour guides point vaguely to the corner of a stairwell. Behind the wall? Nobody knows, thanks to subsequent additions. The founding symbol is lost. Or as an intern assured visiting constituents, “misplaced”. Concealed?

No matter. Dan Brown is right that Washington is a Masonic city with lots of evidence of subsequent solemn events that were accompanied by the rituals of that secret fraternity. In fact, when Harry Truman (a Grand Master while in the Senate) got Congress to vote money for an entire reconstruction of the White House, enough Masonically marked stones were found for the President to send all the Grand Lodges of the country a souvenir.

Freemasonry of all kinds grew along with Washington but the real growth was with a certain kind of Freemasonry. Talking about Freemasonry as a single movement is about as specific as talking about green growing things. Better as we have said in the previous
pages to talk about *Freemasonries*. It is wrong to describe Masonry as if it were a single, monolithic entity. That is a frequent mistake made when pundits discuss it.

During the nineteenth century, when Freemasonry became widespread in Washington, there were, as there are now, a number of competing *rites* — ritual systems consisting of a series of initiations. The Rites of Swedenborg, and Memphis, the Ancient and Primitive Rite, and the Rite of the Beneficent Knights of the Holy City are all examples of groups that persist, albeit less magnificently housed than their Scottish Rite brethren, in the capital.

Of course, everyone who became a Mason took the first three degrees of entered *apprentice*, *fellowcraft*, and *master mason*, but there were profound differences between these degrees as practiced in the different rites. Beyond those first three levels that were available in the symbolic or blue lodges, there were many options, including some organizations with a single initiatory degree and others with a succession of degrees. Systems were created to bring order to the more than 1000 degrees created, and hence the various rites.

Masons owe part of their endurance through centuries to an intriguing identity created by keeping secrets. They flavored Washington. They continue to flavor it. We can remember the delight in childhood of having secrets. The fact is that some of our leaders still do enjoy the mystery of concealment, and it still is an ingredient of The Hill. Watergate without Deep Throat? Perhaps Dan Brown has just hinted at the point, which is that the symbols
not lost but concealed. As Robert Frost suggested, we think we are in the circle and suppose, but the secret sits in the circle and knows.