

THE HISTORY OF THE GEORGE WASHINGTON GAVEL

A part of America's history is to be on public display in Ocala on March 23-25.

The actual gavel that President George Washington used in the cornerstone laying for the U.S. Capitol will be on display at West Port High School on March 23rd, at the Ocala Kiwanis Club and a reception at the Ocala Shrine Club on March 24th, and at Marion-Dunn Lodge No. 19 on March 24.

The gavel has been in the protective custody of Potomac Masonic Lodge No. 5, A.F. & A.M., of Washington, DC, since it was used by President Washington, who was a Freemason and then Worshipful Master of Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22 of Virginia, to lay the cornerstone of the new Capitol Building in a forest that would become the modern day capital of the nation. Gen. Washington was also a member and Past Master of Fredericksburg Lodge No. 22.

Three members of Potomac Lodge are traveling with the gavel which has been kept in Washington in a bank vault with a glass front and will be guests of the nine Lodges of the 15th Masonic District of Florida who are paying all of the expenses for these events. Chairman of the Committee bringing the gavel to Ocala is W.: Glenn Lee Garner, Past Master of Ornan Lodge No.117, F & A. M., of Williston, Florida. He visited Potomac Lodge and was told about the gavel and its history while visiting in Washington last summer.

Plans call for the gavel to be shown to students at West Port High School during two viewings on the afternoon of Thursday, March 23rd, to members of the Ocala Kiwanis and Elks Clubs at noon on Friday, March 24th, and at a public reception at the Ocala Shrine Club that evening beginning at 7:00, a donation of \$30.00 includes heavy hors d'oeuvres for attendees. Members of The Grand Lodge of Florida, Free and Accepted Masons, will be in Ocala to participate in the various events, including the reception. On Saturday morning, March 25th, there will be a Masonic Communication with the Grand Master of Florida, M.:W.: Stanley L. Hudson, at Marion-Dunn Lodge No.19, F. & A.M., from 8:30. to 9:45 a.m. He will be assisted by the Grand Line Officers of Florida and officials of the 15th Masonic District after which the George Washington Gavel will be on Free Public Display from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

On Sept. 18, 1793, Gen. Washington, then Master of his Lodge in Alexandria, led a procession from the north shore of the Potomac River, in what is now Georgetown, to the site of the Capitol, with spectators cheering every step of the way. Although the Capitol Building was at the time a simple hole in the ground in the middle of a forest, the dignity afforded to its cornerstone spoke volumes about the hope that it represented. Masonic traditions for the laying of cornerstones were used at this occasion according to newspaper reports from that time. The silver trowel used by Gen. Washington was given to his own Lodge in Alexandria.

The head of the Washington Gavel is made of the same Maryland marble originally used in the interior of the Capitol and its handle is crafted of a dark Native American cherry of unique grain. It was made specially for the purpose of laying the cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol by John Duffy who also made the other Masonic tools used that day. John Duffy was a silversmith by trade and was married to a daughter of President Washington's gardener; he is also reputed to be a member of the President's mother Lodge, Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4 of Virginia.

To permanently identify this historic gavel, in 1856 the Lodge affixed a gold plate to the top of the marble head and engraved with a brief citation of its history. The cost to affix the cap was \$60 in 1856 (2017 cost equates to \$1,600). It was engraved with this inscription:

“This Gavel was prepared for Bro. George Washington for the purpose of laying the Corner Stone of the U.S. Capitol and was so used by him September 18, 1793. He then presented it to Potomac Lodge No. 9 of Maryland, afterward Potomac Lodge No. 43, and now Potomac Lodge No. 5 of the Grand Lodge of the D.C., by whose Order of 1840 this Inscription is placed upon it. 1856”

As part of Potomac Lodge’s stewardship of this important historical artifact, the Lodge responds to several requests each year for presentations or ceremonies which include the George Washington Gavel. It has been used to lay the cornerstone of many public buildings throughout the United States and for other public and Masonic ceremonies of a historical nature. Among some of the most noteworthy events include the laying of the cornerstones of the following:

City Hall of the District of Columbia on August 22, 1824; State Capitol of Pennsylvania in Harrisburg in 1898; Washington Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul at Mount Saint Albans in Washington on September 29, 1907; Scottish Rite House of the Temple in 1911; Smithsonian Institution in 1847; Washington Monument on July 1, 1848; Soldier’s Monument at Antietam Battlefield in 1867; Grand Lodge of D.C. in 1868; and Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania in 1868.

The following Presidents of the United States, all Master Masons except two, have either used or been present at the using of the gavel on the occasions cited below:

James K. Polk in the laying of the cornerstone of the Smithsonian Building in 1847; **Millard Fillmore** in the laying of the cornerstone of the extension of the U.S. Capitol on July 4, 1851; **James Buchanan** at the dedication of the Equestrian Statue of George Washington in 1860; **William McKinley** at the George Washington Centennial Observance at Mt. Vernon in 1899; **Theodore Roosevelt** at the celebration of the sesquicentennial date on which General Washington received the Master Mason Degree on November 2, 1902; in laying the cornerstone of the House Office Building in 1906; and again, in laying the cornerstone of the Masonic Temple in 1907; **William H. Taft** in laying the cornerstone of the All Souls Unitarian Church in 1913; **Warren G. Harding** in laying the cornerstone of the Washington Victory Memorial in 1921; **Herbert Hoover** in laying the cornerstones in 1929 and again in 1932; **Harry S. Truman** in the Centennial Observance of the cornerstone laying of the Washington Monument on July 1, 1948, this being a repeat engagement for the gavel as it was used to lay the original cornerstone of the Monument on July 1, 1848; and **Dwight D. Eisenhower** in laying the cornerstone of the new extension of the U.S. Capitol building in 1959. A most special honor to Potomac Lodge occurred when the gavel was personally used by Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, II, in laying the foundation stone of the new British Embassy building on October 19, 1957.

Other Notable Dedications and Reenactments include Reenactment of the place of the original boundary marker of the District of Columbia at Jones Point on October 9, 1976; the 250th Anniversary of the birth of Illustrious Brother George Washington, held at Potomac Lodge No. 5, Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4, and Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22 in 1982; the Statue of Liberty centennial celebration on August 5, 1984; the White House bicentennial cornerstone reenactment in 1992; and the United States Capitol bicentennial cornerstone reenactment in 1993.

Following the presentation at Marion-Dunn Lodge, the gavel will be returned to Washington, D.C., and the bank vault until the next time it travels to share a piece of American History elsewhere in the United States.