

Gunning Bedford, Jr.

The First Grand Master of the First State

By Harold J. Littleton, PGM

Gunning Bedford, Jr., statesman, signer of the United States Constitution, Freemason, and jurist is one of Delaware's most distinguished and colorful patriots. With nine other Gunning Bedfords in the family, Delaware's signer of the Constitution is always referred to as Gunning Bedford, Jr. to distinguish him from his grandfather, his father, his son, three first cousins including Governor Gunning Bedford who is generally called Gunning Bedford, Sr., two second cousins and a third cousin.

Gunning Bedford, Jr. was born in Philadelphia in 1747, the fifth of eleven children. He left there when he was twenty years of age to attend Nassau Hall, which later became Princeton University. After graduating in 1771 he returned to Philadelphia and studied law under Joseph Read, a noted lawyer. In late 1772 or early 1773 he married Jane Ballareau Parker. The Bedfords had three children, none of whom married.

In 1775 General George Washington appointed Bedford to the position of Muster Master General, but little other information is available about his Revolutionary War activities. Bedford spent a year in Dover in 1779 before moving to 606 Market Street in Wilmington. In 1784 he was appointed Delaware's Attorney General. In 1789 Washington chose him as the first judge of the United States District Court for the District of Delaware. Bedford also served in the Continental Congress from 1783 until 1786.

Bedford took his seat at the



Continental Convention on May 28, 1787 and regularly attended the sessions. The account book of the auditor of the State of Delaware shows that he was paid for attending at least sixteen days. Bedford spoke out warmly in favor of a federal government whose powers would be vested in congress and withheld from the executive. He feared the undue oppression of the larger states and he repeatedly insisted that all states should be represented equally; Bedford returned to Dover where he used his influence to secure Delaware's early ratification of the Constitution on December 7, 1787.

Gunning Bedford, Jr. was active in the fraternal and social life of Wilmington. In 1799 he was elected President of the Lyceum of Delaware and in 1802 he served as President of the Wilmington Academy. In 1806 Bedford was elected as the first Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Ancient and Accepted Masons of Delaware.

What did Gunning Bedford look like? A Wilmington paper of 1803

described him as "a very large, stout, bony, brown horse, 16 ? hands (5 feet, 8 inches) high". Another colorful description of Bedford says he was "very corpulent". He never adopted trousers but adhered to short breeches with knee buckles. He wore a cue with powdered hair. He was an imposing figure.

Gunning Bedford, Jr. died March 30 1912 at the age of 65. A special communication for the Grand Lodge of Delaware was called the next day to attend the funeral. They formed in procession at Town Hall and proceeded to the corner of Market and Second Street and then preceded the corpse to the graveyard. In the Upper Presbyterian Church (on the east side of Market Street between Ninth and Tenth Streets) the corpse was interred in the aisle, attended by the mourners. In 1858 his daughter, Henrietta has erected a beautiful marble monument. Bedford's nearly 150-year-old monument now shows signs of deterioration because of its age, weather and environmental problems.

When it was necessary to move the cemetery, the Masonic fraternity took charge of the remains of Bedford, his family and the monument. On March 31, 1921, the Grand Lodge of Delaware was convened by Most Worshipful William J. Highfield, Grand Master, in the old Town Hall for the purpose of reinterring the remains. In selecting a place, month, date and hour of meeting, the Grand Master followed the action taken 109 years ago at the funeral of Bedford.

Gunning Bedford, Jr., the First Grand Master of the First State!