

MASONRY, THE GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC,
AND THE SONS OF UNION VETERANS OF THE CIVIL WAR

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The Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.) was instituted April 6, 1866 in Decatur, Illinois, and was founded as a veterans' organization for honorably discharged veterans of the United States Army, Navy and Marines who had served anytime from April 12, 1861 until April 9, 1865. It was comprised of Posts, numbered sequentially within a particular state. The state governing body was termed a Department, and all the Departments collectively formed a National Encampment.

The first GAR National Commander was Benjamin F. Stephenson of Illinois. He was succeeded by Stephen A. Hurlburt, a former Brigadier General, and Hurlburt, in turn was succeeded by John A. Logan, a former Major General. All were from Illinois, and Logan, in particular, was well known nationally. Perhaps not coincidentally, they were Masons. I have no record of Stephenson's Masonic membership, but Hurlburt was a member of Belvedere Lodge #60, and Logan a member of Benton Lodge #64.

For the next ten years or so, former generals headed the organization, at least two of whom John F. Hartranft (Charity Lodge #190, PA) and John C. Robinson (Binghamton Lodge #177, NY and PM Rocky Mountain Lodge #206) were Masons.

Most revealing of the connections, however, is the ritual that was adopted by the GAR. The presiding officer, the Camp Commander, sits in the East. The Senior Vice Commander sits in the West, and the Junior Vice Commander in the South. The Secretary, Treasurer, and Chaplain sit in the same places as they would in a Masonic Lodge. A Guide and a Guard, respectively, sit in places occupied by the Senior and Junior Deacons in a lodge room. There is an altar in the center of the room, containing a Bible, which is opened by the Guide during the opening ceremony, and protocol prohibits passing between the East and the altar while business is being conducted. Three raps by the Commander cause the members to arise, one rap seats them, and two raps calls only the officers to their feet. Election is by ballot box, but rejection only comes with four black balls.

New members took an obligation at the altar, with one hand resting on the Bible and the other grasping the American flag. After taking the obligation, the newly initiated member was conducted around the room to the other stations where various patriotic and fraternal lessons were imparted to him.

The GAR, by its nature, died out when its last members died away. The last National Encampment was held in 1949, and the last member died in 1956. However, the membership in the GAR saw fit to create a successor organization, and in 1881 the organization that became the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War (SUVCW) was created. The SUVCW became the legal heir to the GAR and as such, adopted the ritual that had been previously used by the GAR. Consequently, the ritual used by the SUVCW today, with some minor modifications and updates, is essentially the same Masonically derived ritual that was adopted by the GAR in 1866.

