

# Washington Navy Yard: The Early Years

By John Sharp

The story of Naval Lodge No. 4 in 1812 is very closely linked to the story of life at the Washington Navy Yard in 1812. The Lodge was located right outside the gates of the Navy Yard, and most of the members were either employed at the Navy Yard or serving in the Navy or Marines. Understanding what was happening at the Navy Yard in 1812, helps one understand what was happening at Naval Lodge during that time.

For its first half century, the Washington Navy Yard's principle mission centered on building, repairing, and holding in readiness naval vessels. Founded in 1799, the ship yard grew during the next decade to become the largest employer in Washington D.C., employing between 200 and 350 workers. During these formative early years the shipyard leadership cadre was frequently composed of members of Naval Lodge No. 4. Indeed the Lodge was the principle meeting place for many aspiring naval clerks and mechanics and the pages of Naval's early minutes are replete with their names. Naval Lodge quickly became the place where men from a variety of different backgrounds and creeds made lifelong and important friendships with civic and naval leaders, which brought great benefits to the Navy Yard and the larger civic community.

Such lodge friendships were important, given that, like the larger society at that time, the workforce was highly stratified. However, the lodge provided an opportunity for all to meet "on the level" and share in a common vision.

## The Daily Routine

Each day, early in the morning before first light, the workers would be roused by the Yard's bell and would walk from their nearby South East residences toward the Anacostia River. There they would enter through the Latrobe Gate and leave by the same route twelve hours later.

Early Washington, DC was a small town. In the new federal city there was no public transportation, paved roads or street lamps. Those people wanting to travel had to walk, go by stagecoach, or rent/own their own carriages and horses (something few workers could afford). Thus, most mechanics lived by necessity near the Yard's boundaries within the District's 6<sup>th</sup> Ward. Most lived in small lodgings, shopped for groceries in nearby stores and went to church in the surrounding area.

In his 1950 history of the Navy Yard, *Round-Shot to Rockets; a History of the Navy Yard and U.S. Naval Gun Factory*, Taylor Peck wrote: *This Navy Yard settlement or 'Navy Yard Hill,' as it was called, became early in the century one of the most flourishing settlements within the limits of the District of Columbia; it has been described as having the characteristics of an English village with its public market, its village green, its public wells and springs, and its little churches among the trees. The streets were green lanes bordered on either side by fields of grass or grain. Fruit or shade trees were numerous, and there were few row houses.*

After a long day, many workers spent their time at local taverns and restaurants, where they could meet friends, gossip and discuss current events. Sundays were the one day of rest for Yard workers and many would go to nearby churches such as Christ Episcopal at 6<sup>th</sup> and G streets.

In 1812, drinking beer and stronger spirits in the workplace was a common and accepted practice. In an age when potable water was often foul and noxious tasting, Navy Yard workers often preferred their libations mixed with whiskey or rum.

## **Navy Yard Hierarchy**

At the Navy Yard, workers established their own social world. This small world had its own hierarchy and customs. The early shipyard was similar to a vast pyramid with the shipyard commandant at the apex. The commandants were all career naval officers, such as long serving Commodore Thomas Tingey, commandant from 1800 to 1829. While Navy Yard commandants exercised almost unlimited authority over all matters related to naval officers, enlisted personnel, and the civilian workforce, in practice there were both institutional and customary checks on his decision making powers. Just below him, making up the civilian workforce, were the various navy yard clerks. Their jobs were primarily administrative in nature and unlike most employees of this era they received a fixed or annual salary. Shipyard clerks exercised considerable executive responsibility. In addition to their other responsibilities they were in charge of official correspondence, the conduct and recording of the daily musters, and the review of all official outgoing correspondence. Most importantly, these clerks often acted for the commandant on budget, contracting, and administrative issues; in this role they exercised wide discretion within their particular domains. Having a steady salary rather than a daily wage meant they enjoyed financial security and access to a wider range of amenities than was possible to mechanics and laborers at the time. The clerks often could afford to rent or own a house, keep horses, employ servants, and in many cases own slaves. For example, in 1830 the Chief Clerk Thomas Howard owned his home, had extensive property, supported a large family, and held six slaves.

Among shipyard workers, the master mechanics were the most important and crucial individuals in the hierarchy. Many Lodge members were master mechanics, such as John Davis of Abel, Benjamin King, William Easby and Shadrach Davis. They personified authority, trade knowledge and tradition, and provided day-to-day leadership for workers. These master craftsmen were recognized experts in their specialty, such as ship carpenter, joiner, blacksmith, etc. and usually had many years of trade experience. Many of these master mechanics became wealthy. For instance, Davis of Abel owned his own residence, other properties, and four slaves, while William Easby would go on to a highly successful career as one of the nation's preeminent shipbuilders.

Master mechanics often supervised large numbers of employees with authority to hire and dismiss mechanics and laborers. They also provided the overall work direction to the many tradesmen through the subordinate supervisors. These subordinate supervisors' (often fellow Lodge members) were hard driving aspirants for any openings as a master mechanic.

Almost all of the master mechanics began their time at the Navy Yard as journeymen mechanics. They were the skilled tradesmen -- the most plentiful of the shipyard workers. Each journeyman had successfully completed a rigorous five or six year trade apprenticeship in their field. Each trade also had trainees or apprentices, who were young workers in training. Each apprentice signed a binding legal agreement with a master mechanic to return designated service for trade knowledge. The Navy Yard also employed numerous unskilled laborers who performed heavy but necessary work such as digging, pile driving, and pulling or hauling of ships and ship parts.

Navy Yard mechanics and laborers faced a precarious economic situation, for they were in law, and in fact, day laborers, and paid a per diem wage only for days actually worked. Shipyard work was a life where the only certainties were often hard and unpleasant. A cold winter usually led to mass layoffs as only the most essential crews would be kept working. Fewer naval ships to repair invariably meant fewer mechanics and laborers on the payrolls. These conditions, and

especially any cutbacks by Congress in annual naval appropriations, made the workforce particularly vulnerable to economic downturn, wage reduction and prolonged unemployment, which rapidly led the men to destitution.

Most navy yard workers had little savings on which to fall back, and imprisonment for debt within the District of Columbia continued as a daily reality experienced by thousands of the city's workers each year. A severe economic downturn or late naval appropriation by Congress could damage even the economic positions of relatively prosperous men such as master mechanics Jesse Barnes and Jonathan Criddle. The friendships formed at the Naval Lodge were often crucial in helping, or at least ameliorating, shipyard workers distress in times of economic or personal suffering.

The onerous militia requirements of the District of Columbia in 1812 made it mandatory that all white males perform militia service. Militia duty added to workers' financial woes as it represented a time-consuming and significant economic burden for all mechanics and laborers. Such militia service was largely performed without compensation. In practice these militia musters fell heaviest on the per diem worker who, unlike a salaried clerk and some master mechanics, received no pay for their service and were compelled to muster or be fined while the salaried government clerk was exempt.

Organizational and technological changes beginning in the late 1820s underscored the workers employment concerns, especially the 1827 decision by the Board of Navy Commissioners to centralize the procurement of Navy supplies by designating the Navy Yard as a manufacturing center. Manufacturing now became the Yard's main objective, which drastically reduced ship building to only five vessels between 1827 and the Civil War. As a consequence the number of carpenters and ship joiners gradually declined, while the employment of metal smiths and ordnance mechanics expanded.

Throughout this era of profound change one steady factor for many was the close ties of Naval Lodge brethren with the shipyard, which was to remain a bright constant in trying times.



*Washington, DC in 1833. The Navy Yard can be seen along the Anacostia River, the Capitol building is on the hill in the center and the White House is on the left.*

A regular stated meeting of Washington  
Naval Lodge No. 4 on Saturday the 5<sup>th</sup> Day  
of February A. D. 1812

Officers of the Lodge - Joseph Capin Treasurer  
John Davis of Able W. M. Edw. M. Grant S. D.  
Shadrach Davis S. W. William Howard S. D.  
Peter Provoost S. W.  
Thomas Howard Secy William Hembrow  
Teller

Members Present -

Adler Spooner, William Lambell, Anthony St. Aubert  
Daniel Kealey, George Lake, Jesse M. Gay, Isaac  
Davis, Rob: Dillon, Jess Barnes, Reynolds Donalson  
Benjamin King Junr, Thomas Allen, James A. Thomas,  
Edw. Fitzgerald, Visitors Brothers Young, Lifer,  
M. Gunder, Rappine, Farel, Fisk & Parry &  
W. Smith,

An entered apprentices Lodge being opened in  
Common form, when the petition of Daniel Bourne  
was read praying to become a member of this Lodge  
Recommended by Rob: Dillon & Benjamin King,  
accompanied with a deposit of \$7- and Broth  
Capin, Lambell & Shadrach Davis appointed a committee  
to enquire into his character, and report the result thereof  
to this Lodge at their next stated meeting

Brother William Keith having requested to be raised  
to the second degree of Masonry, was examined in the first  
degree, Balloted for and declared worthy of being raised  
to the degree of a fellow craft Mason when

At a regular stated meeting of Washington Naval Lodge No. 4 on Saturday the 1<sup>st</sup> day of February A.L. 5812 –

Officers of the Lodge – Joseph Cassin, Jr. Treasurer  
John Davis of Abel W.M. – Edw. N. Grantt S. D.  
Shadrach Davis S.W. – William Howard J.D.  
Peter Provote J. W.  
Thomas Howard Secretary – William Hamden Tiler

Members Present : Holder Spooner, William Lambell, Anthony F. Shrasset, Daniel Kealey, George Lake, Jesse McCoy, Isaac Davies, Robert Dillon, Jefs. Barnes, Reynold Danalion, Benjamin King Jr., Thomas Allen, James H. Kearney, Edward Fitzgerald  
Visitors – Brothers Young, Lifier, McGruder, Rappine, Farrel, Fisk & Parry and Wm. Smith

An Entered Apprentices Lodge being opened in common form when the petition of Daniel Baurret was read praying to become a member of this Lodge recommended by Robert Dillon and Benjamin King accompanied with a deposit of \$7 and Brothers Calpen, Lambell & Shadrach Davis appointed a committee to inquire into his character and report the result thereof to this Lodge at their next stated meeting.

Brother William Keith having requested to be raised to the Second degree of Masonry was examined in the first degree, balloted for and declared worthy of being raised to the degree of a Fellowcraft Mason when

Blue Lodge Masonry uses “Anno Lucis,” or A.L. when writing out the date. Anno Lucis means the “year of light.” This is meant to represent the date since the universe was created. Conveniently, the universe was calculated to have been created exactly 4,000 years B.C. So to calculate the Masonic year, you need only add 4,000 to today’s date. There is no particular Masonic significance in this method of calculating the date, other than a desire by early Masonic writers to create as ancient a lineage for Freemasonry as their imaginations would allow. Various ancillary Masonic bodies use other systems for their dates.

when this Lodge closed in order to open a fellow  
Crafts Lodge. a fellow crafts Lodge being  
opened in the usual form when Brother William  
North received the degree of a fellow craft Mason  
and after paying into the hands of the Treasurer  
the sum of Five Dollars, returned thanks to the  
Lodge and received a charge from the W.M.  
suitable to the occasion

The following Communication was recd from  
the Grand Lodge Vt. —

In Grand Lodge District of Columbia  
at the Union Lodge Room, in the City of Washington  
Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> January 1812. among others the following  
proceedings were had Vt.

Resolved, That each Lodge in the  
District of Columbia, working under the jurisdiction  
of the Grand Lodge, be requested to appoint three  
Delegates to meet in convention at the Union  
Lodge Room in the City of Washington on the first  
Tuesday in March next, at 10 o'clock A.M. for the  
purpose of devising and adopting a uniform mode  
of working: &c. — that this Convention have  
power to meet and adjourn from time to time, until  
they may agree on some plan or mode of working,  
which they may think most consistent with the  
History of Masonry and conducive to the good  
of the Craft — which mode so agreed on shall  
be reported to this Grand Lodge for their consi-  
deration at their next stated meeting.

The following alterations in the  
Constitution of the Grand Lodge were

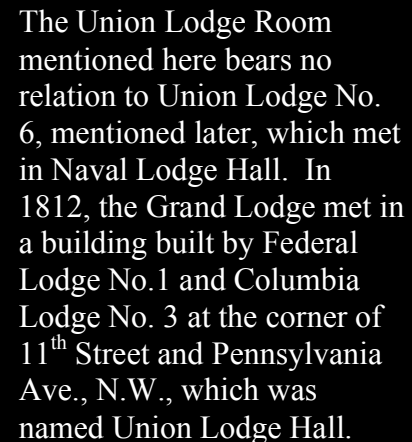
when this Lodge closed in order to open a Fellowcrafts' Lodge. A Fellowcrafts' Lodge being opened in the usual form when Brother William Keith received the degree of a Fellowcraft Mason and after paying into the hands of the Treasurer the sum of five dollars returned thanks to the Lodge and received a charge from the W.M. suitable to the occasion.

The following communication was read from the Grand Lodge, Viz. -

In Grand Lodge District of Columbia at the Union Lodge Room in the City of Washington Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> January 1812 among others the following proceedings were had viz.

Resolved that each Lodge in the District of Columbia working under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge be requested to appoint three delegates to meet in convention at the Union Lodge Room in the City of Washington on the first Tuesday in March next at 10 o'clock A.M. for the purpose of devising and adopting a uniform mode of working: Etc. That this convention have power to meet and adjourn from time to time until they may agree on some plan or mode of working which they may think most consistent with the History of Masonry and conducive to the good of the Craft – which mode so agreed on shall be reported to this Grand Lodge for their consideration at their next stated meeting.

The following alterations in the Constitution of the Grand Lodge were



The Union Lodge Room mentioned here bears no relation to Union Lodge No. 6, mentioned later, which met in Naval Lodge Hall. In 1812, the Grand Lodge met in a building built by Federal Lodge No.1 and Columbia Lodge No. 3 at the corner of 11<sup>th</sup> Street and Pennsylvania Ave., N.W., which was named Union Lodge Hall.

were offered and agreeable to a provision thereof  
ordered to lie over until next stated meeting

Very

Each officer of the Grand Lodge, appointed  
by the Grand Lodge, shall be individually entitled  
to a vote on all questions -

Whereas in the opinion of a number of Master  
Masons the Supplement to the laws of the Grand  
Lodge which exacts a pecuniary fine from  
Officers and Lodges not attending the Grand Lodge  
is inconsistent with the Tenets of Masonry &  
practice of all Grand Lodges

Resolved, That such part of the laws of  
this Grand Lodge as exacts a pecuniary fine of  
Grand Officers & Lodges not attending be repealed

Ordered, That a copy of the foregoing  
Resolution and proposed amendment to  
the Constitution be transmitted to the Grand  
Secretary to the Lodges in this  
Jurisdiction

were offered and agreeable to a provision thereof ordered to lie over until next stated meeting.  
Viz.

Each officer of the Grand Lodge appointed by the Grand Lodge shall be individually entitled to a vote on all questions –

Viz. is a medieval abbreviation for “videlicet,” Latin for “as follows.”

Whereas in the opinion of a number of Master Masons the supplement to the laws of the Grand Lodge which enacts a pecuniary fine from officers and lodges not attending the Grand Lodge is inconsistent with the tenets of Masonry and practice of all Grand Lodges.

Resolved: that such part of the laws of this Grand Lodge as enacts a pecuniary fine of Grand Officers and Lodges not attending be updated.

Ordered that a copy of the foregoing resolution and proposed amendment to the constitution be transmitted by the Grand Secretary to the Lodges within this jurisdiction. \_\_\_\_\_



*Naval Lodge's first bible, published 1803, and likely in use in 1812.*

Officers who shall not attend the Grand Lodge at each regular or extra meeting being duly notified thereof, shall pay a fine of Five Dollars unless the Lodge may consider the excuse if any, reasonable.

Each Lodge failing to be represented by their officers or to send a deputation duly authorized at each meeting of the Grand Lodge, shall pay a fine of Five Dollars, provided the Lodge or Master or Wardens thereof shall be duly notified of such meeting; unless satisfactory excuse shall be given to the Grand Lodge. The Lodge to be opened within half an hour after the time appointed in the Constitution or notification in case of an extra meeting, or as soon thereafter as a ~~majority~~ sufficient Representation may appear - and such fines shall be assessed and entered at large on the proceedings -

Signed Alex. McCormick  
R. W. Grand Master Pro tem

Jas Hewitt  
Grand Secretary

Communication a

Brother

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Signed Alex McCormick  
R.W. Grand Master pro tem  
James Hewitt  
Grand Secretary

\_\_\_\_\_ communication a \_\_\_\_\_ Brother \_\_\_\_\_

### Grand Lodge Fines

The early part of 1812 saw the new Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia dealing with a proposal to fine lodges for not sending representatives to Grand Lodge meetings. The proposal was made in 1811, and a draft amendment to the Grand Lodge Constitution was sent to every Lodge for review and discussion. However, R.W.B. Joseph Cassin, of Naval Lodge, fervently disagreed with this proposal and offered a different amendment which would have prohibited levying a fine for not attending Grand Lodge meetings. In the end, and after significant discussion, the Grand Lodge decided to put the fine in place. Today it is difficult to image how difficult it was to travel across the District in 1812. All travel was on foot or on horseback, and could take quite a bit of time, energy and expense. It seems clear that these hardships hurt attendance, and the Grand Lodge wanted to be sure they had full attendance at every meeting.

It is unclear whether the fine may have also been an attempt to bring the resistant Alexandria Lodge into the fold. Alexandria Lodge refused to have any part in the formation of a Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, despite being within the bounds of the District at that time. They retained their ties to the Grand Lodge of Virginia, and, in any case, the Virginia section of D.C. was retroceded back to Virginia just 35 years later.

*-Isaiah Akin*