

A Trans-Atlantic Tale – An interesting and colourful story prompted by a single document.

For the trustees at the Warrington Museum of Freemasonry, it is not just the object that comes into the museum itself, but the history and the story of that object which is important.

In early 2018, Peter Taylor Provincial Grand Secretary of the Province of West Lancashire forwarded a very well-preserved Grand Lodge certificate which had been found in the archives of Triangle Lodge No 1 in Portland Maine, by the Secretary Brother Chris Camire.



The certificate belonged to a John Lindsey Lewis, who was initiated on the 16th April 1797 into Lodge 299, a Lodge of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of England according to the old constitutions. The certificate is signed by Robert Leslie Grand Secretary and Thomas Harper Deputy Grand Secretary. On the reverse is a paragraph written in French, which we will come to later...

My initial thoughts were which Lodge is 299, and who was John Lindsey Lewis?

Lodge 299, an Antients Lodge was warranted 22nd April 1796 and met at an interestingly named hostelry called Merlin's Cave in Mersey Street Liverpool. In 1804 the Lodge was named Lodge of Concord and renamed Harmonic Lodge in 1819. In 1830 the Lodge became dormant, but it was revived in 1838 and during one of the many renumbering of Lodges it became Harmonic Lodge No 216 in 1863. The Lodge during its long history moved around many of the taverns and Masonic Halls in Liverpool, and now meets in The Britannia Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool.

Now, who is John Lindsey Lewis, my usual method of finding out about anyone is to prepare a family tree, this way it is easier to find out significant information and keep it methodically in one place. Fortunately, I was pleased to find his entry in the Freemason registers online, this led me to discover that he was a Mariner, but I could not read the words in the next column, I contacted the fabulous staff at the Museum of Freemasonry in London, who checked their copy, it showed that his initiation certificate had been sent, but where to?

The next step was to contact the Secretary of Harmonic Lodge No 216, Eric O'Callaghan to find out if they still had the Minute books and Registers from the beginning of the Lodge. Unfortunately, he had no idea where the records had gone, but promised to initiate a search for them.

With that, we needed to have the paragraph on the reverse of the certificate translated into English to see if that shed any more light onto John's history. One of the Brethren lives in France, so he translated the paragraph for us.

The transcript of the paragraph can be seen below.

"Seen in Lodge No.45 under the distinctive title of The French Reunion, regularly constituted by the G M of the Lodges of the State of South Carolina, Ancient York Masons, at the East of Charleston, this 4th day of the 10th Masonic month, in the year of the True Light 5808 By command of the Wor. Lodge, The Secretary Riviere, M.M."

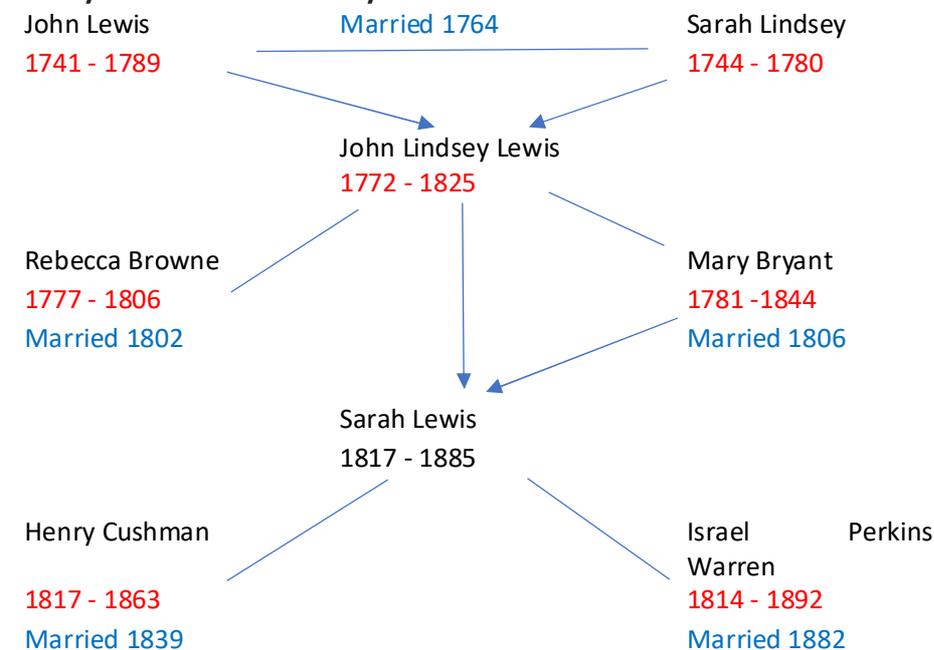
This suggested that John Lindsey Lewis visited or joined the "The French Reunion Lodge No 45" on the 4th October 1808 using his initiation certificate to assist in proving he was a Freemason. I wondered if this Lodge had any records but after contacting the Grand Lodge of South Carolina I found out that no records exist as General Sherman, "burned them all during the Civil war."

So, now I knew that he was in America, so was he English or American? A Google search gave me nothing, Ancestry searches in Britain had only given me his entry on the Registers, so I started to

search in America. Unfortunately, no age was given on the Lodge register, but I knew he had to be over 21 to be a Freemason, so I calculated he would have been born around 1775, and John Lindsey Lewis was not such a common name, which was an advantage. By this time some more information had been received from Brother Camire in Portland, he had come across another note in the archives which said that during the war in 1812, when the British Royal Navy were blockading Portland Harbour, “Captain John Lindsey Lewis led a group of locals in repelling the attacking force”, and several books with excerpts from his life, which will be described later.

This information was useful in that I now knew he lived in Portland Maine in 1812 and he was a Captain, a Master Mariner, I added the information to his family tree and confirmed that the John Lindsey Lewis I had found, was the right one.

Family Tree for John Lindsey Lewis



True to his word, Eric O’Callaghan Secretary of Harmonic Lodge searched around for the records but to no avail, he then contacted Grand Lodge, who advised him that the early minute books were on a small Greek island! They, all 27 leather bound volumes, handwritten in copper plate script, had been retrieved from a skip in a paper recycling depot by a worker there, who although he could neither read nor speak English, thought they looked interesting. He contacted a friend of his, who could speak English, who was a Freemason and he recognised what they were. He notified the Museum of Freemasonry in London of their whereabouts. After several exchanges, the minute books were returned to England in five stout boxes and they are now held in Warrington Museum of Freemasonry, but unfortunately, the minute book covering 1797 was missing!

It was likely that John's ship was a sailing vessel with either two or three masts, bringing furs and timber from Portland to Liverpool and returning with goods such as, pottery, textiles, cutlery and salt. It would have taken approximately six weeks to complete the 4891km with fair weather and as long as 12 weeks in poor weather.

In the book "A Ruinous and Unhappy War : New England and the War of 1812", the tale is told of Captain John L Lewis sailing a "packet run to Boston", having taken a merchants order for a "fortepiano" he must have misunderstood the request and returned to the merchant saying he couldn't get a "forty-pounder" but had brought him a long 32 pounder gun instead, apparently it spent a while on the dock until it was used as the pivot gun on a Portland privateer ship.

Further information regarding the defence of Portland harbour can be found in "Portland in the Past". William Gould (1886) "August 1814, it was decided by the "committee of public safety," to throw up a battery for heavy guns at Fish Point, the most easterly point of the neck, "for the use of the Sea fencibles." This was a company of ship-masters and mates, whose commander was Captain John L. Lewis. These water batteries were alluded to by Longfellow in these lines: "I remember the bulwarks by the shore and the fort upon the hill"". The Sea fencibles were militia units specifically formed to defend ports and harbours, from the blockades of the British Navy. Interestingly John's first wife Rebecca Browne was related to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow via her mother's line.

John was also involved with the local Episcopal church, St Paul's church Portland, and was one of several men chosen to attend the first Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Maine, 3rd May 1820 alongside Simon Greenleaf Esq.

Simon Greenleaf a Lawyer, was a prominent Maine Freemason, known as the "Father of Maine Freemasonry". He assisted in the creation of the Grand Lodge of Maine and was its second Grand Master. He also helped in establishing Harvard University's school of Law and served as a Professor there for many years. A medal bearing his name is presented by the Grand Master every year, "to Freemasons who have contributed their time, thought and services to Masonry beyond the usual line of duty".

Triangle Lodge No1 was constituted in 1762, by the Provincial Grand Lodge of America, under the authority of the Premier Grand Lodge of England, the first Master of the Lodge being a Colonel serving under King George III, and the first Treasurer, a patriot Brigadier General. Maine became a State in its own right and joined the Union in March 1820. The Grand Lodge of Maine was created just three months later, on the 1st June 1820.

Captain John Lindsey Lewis would have witnessed these important events, he passed away in Portland on the 21st January 1825 just four days before his 53rd birthday, he is buried in Eastern Cemetery Portland Maine (opened 1668).



The grave of John Linsey Lewis

References:

Lanes Masonic records

Ancestry.com

United Grand Lodge of England Freemason Membership Registers, 1751 – 1921

Brother Chris Camire Triangle Lodge No1

A History of the Eastern Diocese, Volume 1

Calvin Redington Batchelder (1876)

Portland in the Past

William Goold (1886)

A Ruinous and Unhappy War: New England and the War of 1812

By James H. Ellis

My Lost Youth

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Caroline Crook

Archivist

Warrington Museum of Freemasonry