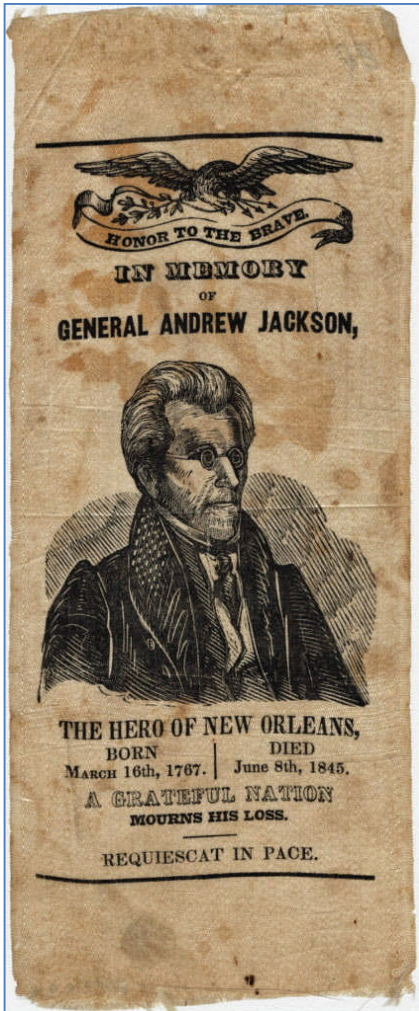


# Andrew Jackson's Pall Bearers, 1845

by John E. Norvell



**Funeral Ribbon**

(Historic New Orleans Collection)

On June 8, 1845, General Andrew Jackson died at The Hermitage.<sup>i</sup>

The former president's death was widely reported around the nation. The *Jeffersonian Republican* newspaper of New Orleans noted that he had been in ill health for several months at the time of his passing.<sup>ii</sup> The paper also noted that the citizens and authorities of Nashville quickly came together to form a committee, chaired by Felix Robertson, to mark the solemnity of this occasion. A series of resolutions honoring the late president were passed and several of Nashville's citizens were named to act as his pall bearers: J.W. Horton, Jacob McGavock, John McGavock, Joseph Norvell, Dr. John Shelby, and Major Thomas Claiborne.<sup>iii</sup>

Perhaps the selection of these men connected them to the general through military association, but only Thomas Claiborne was identified with the military rank of major. So then the question arises: Why were these six men chosen to be pall bearers at the funeral of so distinguished a resident of Nashville and the former president of the nation?

My curiosity about this group of men was piqued because Joseph Norvell is part of my own lineage. I tackled his research first, finding an obituary published at his death in 1847, just two years after Jackson. The *Republican Banner* notice revealed that in 1845 Norvell was serving as the Grand Master of the Freemasons for the State of Tennessee. It seemed possible that it was Norvell's role with the Masons that tied him to Jackson.<sup>iv</sup>

A history of the Freemasons in Tennessee notes that the first lodge, Saint Tammany Lodge No 1, was established in 1789, later renamed Harmony Lodge in 1800, and notes that Andrew Jackson was a member in 1805.<sup>v</sup> Records are not clear as to just when Andrew Jackson became a mason.<sup>vi</sup> In 1825, the Marquis de Lafayette, himself a mason, visited Nashville and was hosted by Jackson at a meeting of the Grand Lodge of Tennessee.<sup>vii</sup> Today,

at the Hermitage visitors' center a timeline showing the important events of Jackson's life includes the fact that he became a mason. The Masonic connection, it seems, was a significant factor in Jackson's life.<sup>viii</sup>

Early Freemasons played an important role in the history of Tennessee, Nashville, and the nation. In the north, for example, it was estimated that about 25 percent of clergyman were masons.<sup>ix</sup> Further, masons were not limited to the upper classes. In Nashville they embraced the entire spectrum of professions.<sup>x</sup> The fraternity had workingmen,

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cabinet makers, city officials, tavern owners, bankers, lawmen, farmers, shoemakers, and merchants.<sup>xi</sup> Future President James Knox Polk, a Jackson protégée, became a mason in 1820.<sup>xii</sup> It in many ways the masons reflected the ideal of democracy for the “common man” that was sweeping the nation during Jackson’s presidency.<sup>xiii</sup> Masonic membership and influence might have continued to grow except for a curious incident.

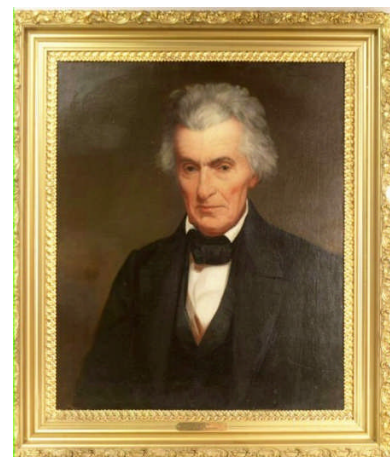
In 1823, William Morgan, a mason of upstate New York, was excluded from membership in the lodge at Batavia, New York. He wrote, possibly for revenge and most likely for profit, an exposé of the masons and arranged to have it published.<sup>xiv</sup> When the plan was leaked, he was allegedly kidnaped and murdered by those who feared that he would reveal masonic secrets. His kidnapers, it was said, bound him with weights, rowed him into the middle of the Niagara River, and dropped him overboard.<sup>xv</sup> The lurid story of his death inflamed “anti-masonic” feelings in Western New York, where the citizens were outraged.<sup>xvi</sup> They demanded an investigation into Morgan’s death and when this was met with resistance, it seemed to confirm in their minds that the masons had conspired to kill him as part of their plot to dominate life in America.<sup>xvii</sup>

The controversy continued for more than five years spreading the anti-masonic movement to many parts of the country. In Tennessee, as well as elsewhere, the result was the formation of the first American third political party, the “Anti-Masons.” As a result, hundreds of lodges throughout the nation went out of existence, and the fraternity never again regained the political and public influence that it had in earlier years.<sup>xviii</sup> By 1833, the Anti-Mason party was absorbed into the newly emerging Whig party as political causes and concerns shifted again in America. Andrew Jackson and James Polk were Democrats opposed to Whig politics.<sup>xix</sup>

I continued my search to see whether Jackson’s other pall-bearers were members of the Masonic Lodge.

#### Felix Robertson (1781-1865)

Robertson, who organized the funeral and led the pall-bearers, was the son of Nashville’s founder, James Robertson.<sup>xx</sup> Like Jackson, James Robertson appears on the 1805 list of members of Harmony Lodge Number 1.<sup>xxi</sup> James died in 1814. Felix, born in 1781, was considered the first white child born in Nashville. He was a prominent citizen, serving twice as mayor in addition to his work as a physician.<sup>xxii</sup> The report of Cumberland Lodge Number 8, filed in 1825, lists Felix Robertson among the members.<sup>xxiii</sup>



**Dr. Felix Robertson**  
(Wikipedia.org)

#### John Shelby (1785-1859)

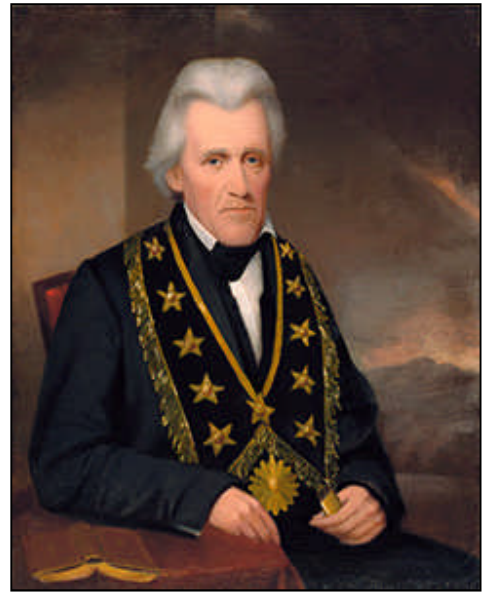
An article in the *Republican Banner*, Friday, July 2, 1869, entitled “Personal Reminiscences of Distinguished Nashville Masons” contains a short list of the Freemasons of 1818. John Shelby is included with the comment, “Dr. John Shelby came from Sumner County and practiced medicine. He was at one time a partner of Dr. Boyd McNairy, Postmaster at Nashville, Director in the State Bank, Trustee of the University, etc.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Shelby’s obituary further states that he was a founder and benefactor of the Shelby Medical College, and that after the funeral at Christ Church “his remains were followed to their last resting place by the members of the Masonic Fraternity, in which body he had held a high position.”<sup>xxv</sup>

#### Thomas Claiborne (1780-1856)

Claiborne, the only one among the pall-bearers who is identified with a military title, came from Virginia to Tennessee as a young lawyer. He served under Jackson in the War of 1812, thus earning his rank as major. Active

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in politics, he represented Davidson County in the Tennessee House of Representatives and was later elected to Congress.<sup>xxvi</sup> Most importantly for the purposes of this article, Claiborne is found as a member of Knoxville's Polk Lodge in 1803, and when Tennessee established its Grand Lodge (the statewide governing organization) in 1814, Thomas Claiborne was named the first Grand Master.<sup>xxvii</sup>



**Andrew Jackson as Grand Master of the Tennessee Grand Lodge, 1822-23**  
(GrandLodge-tn.org)

**J.W. Horton (1792-1846)**

Joseph W. Horton was a leading banker and businessman of Nashville.<sup>xxviii</sup> Although his name does not appear on the 1825 report of Cumberland Lodge, he was evidently a member there. In a list of Masons "exalted" in December of 1824 are Joseph W. Horton and Anthony W. Johnson of Cumberland Lodge Number 8.<sup>xxix</sup> (Exalted evidently means raised to a higher rank of membership.) Horton and his wife, Sophia (Davis) Horton, are buried at Nashville City Cemetery, as so many of these Masons and leaders of Nashville were.<sup>xxx</sup>



**Jacob McGavock (1790-1878)**

A son of Hugh McGavock and member of one of Nashville's most prominent families, Jacob came to Nashville from Virginia in 1807 to attend Cumberland College. He served under Andrew Jackson in the War of 1812 and followed a career of civil service. Among the offices he held were Clerk of the County Court and Circuit Court Clerk for Davidson County, and until the state seceded in 1861 he was Clerk of the U.S. District Court in Nashville. At his death he was one of the oldest and wealthiest citizens of Nashville.<sup>xxxi</sup> No evidence of his connection to the Masonic Lodge has been located.

**John McGavock (1792-1877)**

**Jacob McGavock**  
(Nashville City Cemetery)

The 1840 census of Davidson County lists only one John McGavock, aged 40-49. He was evidently the son of David McGavock and a cousin of fellow pall-bearer Jacob. He was a farmer and slave-owner who lived in the Edgefield suburb of Nashville. Little more was found about this man, and no evidence that he was a Mason came to light.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Today, there are many masons buried in individual family plots in the City Cemetery as well as a section exclusively housing the graves of masons who lived in Nashville.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Other masonic graves are in Mt. Olivet.<sup>xxxiv</sup> These memorials are reminders of an earlier time when the bonds of fraternity joined a great many of Nashville's citizens.



**Maj. Thomas Claiborne's grave marker identifies him as the first Grand Master of Tenn.**  
(Nashville City Cemetery)



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## Endnotes

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- i. Dyer, Oliver, *General Andrew Jackson: hero of New Orleans and seventh president of the United States* (New York: Robert Bonner and Sons), p. 367.
- ii., "Death of Andrew Jackson," *Jeffersonian Republican*, New Orleans, June 24, 1845, p 2.
- iii. *Ibid.*
- iv. "Death of Joseph Norvell," *The Republican National Banner*, January 8, 1847. Also "Tribute of Respect," Nashville City Cemetery, ([http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/1847.htm#norvell\\_p1](http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/1847.htm#norvell_p1)).
- v. Snodgrass, Charles A., *Freemasonry in Tennessee* (Chattanooga: Masonic History Agency, 1944), p. 25.
- vi. Snodgrass, *Freemasonry in Tennessee*, p. 25.
- vii. Snodgrass, *Freemasonry in Tennessee*, 390-393.
- viii. Jeffers, H. Paul, *Freemasons: A History and Exploration of the World's Oldest Secret Society*, (New York: Citadel Press, 2005) pp. 166-167.
- ix. Cross, Whitley R., *The Burned Over District*, (New York: Harperry & Row, 1950) pp. 122-123.
- x. Nelson, Anson, *Republican Banner*, Friday, July 2, 1869.
- xi. Nelson, Anson , *Republican Banner*, Friday, July 2, 1869.
- xii. Jeffers, *Freemasons*, 166.
- xiii. Huggins, Walter, *Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1960), Introduction, p. 3.
- xiv. Cross, *Burned Over District*, 114-115.
- xv. Cross, *Burned Over District*, 113.
- xvi. Cross, *Burned Over District*, 115.
- xvii. Cross, *Burned Over District*, 115.
- xviii. Snodgrass, *Freemasonry in Tennessee*, p. 391.
- xix. Cross, *Burned Over District*, 116.
- xx. "Masonic Record, A Monthly Magazine," Nashville Tennessee, 1870, p. 196. (Digital image, books.google.com).
- <sup>xxi</sup> Snodgrass, *Freemasonry in Tennessee*, 25.
- <sup>xxii</sup> "Robertson, Felix, Dr.," *Nashville City Cemetery Tombstone Inscription Project*, ([www.thenashvillecitycemetery.org/280043\\_robertson.htm](http://www.thenashvillecitycemetery.org/280043_robertson.htm)). Robertson's status as the first white child born in Nashville is engraved on his tombstone.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Records of the Grand Lodge of Tennessee. Mf. 1967, reel 3, Tennessee State Library and Archives. (Records of Cumberland Lodge No. 8).
- xxiv. "Old Memories: Personal Reminiscences of Distinguished Nashville Masons," *Republican Banner*, Friday, July 2, 1869.
- <sup>xxv</sup> "Obituaries, 1859," *Nashville City Cemetery*, ([www.thenashvillecitycemetery.org/1859.htm#page1](http://www.thenashvillecitycemetery.org/1859.htm#page1)).
- <sup>xxvi</sup> "Claiborne, Thomas," *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, (<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000407>).
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Snodgrass, *Freemasonry in Tennessee*, 35, 59.
- xxviii. Hoss, Elijah Embree, and Reese, William B., *History of Nashville* (Nashville: Barbee and Smith, 1890), p. 286.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Snodgrass, *Freemasonry in Tennessee*, 222.
- <sup>xxx</sup> "Horton, Joseph W.," *Nashville City Cemetery Tombstone Inscription Project*, ([http://www.thenashvillecitycemetery.org/250100\\_horton.htm](http://www.thenashvillecitycemetery.org/250100_horton.htm)).
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Gray, Robert. *The McGavock Family*, (Richmond, VA: W.E. Jones, 1903, reprint 1970).
- <sup>xxxii</sup> "Edgefield," *Nashville Daily American*, 10 July 1877 (death notice). Find-a-Grave.com provides additional details from his cemetery plot at Mt. Olivet.
- xxxiii. Cumberland Masonic Lodge 8, *Nashville City Cemetery* (<http://thenashvillecitycemetery.org/masons.htm>).
- xxxiv. Mount Olivet Cemetery Records, Tennessee State Library and Archives, <http://www.tn.gov/tsla/history/manuscripts/findingaids/89-123.pdf>