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'I swear': Last-minute availability put Masons' Bible into history

By Patricia Zapor
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WASHINGTON (CNS) -- As Ryan Johnson explains it, George Washington's inauguration ceremony was painstakingly planned down to the tiniest detail about seating arrangements -- with just one exception.

As the first president of the United States arrived at New York's City Hall by horse-drawn carriage and prepared to step onto the open balcony that April 30 in 1789, it belatedly occurred to organizers that there ought to be a Bible on which Washington could take the oath of office.

One of the men at hand, parade marshal Jacob Morton, also happened to be master of the St. John's Lodge No. 1 of the Masons and offered to provide one from the lodge, located nearby at the corner of Water and Wall streets. The organization's 1767 King James Version was rushed to the hall and opened to Genesis, at the end of Chapter 49 and the beginning of Chapter 50, where Washington placed his hand for the ceremony.

As he completed the oath written for the occasion, Washington added the unscripted words, "I swear, so help me God," and bowed to kiss the Bible.

Thus was born a tradition followed by almost every one of the 42 presidents inaugurated since then, including some who have used the very same Bible.

The volume is still owned by the St. John's Lodge, which Johnson serves as chairman of the George Washington Inaugural Bible Committee. He was one of three lodge members who escorted the Bible to Washington in January for it to be displayed as part of an inauguration exhibit at the National Archives.

At a Jan. 10 presentation at the Archives, Johnson explained that in the 1770s it was something of a luxury to have a copy of the Bible, let alone one of as high quality as the Masons' edition.

Prior to the nation's independence, no publisher in the colonies had been allowed to print Bibles, because the authorization of the King of England was needed. Like the Masons' Bible, those used in the fledgling republic tended to come from Europe and at great expense.

In commemoration of the new importance of the George Washington Inaugural Bible, as it came to be known, it soon had a new engraved image of the president inserted to face the opening page portrait of King George II.

Johnson said it was likely unintentional, but the use of the Masons' Bible for Washington's ceremony also may have dodged an ecumenical problem.

"No church's Bible would have been acceptable to people of the various denominations," he explained. By using one owned by a fraternal organization instead of a Bible from one of New York's 22 different churches, a potential disagreement over the president favoring one denomination over another was avoided, Johnson said.

In the two centuries since then, the Washington Bible has been used at a variety of national events, including other inaugurations, the dedication of the Washington Monument and the laying of the cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol building, Johnson said. Lodge rules also allow it to be used for various Masonic ceremonies and the inaugurations of New York governors.

Records weren't kept to indicate whether other early presidents may have used the Washington Bible for their inaugurations, but four in the 20th century did: Warren G. Harding in 1921, Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1953; Jimmy Carter in 1977 and George H.W. Bush in 1989. President George W. Bush had hoped to use it for his first inauguration in 2001, but the damp weather that day put a crimp in the plans.

Johnson explained that the Bible was brought to Washington for the ceremony, but the Secret Service wanted it in place on the podium an hour before the ceremony started.

Given the Bible's age and historic value, the Masons weren't willing to let it be exposed to the cold drizzle that long, so Bush used a family Bible.

Records kept by the Architect of the Capitol suggest only one president in the 216 years since Washington was inaugurated did not take the oath of office with one hand on a Bible. Franklin Pierce, the 14th president, "affirmed"-- but did not "swear" -- his oath with one hand on a law book, instead of a Bible. Some historical records say Pierce did so because of a crisis of faith after his only remaining child, an 11-year-old boy, was killed in a train accident a few weeks before the inauguration.

The nation's only Catholic president to date, John F. Kennedy, used his family's Douay Version of the Bible. The 1850 edition was brought by his Fitzgerald ancestors from Ireland, according to the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. That Bible, a massive tome now on display at the library, was kept current with records of family births through the time of Kennedy's presidency.

There are some firm rules about the use and handling of the George Washington Bible. Only a president being sworn in is allowed to touch the pages of the Bible without gloves, for instance. But Johnson said one popular belief -- that it cannot travel by airplane -- is a myth.

The misconception that the Masons wouldn't allow it to be transported by airplane was based on the refusal of a previous grand master of the lodge to fly ever again after he returned from a stint in the military as a helicopter pilot, Johnson said. If he wouldn't fly, neither could the Bible when he was escorting it.

Gilbert Savitzky, grand secretary of the lodge, said the Masons do obtain special permission for the Bible not to be X-rayed for airport security, however. Instead, when it must be transported by air, arrangements are made for it to be inspected by hand, including being screened for explosives residue.

END

Presented on March 1, 2005 at Long Pine Lodge No.136, Long Pine, Nebraska by W.: Alvin Benemerito



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