

A Leader Amongst Leaders

M.W. Bro. William Mercer Wilson, 1813 – 1875

In Lodge address by Bro. Thomas W. Hogeboom, Director of Ceremonies of Templum Fidelis Lodge No. 746 on the Registry of the Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of Canada in the Province of Ontario, to the Brethren assembled at Templum Fidelis Lodge No. 746, at Bath Masonic Hall, 428 Main Street, Bath on Saturday, March 17, 2012

Worshipful Master, Right Worshipful the District
Deputy Grand Master, my Brethren.

On the last Sunday of June, for as many years as anyone alive can remember, the Brethren of Norfolk Lodge in Simcoe have gathered their families, friends and fellow Masons from across our Grand Jurisdiction for a service of remembrance of our First Grand Master, M.W. Bro. William Mercer Wilson, at St. John's Anglican Church in Woodhouse Township, a few miles south of Simcoe. Following the service, there is a parade led by the William Mercer Wilson Medalist in attendance to the adjoining cemetery where the mortal remains of M.W. Bro. Wilson lay

interned beneath his most impressive head stone. It is at this time that one of the Brethren assembled makes a presentation on the life and times of Bro. Wilson.

Given that some of those in attendance this afternoon will never be able to afford themselves the opportunity to be so far away from home on, what is always a beautiful Sunday afternoon in late June, I will endeavour to give you a feel at least, for the man who led Masonry in Ontario to become what it is today that we might reflect on the life and times of our first Grand Master and one of the most distinguished public figures in Norfolk's history, M.W. Bro. William Mercer Wilson.

The premise of my presentation this afternoon is that our first Grand Master would never have been able to achieve such successes over his lifetime, if he

was not in possession of exceptional leadership skills – an essential necessity to the creation, development and overall success of any organization.

Society, including Masons, need leadership.

Someone to direct the administration that makes the organization a living, vital team and, particularly, to ensure that there is some growth, and that standards of enthusiasm, action and competence are maintained at a high level.

Perhaps the first step is to define what makes a good leader. The most important quality of a leader is to have the ability to work with people. They must interact easily and productively with others, think critically about ideas, assess conflicting opinions, listen well, communicate ideas by speech and be tolerant and trusting in their dealing with others. Along

with this, go self-evaluation, and the awareness and understanding of oneself to produce self-confidence and self-respect in others. From this there is definitely an emphasis on the affective rather than the cognitive, and on interpersonal skills rather than academic competence.

A leader must spare a thought for the interests of others; and most particularly, keep his promises. A leader must rule with kindness, so that a person can obey with self-respect. Your leadership rests upon the esteem that the followers hold for you. The leader must make the structure strong and set goals that are actually attainable and with which the members of the group feel comfortable.

A leader is a source of inspiration. Some further abilities needed for effective leadership are: to give

praise; to be self-confident; to delegate, yet maintain control; to identify with the ideas and aspirations of others; to project enthusiasm for the task and to accept responsibility. Effective leadership installs good morale, generating thinking and initiative, and inspiring people to do their best.

A leader must sell himself as a person of some substance in order to earn the respect, admiration and the willing effort of those he leads. He must eliminate arrogance, temper and impatience and cultivate courtesy, tolerance, tact, fairness, tenacity and courage.

There are several skills required to be a good leader. He must demonstrate confidence; he must motivate himself; he must be sympathetic to the needs of others; he must be strong enough to give

others certain freedoms and responsibilities and yet be able to retain control; he must be able to praise good work and apportion blame where necessary; and finally, he must be loyal. All of these skills are self-explanatory.

One that has not been mentioned previously is loyalty. The concept is simple: loyalty to one's friends, to one's fraternity, to one's country, need not be explained. It is essential to point out however, that 'loyalty' is not demeaning; it does not in any way imply submission, but rather an intelligent devotion and involvement, as well as a contribution to human dignity.

Now when I review some of the highlights of the life and times of our distinguished Past Grand Master, think of these leadership character traits and how he

would have exhibited them to accomplish the many successes he achieved over his sixty-two years.

In Bruce M. Pearce's excellent book entitled "First Grand Master", we learn that William Mercer Wilson was born to parents of "at least moderate financial circumstances" and there is no records of any extraordinary educational achievements, but he did have "the cardinal Scottish principles of integrity, industry and ingenuity", a good character, pleasant personality and drive which proved to be far more beneficial in carving out his place in history than any formal education.

On April 12, 1834, after being an immigrant to Canada for only two years, he was appointed Commissioner of the Court of Requests in the Talbot District by Sir John Colborne, the Lieutenant-

Governor of Upper Canada, who noted “that his unusual mental attainments and native ability were already receiving recognition.”

At a time and place where so many ambitious young men were moving away from Simcoe due to its isolation and slow development, at twenty-one years of age, our Bro. Wilson showed the great “vision that served him so well in later years which evidently enabled him to foresee a progressive and growing community there and to realize that it would afford a wide scope for his talents. He made his home in Simcoe and stayed there until the day of his death.”

His keen foresight was exhibited prior to the Rebellion of 1837-38. Before the rebellion broke out, he had been engaged in raising and drilling a troop of militia cavalry in Simcoe. Given his foresight and

leadership, he was accorded the rank of Captain when war broke out and his patrol engaged in active combat where he was again recognized for his leadership in the affair.

His ability of meeting and acquiring the friendship of men of influence was a keystone of his career and through the good offices of Sir Allan McNab; he was appointed Clerk of the Peace and Clerk of the District Court for the Talbot District on December 8, 1838. Soon after, he assumed the duties of a Notary Public and Registrar of the Surrogate Court while still patrolling the dying embers of the Rebellion.

Further leadership was exhibited in 1840 when our first Grand Master founded the “Norfolk Observer”, the first newspaper published in the county – the same year he was Initiated into St. John’s Lodge in

Simcoe. His leadership skills must have been very apparent here as well because by the end of that same year, he was elected Junior Warden. After two years had passed, he progressed to the Chair of King Solomon, a position he would hold in that lodge eleven times over his Masonic career.

His leadership in the Craft was paralleled in his community as well, where he held such positions as Master Extraordinary in Chancery; Commissioner in the Queen's Bench; first President of St. Andrew's Society in Simcoe; Lieutenant-Colonel of the Third Battalion of the Norfolk Militia; enrolled by the Law Society of Upper Canada as a student; President of the Mechanics' Institute; Director of the Gore Mutual Fire Insurance Company; Councilor and then Reeve of the Village of Simcoe for several terms; Warden of

Norfolk County; Crown Attorney and then Judge of Norfolk County; and Chairman of the Simcoe Board of School Trustees and then Chairman of the County Board of Education.

However, I think the greatest exhibition of the leadership talents of our Brother Wilson came forth during the turbulent years leading up to the formation of the Grand Lodge of Canada. In the early 1850s, while ever loyal to England, a spirit of nationalism was spreading throughout Canada and this awakening political consciousness naturally, was echoed in fraternal organizations as well. At the Grand Lodge Communication in 1852, a proposal to petition the Grand Lodge of England for permission to establish a fully independent Grand Lodge of Canada West was recorded. Though the idea was gaining momentum, it

was ruled out of order in 1855. It was under William's guidance and perseverance that the Grand Lodge of Canada would be established later that same year.

On October 10, 1855, delegates of 41 lodges met in Hamilton to vote to form the Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of Canada. W. Bro. Wilson chaired the committee to prepare a new Constitution and in recognition of his accomplishments, was installed as the first Grand Master of the new Grand Lodge on November 25, 1855 – a position he would hold for ten years over the next twenty.

M.W. Bro. Wilson continued his activities with the Craft and its appendent bodies as well as outside of freemasonry – always active – always contributing to the growth of his community. This involvement and

activity continued for the remainder of his life. The last three years of his life were devoted to extending the influence of the Grand Lodge of Canada through his many visitations and dedications throughout our Grand Jurisdiction.

The Masons of Canada owe more to M.W. Bro. William Mercer Wilson than to any other person of his generation or any since, for the development of our gentle Craft. His judicial mind, schooled in the art of balancing the scales of justice served to resolve the many contentious parties involved in the formation of Canada's first Grand Lodge. It was his patient leadership that marshaled the forces of temperance and brotherly love against those of selfishness and prejudice and came out the victor in the end. It was his skill and superior knowledge of human nature that

perfected our organization of which he was **the** Founding Father. He was a man of boundless energy, proven ability and recognized standing in his community. He had two talents that served Masonry particularly well – a facility with words and a superb sense of timing. These traits made him a splendid leader. The strengths of our Craft today are attributable to the sound and wise counsel, and leadership skills displayed during those trying years when M.W. Bro. William Mercer Wilson served as Grand Master – and for that we thank him!