

# JOSEPH FORT NEWTON, D.D.

---

*Bro. Roberts is a member and Past Master of Babcock Lodge #322 of Highland Springs, VA. He is a noted Masonic writer and historian. Bro. Roberts has several books to his credit, including House Undivided, Brother Truman and Freemasonry in American History. This STB was originally printed in "The Altar Light" Mar./May 1979. -Editor*

Freemasonry's simplicity, its dignity, and its spirituality sustain me in all that I try to do, and permit me to forget the incredible pettiness of mind that we sometimes encounter, sustaining and enabling me to join hands with my brethren everywhere, to do something, if it be only a little, before the end of the day, to make a gentler, kinder, and wiser world in which to live.

Joseph Fort Newton

What made Joseph Fort Newton the great Mason and greater Minister he turned out to be? If one word had to be used it would be--enthusiasm. Without question he enthusiastically loved his fellow man. His writings prove it beyond a doubt.

The story of Joseph begins with his father, Lee Newton (for other than the obvious reasons). During the closing days of the American Civil War, Lee was taken prisoner and sent to a camp in Rockford, Illinois. He had earlier been made a Mason in a Confederate Military Lodge. While in the camp he became deathly ill. Somehow the commander of the camp learned Lee was a Mason, so he took him into his own home and nursed him back to health. When the war ended, the commander gave Lee money and a gun, then saw him safely on his way to Texas.

It might be said that Freemasonry gave birth to Joseph, who was born on July 21, 1880. If a Brother Mason hadn't saved the life of the father there would have been no son.

The young Newton learned of this kind act from his father. This impressed him so much he petitioned Freemasonry as soon as he was old enough to do so. And on May 28, 1902, Joseph became a Master Mason in Friendship Lodge No. 7, Dixon, Illinois, where he was Pastor of People's Church.

Joseph was born in Decatur, Texas. He graduated from Coe College in Iowa in 1912; in 1918 he graduated from Tufts College; in 1929, from Temple University. He was an ordained Baptist Minister. He left People's Church in 1908 and became the Pastor of Liberal Christian Church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. There he would remain until 1916, when, with "The Great War" raging, he accepted a call to take over The City Temple in London, England. In 1919 he became the Minister of the Church of the Divine Paternity in New York City. From 1925 to 1930 he was with St. James Church in Philadelphia; in 1938 he went to St. Luke and Epiphany in Philadelphia.

The world will never be better than the men who inhabit it. Everything begins with the individual. One man living a Brotherly Life is worth a thousand lectures on Brotherhood. Joseph Fort Newton in "The Men's House"

In his autobiography, River of Years, he didn't hesitate, as so many great men do, to credit Freemasonry for much of his success. But his success came from his God. Those who were fortunate enough to hear him speak, slowly, quietly, could never forget him.

The lessons Joseph learned from his father caused him to petition a Masonic Lodge. He said so himself by putting it this way: "The fact that such a fraternity of men could exist, mitigating the harshness of war, and remain unbroken when states and churches were torn in two, became a wonder, and it is not strange I tried for years to repay my debt to it."

It was at a Masonic church service I first heard those words, (if you'll pardon a personal note.) It was 1957 and I had been a Mason for nine years. Until then I thought Freemasonry consisted of ritual only. I was shocked, but my eyes were opened at that moment to the beauty that is Freemasonry. It caused me to start searching for other beautiful stories to come out of the nastiness of war. The result was House Undivided, the Story of Freemasonry and the Civil War,

It was while Newton was in Iowa he, too, learned there was more to Masonry than the ritual. At the urging of the then Grand Master and Grand Secretary, he wrote a little book entitled The Builders. It was first published in 1914. Ten years later he wrote a "Forward M.S.A. Edition" from Church of the Divine Paternity. It had passed through forty editions by then! Without any advertising!

This remarkable book would continue on the "best seller" list of Masonic books until the present day. And shortly before his death, Newton completed his final revision, and a chapter was added entitled "The Unknown Builders." This is available from only one publisher, Macoy. To the remarkable woman who has been the guiding light behind Macoy Publishing, Miss Vee Hansen, Newton willed the copyright to The Builders.

Requests for other books from the poetic pen of Newton were answered. For the Masonic Service Association he wrote The Men's House, The Religion of Masonry, and Short Talks on Masonry. Eventually Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Company purchased the rights to the excellent books the MSA had printed. All of Newton's books were reprinted in special editions, fortunately for those Freemasons who enjoy reading and learning.

In his capacity as Educational Director of the MSA, Newton was urged to be "more militant." He answered this: "It has always been in my heart to use Masonry as a wand of blessing and never as a weapon of battle. It is intended to make men friends, to bring men of all types of temperament, antecedents, and training together, to defend their Brotherhood and make them builders of a purer world. The temptation is very great, sometimes, by members of our Fraternity, good men and true, to use Masonry as a weapon of battle. We can never do it. I refuse to do it. It is too great. It is too beautiful. It is too holy." Beautiful phraseology! Beautiful sentiments! In this short statement he covered the deep-seated meaning of Freemasonry.

Newton joined his Grand Architect on January 24, 1950. But he left a legacy that will never die. And it will never be equalled. There will be, and have been, Masons who have written more books about Freemasonry. None of these contain, or ever will, the poetic prose only Newton could write.

I joined the Fraternity as soon as I was old enough to be received, in Friendship Lodge, No. 7, Dixon, Illinois. There, to my amazement, I saw men of all churches--except one, and there was no reason in Masonry why that one church should not be represented--gathered about an open Bible. In their churches they could not agree about the teachings of the Bible; in the Lodge they could not disagree, because each one was allowed to interpret it in the way his heart loved best, and asked to allow others the same right; a secret almost too simple to be found out.

--Joseph Fort Newton in "River of Years"

Harry Leroy Haywood, who as a young man talked with Joseph Fort Newton on several occasions, wrote of him after his death: "He was a Texan always, down to the marrow in his bones" Whenever you see Newton going along with a strong wind behind him, and all the banners of independence fluttering over his head, it is the Texan coming out in him.

"He was ordained to the ministry in that State in 1893, and his first pastorate was of a Baptist Church in Paris, Texas. Fifteen years later he told me all about those years in a conversation that lasted all one night and into mid-morning of the following day".

"In those early years Newton had no difficulty about religion. He was born to be a religious man, always was, and never once did he falter for so much as a moment. Religion was not his second nature, but his first. But he had, and always had, a great deal of difficulty with theology."

Haywood later added: "At that time I had not yet become a Mason, and we did not discuss the subject, but as the sequel turned out, he came up to the Lodge in Webster City to help raise me and after the ceremonies were concluded delivered his oration, "The Men's House."

I asked Miss Hansen what she remembered most about Newton. "He loved baseball!" she said. "He would sit down with me and talk for hours about baseball. And no matter what he talked about, you listened. He didn't exactly have an hypnotic voice, but he had one that made you listen. He was a remarkable man. I'm glad I knew him, and especially as a friend."

Perhaps not so strangely, that's the way I feel about him through his writings. Although I wasn't privileged to have met him, I still feel as though he was my friend. Without question, he has been my inspiration in Freemasonry.

This brief story of Joseph Fort Newton could go on for pages, but it must be brought to a close. Let's close it with his ending paragraph in "The Temple of Brotherhood," a chapter in his *The Religion of Masonry*:

"In the noisy clamor of the world our wise Masonry does not strive and cry aloud, indulging in agitations and the making of programs. It works in quieter, gentler ways, teaching men the

religion of the brotherly life knowing that by as much as the world fills up with men of 'the larger heart and the kindlier hand,' by so much will our dreams of a juster, gentler, happier world come true, and the final hope of the Kingdom of God on earth be fulfilled. Slowly the Temple rises, builded by the love of many hearts and the loyalty of many workers; and at last it will be completed, and dedicated." All Masons should proudly salute Joseph Fort Newton, the last of the poetic-prose writers!