

## **The History of Fish House Masonic Lodge #298, 1853 to 2003**

*As compiled by W.: Alfred Graham & W.: Clayton "Skip" Swain  
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It is quite apparent why the organizers selected the rather unique name by which our Lodge is known. Fish House was, and still is, the popular name for the community in which the organization took place, although the post office was always listed as Northampton, NY. The name was particularly appropriate inasmuch as it was the one selected by Sir William Johnson when he built his hunting and fishing lodge at this place in 1762 and he thereafter referred to it as the Fish House. The founder of Saint Patrick's Lodge No. 4 of Johnstown, NY thus unknowingly named this later Lodge in the same area.

We would be remiss not to refer to the two parents of our Lodge, North Star No. 162 and Golden Rule No. 384. Fortunately, the Minute Book of the former has recently been recovered so that we have definite information regarding it. This Lodge was located at Edinburg and held meetings from August 28, 1807 until July 27, 1826. The differences in Lodge procedures of that era are indeed less striking than the similarities and remind us of how much the ancient traditions persist to the present time. Probably most surprising is the fact that all business was conducted on the Entered Apprentice Degree and much is to be said for the custom of permitting new initiates to attend meetings immediately after receiving the first degree.

Our information on Golden Rule Lodge is rather sketchy. Some authorities locate it in Northville and others at Northampton. However, the best sources lead us to believe that it held meetings, at least during part of its existence, at Osborne's Bridge, a small hamlet midway between Northville and Fish

House. We know, definitely, that it was in existence between the years 1824 and 1836.

As was true throughout the eastern states, Masonry received a serious set back during the 1830s and 40s, particularly in the rural areas. The combined efforts of misguided clerics and political opportunists needed only the spark of the Morgan incident in 1826 to label the Masonic Fraternity as anti-Church and anti-American. It required twenty years for the Craft to prove itself. In 1826 there were 480 Lodges in this State with over 20,000 members. Just two years later there were only 75 Lodges registered with 300 members. Although both North Star and Golden Rule Lodges ceased to operate at this time, a brave group of Masons inspired with the fraternal spirit, met clandestinely in the loft of a barn. This barn was located in Parkville, commonly known as "The Dam"; a settlement immediately to the north of Northville and that building is still in existence.

On March 4, 1853 the Grand Lodge of the State of New York granted a dispensation to Fish House Lodge to organize. Ten men are listed as charter members at the time of its institution, among them five who were former members of North Star Lodge and one of Golden Rule Lodge. James Partridge, a resident of Edinburg, was one of these North Star former members who helped to organize the present Lodge. He had the distinction of being a Mason for 59 years and seven of his sons were members of Fish House Lodge. Certainly this is an enviable record and one duplicated by few Lodges.

During the brief period when the Lodge was under dispensation George Van Slyke was initiated. Opposite his name in the register of members we find one of those isolated remarks so gratifying to a historian, stating that he was "one of the best Masons, for seven years Worshipful Master."

The Grand Lodge session in June 1853 issued a warrant so that Fish House Lodge was constituted as number 298 on June 11th of that year. At that time it was located in the Seventh Masonic District which comprised five counties. Henry W. Spence has the honor of being the first Master of the Lodge. During the first four years, three other former North Star members affiliated with Fish House Lodge, but the first Northville resident did not join until 1865. He was B. N. Lobdell who had Lodge number 157. Northampton was much the larger of the two places at that time and despite the proximity of these villages very few Northville men applied for membership until after 1870.

Meetings have always been held on Wednesday evenings, but not until 1872 did the bylaws call for the first and third Wednesdays as is presently practiced. Following the custom of North Star Lodge, and indeed most Lodges in these early days, meetings were scheduled for 6 o'clock on the Wednesday on or before the full moon, with another meeting two weeks later from October through March. The quality of artificial illumination being so inferior, it was necessary to conserve all the sunlight possible for one's vocation, especially in the farming community. Then, too, the advantages of having moonlight for the journey homeward after a meeting could hardly be neglected.

Masonry was then a more vital part of the lives of its members than it is today, the brethren taking its precepts very seriously. Saints Johns days were seldom passed by without notice and on several occasions elaborate ceremonies were held. We are proud that nearly all the local municipal officials have their names listed on the Lodge rolls. As always Masons were a select group and should one be guilty of un-masonic conduct he could be brought before the Junior Warden for trial. Meetings on many evenings must have been very lengthy. Very often two degrees

were conferred on an evening, sometimes at the time of the District Deputy visitation or on annual meeting night. At a November meeting in 1865 the minute's record that a report was read on a Masonic trial, five candidates balloted upon and all three degrees worked along with various items of miscellaneous business.

Because of a fire in the Lodge rooms in 1866, many valuable records were destroyed including the Minutes of meetings from 1853 to 1861, and all the records of Golden Rule Lodge. By the end of that year a new Masonic Temple was nearly completed so that meetings could be held there.

The first recorded proposal for moving the Lodge to Northville occurred in 1870. Little headway was made at that time and the next year the following quote from the Minutes of the January 4th meeting dramatically indicate the intensity of the feeling on the matter. "Motion that Fish House Lodge No. 298 petition the Grand Lodge of the State of New York for permission to hold its meetings at Northville. Amended that the motion be laid on the table. Amendment lost. Then the Worshipful Master declared the motion out of order." Later that year the proposition for establishing a new Lodge at Northville was voted upon resulting in a 36 to 36 tie. Applications for new Lodges at Day Center and Luzerne were summarily defeated often without the necessity of a ballot.

In 1882 a vote was again taken either to move the Lodge to Northville or to establish a new Lodge there. Both motions were defeated. During the next decade Northville experienced a rapid growth attaining a population of 1,100 by 1892. By that time enough Northville residents had managed to become members of the Lodge that in June of that year it was finally voted to move there. Because as Northampton and Northville were so

close together, both in the same jurisdiction, Grand Lodge looked with favor on the move. The majority of the membership decided that the prosperity of the Lodge would be promoted by the move. In July, 1892 the first communication was held at Northville in the Kested and Bowman block owned by the Lodge treasurer, George N. Brown.

Although we find few references to national conflicts in our early Minutes, the effect they had on the Lodge, particularly in the case of the two World Wars was profound. The only mention of the Civil War was the notation in 1865 of a letter received seeking aid for a destitute brother, "who was pecuniary reduced by aiding brethren who were prisoners in and near Charleston." During World War I special dispensations were received from Grand Lodge permitting degrees at intervals less than the usual time limits. Leon H. Dunn received the first degree November 6th, 1918, and the two remaining degrees the next night. So many line officers answered the call to service that in 1920 we find five past Masters installed as officers. A similar situation was repeated during World War II.

The Lodge was incorporated under the Benevolent Order Law of the State in 1923. It was during this year that the home of George N. Brown was acquired but never used for Lodge meetings, negotiations having been started in the interim to purchase the Cole block. On the morning of June 16, 1928, dedication ceremonies were held at the present Masonic Temple with the Grand Master of the State of New York the principle speaker.

There has always been a mutually beneficial and harmonious relationship between the Masonic Fraternity and the Order of the Eastern Star. As early as 1866, before the Eastern Star was organized into the present Chapter system, the Officers of Fish

House Lodge conferred the "Ladies Degree". From that time until recently when the Chapter closed, the men had not hesitated to request the ladies to serve meals for them. Our records frequently show thanks being tendered the ladies for the "generous collation" served on some occasion or another. When the local Chapter of the Easter Star was formed in 1902 every encouragement was given them by the Masons and the Lodge rooms were donated to them rent-free during the first year.

A particularly pleasant fraternal spirit has existed with Gloversville Lodge No. 429. Two former members of Fish House Lodge helped organize Gloversville Lodge in 1857 and one of them became their first Junior Warden. Our present altar was a gift of Gloversville Lodge having been presented at the time of the dedication of our present rooms.

Grand Lodge has honored Fish House Lodge by the appointment of eight District Deputy Grand Masters. The first was Lee S. Anibal who served two terms from 1883 to 1885. The office was later held by Edgar P. Palmer in 1922-23, James Carpenter in 1937-38, Herbert G. Corey in 1950-51, Erwin B. Angell in 1961-62, Robert E. Russell 1970-71, Donald M. Cast 1981-82 and Peter Nicosia 1989-90. Each of these men was of the highest caliber both as men and Masons serving their Lodge and District with exceptional distinction.

Grand Lodge has also honored us with appointments of Norman "Bunny" Barker to Grand Sword Bearer 1975-76, A. Wendell Hollenbeck to Grand Representative, Heinz Proske to Grand Steward 1985-86, John Ille to Grand Director of Ceremonies 1994-96 and Maurice Russell to Grand Director of Ceremonies 1996-98.

Our ranks have also been blessed with three Dedicated Service Award recipients as well. They are Brother Frank G.

Proske in 1981, Brother Alexander Hitrick in 1987 and Brother Donald Robinson in 2002. (The last two still being very active members)

Grand Lodge having instituted the policy of giving 50-year medals, Brother David Sandner and Worshipful Brothers Arthur Heath and Seymour Brownell, in 1948 were presented with that honor. Two years later a 60-year palm was added to Worshipful Brother Brownell's medal. Unfortunately all three of these faithful members were called to the Celestial Lodge before the occasion of our centennial celebration.

Other 50 & 60 year members include Br. Gordon J. Hammond, W.; John E. Hefferman, Br. Alexander Hitrick, R.; W.; A. Wendell Hollenbeck, Br. Donald L. Kemp, Br. Earl C. Schermerhorn, Br. Francis Sheldon, W.; George E. Langr, W.; Ward Smith and W.; Eugene P. Zoeller.

There have been a total of approximately 750 brothers raised in Fish House Lodge in the course of the past century and a half. At the present time our membership is 120 active members.

The lodge building has been having major renovations in the last few years. Thanks to the many talented brothers in the lodge, most, if not all of the work has been done in house. New round tables and chairs were bought. A new hard wood floor has recently been installed in the dining/sitting room; the kitchen has had major upgrades, improvements and new equipment. The lodge ceiling has been repaired and leveled in the lodge room with the original light fixtures and globes reinstalled. The bar room has had new carpet and tile put down. The pool tables have been resurfaced. The entire second floor has been painted and all windows and doors have been replaced with energy saving items. The electric services have been upgraded and repaired or renewed where necessary.

The trustees have been very busy keeping our rental properties occupied and happy. The commercial property fronts have been upgraded with new energy efficient windows and doors. The interiors have had new ceilings and upgrades to the floors along with many new items in the plumbing area. All in all, the entire lodge has been kept very well and the members very diligent in keeping it this way. Thanks to grants from other Masonic orders the work has been of top grade materials.

In conclusion we find the members very in touch with the degree work of Masonry. All degree work is performed in house with lodge members filling the stations and places of officers. The quality of the degrees has been held to the highest and all Wardens are required to perform each degree when it is his turn in office. Candidates are required to memorize all ritual work required of them before advancement. Older members critique the degrees and instruct when necessary. The harmony of the lodge is in true keeping with the Masonic spirit of charity.

The giving of the lodge is remarkable to behold. Each year the lodge sponsors Thanksgiving Baskets for the needy families of the area. Each year the Brotherhood fund for the lodge and district are number one (or close to) in the state. Each year the brothers donate their time to assist other lodges or families of widows of masons. A car pool was designed to assist one of our past brothers in getting to and from his dialysis appointments. Masonry has truly touched the lives of all our members. We hope and will keep the spirit going just as our forefathers did before us.