

A Beginning . . .

History of Odd Fellowship in North America

Established on April 26, 1819

By Don R. Smith

Past Sovereign Grand Master

The Independent Order of Odd Fellows of North America was founded in the City of Baltimore, in the State of Maryland, on April 26, 1819, a day that goes down in history as the beginning of a great fraternal organization with the institution of Washington Odd Fellows Lodge No. 1.

Washington Lodge was formed in one of the crucial periods in the history of the United States. Only a few years had passed since Baltimore, the birthplace of Odd Fellowship, had been the scene of many heroic deeds in the Revolutionary War. Perilous times were still prevalent, for the country had not recovered from the dire effects of the War of 1812. Inasmuch as these two great struggles had been against England, the hatred of Englishmen was intense and they were looked upon all over the country as enemies of everything American.

It was in the winter of 1817, while these feelings were still very much in evidence, that Thomas Wildey, the founder of Washington Lodge, came to Baltimore. Of course, he was classed with the enemy and was looked upon with suspicion. He felt he was a stranger in a strange land, and Brother Wildey longed for the fraternalism he knew in England.

During his second winter in America, Brother Wildey made friends with John Welch, another Englishman. These two men spent much time together, and no doubt, discussed at length the possibilities of establishing an Odd Fellows Lodge in America. Their affiliation with Odd Fellowship brought them closer together and as they discussed their experiences it rekindled their love for the Order as they resolved to organize an Odd Fellows Lodge in America.

Ancient usage having established the rule that at least five members were necessary to institute a lodge, they began to search for the proper number. Three more Odd Fellows were needed, and many different plans were followed until as a last resort they advertised in the *Baltimore American* on February 13, 1819, as follows:

NOTICE TO ALL ODD FELLOWS — A few members of the Society of Odd Fellows will be glad to meet their brethren for consultation upon the subject of forming a lodge. The meeting will be held on Friday evening, the 2nd of March, 1819."

While this advertisement did not state the place of the meeting, it was responded to in some way by two more Odd Fellows - John Duncan and John Cheatham. Still an obstacle presented itself because one additional member was required to organize a lodge. The temptation was very strong to disregard the ancient usage and organize with four members, but they proved

true to what they considered one of the fundamental laws of the Order. Again they resorted to inserting an advertisement in the *Baltimore American*, an early day newspaper, on March 27, 1819.

In answer to this second notice, Richard Rushworth joined his four brothers in having the magic number of five necessary for starting a lodge. Their eagerness prompted them to complete arrangements speedily, and on April 26, 1819, at the Seven Stars Tavern in Baltimore, they instituted the first successful lodge of Odd Fellows in North America. The name of "Washington" was selected for the new lodge as a compliment to the Great Father of American Liberty, General George Washington, the first President of the United States.

The tavern was located on the south side of Water Street, between Frederick Street and Market Space. William Lupton was the host of the Seven Stars and had the reputation of keeping a first class hostelry. The house had two stories and an attic and the location was considered very respectable at this period of Baltimore's history. Washington Lodge met in one of the upper rooms, which was furnished with rushbottom chairs and benches. The room was lighted with candles which were hung around the walls and decorated with a variety of pictures, among which are said to have been those of Washington, Lafayette and other great men of the Revolution.

While the Seven Stars Tavern was destroyed by the Great Baltimore Fire on February 8, 1904, a bronze plaque marks the spot as the birthplace of American Odd Fellowship.

The young lodge began its mission of disseminating the principals of Friendship, Love and Truth. With Brother Wildey as the first Noble Grand, Washington Lodge and Odd Fellowship flourished a thousand-fold greater than their wildest dreams.

The lodge continued meeting at the Seven Stars Inn for the first five months of its existence, then in September of 1819 moved to the Three Loggerheads Inn on Frederick Street, near the docks. Some of the most vital things in the life of the Order were transacted while the lodge was residing at this place. Meetings were held here when Washington Lodge received its first charter form the Order in England, giving it authority to establish lodges throughout the land.

Odd Fellowship was established in Baltimore, a city of 60,000 inhabitants, by men with little education and no social standing, yet that foundation was sturdy and from it grew one of the finest and most outstanding fraternal organizations known to modern man. In the years that followed, educated and cultured individuals were attracted to the "Three Link Fraternity." Growing from five men, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows became the largest and strongest united fraternity in the world. Its deeds and accomplishments attracted individuals from all walks of life, and destined to become members were Presidents of the United States, Premiers of Canada and other political and industrial leaders throughout the world.

In observing the 166th anniversary of the founding of Odd Fellowship in America, we can look back on a great and glorious history. The bonds of Odd Fellowship were strengthened with the signing of "The Albuquerque Compact" in September of 1984 by the representatives of The Sovereign Grand Lodge, the European Grand Sires and the Manchester Unity of Odd Fellows - the parent organization in Great Britain. The hands of friendship have been extended uniting thousands and thousands of Odd Fellows throughout the world.