

A Most Cherished Gift
The George Washington Ladle

by

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Few lodges in Southwest Virginia can trace their origins back to the 1790s; fewer still can claim an artifact that was given to one of its founding members from the Father of Our Country, Worshipful Brother George Washington. The subject of this paper, a relic of late 18th-Century craftsmanship, the so-called "George Washington Ladle", has spanned two centuries and has had quite a journey.

In order to properly tell the story of the ladle and its journey, one needs to understand the background of the time period, geography and people involved. M. W. Bro. Washington needs little, if any biographical sketches, yet his early years, which are not always taught in our history lessons, play a major part in the ladle's history. The reader will note the ladle was first presented to The Honorable Francis S. Preston, a Member of Congress, representing Washington County in 1797 a founding member of Abingdon Lodge No. 48, A.F. & A.M. and served as its third Master. But what set Francis Preston apart? For this, we must review the history of Preston's family.

William Preston, father of Francis Preston was born at Newtown-Limavady, County Derry, Ireland on December 25, 1729ⁱ. His father, John moved the family to America when young William was but eight. By eighteen, the death of his father prompted Preston to leave his studies and join his uncle as a surveyor. William later fought during the French and Indian War where he was made Captain of the Augusta Rangersⁱⁱ, later obtaining the rank of Colonel in the Virginia Militia. In 1760 at the age of thirty-one, Preston married Susannah Smith and ventured west to live in what was then Fincastle County. He served as County Lieutenant, Sheriff, and Surveyor of Fincastle County, VA 1772-1776. Fincastle County came into existence in 1772 and consisted of the lands of Southwest Virginia and the present day Commonwealth of Kentucky. Fincastle County went out of existence in 1776 when it was divided into Washington, Montgomery and Kentucky Counties. By 1774, Preston moved his wife and their six children (they would go on to have 13 children total) into a new house he had constructed in Montgomery County. The house, known as Smithfield received its name in honor of Preston's wife Susannah (Smith). Still standing, Smithfield and the land are now part of the campus of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State Universityⁱⁱⁱ.

William Preston was, like many of our Founding Fathers, a man of many talents. Not only did he excel at land surveying, he was a military strategist; possibly assisting in the campaign strategy^{iv} that led to the British defeat at King's Mountain which both President Washington and Jefferson commented were "the turn of the tide of war in favor of the Colonies and led Cornwallis to march to Yorktown, to his surrender, and the end of the war."^v

Preston, along with other prominent men of Fincastle County at that time, is thought to have authored the *Fincastle Resolutions* a statement adopted on January 20, 1775 by thirteen elected representatives of Fincastle County, Colony of Virginia addressed to Virginia's delegation at the First Continental Congress. These resolutions were the first adopted statement by the colonists which promised resistance to the death to the British crown to preserve political liberties, expressing support for Congress' resistance to the Intolerable Acts, issued in 1774 by the British Parliament. This, no doubt, impressed upon M.W. Bro. Washington Preston's loyalty to the Colonial cause and deepened their mutual respect. In fact, Washington, when he received the resolutions while in convention at Philadelphia, he exclaimed, "Strip me of the dejected and suffering remnant of my army; take from me all that I have left; leave me but a banner; give me but the means to plant it upon the mountains of West Augusta, and I will yet draw around me the men who will lift up their bleeding country from the dust and set her free."^{vi}

However it was as a surveyor that this paper will concentrate on as it was through this occupation that William Preston befriended Brother Washington. A Mrs. Miller, great-granddaughter of William Preston recalled in her *Memoirs of Governor McDowell* that the Preston family lived on the edge of the frontier, what was then West Augusta. The Indians familiar with that area were friendly with the young William Preston and did not seem threatened by his family's settlement. However, this sentiment was not the "dark stranger" who had come to visit and survey the land with Preston.

One day, while resting from their work no doubt, the two gentlemen sat upon the ground chatting. In the course of the conversation, Preston was alerted to a native in the brush who had raised his bow, arrow pointed at his friend. Preston threw himself upon his friend, and the native drew back, not wanting to chance injury to Preston. The "dark stranger", as he is referred to in Governor McDowell memoirs was the future Father of Our Country, Brother George Washington.

William Preston and Brother Washington remained friends through the years, sharing adventures in surveying and hunting, but also in military endeavors. Many letters exist in the Library of Congress proving the friendship and relationship between the two men, including one where Washington asks his friend to provide information on a survey they had performed^{vii}.

Preston lived to see the end of the Revolution, passing in 1783 while attending a regimental muster in Montgomery County. No record has been found, to date, of Preston having been a member of the Masonic Fraternity, though one can surmise that through his relationship with Washington, who surrounded himself with brother masons, and the fact that his son Francis is well documented as holding membership, he probably was an early Freemason of the Virginia Colony.

Fast-forward to the year 1796. Abingdon Masonic Lodge No. 48 holds its inaugural meeting on October 3rd of that year. One of the Master Masons present at that meeting was one Wor. Brother Francis Preston^{viii}, the second-born son of William and Susannah Preston. Born in Botetourt Co., VA August 2, 1765, Francis would go on to study law at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA and was later admitted to the bar and practiced in Montgomery and Washington Counties^{ix}.

Very active in politics, Bro. Preston served as a member of the Virginia House of Delegates in 1788 and 1789; elected to the Third United States Congress and reelected as a Republican to the Fourth Congress (March 4, 1793-March 3, 1797). He declined to be a candidate for re-nomination and settled in Abingdon, VA, where he resumed the practice of law. His law office still stands on Main Street in Abingdon. But politics were in his blood and so again from 1812-1814, he was a member of the House of Delegates and was commissioned a Colonel of Volunteers in the War of 1812. From 1816-1820, he served in the Virginia State Senate^x. In 1820, Colonel Preston became Brigadier-General Francis Preston of the Virginia Militia.

Bro. Preston married Sarah Buchanan Campbell, daughter of General William Campbell, commander of the Overmountain Men at the Battle of King's Mountain and his wife Elizabeth Henry, sister of Patrick Henry. Their daughter Sarah would later marry John B. Floyd, who was Governor of Virginia from 1849-1852 and who also settled in Abingdon^{xi}. Along with his friend and brother Mason William King, Francis was owner of the "Salt Works" in present-day Saltville, Virginia. Both Bros. King and Preston made their fortunes in the mining of salt and were the proud owners of fine-brick homes in Abingdon, both of which are standing to this day. King's was the first of such material to be built in Abingdon. Francis Preston's being the larger of the two is now operated as the Martha Washington Inn.

It was after having been elected to Congress in 1793 that Brother Preston met his father's old friend who, by that time, had become the first President of the United States. In remembrance of his old friendship, Washington presented the younger Preston with a punch ladle made of buffalo horn^{xii}. The horn was the product of a buffalo Colonel Preston and Washington had killed on a hunt, many years before, in the Alleghenies. A silversmith in Philadelphia had constructed the ladle out of the horn, the handle tipped with a silver cap, and on one side of the silver plate in the bowl Washington had his likeness engraved, while young Preston covered the outside with Masonic emblems^{xiii}.

General Francis Preston was Master of Abingdon Lodge No. 48 1798-1801^{xiv}. He died at the home of his son, William Campbell Preston, a Senator from South Carolina at the age of 69. Brother Preston is interred at Aspenvale Cemetery, near Seven Mile Ford, Smyth County, VA^{xv}.

The ladle was prized by the family over the generations and in 1876, it was loaned to the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia to be exhibited with other relics of the first President^{xvi}. It was at this time that the ladle was either lost or stolen. However, several years later, it was discovered and returned to Mrs. John B. Floyd, daughter of General Francis Preston and wife of Governor John B. Floyd of Virginia. In 1879, shortly before her death, Mrs. Floyd presented the ladle to the Abingdon Masonic Lodge^{xvii}. But the story doesn't end there...

In 1927, Mr. Preston Davie of New York City was writing a history of the Preston family and asked to borrow the ladle from the Abingdon Lodge for part of his work. While in New York he had a silversmith fashion two duplicates of the ladle; one for himself and one for his cousin, Captain John M. Preston of Seven Mile Ford, VA. Mr. Davie sent the original back to the Abingdon Masonic Lodge. At his death, Captain Preston left his ladle to his daughter, Mrs. Robert Gray of Bristol, VA. When Abingdon Lodge was in the process of moving its location in the 1960's, the ladle was lost or stolen yet again; all attempts to find it resulted in failure^{xviii}.

Many years passed with no information on the ladle's whereabouts until 1973. Abingdon Police Chief and member of Abingdon Lodge Brother William 'Bill' Phillips was alerted by another member of Abingdon Lodge, Brother William L. "Bill" Hawkins, that a man delivering linen to his barbershop had spoke of the location of the ladle. Chief Phillips learned that the ladle had been buried in the cellar of a house owned by man who had helped with the moving of the Washington County National Bank, where the Lodge had kept the ladle in a safe deposit box. Chief Phillips, Judge Daniel David Brown, also a member of Abingdon Lodge, and Brother Hawkins drove to Bristol immediately to retrieve the relic^{xix}.

Once in the hands of Abingdon Lodge, the ladle was found to have missing the silver piece with Washington's likeness and the Masonic emblems and the silver handle cap. The horn of the bowl and handle were still in good condition, as was the box with a silver piece and engraving on the lid^{xx}. It should be noted that the silver plate reads, in fine script, as follows:

*Punch ladle presented by George Washington in
1797 to Francis Preston one of the founders of
Abingdon Lodge
Given to Abingdon Lodge by
Susannah Smith Preston McDowell, daughter of Francis Preston
and wife of Governor James McDowell of Virginia
in memory of her father.*

The reader will note this contradicts the information found by the authors and cited in T.L. Preston's *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian* and the Anne Hager Paper. Through genealogical research, the author has determined that they are in fact correct, as the date of death for Mrs. John B. Floyd was found to have been 1879, the year the relic was gifted to the Abingdon Masonic Lodge. Mrs. McDowell passed in 1847, 29 years before the family loaned the item to the Centennial Exposition. It is possible that whoever designed the silver plate on the gift box was confused as to which Preston daughter presented it to Abingdon Lodge. Both Susannah Smith Preston and Sarah Buchanan Preston married their own cousins, both men Governors of Virginia, Governors James McDowell and John B. Floyd, respectively^{xxi}.

The ladle has been in the possession of Abingdon Lodge ever since, but wait, there's more...

Shortly after the Lodge repossessed the ladle, an attorney in Harrisonburg, VA came onto the scene. A client of his had purchased the/a ladle from the Preston family. The reader will recall that two replicas of the ladle were made. This raised the question - Which ladle is the real ladle? Thence began a long enquiry into the history and composition of the ladle. The search involved Brother William S. Phillips, Chief of the Abingdon Police Department; Wallace B. Gusler, Curator of Mechanical Arts of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; Edward Wawrynek, Asst. Mgr., Tiffany and Co. of New York NY; and, Donald L. Fennimore, Assoc. Curator of The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur DE^{xxii}.

The Winterthur Museum made the metallurgical analysis of the silver in order to determine the ladle's authenticity. Older silver has more impurities. Prior to 1850 the technology did not exist to make very pure silver, as there is today, so the presence of other metals indicates an older piece. The analysis, made on 5/9/75, revealed the presence of copper, lead, tin and gold as well as silver^{xxiii}. This experiment seems to prove that the ladle owned by the Abingdon Masonic Lodge is indeed authentic.

In November 2008, Worshipful Billy D. Breeding of Abingdon Lodge took a vote of the lodge at its Regular Stated Meeting as to their acceptance of loaning the ladle to the Grand Lodge of Virginia Museum for display. The lodge voted to do so, on the condition that at anytime the Abingdon Lodge wished the ladle to return, a written request signed by the Master and Board of Trustees of the Lodge, on lodge letterhead, would trigger the ladle's return to Abingdon.

On behalf of the Grand Lodge of Virginia Museum, Most Worshipful John Robert Dean personally attended the December 2008^{xxiv} Stated Communication of Abingdon Lodge where he was given command of the ladle and its box and personally conveyed them to Richmond where the ladle and box now rest on display at the Museum.







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^{xv} *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774-Present*. Retrieved April 2009 from <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=P000514>

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*Photographs provided by Ms. Marie Barnett, Librarian, Grand Lodge of Virginia