

## The Life of John J Mercer

We are here today to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John J Mercer Lodge, 100 years of spreading the cement of brotherly love and friendship, 100 years of conferring degrees, 100 years of Raising Master Masons, 100 years of Making Good Men Better, 100 years of electing a new Worshipful Master every year and a new Secretary every 12 years, 100 years of Installations and Initiations, 100 years of trying to take over the world... in between pancake breakfasts, 100 years of secret handshakes and goat jokes, 100 years of Brothers boasting about their proficiency but still fearing the Grand Custodians, 100 years of practices and arguments over proper floor work, 100 years of signing dues cards and collecting lapel pins, 100 years of business meetings and fish sticks... and as we celebrate all the events and milestones that have been seen in the last century of John J Mercer Lodge and the last 87 years of the Lodge building that we call home, we should also celebrate the life of our Most Worshipful Brother, our Grand Master, our namesake... John J Mercer, himself.

Our story begins on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1833. Andrew Jackson was in the fourth year of his presidency, British troops would seize control of the Falkland Islands in two days, the first music school in the US, the Boston Academy of Music, would be established in one week, the 22<sup>nd</sup> US Congress would enact the *Force Bill to further provide for the collection of duties on imports* in March during *The Nullification Crisis*, and a young couple, Amos and Rachel, gave birth to a little boy named John Jackson Mercer. He was born and raised in a small town in Pennsylvania called New Bethlehem. At the age of nine he entered the workforce learning the blacksmithing trade which would be his career for the next twenty years.

In 1854, John moved from his childhood hometown to Benton City, Iowa and in 1856 on September 16<sup>th</sup>, John would marry the love of his life, Elizabeth Flora, who would be with him until her death on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1906 in Omaha... They are now resting eternally together at Forest Lawn Cemetery with their daughter, Minnie Mercer Bell.

The next month, at the age of 23 and well into his operative trade as a smithy, John took up a speculative trade as a Mason. John's first home in Masonry was Benton City Lodge #81 in Benton City, Iowa. John Jackson Mercer was Initiated as an Entered Apprentice Mason on October 11<sup>th</sup>, Passed to the Degree of a Fellow Craft Mason on November 8<sup>th</sup> and Raised to the Sublime Degree of a Master Mason on Saturday, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1856 in Benton City Lodge #81.

While at Benton City Lodge, John Mercer would serve as Junior and Senior Warden, and in 1860 he would leave Iowa and affiliate with Liberty Lodge #380 in Liberty, Illinois and serve as Junior and Senior Warden there as well. Sadly, on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1993, Liberty Lodge #380 consolidated with Payson Lodge #379 in Payson Illinois.

The next year of our story, 1862, saw the darkest event in our great Nations history... the institution of the first US Income Tax, but it wasn't too bad at the time, only 3% on incomes over \$600 and 5% on incomes over \$10,000... but good things happened that year too, Abraham Lincoln was in the second year of his presidency and still had another two and a half years to live, Lincoln would sign the first of the *Homestead Acts* and the *Morrill Land-Grant Acts* in May, the Confederate government doubled the premium for volunteers to \$20, and that August, a few months before his 30<sup>th</sup> Birthday, John Mercer would put down his blacksmiths hammer and pick up a rifle and enlist as a Private in the Illinois Volunteer Infantry, serving in Company E, of the 78<sup>th</sup> Regiment. He would serve his divided country with honor and would, ultimately, be promoted to Captain on June 27<sup>th</sup> 1864. He would serve for three years until the end of the war and participate in many bloody battles, never leaving his company's side, as he was a leader who led from the front, a trait that would stay with him for life. He would leave combat service in January 1865 due to being declared disabled by rheumatism but would remain in the service to his country as a quartermaster, at which he would labor for the rest of his life.

John would move to Brownville, Nebraska in 1866 and settle down, primarily working in the public sector filling many chairs from City Councils, to local Boards, and many years on the Nebraska State Legislature. He would spend the rest of his life in Nebraska, eventually buying a beautiful cottage at 2811 Hickory Street here in Omaha's Hanscom Park which, after his death, remained in his daughters care until being sold in 1919, and then demolished in the early part of the 1960's to make room for the Gerald Ford Expressway.

The 1870's brought us a time of many changes. We saw a new US Mint in Carson City, NV, the establishment of the National Weather Service by the US Army, the creation of the Department of Justice, and Christmas was declared a federal holiday in the US. On March 30<sup>th</sup>, Congress passed the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment guaranteeing the right to vote regardless of race, and the next day in Perth Amboy, NJ, Thomas P Mundy would become the first black person to vote in the United States and on December 12<sup>th</sup> Joseph H Rainey, of South Carolina, became the first black to be sworn into the House of Representatives.

On February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1871, John Affiliated with Nemaha Valley Lodge #4 in Brownville, NE where, in 1878, he would be elected to Senior Warden. Now, many joke about electing a Secretary and then leaving him there for years on end, but in 1879 John Mercer was elected Worshipful Master of Nemaha Lodge and would sit in the East for seven years and then move a few feet away to sit at the Secretary's desk for two.

These times after moving to Nebraska were busy for Brother Mercer. Despite all the responsibility he found serving in various positions for his community and State, it is this time that his Masonic life began to take root as well. He would join the Royal Arch Masons in Brownville and later affiliate with Omaha, working his way up the positions until serving as High Priest for three years, Brownville Chapter 4 in 1885 and then Omaha Chapter 1 in '86 and '87.

He would then go on to join the Scottish Rite in February 1889, and a few months later, on Thursday, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1889... at the age of 56, the blacksmith, turned soldier, turned statesman, Captain John Jackson Mercer would be elected as the 24th Grand Master of Masons in Nebraska presiding over the 33<sup>rd</sup> Grand Lodge of Nebraska Annual Communication

After his year as Grand Master, he would spend the next decade adding more lapel pins to his collection. He would be elected as Knight Commander of the Court of Honor in 1890, Coroneted 33° Inspector General Honorary in 1892, and serve as Master of the Lodge of Perfection in '93 and '96. John would finish the 1800's as Grand High Priest of the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons. He would then step back and get reacquainted with Blue Lodge Masonry and on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1902, affiliate with Capitol Lodge #3 in Omaha and remain an active member there for the rest of his life.

John Mercer lived a long and full life, he had a successful trade as a smithy, fought in the Civil War, spent many years in the capacity of Public offices, had a loving family, and was... somewhat active in the Masonic community. On February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1915 at the age of 82, John Jackson Mercer passed away in his home surrounded by his family. He was a Union Captain, Grand High Priest, mentor, smithy, Most Illustrious Brother, husband, father, Most Worshipful Grand Master, statesman, and Brother. He was an honorable example of what it means to be a Mason, and a shining example to us all, and whenever we enter John J Mercer Lodge, let us remember the foundation in Masonry that our namesake Brother left for us and always act and part in ways worthy of John's legacy.

Thank you.