

A Chronicle of the Life and Times of William Reynolds Singleton

Marcus A. Trelaine, Past Master
William R. Singleton-Hope-Lebanon Lodge No.7

As Masons we are commonly familiar with the adage, “a Traveling Man”. Yet few have so well embodied the concepts manifest in this simple expression than our brother William Reynolds Singleton. In the course of a life lasting 82 years, he traveled not only in miles over nearly a third of our nation, but forged a path of Masonic discovery that continues to light the way of Freemasonry to this very day.

The son of Henry Singleton & “May” Ann Reynolds, his first breath was drawn on October 24, 1818 in Norfolk, Virginia as new and fresh as the pristine and unknown country to which he was born. Just three years early, the townspeople of Norfolk marveled at the advances of industry when the side-wheeler Washington made its way down the Atlantic coast to become the first steam boat to arrive in nearby Portsmouth harbor. With only 20 states making up this “great experiment” called America, William finds himself thrust into a brave, new world waiting and enticing many young men to seek their future through adventure.

Descended from a long line of distinguished English ancestors, including William Bradford, who led the second Governor of Plymouth Colony, Massachusetts in the years 1620–47, William R. Singleton enjoyed a strong history of creative and independent thinking, to which he would richly add his own legacy. Though not much is known of his youth, it is reasonable to imagine he enjoyed a relatively comfortable life playing with friends and attending his several academic and religious lessons as the son of a middle-class businessman. In the recently made American State of Virginia, young William likely often joined his father at work and there was first introduced to his chosen trade as an engineer and architect. Having proven himself adept in his studies, William R. Singleton was admitted to the private Middlebury College in Vermont at the ripe old age of 15.

As history reveals it was a very liberal college, most certainly distinguished for its progressive ways, having graduated Mr. Alexander Twilight, as the first black student of any college or university in the United States in 11 years earlier in the class of 1823. And like William Singleton, Mr. Twilight also lived up to his expectations later becoming the first African American elected to public office, taking a seat in the Vermont House of Representatives in 1856. For his own, much distinguished service to the field of engineering, Middlebury College would in later years honor William R. Singleton with the degree of artium magister (Master of Arts).

No doubt William Singleton was being exposed to all sorts of radical ideas and innovative changes in his early life. Was this his father’s plan? Was Henry Singleton a member of the Craft? The records do not reveal the facts behind these questions, but as events unfold it appears the Singleton family may have indeed held some of the concepts of Freemasonry, even if a petition was never received from Henry. Whatever the impetus, dramatic change was coming to the Singleton family. After William left home for college in Vermont, his father and mother left Norfolk to settle in St. Louis Missouri, following a short detour in Elkton County, Kentucky. Regrettably, this move proved quite difficult for Henry and William with the passing of May Ann Reynolds Singleton in 1836 soon after her arrival in the city that called itself the “Gateway to the West”.

Before he could graduate however, William was called home to help overcome this family tragedy, arriving in St. Louis in 1836 to join his father in the business of architecture. Securing a building contract, William Singleton submitted his plans for the construction of the Illinois State House in the often preferred Greek Revival architectural style, for which he was paid the sum of \$100.00. Little did William know his work would cause the construction of the Illinois State House and Supreme Court Building that would in the next 20 years become the site that launched the career of an aspiring young attorney named Abraham Lincoln into the office of the President of the United States of

America was indeed on the move, and the fastest way to get there was by rail. “Go West Young Man!”, became the mantra for men irresistibly lured by fortunes in gold and land. But before this great Western migration

could take place, tracks were needed through long stretches of unfamiliar territory, some of it downright hostile. And not only were tracks needed, but so too the men and materials to build this daring dream of iron machines. The maturing mastery of his architectural skill soon brought much interest in William Singleton leading to his first serious appointment – Assistant Engineer on the fledgling Central Railroad – a position which further cultivated his skills as an architect and surveyor, rather than one that allowed him to “blow the horn”. Further refining his skills, he began work as a surveyor in 1839 with the Iron Mountain Railway running between St. Louis and Iron Mountain, near Bismarck, Missouri to deliver the much needed iron ore for building more tracks.

Nearly finished with his surveying task, William returned to St. Louis in preparation of his next great “travel”. The records do not declare why William R. Singleton took this next important step on January 20, 1840, but it is clear that he presented himself before the members of Naphali Lodge No.25, where upon finding him worthy, well-qualified, and properly vouched for, accepted and initiated him an Entered Apprentice Mason. In a highly unusual circumstance, Brother Singleton further received his Fellowcraft’s Degree the following morning and was raised a Master Mason later the same afternoon. For the Masonic “old timers”, it seems the concept of a “Grand Master’s Class” isn’t that recent of an idea after all. Finishing his degree work, Brother Singleton immediately saddled up, and made the two day return ride on horseback to Iron Mountain to complete his “work in the quarry”. Seven months later, Bro. Singleton was exalted to Royal Arch Mason on August 20th, in Missouri Chapter #1.

Was it just the restless nature of his soul, or did the newly received Masonic lessons further spark his insatiable desire to become such a “traveling man”? Whatever his motivations, William Singleton with his refined engineering and surveying skills, set out later in the year with a small team of men on one of his more exciting and difficult adventures – surveying 220 miles of uncharted river for navigational purposes. Following it all the way until it emptied into the “great muddy” Mississippi River, Singleton discovered not much had changed in the 150 years since the first European explorer, French Jesuit priest Jacques Gravier, traveled this tributary river in 1699–1700; and perhaps along the way learned why Gravier first named it the “Meramec” meaning “the river of ugly fishes” or “ugly water” in Algonquian.

Although he didn’t command the wealth of such men as Cornelius Vanderbilt or J.P. Morgan, it seems likely that William Singleton shared a common vision with them of creating a vast transportation network of rail, canals and rivers to support a thriving economy for a developing nation. Whether by boxcar or barge, Singleton’s efforts significantly enhanced the opening West to important industrial shipping and the prospects of carving out a better life. Unfortunately, these accomplishments were used not long after, in more desperate times as America found itself divided. The once collaborative efforts to build a nation were not used to transport men and materials, pitting brother against brother in deadly combat, during the War between the States

Returning up the Meramec to St. Louis, William packed away his surveying equipment and again joined his father in business. This time they jointly worked to help edit and publish the “St. Louis Evening Gazette” newspaper. Writing numerous articles on engineering and mechanical art, William Singleton gained a wide following and excellent reputation for his application of architectural principles to industry. Yet, despite these and other best efforts as a financial Trustee to save the struggling newspaper, it eventually failed, and with it whatever goals William had as a “newsman”. But his life in Freemasonry was only beginning. Having received the Cryptic degrees of Royal and Select Master in 1841, and with a mere two years of Masonic service, Bro. Singleton was appointed Senior Grand Deacon of the Grand Lodge of Missouri in 1842 which he served and was reappointed again 1843.

But his birthplace seemingly kept calling him home. Returning to his native Norfolk, Brother Singleton reapplied his skills in architecture and engineering, earning commissions to design construction of the new City Hall in Norfolk, along with a Court house a block away, as well as a Presbyterian Church in nearby Eastville, Virginia. Begun in 1845, the Norfolk City Court House stood on one of the four corners dedicated for public use in 1752 by Lt. Col. William Crawford, founder of Portsmouth, Virginia. Costing \$50,000 to build, it was occupied by "the Worshipful Court of the City of Norfolk" on May 20, 1850.

The Masons, most likely of Norfolk Lodge No.1 but possibly of Portsmouth Naval Lodge No.100, conducted the cornerstone-laying ceremony. The Classic Revival Court House was the architectural symbol of Norfolk's new dignity, acquired on February 13, 1845, when the Virginia General Assembly passed an act changing its status from a borough to that of a city. Reverend A.L. Hitzelberger, the pastor of Norfolk's St. Patrick's Catholic Church, "delivered an address which was characterized by elegance of style, combined with highly appropriate and classical allusions, and patriotic sentiments." The handsome building housed Norfolk's courts for more than a century and was the scene of many stirring trials and other historic events, until in 1960 the city of Norfolk offered the building as a memorial and tomb to General of the Army Douglas MacArthur.

Times were good for William and apparently afforded him time to not only attend Lodge, but also develop a fancy for the daughter of one of his Masonic brothers, George Reed, Secretary of Naval Lodge No.100 in Portsmouth, Virginia. In April 1846, at age 28, William Singleton took Ms. Emma Reed as his wife. But his destiny would not keep him long in the area and packing up once more, William left Norfolk and returned to the border of the Western frontier; settling in St. Louis with his new wife. Quickly finding employment in the news business, this time with the "Republican", he was briefly commissioned to prepare a map depicting the several campaigns and battlefields, as war raged between the United States and Mexico. Completing his assignment in short order, William and Emma picked up and headed for Peoria, Illinois where he was placed in charge of engineering for the Kingston coal mines in early 1847.

Despite the professional demands placed upon Bro. Singleton and his family, he somehow seemed to find time to attend his Lodge and Chapter meetings. Whether Bro. Singleton was a charter officer or affiliated member of Independence Lodge No.76 in October 1846 is uncertain, but it is clear his support for the Lodge No.76 was much appreciated owing to his election as Worshipful Master in 1848.

But again William Singleton would not stay long in the dark, dreary mines in Peoria, instead seeking master's wages in the light of day as the sound of hammer struck the iron stake deep into the timber, and in the night serving as Worshipful Master of Independence Lodge No.76 and King of then designated Independence Chapter No.15.

Indeed, railroading had gotten into William's blood, for in 1848 we find him returned to Independence, Missouri supervising the construction of a short railroad West of the Mississippi River linking Independence, Missouri with its steamboat landing in Wayne City. From here wagon trains headed to Oregon and California left from Independence Town Square to follow the Santa Fe Trail.

With the short spur completed, William returns yet again to St. Louis and takes a position as surveyor on the Pacific Railroad. Securing a Missouri charter in 1851 to extend the railroad from St. Louis to the Western boundary of Missouri, and then on to the Pacific Ocean, J.P. Morgan and other financiers choose to survey and develop a more circuitous route through various owned properties. Brother Singleton however, no doubt remembering his Masonic obligations, urges a more direct and shorter route which bypasses most of these adjacently owned lands. Finding himself "removed" from this grand project, William spent the next two years working for J.P. Morgan developing the highly speculative business of plank roads. Consisting of heavy timbers laid lengthwise and oak planks nailed crosswise, Singleton built the longest of its kind in Missouri stretching 42 miles in the Iron Mountain region. Ultimately the technology failed to live up to its reputation and millions of dollars in investments evaporated almost overnight, and by the end 1853 William and his family of wife and three small daughters, Emma, Eliza and Susan are back in Norfolk, VA.

With the Singleton family no sooner contentedly settled in, than did William accept a position as civil engineer at the Norfolk Navy Yard. But things would not remain comfortable for much longer. In 1854, it appears William Singleton may have been commissioned in the Naval Service by the recently appointed Commander of the Navy Yard, who shortly thereafter selected Singleton as his Chief Clerk. Seemingly capable of most any endeavor, his accomplishments were heralded by even more opportunities as the success of his engineering skills at the Kingston Mines seems to have come to the attention of mine owners and investors as far away as Wall Street. Requesting he present himself for a meeting to discuss taking the position as Inspector/Geologist of Mines in Guilford County, North Carolina; Singleton so impressed his superiors he was appointed North Carolina Inspector of Mines on the spot.

As any man of accomplishment will say, triumph always comes at a cost of blood, sweat or tears. This time destiny would not be kind to William Singleton and his family. In what should have been a glorious and celebrated time for Bro. Singleton, who just a few months earlier had been elected “Noble Grand” in the Order of the Oddfellows, instead found himself wrestling for his life and that of his family.

Returning from the Dutch West Indies enroute to New York, the steamer Ben Franklin diverted to Chesapeake Bay and tied up at Hampton Roads on June 7, 1855. Her crew in grave distress, infected with yellow fever, were quarantined. Regrettably, the captain ignored orders from the port and health authorities and pumped the ship’s bilge water, filled with infected mosquito larvae, into the Elizabeth River. By August, an epidemic of Yellow Jack (fever) had engulfed Norfolk in a ninety-day terror which came to be called “The Death Storm”. Only with the frost of winter was the epidemic broken, but not without enormous loss to every citizen of the city. Nearly every person had been afflicted leaving 2,000 dead, including Singleton’s wife Emma and their two oldest daughters. William and his youngest daughter also fell casualty, but were able to survive the deadly grip of the disease.

Physically recovered from the scourge that devastated his life and city, William Singleton left Norfolk, arriving in Florida in 1857 where he served as the Chief Engineer of the Pensacola Navy Yard. Finding the area to his liking, at least temporarily, he met and married Mary Frisby, daughter of the Honorable Frisby of Baltimore, Maryland.

While on the surface it appears Bro. Singleton was actively trying to rebuild his life, it was nonetheless a dark time for the Craft. For the next ten years, there is no mention of his Masonic activities. Now it is possible he could have dedicated some of this time to researching and collecting materials for the more than fifty books and essays which would be later published, but his active participation in Freemasonry had definitely been suspended. Still he pushed forward, returning to Norfolk Navy Yard in 1858 with his new wife and little girl, where he remained for the next five years.

For the first time in his life, William Singleton ventured north up along the Atlantic seaboard to Baltimore, Maryland. Perhaps Mary was homesick herself, or new opportunities were presented which couldn’t be ignored. Whatever the reason, the Singleton family relocated to Baltimore where he was soon hired as the Purchasing Agent for the Canton Ship Yard. A year later in 1864, he was appointed as the Auditor of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, his principal duty being to settle up the accounts incurred from “raids” made upon it in the “wild west”.

His work completed, Bro. Singleton arrives in Washington, DC, assumed a position as a draftsman in the Office of the Engineer of Defenses. Likely believing his skills capable of more responsible work, and willing to give his beautiful Virginia “one more chance”, in 1865 he accepted a private consultation position in Richmond, Virginia. But this too was not fulfilling, so returning to Washington, DC in 1866 he began work as Consulting Engineer of the Alexandria-Georgetown Canal. While attending to these duties he was appointed Chief Engineer to the Navy Yard in Portsmouth, Virginia at which facility he supervised the construction of new building and repairs.

In 1867, life events him at the Patent Office in Washington, DC which lasted an unprecedented seven years until 1874. During the census of 1870, William R. Singleton curiously records his occupation as “patent attorney” rather than civil engineer or architect. A notation made even more interesting considering that part of his responsibilities including constructing an aqueduct bridge and elevated roadway over the Potomac River.

At 52, William Singleton finally seems to have allowed his root to take hold of solid ground, or at least his wife finally grew tired of keeping everything in a perpetual state of packed up. For we now begin to see the tremendous depth of knowledge, commitment and leadership he was capable of providing, and coupled with an unprecedented seven years in one location, Bro. Singleton again immersed himself in the Ancient and Noble Craft. Without hesitation, and perhaps making up for lost time, Bro. Singleton was an inspired and irresistible force in Freemasonry. Inspired by the characteristics of his namesake here in the Revolutionary War, 1863 Bro. Singleton became a charter member of LaFayette Lodge No. 19 and a charter member of Pentalpha Lodge #23 upon its reorganization in 1869.

Significantly involving himself in the Capitular and Cryptic Degrees as well, he participated in the formation of the LaFayette Chapter of Royal Arch Masons in 1867 and LaFayette Council No.1 in 1870; served as the charter High Priest of Mount Horeb Chapter No.7 in 1872; and honored as Thrice Illustrious Master. Completing his journey through the York Rite, Bro. Singleton was knighted June 9, 1875, in Washington Commandery No.1. But Bro. Singleton's activities were equally dedicated to the Scottish Rite, when on May 7, 1878 he was made Honorary Sovereign Grand Inspector General, Thirty-Third Degree of the A.A.S.R. by the Supreme council of the Southern Jurisdiction. And later in the same year, was invested in the Royal Order of Scotland, his last official Masonic recognition.

For most, any part of these achievements would be more than sufficient to express a full, meaningful and rewarding journey through Freemasonry. It was not, however, near enough for Bro. William R. Singleton, whose labors became even further distinguished in his role as Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia. In this station, which he served from 1875 until his death, Bro. Singleton assembled a most impressive and profound collection of research upon the body of Masonic knowledge in his own time, which to this day continues to help illuminate the secrets of Freemasonry.

Composing in primary collaboration with Bro. Dr. Albert Gallatin Mackey, another celebrated Mason best known for his exhaustive work producing the Lexicon of Freemasonry and the Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, and for his service as the Secretary General of the Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Rite for the Southern Jurisdiction, and previous Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of South Carolina; William R. Singleton authored at least 57 publications.

In pursuit of the operative and speculative sides of Masonic knowledge, Bro. Singleton left no ashlar unturned. Although his interests focused principally on the chronicles of Masonic formation around the world, including such works as the Organization of the Grand Lodge of England, Freemasonry in Asia explored the more esoteric and legendary aspects of the Craft completing volumes titled An Introduction to The Symbolism of Freemasonry, The Astrologers and Freemasons, and The Legend of Hiram Abif. To reference a generally complete collection of his work, please refer to the attached Table 1., Origin of the Grand Orient of France, and The History of Colored Masonry in the United States; he also

“It is telling that his success has been the result and reward of indomitable perseverance, a truly Masonic virtue and of his inflexible adherence to duty. No lions in the way ever prevented him from his performance. Thus it has come about that he made great sacrifices in every year of his life, and sometimes daily to accomplish the results in the discharge of his duties. If he has not astonished the world with magnificence of great oaks and tall pines of the primeval forests, like some of our great Masonic savants, he could like the humble violet and dewdrop cheer the hearts of the lowly and the advanced, and add much to the beauty if not the grandeur of Masonry.”

On February 23, 1901 the spark that illuminated a life in devotion to adventure, knowledge and service was finally extinguished. Receiving full Masonic honors, delivered by the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, Bro. William R. Singleton was laid to rest at Oak Hill Cemetery in Northwest Washington, DC. Surrounded by delegations from various other Masonic bodies and a large concourse of friends, Reflective eulogies were delivered by member of his Lodge, Chapter and Commandery not merely in sadness of his inevitable departure, but with equal gladness of the brotherly love and truth of his character all were able to enjoy for so many years, basking in the warmth of his wisdom, strength and beauty as a brother Mason.

In remembrance and honor of his work, and under authority of the Most Worshipful Harry Standiford, Grand Master of Masons of the District of Columbia, William R. Singleton Lodge No.30 was chartered on May 8, 1901. Owing to the suddenness of Bro. Singleton's passing, later the same year on December 19th, Most Worshipful Malcolm Seaton, Grand Master of Masons of the District of Columbia, conducted additional special services and initiated procedures to place a more suitable monument at Oak Hill Cemetery in recognition of his inspiration to Freemasonry and the men of Washington, DC., which was dedicated on July 25, 1903 and accompanied by further appropriate and impressive ceremony.

The following is an extract from the memorial issued and circulated by the Most Worshipful Grand Master Standiford, wherein he offers a fitting description for so remarkable a man and brother as William Reynolds Singleton:

“Paint me as I am! said Cromwell,’ when the artist suggested the elimination of a facial blemish. No higher tribute can be paid to the memory of Bro. Singleton than to portray him as he was. We have no need to ascribe to him imaginary virtues, no occasion for the effacement of blemishes. His character was as near perfect as can be attained by finite man. Masonry was his life-long study, and his latter years were given entirely to the service of the Craft. Profoundly learned in Biblical and Masonic archeology, he traced the history of the Craft from the building of the first temple down through the Ancient Mysteries, the Essenes and guilds of the Middle Ages to the formation of the first Grand Lodge, and the evolution from operative to speculative Masonry. Landmarks, symbols, rites, traditions, law and precedent, custom and usage, were to him as household words. At fourscore, with sixty years of Masonic life behind him he often remarked, ‘I am still learning Masonry.’ His contributions to Masonic literature gave him world-wide fame, and placed him among the leading writers and thinkers of the Craft.

Great talents and achievements set men apart. We view them as on a pedestal, admire them from afar, but know little of their personal life, habits and characteristics. But Bro. Singleton was one among us, and his noble life was an open book to the six thousand masons of our jurisdiction, who shared in his joys and sorrows, and to whom his death is a personal loss. He knew no rank or distinction in his intercourse with his brethren, but his office was accessible to all, and his sympathetic disposition, kindly humor, cordial greeting, and ever ready response to calls for counsel, won the love and veneration of all. His charities were limited only by his means, but were known only when spoken of by the beneficiaries. Possessing strong religious convictions, he was ever considerate of the views of others. In his broad nature there was a boundless love for his fellow man, but no room for bigotry and intolerance.”

Changing times have seen nearly all of the lodges, chapters and councils become consolidated or extinct which Bro. Singleton helped to charter. Yet the heritage he worked so tirelessly to create in the previous 100 years still lives through the labors of the men in LaFayette-Dupont Lodge No. 19 and of Osiris-Pentalpha Lodge No.23. And of his namesake Lodge, William R. Singleton-Hope-Lebanon Lodge No.7, and of the Royal Arch Masons, William R. Singleton Chapter No.4, I am convinced he would be especially proud of the men who continue to work in the ever glorious goal to follow in his giant footsteps. In the spirit of his dynamic, adventurous and innovative character, he would be pleased to find a vibrant, growing, and capable Lodge and Chapter in testament to his genius as a man and his worth as a Mason.

A Compendium of Masonic Research and Published Collaborations of William R. Singleton

- An Introduction to the Symbolism of Freemasonry
- Customs of the German Stonemasons
- Customs of the Scottish Masons in the 17th Century
- Druidism and Freemasonry
- Early Masonry in France
- Early Masonry in Scotland
- Freemasonry Among the Anglo-Saxons
- Freemasonry and the Ancient Mysteries
- Freemasonry and the Crusades
- Freemasonry and the House of Stuart
- Freemasonry in Asia
- Freemasonry in British America
- Freemasonry in Mexico
- History of the Introduction of Freemasonry Into Each State and Territory of the United States
- Legends and Symbols in the Several Degrees of Freemasonry
- Mason’s Marks
- Masonic Symbolism of Numbers

- Organization of the Grand Lodge of England
- Origin of the Grand Orient of France
- Origin of the Royal Arch
- The Ancient and Excepted Scottish Rite
- The Anti-Masonic Excitement
- The Astrologers and Freemasons
- The Cathedral of Strasburg and the Stonemasons of Germany
- The Death of the Operative and the Birth of Speculative Freemasonry
- The Early Ritual of Speculative Freemasonry
- The Early Years of Speculative Freemasonry in England
- The French Masonic Guilds of the Middle Ages
- The General Assemblies and Lodges of Medieval Masons
- The General History of Christian Knighthood
- The Grand Lodge of All England or the Grand Lodge of York
- The Grand Lodge of England or the Lodge of Antiquity
- The Grand Lodge of France
- The History of Colored Masonry in the United States
- The History of Freemasonry Part 1
- The Introduction of Knight Templarism Into America
- The Introduction of Speculative Freemasonry Into France
- The Invention of the Third or the Master Mason's Degree
- The Legend of Hiram Abif
- The Leland Manuscript
- The London Companies and the Masons' Company
- The Masonic Mark Degree
- The Organization of the Grand Lodge of Scotland
- The Roman Colleges of Artificers
- The Rosicrucians and Freemasons
- The Royal Order of Scotland
- The Royal Society and Freemasonry
- The Secrets of the Medieval Masons
- The Story of the Scottish Templars
- The Temple Legend
- The Transition from Operative to Speculative Freemasonry
- The Traveling Freemasons of Lombardy or the Masters of Como
- The York Legend
- Three Masonic Revelations
- Two Classes of Workmen
- Usages of the Masonic Craft in the 17th Century
- Was the Organization of the Grand Lodge in 1717 a Revival?