St. John’s Masonic Lodge

Part 1: Orange Street Lodge

Janet K. Seapker

St. John’s Masonic Lodge has the distinction of being the oldest 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. In addition to its stature as the oldest Masonic Lodge in the state, St. John’s is the oldest such building in the state. It celebrated its 200th anniversary, as it was constructed on Orange Street between 1803 and 1805. Stylistically, it is a combination of the 18th century Georgian style with elements of the early national era, Federal style. It retains an extraordinary amount of original fabric, inside and out.

In the United States, the Masons constituted an organization of great significance in the lives and leadership of the state and nation. During the American Revolution, some of the leading Masons were loyal to the Crown and returned to England. Among the leading local masons who stayed and embraced the Revolutionary cause were Major General Robert Howe, Cornelius Harnett, General Jethro Sumner and Colonel Hardy Murfree. Cornelius Harnett, a native of Chowan County, was reared in Wilmington and for a time he was Master of St. John’s Lodge in Wilmington. Harnett played a prominent role in the defiance of the Stamp Acts in 1765-66.

After the Revolution, Masonry in the former colonies was in disarray. After the end of the war, the Lodges in North Carolina declared their independence from England. They organized the Grand Lodge of North Carolina in 1787 and appointed a State Grand Master and other grand officers. The Grand Lodge provided stability for the organization; it encouraged old lodges to reorganize and new ones to form. With its organization, Masonry became a permanent reality and a living force in the state.

Under the Grand Lodge of England, the colonial precedence of the founding of lodges became an issue. St. John’s in Wilmington and Royal White Hart Lodge in Halifax both contended for the designation of Number 1—the first lodge. In 1791, the Grand Lodge settled the seniority issue of the eighteen lodges. The Grand Lodge ruled that the seniority and precedence would be: Number 1, St. John’s Lodge, Wilmington; Number 2, Royal White Hart Lodge, Halifax; and Number 3, St. John’s Lodge, New Bern. Wilmington’s St. John’s accepted a charter from Grand Lodge of North Carolina in 1794 and claims an unbroken record of existence.

At that time, the state’s towns were tiny when compared to northern coastal towns. In 1800, New Bern had 2,467 people and Wilmington had only 1,689. Because of subsequent urban rebuilding and fires, few urban buildings survive from that era. St. John’s Lodge is one of the state’s few examples of non-residential urban architecture of its period—a civic-social building—one once an important building type, but now a rare survivor.

Illustration 1: 1810 map of Wilmington delineated by J.J. Belanger who painted the Masonic mural in the 1803-1805 St. John’s Masonic Lodge building. The third drawing from the right is the lodge building.
On January 25, 1803, Peter Carpenter deeded to Anthony Toomer “Most Excellent Grand Master of the Grand & Royal Chapter of Jerusalem commonly called the Royal Arch,” and to Gilbert Geer the “Worshipful Master of the St. John’s Lodge Number 1, of Ancient York Masons,” the land on which the earliest lodge building stands. The bodies laid the cornerstone on June 12, 1804, and they occupied the building in 1805. The 1826 lodge minutes, in a memorial tribute to Benjamin Jacobs, states that Jacobs was “builder of our first home.” Benjamin Jacobs, and his brother, Joseph, came to Wilmington from Hingham, Massachusetts in 1800, and Joseph Jacobs designed the building that his brother built. We do not know of any other buildings the brothers designed and/or built. St. John’s Lodge Number 1 and Concord Chapter Number 1, Royal Arch Masons continued to share the same facility from 1805, until they moved from the Masonic Temple on Front Street in 1980. (In future, the name St. John’s will refer to facilities occupied by both bodies jointly.)
diligent action of the brethren who placed wet blankets on
the roof to prevent it from burning.6

BROWN’S RESIDENCE

By 1825, the brethren of St. John’s Number 1 constructed
a new lodge on the north side of Wilmington. They sold the
Orange Street property for $1200 to John Taylor who held it
for two-and-one-half years.7 In 1828, he sold it for $600 to
Thomas W. Brown, the area’s premier antebellum jeweler
and silversmith.8 Brown was a Mason, who in 1837 became
the Master of St. John’s Lodge.9 The Brown family moved
into the building. The conversion from lodge to dwelling
underscores the domestic scale and appearance of the lodge
building. The Browns altered the façade to suit the family’s
domestic needs and the regrading of Orange Street. Orange
Street had a much steeper grade in the early 19th century; it
was filled in allowing the Browns to switch the center first-
floor door with the second-floor window and add a one-bay
wooden porch to provide direct access to the second floor.

On August 25, 1849, Thomas W. Brown applied to the
North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company for insurance
on his dwelling house against fire. He described it as:

Located on Orange Street between Front
and Second Streets. Building old and made
of bricks; addition of wood and nearly new;
no scuttles in either building.10

Main building 2 stories, 40 x 20; Piazza
in rear 12 feet wide with room at each
end; shingle roof; a cooking stove in
basement with pipe entering chimney
well secured.

The addition is 2 stories, 18 x 17 feet, on
south east corner; 1 chimney and 2
fireplaces; stove used in one room in
winter, pipe in the chimney well
secured.

On the southeast side, distance 30 feet,
a wooden kitchen.
House occupied by Thomas W. Brown
as a residence.11

The 1850 census lists Thomas W. Brown, age 47, as a
watchmaker, born in New York, with an estate valued at
$8,000. He resided in the lodge building until his death in
1872. The Browns and their descendants continued to live in
the lodge through 1936.12

One of Brown’s daughters, Miss Mary Bettencourt
Brown, in 1895, in association with Miss Annie Hart, had an
addition built on the west side of the lodge to house their
School for Young Ladies. One newspaper described the
addition as a “handsome two-story, frame schoolhouse,”
and in an ad, the principals noted that it is a “high, airy
schoolroom and sunny playground.”13 There, they taught
“English, Latin, French, German, and Music.”14 Later, they
added “Natural Sciences, Mathematics, Bookkeeping” to
the curriculum and engaged Mrs. Devereux H. Lippitt to
teach art.15 By 1901, shorthand was part of their offerings.16
The school operated through 1920.17

Illustration 3: Thomas W. Brown,
master of St. John’s Lodge, who purchased
the building in 1828
and used it as a resi-
dence for his family.
Portrait by William
Garl Browne; owned by
Mr. and Mrs. Adair
Graham.

Illustration 4: Sanborn Insurance Map, 1899, showing the Orange Street
(l14) lodge building with front porch, main block, the piazza rooms and open
stair at the rear and the two-story, one-room residential wing added by
Thomas W. Brown, ca. 1828.

Illustration 5: Sanborn Insurance Map, 1955, showing the western two-
story wing added in 1895 to accommodate the school run by Miss Annie Hart
and Miss Mary Brown until 1920.
A remarkable survivor and unique testament to the building’s original use is the Masonic mural on the lodge room side of the chimneybreast. It was painted about 1808 by Monsieur J. J. Belanger, an itinerant artist who advertised himself as a “Profile-taker, Painter, and Lodge’s Decorator.” His newspaper ads identified Belanger as being from the Island of Martinique. He worked in Charleston before coming to Wilmington. With the prospect of moving to New Bern, he advertised there in an attempt to determine if there was sufficient business in New Bern to move.

The mural is a hybrid, including icons associated with the Royal Arch Masons and the Ancient and Modern orders. It depicts an arch containing the words “Holiness to the Lord” and an all-seeing eye in the keystone. Below, a landscape with a smiling sun rises on the horizon. A shield occupies each lower corner. The left one represents the Moderns and consists of three rooks. The right one, representing the Ancients, is divided into alternating gray and red quarters with images of a lion, an ox, an eagle and a man, representing the four principle tribes of Israel.

Since Thomas W. Brown was a Mason, he may not have minded living with the Masonic mural in his parlor. Actually, we do not know if he lived with it for a while or if it had already been wallpapered over by Mr. Taylor. The painting was covered during most of its post-lodge life.

Henry Bacon McKoy, a native and member of the Wilmington Lodge N. 319, purchased the lodge in 1943 from the 26 heirs. He arranged for his brother, Jimmy, to operate a restaurant called St. John’s Tavern. During the 1943 redecorating of St. John’s Tavern, Jimmy McKoy engaged Claude Howell, local artist, to restore the mural. In 1957, Jimmy McKoy wrote to Ben Williams, Curator of the NC Museum of Art, who had inquired about the mural. The following is quoted from that correspondence:

. . . . The colors were obvious but much of each design was missing. It was my job to locate a copy of the original design and the historical meaning of it. Claude and I spent many an hour with flashlights trying to trace out each line of it.

The “All-Seeing Eye” was almost complete—very little damaged. Parts of the drapery was intact that is next to the ceiling and little was needed to complete the missing lines and folds of it. About 1/3 to a half of each Coat of Arms was visible (sic) though almost three of the figures in the Arms to the right were ruined. “The Sun” was about half left but we could not understand why it appeared to have been never completed at the bottom. There were distinct lines visible (sic) below “The Sun” but we could not make out their
meaning. The motto in the arch was a great question. All we could make out on the left side were the “0,” “N” and the two “S.” On the right side we could see the capitol (sic) “T,” the peculiar formed “h” to its left and the “r.”

My father, William Berry McKoy, was Grand Master of the North Carolina Masons in 1911. In his files there were many books on the subject. I went to them in search of these designs or a description of them. I also went to the Historian of St. John’s Lodge Number 1, Mr. Chas. Newcomb, thinking of course he would be able to help me in locating these designs and learning of their history. He told me that they were of no particular meaning and he could not assist me, that “they were probably the work of some member and were of no meaning.” I felt differently, so looked all the harder for facts. I found quickly two books that I needed. They are today in my library at the Tavern and so I cannot give you their correct titles or dates of publication. They are rather old books. One was a “History of Masonry in the United States.” The other, “A Cyclopedia of Masonry.” The latter was very old and a treasure of facts that brought to light all that Claude and I needed. In this Cyclopedia I found an illustration of each sign and design in the painting, complete and exactly like the one on the old wall. Furthermore this book went into detail, giving the reason for each figure and part of each symbol, and, a detail description of the colors that should be used in reproduction.

What we could not find, was any motto that fit the letters visible in the “arch” supporting the “keystone.” Weeks and weeks went into the study and search for authentic facts that matched the painting in the old room. I could find nothing to give me a clue on the motto. Late one night, I began to read in the “History” of the Royal Arch Chapter. Up to that time I had concentrated only on St. John’s Lodge data. Thumbing through the chapters on Royal Arch - I found that in 1810 there were only twelve Royal Arch Chapters in the United States - and that one of these was located in Wilmington. This was an exciting find to the layman - this meant that the Chapter must have been in the building with St. John’s Lodge, I went on reading and suddenly found the motto, “Holiness to the Lord.” I knew I had found the motto at the old building at last. Although late at night, I called Claude Howell and we rushed to the Tavern, climbed a stepladder and, without any more need of flashlights, the wording of the motto fit... In fact it was perfectly obvious what each letter was. It was right there all the time - in part.

All the molding that divided each section of the painting was gone - but it was obvious where it once was. The nail holes were clearly indicated and furthermore there was no paint where the molding had once been nailed. I had a molding made up by a Wilmington mill to the exact existing pattern of the painting and this was placed in position after Claude had done the restoration.

There was one doubt in my mind about the enclosures of the Coats of Arms - for it was not a square box - we found it to be two inches higher than in width. I felt that it should have been a perfect square of the width-24 inches.

The “Cyclopedia” that I had reference to, carefully described the drapery at the top - in colors. In this case, under the wall paper completely around the room - the present two rooms which once were one - there was a little evidence that this drapery might have been all around the room at the ceiling cornice. Only very little bits of this could be found, but sufficient to make it possible that it once was there.

The “All-Seeing Eye” in the keystone was described many times in the book of reference. This needed little restoration - it was almost completely there. No matter in what part of the room you stood - this “eye” was looking, at you. I found the “Arms” at the left to be described as “The Modern” arms of Masonry in the old reference. This contained the three castles - the chevron in gold with the compass slightly extended. - all just as found in the painting. The Arms on the right of the mantel, I found described as the “Ancient” Arms of Masonry with the four tribes illustrated the Cross of “vert” and in it the small cross of “d’or.” Only part of the “ass” was to be seen, an arm of “Rubem” and a bit of the eagle.

I found the “Setting Sun” (sic) illustrated just as in the painting and described, “denoting the setting sun, the span of a Mason life, well lived.” But the big problem confronting us - what was below the sun - and what concealed part of it? More reading and study brought out, in early times because of persecution - Masons were forced to meet in the highest hills and in the lowest valleys, where no eaves-dropper could hear, and where no traitor could see.” This gave us the clue for what existed below the sun. Claude carefully traced each existing line - connecting them where missing - and then it was obvious that the scene painted there once represented the hills and valleys - the stream most evident because of bits of color still to be seen.

With all these facts before us, with colors existing to copy, Claude started the restoration. He spent many weeks experimenting with colors so that they would perfectly match what was found. No trouble was too great to make it a perfect restoration... .

In 1915, The Royal Arch Chapter of Wilmington celebrated a hundredth Anniversary. My father wrote the historical section of this book, Part (sic) of his chapters are devoted to “the old lodge building on (sic) Orange Street.” In it is included a picture of the building made in 1913 - the original print of this being filed with the book. He tells of the laying of the “Angle Stone” with Masonic rites by
the Rev. Dr. Solomon Halling, Rector of old St. James Episcopal Church - then at 4th and Market streets - that following the services at the site of the building on Orange Street - the body removed to St. James Church for the sermon by Dr. Halling. Mr. McKay goes on to relate that under the wallpaper in the old lodge room, there are paintings of Masonic Blue Lodge and Royal Arch emblems, that these have been seen when old papers have been removed through the years. So you see it was a known fact to Masons that we thought we had discovered was new information - a find... And all the time right in my own father’s files. . . . The copy of this 1915 book I have with my files at the Tavern.

The present lounge of the Tavern where the fresco is to be seen over the mantel is only one part of the original lodge room. The room was divided when the building was converted into a residence by the late Mr. Thomas Brown, a jeweler of Wilmington who purchased it from the Masons in 1825. In order to provide heat for this new room at the east end of the building which is some 11 by 20 feet, a fireplace and chimney was built into this room only. It is a suspended chimney as it does not continue to the rooms below. Before this addition, there are filled holes in the floor, indicating the exact position of the dais for the Master of the Lodge. Since the west wall of the old lodge room has Masonic symbols still evident, I have always presumed that back of the brick of the “new” chimney there must have been proper signs and symbols of Masonry to be found in the East end of the room where a Lodge meets. The original room was some 30 by 20 feet.

On the East wall of the present lounge, I had Claude Howell paint an enlargement of a Map of The Town of Wilmington, which was drawn by J. Balanger in 1810. A copy of this map I had found also in my father’s papers. This map illustrates nine public buildings of the Town at the time. One of these illustrated still stands, “St. John’s Lodge.” The drawing shows the original first floor entrance, which had to be replaced with the present stairway and portico when the level of Orange Street was raised some several feet to open the street to the top of the hill at Third. When the Masons occupied the building, the lodge room was on a second floor with entrance into the ante-room to the West of the big central chimney. There is a door-still in this ante-room which has a filled peep-hole - evidently there to make sure who asked for entrance. In the outside brick walls near this door, there are clear signs that a stairway once existed on the West end of the building, giving the only entrance to the rooms on the second floor.

Some time after the restoration of the building, loose plaster was noted in the ceiling below the lodge room. When this was removed a great quantity of “seeds” came from between the rafters. They were found to be wheat seeds - packed between every rafter from the lower floor ceiling to the floor of the lodge room. The original sound proofing. It had been long noted that no noise in the lounge was evident in the room below. To be packed there in the quantity we found, it must have been placed there after the lower rooms had the ceilings plastered and before the wide pine floor boards now in the lodge room were laid - with hand cut square nails. . . .

Jimmy McKoy performed an essential and thoughtful restoration of the lodge; his work was the basis for later preservation activities. In 1962, Mr. McKoy gave the lodge to a newly organized group, St. John’s Art Gallery for exhibition space. The gallery was the predecessor of St. John’s Museum of Art, now the Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum. Painting conservator, David Goist of Raleigh, restored the mural again in 1995, a project funded jointly by the North Carolina Arts Council and the Wilmington York Rite Bodies. In the early 1980s, the St. John’s Museum of Art restored the brick portion of the building to its original external architectural character, asserting its strong public presence in the urban streetscape. During the restoration a two-story front porch that Thomas W. Brown had added was removed and the earth in front of the lodge was excavated to reestablish the original 1805 grade. That allowed the reinstallation of the door at the first floor level with the window above, restoring the façade to its original appearance, as shown on the 1810 map of the city, drawn by the mural artist, Monsieur Belanger.
Lodge buildings are the chief architectural embodiment and reminder of the importance of the Masons. St. John’s Lodge is the earliest Masonic lodge building in the state, the second oldest brick building in Wilmington, and therefore, vitally important to the history and architectural history of North Carolina and the city. The building was a pace setter of architectural style, bridging the Colonial Georgian and the early Republic Federal styles. Its simple and substantial construction enabled it to serve as a lodge, a home, a school, a restaurant and a museum. It is associated with leading early Masons, Wilmington’s premier nineteenth century silversmith, and other notable people in the community who taught, dined and painted there. That the Wilmington Children’s Museum will make its home there this year seems a good omen for its continued preservation and participation in the life of the community.


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The author is grateful for assistance from: Mervin Hogg, former secretary, St. John’s Masonic Lodge Number 1; Joseph C. Knox, Jr. 33°, former General Secretary, Valley of Wilmington, Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite; Master Mason Charles E. Ponton; James Earl Vann, Ph.D, former General Secretary, Valley of Wilmington, Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite; George F. Jones, 33°; Donald Floyd, 33°; Charles Lewis, former Grand Master; Evangelos Fragos, former District Deputy Grand Master; Robert Snipes, former Master of St. John’s Lodge; Ric Carter, Assistant to the Grand Secretary; Bryan Chadwick, Secretary, Wilmington York Rite; Beverly Tetterton and Joseph Sheppard, North Carolina Room, New Hanover County Public Library; Ann Brennan, Curator, Cameron Art Museum; Sue Miller, Registrar, Cape Fear Museum; Jean McKoy Graham; and Ed Turberg.

This article is the first portion of a two-part article about the Masonic Lodges of Wilmington.
St. John’s Lodge building as painted by Henry Bacon McKoy in 1887. Courtesy of Cameron Art Museum