

GREAT CORNER STONE

CONSTITUTION DAY - SEPTEMBER 17, 1925 Mr. Brethren, as you well know, a corner stone unites two walls and gives unity and solidity to a building, by joining and sustaining its many parts. It is the keystone of the foundation. Everything depends upon it; everything proceeds from it. If the corner stone is faulty the structure is frail. Unless the corner stone is well and truly laid upon a solid base, the house will not be stable.

The Constitution of our Republic is the great corner stone of liberty and law in our nation. It was wrought out and laid down upon bedrock of righteousness by wise and just men. Everything rests upon it. By it all liberty is regulated, all law tested. It unites many states into one nation, yet keeps the integrity of each. Truly it is the written Will of God for our country, at once its foundation and its security.

Good work, true work, square work went into the making and laying of the great corner stone of liberty. It is square with the order of the world, in which liberty and obedience, justice and mercy, join, or neither is safe. It is true to the needs, duties and hopes of man, giving to each the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and the duty of allowing to others the same rights. Under its wise and benign power all may live, and live well, uniting individual initiative and social obligation.

As such it is a bulwark against autocracy and anarchy alike, against rule by the few and ruin by the mob. By its wise poise of power, representative but not ruthless, we have advanced thus far along the path of our history. Under its calm wisdom we map our history. Under its calm wisdom we map our path into the future, yet keep the treasure of a time-tried past. Upon it is built a "Government of the People, by the People, and for the People," which "Shall Not Perish From The Earth." It unites the dead, the living and those yet unborn into a community of memory, service and hope.

Gladstone said that our Constitution was the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man. But it was not struck off. Back of it lay ages of experience, in which the race struggled for the rights of man. Out of that mountain of history, as out of a quarry, our Constitution was slowly wrought, in the face of difficulties and deviances which only a divine aspiration and determination in the heart of the race could have overcome. Faith cut it, truth shaped it, time polished it, making a chief corner stone ready for the builders.

To put it in our own imagery, the Magna Charta, the Bill of Rights, and the Habeas Corpus Act were like the entered Apprentice Degree in the great initiation into free government. The Bill of rights and Constitution framed by various Colonies, and even the Declaration of Independence, may be called the Second degree, in which Fellows in the sublime Craft of Freedom wrought brilliantly. At last, as the Master Degree, after the shadow of the War, with its blood and fire and tears, came the constitution, the final expression in a single document, in permanent and definite form, of the will of a Free People . . . an august instrument such as man had never known before;

no vain declamation but a grand affirmation, clear, concise, comprehensive; of the principles of organized liberty and just and wise law.

No wonder it has won the homage of mankind as the "Last Best Hope of Earth." It divided history into before and after, opening a new era.

Washington wrote: "I can almost trace the finger of Divine Providence through those dark and mysterious days, which first led the colonists to assemble a convention, thereby laying the foundation for peace and prosperity." Hamilton, also a member of the Craft, was no less explicit: "The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for among old parchments or musty records. They are written as with a sunbeam in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of Divinity itself. The establishment of a Constitution in time of profound peace by the voluntary action of all the people is a prodigy." With which agree all the great voices that echo through our history. Like all true wisdom, our Constitution was, and is a compromise between two widely different ideas of government, a balance between the extremes of oligarchy and democracy. Our fathers dreaded the madness of the many as much as the arts of the few. They were equally afraid of the despot and the mob. Their problem was to guard the rights of the states, and yet give the Federal Government adequate power. The negotiations were often difficult, and were more than once saved from wreck by the tact, patience and wisdom of Franklin, Dickinson, Sherman and most of all Madison; who was called "The Father of the Constitution." Two ideas were ever present in their minds, one that the people should rule, and the other that the will of the people should be carefully and deliberately expressed, not swayed by gusts of popular passion. As Madison put it, though every member of the Athenian Assembly had been a Socrates, the aggregate body would have been a mob.

The result of their labors was a Republic, not a democracy; as too few seemed to realize. In a democracy, such as we see in Switzerland, the people make and administer the laws, which may be possible in a small country of intelligent and homogeneous population. What it means in a large country of mixed races has been shown us of late in Russia, where pure democracy ended in the worst kind of autocracy. In a Republic, what Washington called "The Delegated Will of the People," is vested in representatives elected by the people. The rank and mass of the people will not be bothered with the details of state, even when they are capable of dealing with them, as is shown in our time by the amazing neglect of the ballot. The wisdom of our fathers has been justified in ways too many to name.

Ours is representative government, not a pure democracy, as we need to keep in mind, if only because in recent years the tendency has turned more and more toward democracy. As such it is hedged about with every kind of device to avoid hasty and ill-judged action, in order to protect people from themselves, and yet to give expression to their real and considered will. As we look back over our history we see this wise balance of power tipping now toward one extreme, and then toward another, always with bad results; and it behooves us to keep the poise, if we would keep our sanity which is our safety. Of the Constitution Convention, it may truly be said that a more remarkable assembly of men has never been forgathered in history, anywhere or at any time. They were young men, for the most part, though men were deemed old earlier in those days than they are today. Madison was only thirty-six; Dayton of New Jersey twenty-one. As Masons, we have a right to be proud of the number and quality of the men of our Craft who sat in that

conclave of the great. Washington, who presided, was one of our Craft; Franklin, whose quaint humor saved many a tense hour; and Hamilton, in whom genius and wisdom joined; as well as others. Indeed, it has been said that with very few men out of the room, the convention could have been opened on the Third degree of Masonry.

Thus Freemasonry, in the formative days as in all the years of its story, influenced profoundly, creatively the organic law of the Republic. How well they wrought is shown by the fact that for sixty- one years, from 1804 to 1865, not a single amendment was added. In the five years following the Civil War, the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments were ratified. Then for forty-three years no other amendments were adopted; when a movement, vast as a flowing tide, to extend an idea and spirit of democracy found expression in the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th amendments. Just now the tide is ebbing, but it will no doubt return, in obedience to law of ebb and flow. If we are true to our history and genius of our Republic, we shall have a care to do nothing in haste, lest we injure a wise plan in order to make in immediate gain.

Let me tell a story, a true story, in order to point a moral. In a lumber camp in the West, a group of radical lumber-jacks - men from the ends of the land - were one evening discussing the sad state of the world, and especially the wickedness of the Government. They agreed, unanimously, that our Government is all wrong, if not actually rotten, a dirty, capitalistic conspiracy against the rights of the man who works. They said that it ought to be torn to pieces and made over again. Among them was a young minister, a missionary, who listened to their talk, and even drew it out at full length by the questions he asked. Finally, pretending to agree with the radical ideas, he wrote on a piece of paper the following which he proposed as a basis of a just state:

"We, the people, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution."

"That's the stuff! Hit 'em again ," they yelled. "If we had a Government built on that dope, every feller would have a square deal, and a chance to live a bit. Some head you got Padre; go on, give us more."

"Listen boys," said the Padre; "What I read is the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States. If we tore everything to pieces and set out to make it all over, do you think we could do a better job?"

The missionary himself told me the story, adding that as he listened to the talk of the evening - earnest, passionate and bitter - he himself was inclined to agree with much of it, until he began to consider how a better state could be constructed. This led him to think of the Constitution, its wisdom and poise and justice; and the wonder of it dawned on him like a revelation. He remembered the saying of Hamilton, that it is of great importance, not only to guard against the oppression of rulers, but also to protect one part of society from the injustices of another part. He recalled his very words:

"Justice is the end of Government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been, and ever will be pursued until it be obtained, or until liberty be lost in the pursuit."

As Lincoln put it, between those who will "Let Nothing Alone" and those who will allow no change at all, there is a middle way of wise and cautious advance. He approved the praise of Burke for those men in Public life who have "Disposition to conserve and the ability to improve," adding that we must have not only the wish but the ability to improve, else we shall lose what we have while blunderingly trying to get what we want.

To defend, preserve and obey the Constitution of our Republic is the first obligation of every citizen, as it is the first oath of every officer. To teach its history and meaning is the duty of school and church and lodge - making it the Bible of our Political Religion; and to observe its birthday ought to be a universal festival from end to end of the land.