

**ROBERT BENJAMIN FOLGER:
A REMARKABLE FREEMASON**

A Short Biography of a Controversial Brother

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*Presented to the 4,299th Stated Communication of Independent Royal Arch Lodge
September 20, 1979 A.D., 5979 A.L., W.: John Mauk Hilliard, Master*

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Ancient Chinese Curse

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I tried a bit to break the cipher, with no success, and then showed it to a colleague, Mr. Donald Bennett, who broke it in short order. The page he translated contained a homily on the Bible that appeared to be addressed to new members of some society, and its tone was Masonic in nature. The mystery deepened, however, even though we could read the cipher, because the page was clearly one of several. As I began tracking the origins of the manuscript, I discovered that its author was Robert Benjamin Folger, a physician from New York City.

Brother Folger lived during times that can be best described as very "interesting." He experienced the anti-Masonic movement first hand, witnessed at least six different Grand Lodges for the state of New York, lived through the Civil War, and saw fourteen Supreme Councils of the Scottish Rite. Through all of this, he was seldom an idle bystander, but was actively involved in many of the controversies. He is today viewed as a schismatic, a troublemaker, and one of the most ardent proponents of Cerneauism ever seen.

While his Masonic Career is perhaps as checkered as the ground floor of King Solomon's Temple, one cannot study his life without feeling that he was indeed a remarkable Freemason.

EARLY LIFE. Robert Benjamin Folger was born on December 16, 1803, in Hudson, New York, a city in Columbia County that had been settled some 25 years earlier by Quakers. His education began in the Quaker Schools, and then was continued at a boarding school in Lenox, Massachusetts, some 35 miles from Hudson. He returned to Hudson with the intention of completing his preparatory education, but was unable to enter college, and moved to New York city in 1817.

After a year in New York, he decided to become a physician and was apprenticed in a wholesale drug store. His apprenticeship lasted a year, following which he took the position of a druggist in an apothecary and later began medical studies. He graduated from medical school in 1824 with the M.D. degree, and is listed in the 1825 New York directory as a physician, living at 23 Suffolk Street.

In 1824, the year he graduated from Medical School, he was Initiated in Fireman's Lodge No. 368, which later became New York Lodge No. 368. This Lodge was a daughter of Independent Royal Arch Lodge No. 2. On February 10, 1826, he was Raised to the Sublime Degree of Master Mason, and then began a period of extensive Masonic labors. On May 25, 1826, he was Exalted to the Holy and Sublime Degree of Royal Arch in Jerusalem Chapter No. 8 and later was Received and Greeted in some Council of Royal and Select Masters, presided over by James Cushman, the itinerant lecturer. It is interesting to note that Folger's first direct contact with Cushman was apparently regular; though subsequent events, which can be traced to Cushman, were to have the tragic effect of alienating Folger from regular Masonry.

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ment. Atwood, who was Grand Master several times in both of the schismatic Saint John's Grand Lodges of New York, had a zeal for Masonry that matched Folger's. On August 23, 1826, less than three months after being Exalted, Brother Folger resigned from Jerusalem Chapter, presumably to help form Temple Chapter. Temple Chapter, of which Folger was described as a leading spirit, existed briefly before being forced to close by the anti-Masonic excitement. Its members (including Folger we may assume) consolidated with Ancient Chapter No. 1, which also closed for the same reasons.

We have no records to directly indicate that Folger ever reaffiliated with a Chapter of Royal Arch Masons after resigning from Jerusalem Chapter. However, he stated that he had come

to the conclusion that all that ever has been, or is now known as pure Ancient Masonry, is contained in the three degrees, viz. the Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft, and the Master Mason, with the Royal Arch Instructions. This is the Alpha and Omega of Masonry, the beginning and the end.⁷

With a statement this encompassing and emphatic, it is hard to imagine that he would not have reaffiliated. In fact, his continued and documented activity in Templary is further evidence of reaffiliation with some Chapter.

The remaining important Masonic event in 1826 for Brother Folger was his investiture with the ineffable degrees. He, Atwood, and several others traveled to Trenton, New Jersey some time in 1826, irregularly received the 14° through the 32° from Abraham Jacobs, and joined Lafayette Chapter of Rose Croix. Jacobs was never appointed an Inspector General and he peddled degrees whenever the opportunity presented itself. In fairness to Folger, we should note that during this period ignorance prevailed as to who was authorized to confer the Scottish Rite degrees or what constituted a legitimate Scottish Rite body. He probably received the degrees in all good faith, though his honorable intentions did not save him or the Craft from future controversy and dissension.

On June 8, 1827, a Charter was granted to Zorobabel Lodge of New York City (which was likely Zerubabel Lodge No. 242). Brother Hans B. Gram was the Master, and Brothers Robert B. Folger and Lewis Saynisch were the Senior and Junior Wardens. Hans Gram was apparently a close friend of Folger's, and this is born out by Folger's own writing.

FOLGER'S CIPHER. During or prior to 1827, Robert Folger prepared a manuscript in two small books, which was written in a strange, hieroglyphic-like code. One was $4\frac{3}{4}$ inches by $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches, contained 32 pages of cipher, and is now in the possession of Macoy Publishing Company of Richmond, Virginia. On the first page of this book, dated July 12, 1827, is a bequest that reads in part:

It is my earnest prayer that this book, if it be found among my earthly remains after my decease may be handed over to my dearly beloved Friend and Brother Dr. Hans B. Gram to whom I bequeath it with my thanks for the constant and untired kindness which he has shewed me from the first hour of my acquaintance with him to the present...⁶

If Dr. Gram was not in America, the book was to have been given to Mr. Ferdinand Halsey who was "... to preserve the substance in his mind while he [committed] the manuscript to the flames."⁶ The name of Halsey has been almost obliterated on the page, probably in 1854 when the bequest was revoked.

The books were found by Brother Harold van Buren Voorhis; Brother Henry Emmerson, Past Grand Treasurer of New York attempted to break the code. Brother Will Baden, Past Master of Henry Clay Lodge of New York, Broke the cipher in the early 1950's and prepared a translation. He concluded that the Folger Manuscript is a French Blue Lodge Ritual.

The translating is slow and tedious, even when the key to the cipher is known. I have confirmed Baden's translation and agree with his conclusions regarding the nationality of the ritual. The work is a Christian Masonic system with the degrees of Disciple, Fellow, and Master. The degrees apparently are intended to follow the Master Mason degree. The manuscript abounds with symbols

of the Blazing Star, and has a Lodge room diagram showing seven steps leading to a locked door. These symbols are common in several French exposures of the period 1737 to 1751. Particularly interesting is the reception of a Fellow who wishes to be admitted a Master. The password used is *giblem*, which was given as the password of a Master Mason in *L'Ordre des Franc-Maçons Trahi* of 1745, *L'Anti Maçon* of 1748, and *Le Maçon Demasque* of 1751.

Further hints of a French connection are a portion of the "vow of an Anc[ient] Scotch Master," perhaps related to the *Maitres Ecossais*; a page with a cross mounted on a cubical stone, reminiscent of the Rose Croix Degree; a clearly Christian ritual; and a ceremony of purification by handwashing similar to that seen in some of the Scottish Rite Degrees. However, without both books, a full translation of each, and unlimited time to research, the manuscript will remain a mystery.

Going back in time, we find in 1824 that James Cushman was made an honorary 33° and was granted honorary membership in the Southern Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite. At this present time, we cannot know if Cushman fully understood the limitations of being an honorary Sovereign Grand Inspector General. In any event, whether through ignorance or opportunism, Cushman assumed the prerogatives of an active 33°, and on November 9, 1827, elevated Henry Atwood to the 33°, who in turn that year elevated Robert Folger. Thus we see that Folger's reception of all of the Scottish Rite Degrees was irregular and illegitimate, though he likely was unaware of this and had acted in all honesty.

Brother Folger affiliated with Morton Encampment No. 4 in about 1828, and was listed as its second charter member. In 1832, Folger's 33° was recognized by the Hicks Supreme Council, or so his obituary by the 1881 Cerneau Supreme Council claimed. However, Baynard, author of the *History of the Supreme Council, 33°, Northern Masonic Jurisdiction of the U.S.A.*, stated that he can find no connection of Folger with any Cerneau body prior to 1851.

He was Captain General of Morton Encampment in 1833. In 1835, New York Lodge No. 368 surrendered its Charter; and on November 9, 1835, probably to maintain his Lodge membership, Robert B. Folger was admitted as an adjoining member of Independent Royal Arch Lodge No. 2 of New York City. His advancement in Independent Royal Arch Lodge was rather rapid, being Junior Warden in 1836, Senior Warden in 1837, and Master in 1838, 1839, and 1840. In 1838 while serving his first term as Master of No. 2, he was Commander of Morton Encampment.

THE DUTCHER AFFAIR. On February 3, 1841, Robert Folger assumed the East for Brother Benjamin C. Dutcher, Master of No. 2, and held an extra meeting under a Dispensation from the Deputy Grand Master, Brother William Willis. A Mr. Page was the candidate. During the course of the evening, Brother Folger deviated in some way from the activities approved by the Deputy Grand Master in his dispensation and permitted some "informality" in the proceedings. Brother Willis visited Independent Royal Arch Lodge on February 8, 1841 and pointed out Folger's error. Folger attempted to justify his actions (whatever they were is not known now) and held that he would repeat the act under similar circumstances. Willis apparently bullied the Lodge into unanimously disapproving of the proceedings, and while he was conducting this investigation, he kept some candidate waiting in the preparation room.

Folger later made a statement to the Grand Lodge and the affair was referred to a special Committee. He asked to speak before the Committee with counsel, and was denied. The Committee then summoned Br. Folger to appear before them. He responded with a letter which was deemed improper to be read, and the letter was ordered to be destroyed by the Grand Secretary. On June 4, 1841, Folger was suspended until he acknowledged his error. He answered that afternoon with a letter that was held unsatisfactory as it did not acknowledge his error in unequivocal terms, nor properly apologize for "... the indignity which he [inflicted] on [the] Grand Lodge."¹⁰

Folger withdrew from No. 2 on June 28, 1841, though on September 27 of the same year he again applied as an adjoining member. On November 8 his application was rejected by the Lodge, and the episode ended on December 13 for Folger when the Master, by authority of the Deputy Grand Master, declared Folger a member and ruled his withdrawal invalid because of some technicality. It is worth adding that during the course of this dispute, Dutcher withdrew from the Lodge, took the Charter to his house, and made arrangements for it to be buried with him.

A circular in 1843 listed Robert B. Folger as a member of a committee to form a Freemasons' Hall and Asylum Fund, of which he later became a Trustee. In 1844 he was again elected Master of Independent Royal Arch No. 2, and in 1845 he served briefly as its Secretary, resigning April 28, 1845. He continued his activities in Templary by being Captain General of Morton Encampment in 1845 and 1846. He was a member of the New York Legislature in 1849.

ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT WITH CERNEAUISM. Scottish Rite Masonry in the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction had a long and painful birth. There were basically two branches that competed from 1813 to 1867, one formed by Joseph Cerneau in 1807 and the other by Antoine Bideaud in 1813. The latter was regularized or established on September 21, 1813 by Emmanuel de la Motta, one of the founders of the Mother Supreme Council. The proclamation was confirmed on January 31, 1814 by the Southern Supreme Council. The Bideaud or regular Supreme Council was conservative and slowly expanded; Cerneau was bold and audacious, and expanded aggressively. Both groups either were dissolved or dormant during the anti-Masonic period.

After more than a century and a half, we can with fair certainty determine that Cerneau was never authorized to confer more than the twenty five degrees of the Rite of Perfection. His pretensions to all thirty three degrees of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite were fabrications, but from the immediacy of New York in the late 1820's, such judgements would have been difficult

at best. Masons of that period were essentially faced with choosing sides on the basis of intense propaganda, if they were even aware of the two (and frequently more) conflicting systems.

As we have seen, Brother Folger was an active Knight Templar, and this may have influenced his leanings toward Cerneauism. The connection of Cerneau and Templary was another example of the chaos in the "high degrees" in New York during that period. In 1814, with *absolutely* no authority, Joseph Cerneau, acting as head of his "Sovereign Grand Consistory of Exalted Masonry," established the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar for New York! While this group was not initially recognized by the several Encampments of New York, it was later admitted to the General Grand Encampment in 1816. It eventually became the accepted Grand Encampment for New York without any serious questions as to its regularity being raised. In fact, Thomas Lowndes, as a delegate from the Cerneau Consistory, helped form the General Grand Encampment (which may explain why the New York Group was admitted in 1816).

It is easy to see why Folger threw in his lot with the descendants from the Cerneau Consistory. Not only had Cerneau's group been formed some six years before the Bideaud group, but it had been accepted as having the nominal authority to form a Grand Encampment of Knights Templar. Brother Folger was thus faced with being a 33° with the Cerneau group or having a probably lesser rank with the regular Supreme Council.

Henry Atwood, who had helped to form the schismatic Saint John's Grand Lodge of New York, formed a Supreme Council in 1848 to 1849 which he claimed was a revival of the Cerneau group. He had been conferring the 33° on members of his Saint John's Grand Lodge and apparently wanted to add prestige to the schismatic group by establishing a Supreme Council composed of the leaders of his Grand Lodge.

The Atwood body was reorganized in 1851 and Folger joined in the efforts of revitalization and became the Grand Treasurer.

Further, he induced Jeremy Cross, the noted lecturer, to become Sovereign Grand Commander. Cross agreed upon the condition that only Royal Arch Masons could receive through the 16° and Knights Templar through the 32°. Cross was an Active Member of the Southern Supreme Council, but he had no authority to work in the North or form a Supreme Council in competition with the legitimate Bideaud body. To further complicate matters and illustrate the chaotic state of affairs at that period, the Southern Supreme Council forgot that they had made Cross an Active member and denounced him as an impostor!

Cross completed his term of office in 1852 and we find his Supreme Council again revived or reorganized with Atwood at the Helm. The York Rite prerequisites were apparently dropped then and Folger was listed as Grand Secretary General. Folger was one of the four nominees for Deputy Grand Master that year; a year that saw another schism in the Grand Lodge. Reuben H. Walworth was elected Grand Master, who was believed by some to have made anti-Masonic statements during the recent anti-Masonic period. This was a period that saw the Craft almost destroyed in New York.

On June 13, 1852, Robert B. Folger spoke for reviving Saint John's Grand Lodge, motivated primarily, we may assume, by the election of Walworth as Grand Master. Folger was one member of a committee of three appointed by the dissenters to draw up plans. Later he, Atwood, and others withdrew to reactivate Saint John's Grand Lodge only three years after a merger of the two Grand Lodges had been effected.

CLANDESTINE ACTIVITIES. In March of 1853, the second Atwood Supreme Council chartered two symbolic Lodges in New York City, Saint John the Forerunner No. 1, with Robert B. Folger as Master, and La Sincerite No. 2. "Number 1 was to work under a critical translation from the French; the Warrant was finally recalled before work commenced . . ." ¹⁰ It is interesting to speculate that the French translation that was to be used was the ritual in the cipher manuscript of Folger. However, that ritual

seemed to have been intended to come after the Master Mason degree. Further, Folger never indicated any objection to non-Christians being Masons, and the clear restriction of the Degrees in his manuscript to Christians would seem to preclude it being used in a Symbolic Lodge without revision.

He was suspended on September 27, 1853 by the regular Grand Lodge of New York for refusing to appear at Grand Lodge and for an unmasonic communication. We do not know if the root cause was organizing a schismatic Grand Lodge, chairing a clandestine Lodge, or perhaps some other offense. It would be interesting to see one of his "offensive" letters. On December 9, 1853, he was suspended by Morton Encampment.

Folger revoked the preface and bequest contained in his cipher book on September 25, 1854. An X was drawn through the page, and the name of Ferdinand Halsey was almost totally obliterated. No reason for the revocation was given, but it probably came about from Folger's recent clandestine activities.

Saint John's Grand Lodge collapsed in 1856 as Folger withdrew and returned to the regular Grand Lodge of New York. He was restored to Masonic membership on June 6, 1857. We do not know if he rejoined Independent Royal Arch Lodge No. 2 or which, if any, of the other bodies in which he had been active. He also resigned that year as Grand Secretary General of the second Atwood Supreme Council.

In 1862 he published his notorious book, *The Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite in Thirty Three Degrees*, which was the most rigorous defense of Cerneauism ever published. While he claimed no partiality in his history, a casual reading contradicts this. He stated that "the whole proceedings of Stephen Morin and his Successors, from the beginning, have been illegal and unmasonic . . ."7 Brother Folger attacked the Mother Supreme Council for admitting Jews to the 17° through the 32°, claiming these teach Christian doctrines and should be reserved for Christians. Finally, he claimed that the Scottish Rite did not originate in

Charleston in 1801, but had always been under the control of the Grand Orient of France, which group regularized the Cerneau Consistory in 1813. In short, Folger's history is at odds with what we accept and can verify today. Whether he willfully invented some of his "history" or was misled by others, we do not know. In any event, the book is not accurate and should be read with this in mind.

The Cerneau and the regular Supreme Councils united in 1867 to form the current Supreme Council for the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction. Folger signed an oath of fealty to the new Supreme Council and then seemed to have slowed his Masonic labors, as far as records indicate. His son, Robert Benjamin Folger, Jr., was born in 1868, when Dr. Folger was 65.

He wrote the Supreme Council in 1873 with the idea in mind of rewriting and republishing his history. He said

it was written at a time when party spirit in Masonic matters ran high, & being an old member of the Cerneau body, devotedly attached to that section & all its interests, indulged largely in sharp words & many expressions which would now be deemed objectionable in the highest degree. But the true history of the Rite is not marred.²

This is perhaps an indirect confession to some historical inaccuracies in the book. The Supreme Council refused his offer.

In 1876 Brother Folger attended the only Supreme Council session since he signed the Oath of Fealty. In 1881 he republished his book and did not seem to have changed any of its earlier, harsh opinions. Then, barely eight months after printing in his book that "... he [disclaimed] any partiality for either of the parties, having long since withdrawn his connection with the 'High Degrees','⁷ he and Hopkins Thompson resigned their honorary memberships in the Northern Supreme Council, withdrew their Oaths of Fealty, and on September 27, 1881, revived the Cerneau Supreme Council! There is some confusion as to what actually transpired. Folger's request to withdraw from the Supreme Council was denied because he was "under charges" for some

unspecified activity. It is unclear whether the charges were caused by the revival of the Cerneau Supreme Council or if the schism occurred because of the charges. Thompson and Folger claimed that there were irregularities in the Union of 1867; irregularities of which they only later became aware. Thompson became Sovereign Grand Commander and Folger resumed his office of Grand Secretary General. This body had an uneven existence and died out about thirty years later.

Brother Folger became the Corresponding Grand Secretary in 1885. On July 23, 1892, he made a "... long journey of over six miles..."¹¹ from Brooklyn to New York City to attend an informal meeting of Sovereign Grand Inspector Generals where he made a speech. This was his last recorded Masonic activity, for on September 13, 1892, at 89 years of age, he was called from labor at his home. On September 16, 1892, Masonic services were conducted by Silertia Lodge No. 198 (indicating he maintained good standing in his Lodge, whatever it was), and he was later buried in Oak Woods Cemetery at Nyack-on-the-Hudson. He was survived by his wife and son.

Thus ended the career of a zealous Craftsman. Brother Folger's life and activities indicated a passion for our gentle Craft that was at times overwhelming in its intensity. He was frequently at odds with the regular Masonic authorities, but in almost all cases acted in a manner that can be viewed as honorable and certainly in a manner that he felt was in the best interests of Freemasonry. In any event, whether he is viewed as a rogue and a charlatan or a sincere Craftsman whose error was to choose the losing sides of several battles, we must agree that he was *indeed* a remarkable Freemason.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE LIFE OF ROBERT B. FOLGER

- 1803:** Born December 16 in Hudson, New York.¹¹
Educated in Quaker schools in Hudson.¹¹
Attended boarding school in Lenox, Massachusetts.¹¹
- 1817:** Moved to New York City.¹¹
- 1818:** Apprenticed in a wholesale drugstore.¹¹
- 1819:** Worked for an apothecary and then began medical school.¹¹
- 1824:** Graduated from medical school.¹¹
Initiated in Firemans' Lodge (later New York Lodge)
No. 368.¹¹
- 1825:** Listed in the New York City directory as a physician.²
- 1826:** Raised to the Sublime Degree, February 10.¹²
Exalted in Jerusalem Chapter No. 8, May 25.²
Received and Greeted by James Cushman.¹¹
Dubbed and Created a Knight Templar in Columbia
Encampment No. 11.¹¹
Resigned from Jerusalem Chapter, August 23.²
Helped found Temple Chapter.¹¹
Received 32° with Atwood from Abraham Jacobs in Tren-
ton, New Jersey, and joined Lafayette Chapter of Rose
Croix.^{2,11}
- 1827:** Served as charter Senior Warden of Zorobabel Lodge.⁸
Prepared the cipher manuscript, July 12.⁶

(Atwood received 33° from James Cushman, an honorary 33°.)¹²

Received 33° from Atwood.¹¹

Stated, November 17, 1881, "I am the oldest living Sov. Gr. Ins. Genl. in the U.S. I received the degree in 1827."²

1828: Became second charter member of Morton Encampment No. 4.¹²

1832: Recognized as a 33° by the "Hicks Council of 1832."¹¹

1833: Served as Captain General of No. 4.²

1835: (New York Lodge No. 368, formerly Firemans', surrendered its Charter.)²

Became an adjoining member of Independent Royal Arch Lodge No. 2.⁵

1836: Served as Jr. Warden of No. 2.⁵

1837: Served as Sr. Warden of No. 2.⁵

1838: Served as Master of No. 2.⁵
Served as Commander of No. 4.²

1839: Served as Master of No. 2.⁵

1840: Served as Master of No. 2.⁵

1841: Presided over No. 2 for Benjamin C. Dutcher, February 3.⁵
Chastised at No. 2 by William Willis, D.G.M., February 8.¹⁰

Suspended by Grand Lodge.¹⁰

Withdrew from Masonry, June 28.⁵

Applied to No. 2 as an adjoining member, September 27.⁵

Rejected by No. 2, November 8.⁵

Restored to membership in No. 2 when withdrawal
declared invalid, December 13.⁵

- 1843: Listed as a member of a committee to form Freemasons'
Hall and Asylum Fund.⁵
- 1844: Served as Master of No. 2.⁵
- 1845: Served as Secretary of No. 2.⁵
Served as Captain General of No. 4.²
Resigned as Secretary of No. 2, April 28.⁵
- 1846: Served as Captain General of No. 4.²
- 1849: Served as member of the New York Legislature.¹¹
- 1851: Served as Grand Secretary General of second Atwood
Supreme Council.¹¹
Nominated with three others for Deputy Grand Master.²
Spoke for reactivating Saint John's Grand Lodge,
June 13.¹⁰
Withdrew from Grand Lodge with Atwood and others.⁴
- 1853: Scheduled to be Charter Master of Saint John the
Forerunner Lodge No. 1, chartered by Atwood Supreme
Council.¹⁰
Suspended by regular Grand Lodge, September 27.¹⁰
Suspended by No. 4, December 9.²
- 1854: Revoked preface to cipher manuscript, September 25.⁶
- 1856: Withdrew from Saint John's Grand Lodge, which soon after
collapsed.⁴
- 1857: Restored to Masonic membership by regular Grand Lodge
upon petition, June 6.²

Resigned as Grand Secretary General of the Atwood
Supreme Council.²

1862: Published *Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry in Thirty Three Degrees.*⁷

1867: Signed Oath of Fealty to United Supreme Council.²

1868: (Robert Benjamin Folger, Jr. born.)¹¹

1873: Offered to reprint his book for the United Supreme
Council.²

1876: Attended United Supreme Council.²

1881: Republished his book.⁷

Formed Cerneau Council Revived (or Thompson-Folger
Council) and became Grand Secretary General,
September 27.²

Resigned honorary membership in and withdrew from the
United Supreme Council while under charges.²

1885: Corresponding Grand Secretary of the Cerneau Council.¹¹

1892: Spoke at a meeting of Sovereign Grand Inspector Generals,
July 23.¹¹

Died in Brooklyn, September 13.¹¹

Buried in Oak Wood Cemetery, Nyack-on-the-Hudson,
with Masonic services conducted by Silentia Lodge
No. 198.¹¹

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following people provided invaluable assistance and advice in this research:

Mrs. Inge Baum, Librarian of the Supreme Council, 33°, S.M.J.;

Ms. V. Hansen, Secretary, Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Co., Inc.;

Ms. Gloria Jackson, Assistant Librarian of the Supreme Council, 33°, N.M.J.;

Br.: Ameil Pouler, Editor, *The New Age*

Br.: Harold van Buren Voorhis.

OTHER PRESENTATIONS

1. Independent Royal Arch Lodge No. 2, 4,229th Stated Communication, September 20, 1979, W. Br. John Mauk Hilliard, Master.
2. Maryland Masonic Research Society, November 24, 1979.
3. *The Royal Arch Mason*, pp. 163-171, Vol. XIII, No. 10, Summer 1981.