St. John’s Masonic Lodge

Part II: Other Masonic Lodges

Janet K. Seapker

St. John’s Masonic Lodge in Wilmington, North Carolina, has the distinction of being the oldest such organization in North Carolina and celebrated its 250th anniversary in 2005. The Grand Lodge of England chartered St. John’s Wilmington as Number 213 in 1755. This article is a continuation of one published in January 2006 and is the story of three lodge buildings.

NORTH FRONT STREET LODGE

In 1825, the Lodge moved into its new facility on North Front Street. St. John’s new lodge building on North Front Street, between Red Cross and Walnut, is among the buildings illustrated on the 1826 map of Wilmington, drawn under the supervision of T. E. Hyde. Architecturally, it looked very much like the Orange Street lodge and was domestic in scale. An 1825 insurance policy issued by the Manhattan Fire Insurance Company of New York described the second St. John’s Lodge as “a two-story brick building, covered with shingles, with a brick addition and portico, known as St. John’s Lodge, occupied as dwelling and Lodge rooms, situate on the east side of Front Street in lot no 5 A, between Walnut and Red Cross streets, in said Wilmington, as per report filed.” In January 1841, at public auction, they were to sell “the Lodge Lot” and “lodge buildings.” After the Lodge sold the property, the Jones Hotel occupied the building. The brethren did not complete the new lodge until 1842 and met in the courthouse in the interim.

ON TO MARKET STREET

In 1842, St. John’s Lodge moved into its splendid Gothic Revival style building on Market Street between Front and Second. It was known as St. John’s Hall. The architect has been long been lost. One or both of the Wood brothers, Robert Barclay Wood and/or John Coffin Wood, were the prime suspects. They were fresh from serving as the masons for St. James Episcopal Church. The similarity of window design and execution and crenellation to that found on St. James Church makes attributing the lodge construction to the Wood brothers very tempting. In 1845, the Wood brothers applied the St. James design, minus the tower and pinnacles to St. Thomas the Apostle (Roman Catholic) Church on Dock Street, so the precedent for their employing elements of the St. James design is clearly established. Robert was a member of St. John’s Lodge from 1842-1849. Finally, a newspaper article about the demolition of the Carolina Hotel ended the speculation. The Carolina Hotel, built, owned and operated by the Wood brothers, was demolished in 1913. The article about the razing identified them as having “had charge of the construction of the old Masonic Temple (sic) on Market.
Street and built it about the same time the hotel was erected.”

The Market Street building known as St. John’s Hall was markedly different from the previous two. It was three stories and of the Gothic Revival style—with sumptuously crafted, pointed arch windows on the front and crenellation along the parapet on the sides and across the front. Those elements are very similar to elements found on St. James Church. It had revenue-producing commercial space on the ground level. The second floor, sometimes used for a school, was in part supported by the rents from the first floor. The lodge and chapter occupied the third level.

Chronicler Nicholas Schenck noted that a Daguerreotype-maker named Clark, one of the brethren, occupied the lodge room for his office.

Such an urban arrangement was entirely appropriate for the largest city in the state, a distinction Wilmington claimed from 1840 through 1910. The Lodge laid the cornerstone on December 27, 1841—St. John’s Day.

The brethren were probably eager to lay the cornerstone on St. John’s Day and therefore settled for putting it on the foundation that had been completed to date. In preparation for laying the cornerstone of the 1899 Masonic Temple, St. John’s Lodge wanted to open the cornerstone of St. John’s Hall and retrieve its contents. They had a considerable search for the cornerstone, despite the tradition of placing them at the northeast corner of buildings. The newspaper described the search: “...it took two men, two days to find the cornerstone and it was reached with great difficulty. It was in the very bottom of the northeast corner... several feet below the level of the earth.” The copper box contained the usual array of coins, newspapers, Masonic documents and paraphernalia in a surprisingly good state of preservation.
After the Civil War, occupying Federal troops used St. John’s Lodge building as a hospital. During that time, the Lodge suspects that members of the occupation force removed some of the records. It seems the Federal troops also liberated “the jewels,” the badges worn by Lodge officers to identify their stations. The Lodge ordered a replacement set of jewels. Quite possibly renowned silversmith and jeweler, Thomas W. Brown, member and former Master of St. John’s, may have provided the replacement set that is preserved in an exhibit case in the lodge.

St. John’s continued to meet in their Market Street lodge hall until 1900 when their new quarters in the Masonic Temple were completed. But they continued to own the old building until 1949. By 1904, St. John’s acquired from Concord Chapter its undivided half-interest in the Market Street property for $3,750. They undertook the unfortunate remodeling of the facade of the old Masonic Hall in 1907 which removed all the Gothic Revival ornament. The contractor, R. H. Brady, carried out the so-called improvements at a cost of $4,500. Ironically, Carl B. Cooper, a partner of Charles McMillen, the architect for the Masonic Temple on Front Street, designed the project.

The work involved putting an addition on the rear, “a change in the pitch of each of the stories and the remodeling of the front of the building.” It is the resurfacing of the hall with an anonymous gray brick that architectural devotees regret, because it eradicated the Gothic Revival elements of the building, save for the crenellation on the sides.

In 1895, the five Masonic bodies in Wilmington agreed to construct a new facility and formed a corporation, The Masonic Temple Corporation, to do so. It included the three Blue Lodges—St. John’s Number 1, Wilmington Number 319, Orient Number 395—the Royal Arch Masons, and Plantagenet Commandery, Knights Templars. All the bodies went together to build a monster of a building, far larger than anything each could have constructed individually. They purchased the property on Front Street between Market and Princess, upon which sat old First National Bank, a structure designed by New York architect, John Norris for the Bank of the Cape Fear after the conflagration of 1840. They solicited proposals for the Masonic Temple to be built there. The Masons engaged Charles McMillen, an architect from Minnesota who specialized in Masonic Lodges, to design their new temple. Such later buildings took a markedly different form from the smaller, domestic-scale lodges of the early 19th century. Like many of its day and later, it was a large, multi-storied building with offices and shops for rent as well as the lodge room. Local architect-builder, James F. Post, submitted a design which was not selected although it shared similarities with the winning design. Both were multi-storied with income-producing space, a variety of materials (brick, granite, cast iron) and the Italianate windows which he first built at City Hall-Thalian Hall in 1858. Had the Masons selected Post’s design it would have been his last commission, one which he would not have lived to see built. He died on July 15, 1899.
THE CORPORATION

The corporation counted on income from renting retail and office space to pay the $50,000 mortgage. In November, they held a 13-day fair to raise additional funds to liquidate the floating debt. Fair events included Ladies’ Night, Commandery Night featuring the Knights Templars, Shriner’s Night and Military Night.29

The following is excerpted and quoted from an article in the newspaper that identified the fine points about the structure:

The temple building measures 78’ on Front Street, spanning the space between two alleyways, and runs back 100’ toward Water Street. It is to be steam-heated and lighted with both gas and electricity. (Many people did not trust electricity in those days, so installed both electric and gas illumination.) Sandstone or brownstone quarried from Sanford, North Carolina, faces the first and second levels. The remainder of the façade is pressed brick with brownstone and pressed metal trim. “The carvings of Masonic emblems, with few exceptions, have been eliminated from the front, giving a simple and more beautiful exterior.” They plan for three stores to open onto Front Street. Each store has its own basement storage space. (The land drops considerably in the rear, so only minimal excavation was necessary to create basements.) They divided the second floor into seventeen offices, toilets for ladies and gentlemen and a large vault in which the tenants could individually store valuables. The third floor will be the “Masonic floor,” containing a tiler’s room,30 Blue Lodge room and a Chapter and Commandery room with gallery and armory room. In the latter room they will store all the robes, regalia, paraphernalia and the Knights Templars’ uniforms. The top floor contains the 49’ x 60’ ballroom with a gallery that seats 100 people. Off the west side of the ballroom is a 50’ x 75’ roof garden with an impressive view of the Cape Fear River.31

The Masonic Temple became representative of the national quality that architecture had achieved by the end of the 19th century. Not only was the architect imported to North Carolina, but also much of the building material and technological systems came from far off. The world had gotten smaller and architecture began to take advantage of that situation. The corporation hired D. Gatz & Co. of Knoxville, Tennessee as the general contractor.32 As work progressed, the paper assiduously informed the public of the progress. It commented on the arrival of “Mr. F. B. Miles, an expert stone carver” from Lexington, Kentucky. He was responsible for the carving above the entrance.33 Wilmington Iron Works, one of the few local contractors, was feeling considerable pressure to complete the installation of the heating plant on time. To that end, they kept seventeen workers laboring until ten PM for several days.34 The paper commented that the tiles of the entrance floors, manufactured by Alfred Boote of New York, were being put down by John Meaney.35 And finally, it noted that the metal trimmings for the temple, a product of the Johnson Manufacturing Company, were shipped from Greensboro36 and installed immediately.37
Illustration 7: Plan of the third floor of Masonic Temple showing ceremonial spaces.

Illustrations 8, 9, 10 and 11 (Below). Interior of Masonic floor before being converted into condominiums. Top left 8, Blue Lodge looking south; top right 9, Blue Lodge looking north; lower left 10, Commandery and Chapter looking east; lower right 11, Commandery and Chapter looking west.

Illustration 12 (Above): Masonic Temple, 21-25 North Front St., built in 1899-1900, became the home for all three blue lodges and in 1914, the Scottish Rite. Photograph by Janet K. Seapker, 1985.
The Masons ordered furnishings from the Grand Rapids Furniture Company. These included chairs, altars, pedestals and desks, all of “quarter-sawn oak and splendidly finished.” By 1906, they decided to install an elevator. This may actually have been a second elevator, since one was mentioned in the lengthy initial description of the building.

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For a time in 1909, various committees considered converting the ballroom into additional offices to provide a more consistent flow of income. The next year, they leased the ballroom to John F. Kneisel who proposed to sponsor a dance each week with music furnished by his own orchestra. Charles Terry was to be the floor manager and he also gave dance instruction.

Finally, by 1914, the ballroom had moved to the top floor of the temple, but its tenure there was short-lived. In January of that year, the Scottish Rite Masons, which had formed in Wilmington in 1909, leased the ballroom from the central body. They expended $4,000 to create a theater, complete with stage, designed by architect J. F. Leitner. This was a departure for Leitner who specialized in designing railroad stations, offices and warehouses. The theater setting was necessary for their ceremonies which involved extensive costumes and scenery. The scene drops, currently installed in the 17th Street building, were painted in 1910 and acquired for $37,000. They were smoke-damaged in a fire on February 28, 1924, but apparently were cleaned and are treasured by the Scottish Rite.

Long-time residents may remember the commercial floor being rented by S.H. Kress & Company and later by Buy-Rite, both department/Five and Dime stores. As downtown locations became less and less desirable after World War II, the Masons began to think about leaving the old stand on Front Street and moving to the suburbs. The bodies split, each building its own facility. The Front Street building was sold to the Wilmington Holding Company and in 1992, to movie actor Dennis Hopper and his wife, Victoria. The Hoppers conveyed it to Masonic Partners, LLC, which carried out major renovations from Masonic building to condominiums.

It is fitting that St. John’s Masonic Lodge Number 1 has passed down to us two of their fine former homes. After all, masons, the profession from which the organization takes its name, are builders. Now the first lodge building on Orange Street has a new mission -- to serve as home for the Wilmington Children’s Museum. The Masonic Temple has found a new life as rental space for a street-level coffee shop and restaurant and the Masonic floor as condominiums. The second floor remains office space.

Many elements associated with the Masonic occupation still are in use. The Orient Lodge was fortunate enough to receive the Blue Lodge furniture and the stained glass windows that adorned the facade of the Front Street structure. The Scottish Rite removed the scenery to the new building and installed it in the auditorium where it is often used by theatre groups who rent the auditorium and use some of the scenery as part of their production. The theatre-going public now has the opportunity to see a part of the Masonic ritual that they are unlikely to encounter otherwise.
FOOTNOTES

2 When using “lodge” to represent the organization, it is capitalized; when it refers to a building it is lower case.
3 T.E. Hyde Map, 1826, Map 2, North Carolina Room, New Hanover County Public Library.
4 “Corner-Stone Laying Ceremonies To-day,” Wilmington Star, May 19, 1899. The newspaper carried an article about the contents of the cornerstone for the 1899 Masonic Temple. Among the contents was the fire insurance policy.
5 “For Sale,” Wilmington Weekly Chronicle, December 9, 1840.
6 Resolution of St. John’s Lodge Number 1, F & A.M. presented at the meeting of September 30, 1880, upon the death of Brother P.W. Fanning, St. John’s Masonic Lodge Archives, pp. 298, supplied by then Secretary Mervin Hogg.
8 Author’s interview with Mervin Hogg. The Lodge retained ownership of some of the property until 1904, when they sold it to Amanda E, Berkheimer. Corduroy Block Book, Block 218: 2-24-1904, St. John’s Lodge, et al to Amanda E. Berkheimer, parts of lots 1 and 2.
9 Historians speculated that the architect might have been John Norris of New York, who in 1840 completed supervising construction of the Gothic Revival St. James Episcopal Church. He remained in town to design the 1843 brick Greek Revival Custom House on Water Street; therefore, he was here at the time the Market street building was designed and constructed.
11 St. John’s Lodge membership records show that Robert B. Wood was excluded for non-payment of dues in 1849, but was again listed as member in 1867. Phineas Wines Fanning, the Wood brothers’ uncle, and a fervent member of St. John’s Lodge, may have helped procure the construction project for them.
12 “Razing Landmark,” May 1, 1913, clipping in Bonitz file, Reaves Collection, North Carolina Room, New Hanover County Public Library.
13 “Market Street Lodge,” Wilmington Advertiser, April 1, 1841.
14 Schenck Diary, 109.
15 “Cornerstone Laid,” Wilmington Weekly Chronicle, September 6, 1841.
16 Author’s conversation, February 5, 2004, with Master Mason, Charles E. Ponton.
17 “Mementos of Long Ago,” Messenger, May 4, 1899, Reaves. The lodge avoided such a problem in the future by placing the cornerstone in a nontraditional spot when the Market Street Hall’s facade was redesigned. They placed the old stone in at the southwest corner, in clear view of pedestrians.
18 Resolution St. John’s Lodge, No. 1, F. & A.M., presented at the meeting of September 30, 1880, upon the death of Brother P.W. Fanning, St. John’s Masonic Lodge Archives, pp. 300.
19 “Who Stole the Jewels,” Herald of the Union, April 8, 1865, p. 2: “The thief who stole the Masonic Jewels from St. John’s Lodge No. 1 will be paid the value of them by leaving them with T.M. Gardner, Market St., April 5, 1865, and Wilmington Messenger, May 4, 1899, Reaves.
20 Author’s speculation.
21 “Opening Ceremonies,” Dispatch, March 7, 1900, Reaves.
22 New Hanover County Deed Book 436, 273.
23 “Real Estate Transfers,” Wilmington Star, September 2, 1904, Reaves.
24 Wilmington Dispatch, May 21, 1907, Reaves; and Wilmington City Directory.
25 “Building Permits Issued,” Wilmington Messenger, May 22, 1907, Reaves.
26 Masonic Fair Journal, November 1899, 3, St. John’s Masonic Lodge Archives.
27 Ibid.
29 Masonic Fair Journal, 11.
30 The tiler is the Lodge’s gate keeper, the officer who verified the credentials of those wishing admission to the lodge room.
32 Masonic Fair Journal, 3.
33 “Work on the Temple,” Wilmington Dispatch, October 25, 1899, Reaves.
34 Wilmington Dispatch, November 16, 1899, Reaves.
35 “A Beautiful Masonic Tiling,” Wilmington Messenger, December 12, 1899, Reaves.
36 “Was Shipped Today,” Wilmington Dispatch, December 20, 1899, Reaves.
37 Wilmington Dispatch, January 5, 1900, Reaves.
38 “Masonic Temple Furnishings,” Wilmington, Star, September 22, 1900, Reaves; Orient Lodge owns and uses much of the lodge furniture.
39 “New Elevator installed,” Wilmington Dispatch, August 7, 1906, Reaves.
42 “Leases Ball Room,” Wilmington Dispatch, October 6, 1910, Reaves.
43 Author’s interview with the keeper of the scenery, Woody Henderson. He said it was painted in 1910 in St. Louis, Missouri. Some pieces may have been painted in Chicago.
44 “Fire In Masonic Temple With Loss of $75,000 is Caused by Electric Wire,” Wilmington Morning Star, February 29, 1924, Reaves.
45 New Hanover County Deed Book 1204, 872, June 24, 1982.
46 New Hanover County Deed Book 18618, 0353, August 31, 1992.

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CORRECTION

The January 2006 Bulletin mistakenly identified the artist of this image as Henry Bacon McKoy when it was in fact Henry Bacon, architect of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC.
As the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society celebrates its 50th Anniversary, we look back at the first Bulletin which appeared in October 1957, Volume 1, Number 1. On the front cover was a photographic image of the historic Dram Tree that once stood guard along the banks of the Cape Fear River. In 1957, it was suggested as the official emblem of the LCFHS but it was never adopted and by 1958 it was decided to use a seal as the symbol to represent the Society.

Why would this unusual tree have been considered in the first place? The mouth of the Cape Fear River is approximately 28 miles from the Port City. The Dram Tree, a moss-covered cypress, stood approximately 2 miles down river in the area now occupied by the State Port. When this tree came into sight a ship’s captain would issue the crew a dram of rum to celebrate the safety of the harbor. Outgoing vessels when coming upon this tree were authorized a dram under full sail to fortify the crew for the dangerous voyage. This nautical tradition was established first by the British Royal Navy in 1731 and later adopted by the U.S. Navy in 1775. A dram is actually less than a teaspoon by measurement.

In the 1989 dedication ceremony of Dram Tree Park Capt. Pluta of the US Coast Guard remarked that “the old dram tree was a natural symbol of the safe haven and hospitality Wilmington has provided to mariners for over 200 years.” So in 1957, the newly formed Society was on track in trying to preserve the memory of this local legend.