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THIS DAY IN **HISTORY** | AUGUST 04 ▾

1753

Washington becomes Master Mason

[George Washington](#), a young [Virginia](#) planter, becomes a Master Mason, the highest basic rank in the secret fraternity of Freemasonry. The ceremony was held at the Masonic Lodge No. 4 in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Washington was 21 years old and would soon command his first military operation as a major in the Virginia colonial militia.

Freemasonry evolved from the practices and rituals of the stonemasons' guilds in the [Middle Ages](#). With the decline of European cathedral building, "lodges" decided to admit non-stonemasons to maintain membership, and the secret fraternal order grew in popularity in Europe. In 1717, the first Grand Lodge, an association of lodges, was founded in England, and Freemasonry was soon disseminated throughout the British Empire. The first American Mason lodge was established in Philadelphia in 1730, and future revolutionary leader [Benjamin Franklin](#) was a founding member.

There is no central Masonic authority, and Freemasons are governed locally by the order's many customs and rites. Members trace the origins of Masonry back to the erecting of King Solomon's Temple in biblical times and are expected to believe in the "Supreme Being," follow specific religious rites, and maintain a vow of secrecy concerning the order's ceremonies. The Masons of the 18th century adhered to liberal democratic principles that included religious toleration, loyalty to local government, and the importance of charity. From its inception, Freemasonry encountered considerable opposition from organized religion, especially from the Roman Catholic Church.

For George [Washington](#), joining the Masons was a rite of passage and an expression of his civic responsibility. After becoming a Master Mason, Washington had the option of passing through a series of additional rites that would take him to higher "degrees." In 1788, shortly before becoming the first president of the United States, Washington was elected the first Worshipful Master of Alexandria Lodge No. 22.

Many other leaders of the [American Revolution](#), including [Paul Revere](#), [John Hancock](#), the Marquis de Lafayette, and the [Boston Tea Party](#) saboteurs, were also Freemasons, and Masonic rites were witnessed at such events as Washington's presidential inauguration and the laying of the cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C.—a city supposedly designed with Masonic symbols in mind. Masonic symbols, approved by Washington in the design of the Great Seal of the United States, can be seen on the one-dollar bill. The All-Seeing Eye above an unfinished pyramid is unmistakably Masonic, and the scroll beneath, which proclaims the advent of a "New Secular Order" in Latin, is one of Freemasonry's long-standing goals. The Great Seal appeared on the dollar bill during the presidency of [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#), also a Mason.

Freemasonry has continued to be important in U.S. politics, and at least 15 presidents, five [Supreme Court](#) chief justices, and numerous members of Congress have been Masons. Presidents known to be Masons include Washington, [James Monroe](#), [Andrew Jackson](#), James Polk, [James Buchanan](#), [Andrew Johnson](#), James Garfield, [William McKinley](#), [Theodore Roosevelt](#), [William Howard Taft](#), Warren Harding, Franklin Roosevelt, [Harry Truman](#), Lyndon Johnson, and [Gerald Ford](#). Today there are an estimated two million Masons in the United States, but the exact membership figure is one of the society's many secrets.

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