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Masons played historic role in early Texas days



BARTEE HAILE
Commentary

Twenty-four-year-old Sam Houston joined a Masonic lodge in his home state of Tennessee on

July 12, 1817, a couple of decades before members of the fraternal order helped shape the future of Texas.

The principles and practices of Masonry date back to the Middle Ages, when the building of churches on a monumental scale was the public works project for eight centuries. The stoneworkers that roamed from place to place plying their indispensable trade were known as freemasons, and their craft associations or lodges evolved into secret societies after the decline of cathedral construction.

The birth of modern Masonry took place in 1717, when four of the surviving fraternal organizations came together under the Grand Lodge of England. The British migration to North America included a large and influential group of Masons, who founded the first lodge at Boston in 1733.

By the time the colonists challenged the mother country for control, membership had increased to an estimated 3,000 in more than a hundred lodges. Masons were a majority at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 with 32 of the 55 delegates. The fact that the motto and several symbols of the order ap-

peared on the currency printed by the new government can hardly be chalked off to coincidence.

The Marquis de Lafayette claimed Gen. George Washington was such a zealous Mason that he entrusted key commands only to fellow disciples. While the Frenchman may have been stretching the truth, Washington did wear his Masonic regalia for the ceremonial laying of the Capitol cornerstone.

Stephen F. Austin tried to establish the first lodge in Texas with a petition to the York Grand Lodge of Mexico in February 1828. But before his application could be processed, the Mexican government banned the York brand of Masonry.

Texas Masons had to wait almost eight years for a lodge of their own. With a charter granted by the Grand Lodge of Louisiana, Dr. Anson Jones, John H. Wharton and four other Masons held their first meeting at the Brazoria courthouse in December 1835.

The Masonic presence was unquestionably strong at the Washington-on-the-Brazos convention in March 1836. Of the 59 signers of the Declaration of Independence, 20 identifiable Masons included Sam Houston, James Collinsworth, Lorenzo de Zavala, Thomas Rusk and Antonio Navarro.

The long list of Masons in the Republic regime reads like a who's who of early Texas history. The four presidents as well as

the nine vice-presidents were members. Seven out of nine speakers of the house and eight of the 14 judges on the supreme court also belonged. Thirty-six of the 61 delegates to the special convention in July 1845 which accepted the United States' annexation offer were known Masons.

At the subsequent convention called to write a constitution for the newest and biggest state, Masons took the lead in pushing for the fulfillment of a promise the Republic never had the resources to keep. A Mason-dominated committee recommended, "The Legislature shall, as early as practicable, establish free public schools throughout the State, and shall furnish means for their support by taxation of property."

When lawmakers delayed in honoring the constitutional commitment to education, Masons took up the slack. Between 1850 and 1873, the order opened and operated 17 state-chartered institutions and another hundred or so schools that functioned without official accreditation. The direct and grateful beneficiaries were thousands of young Texans, whose hunger for learning might otherwise have gone unsatisfied.

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