

# THE SHORT TALK BULLETIN

November 2012

## **BEN FRANKLIN MEETS VOLTAIRE** By Larry Jacobsen

*Brother Jacobsen is a Past Master of Shiloh Lodge #327 in Omaha, Nebraska, and a 33rd Degree Mason. He is a member of the Grand Lodge of Nebraska Education Committee and editor of the quarterly "To Light" Masonic education publication. He is a professional architect.*

*Brother Jacobsen is the chair of the Scottish Rite Valley of Omaha's Ethics Initiative, which funds an Ethical Literary program for selected public schools in Omaha and also an internal program on ethics in the Valley of Omaha — making the connection between lessons of the ritual and 21st Century ethical issues and dilemmas.*

— Editor

"So what?" you might ask. An American diplomat encounters a French philosopher, both well known and renowned in their respective endeavors. But it was Freemasonry that brought these two iconic figures together, and that makes the encounter all the more interesting.

**Ben Franklin** we know quite well, not only as a Mason, but as an 18th Century Renaissance man — writer, inventor, scientist, media baron, and one of early America's most respected political leaders. Walter Isaacson, author of *Benjamin Franklin — an American Life*, provides a thoroughly researched chronicle of Franklin's life, particularly Franklin's lengthy tour of duty in France as a diplomat seeking the support of the French in the American colonies war with England.

**Voltaire** is equally in the pantheon of history's intellectual elite. He was a Mason and revered among his contemporaries - a French Enlightenment writer, historian, philosopher and known for his advocacy of civil liberties, including freedom of religion, freedom of expression, free trade and separation of church and state.

Franklin and Voltaire were, as Walter Isaacson described, "soul mates — both were aging embodiments of the wit and reason of the Enlightenment, playful yet pointed parodists, debunkers of orthodoxy and pretense, disciples of deism, tribunes of tolerance, and apostles of revolution. That the two should meet seemed predestined."

While in France, Franklin paid his first visit to Voltaire in 1778 as a ceremonial gesture asking Voltaire to give his blessings to Franklin's grandson Benny Bache. Later that year they appeared together at the Academie Royale and gave each other a French embrace, wildly acclaimed by the audience. Voltaire by this time was 84 and ailing and would die within a month.

### **Lodge of the Nine Sisters**

And so we come to the Lodge of the Nine Sisters. This was a Parisian lodge whose name refers to the nine muses of the arts and sciences from Greek Mythology. This lodge evolved from a traditional businessman's social club into a movement led by the philosophers and other freethinkers who challenged the orthodoxy of both the church and the monarchy. Its membership boasted important thinkers, artists, scientists and statesmen.

It was formed in 1776, and in 1778 Franklin and Voltaire joined the Nine Sisters Lodge. Franklin went on to become Venerable Master of the Lodge from 1789-1791, a tribute to his reputation among the French intellectual society.

This lodge was also influential in organizing French support for the American Revolution, so the organization provided Franklin with influential supporters and enjoyable evenings. But, as Isaacson noted in

his book, it was risky. Both the king and the clerics were wary of this renegade lodge and of Franklin's membership in it.

Exacerbating this situation, Voltaire, on his deathbed waved off priests seeking to give him last rites, and at his memorial service in November 1778, some influential friends thought it wise to avoid the service, but Franklin not only attended, but also took part in it. Isaacson's research provides a rare glimpse into the Lodge of the Nine Sisters and Voltaire's memorial service:

*The hall was draped in black, lit only dimly by candles. There were songs, speeches, and poems attacking the clergy and absolutism in all forms. Voltaire's niece presented a bust by Houdon (Houdon, a member, also did a bust of Franklin for the lodge, which is now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.) Then a flame of light revealed a grand painting of the apotheosis of Voltaire emerging from his tomb to be presented in heaven by the goddess of Truth and Benevolence. Franklin took the Masonic wreath from his head and solemnly laid it at the foot of the painting. Everyone then adjourned to the banquet room, where the first toast included a tribute to Franklin — "the captive thunder dying at his feet" — and to America.*

Louis XVI, though partial to the Masons and who may have actually been a Mason, was somewhat annoyed by the Lodge of the Nine Sisters and sought to have the lodge expelled. After some months of deliberations, the Lodge of the Nine Sisters reorganized itself and Franklin took over as Venerable Master. He later would induct many Americans into the Lodge including naval warrior John Paul Jones, the spy Edward Bancroft, and Franklin's own grandson Temple.

All this was part of the much broader political soup that preceded the French Revolution, during which Louis XVI would meet the guillotine along with countless influential acquaintances Franklin made during his years in France.

Like the Masonic symbols that enlighten us to a higher understanding of ourselves and our relationship with others, the Franklin/Voltaire encounter is also a symbol -- a symbol of the fruit that flourishes from dialogue on important ideas. Both Franklin and Voltaire had been given a gift for communicating and acting on ideas so relevant to their time, but can also translate to all time. We are now removed from their encounter by more than 230 years, and yet their ideas resonate as strongly as ever with us today.

Franklin carried the banner and led the life of middle class values. Those virtues included diligence, honesty, industry and temperance. As for civic virtues, it was Franklin who helped create the social order that promoted the common good.

And as for Franklin's view of religious tolerance, Isaacson noted, "it was in fact no small advance for civilization in the eighteenth century. It was one of the greatest contributions to arise out of the Enlightenment, more indispensable than that of the most profound theologians of the era."

Voltaire, though operating at a higher philosophical level, coined phrases that one might mistake for Mark Twain and would be relevant openers for discussion anywhere today:

- "What we find in books is like the fire in our hearths. We fetch it from our neighbors, we kindle it at home, we communicate it to others, and it becomes the property of all."

- "Love truth, but pardon error."

- "It is dangerous to be right in matters where established men are wrong."

- "Opinions have caused more ills than the plague or earthquakes on this little globe of ours."

- "I die adoring God, loving my friends, not hating my enemies, and detesting superstition."

- "Let us read, and let us dance; these two amusements will never do any harm to the world."

- "Man ought to be content, it is said; but with what?"

### **So What?**

So it is with a slight degree of envy that we reflect on the meeting of these two unique characters from the past. They will forever live in the realm of recorded history.

The recent movie *Midnight in Paris* by Woody Allen comes to mind. A young writer seeking to find his own way in the world is magically transported back in time amidst Hemmingway, Stein, Picasso and other great creative thinkers, writers and artists of the past. There was the momentary illusion that life different from his own is better, but the young writer quickly recognizes that his life is his because of the here and now, good or bad, and he leaves inspired and confident of his place in the world.

So where do we go to revive that spirit of Franklin and Voltaire in the 21st century?

Try a Masonic Lodge meeting, but with a twist. After concluding the necessary protocols, gather together and pose a question, perhaps Voltaire's "*Man ought to be content, but with what?*" and let the discussion grow.

The biggest problem may be calling an end to the discussion. The ideas discussed will not likely transform the world, but an open discussion of virtues and values will likely transform

### **Questions for reflection and discussion:**

1. What examples of ignorance and intolerance do you see in your workplace, neighborhood, or community? What lessons of Freemasonry could be helpful in bringing Masonic Light to these examples?
2. How has your Lodge or Masonic Brothers been part of being examples of our "Universal Brotherhood of Man?"
3. How can each of us continue to reflect this Masonic Light in our daily lives at home, work, and in our community?

*(Thanks to Don Hrinko, Past Master of Arts & Science Lodge in Ohio, for this month's "Questions.")*