



## Masonry in District #4

The fourth Masonic District of VT, encompasses today Rutland and the three lodges along the valley stretching to NY where Rte 4 runs, and Morning Star in Poultney slightly to the south. This area is of considerable historic interest as it was one of the first areas settled in Vermont. The Otter Creek formed the first “road” through the wilderness of the Mountain Republic, then usually known as the New Hampshire Grants. In 1759 a first true road was cut from Charlestown N. H. to Crown Point which was called the Old Military Road. It passed Otter Creek at center Rutland, and the area’s first bridge was constructed where this road crossed the Otter Creek in Rutland. Thus Rutland became a cross roads even before settlement, when Vermont was but a battleground for rival forces. It was these small military units that first set up Masonry on our soil during the colonial period, for they all contained traveling Masonic lodges. For many years a large picket fort stood here, and the first trading post and tavern rose up in its shadow.

It is not to District Four but to Windsor, Vergennes, and to Middlebury that our earliest fixed lodges belong. However, on October 10, 1794 fourteen members of the five early lodges met at the house of Jess Gove in Rutland and formed our Grand Lodge of VT. This house stood near the present corner of Rte 7 and Rte 4, and the place was commemorated in 1994 when, to honor the bicentennial of its creation, Grand Lodge placed a plaque upon the door of the building that now occupies this spot. It was here the first Grand Lodge constitution was created, which is now framed on the wall in the hall just outside of the Grand Secretary’s office in Berlin. The first Grand Master Noah Smith was at that time resident in Rutland, and perhaps that is why they met there.

Center Lodge #6 was the first lodge chartered by the Grand Lodge after its organization. They met again in the house of Brother Gove on October 15, 1794 to answer the petition for a lodge by five prominent citizens of Rutland, the most famous of these being Nathaniel Chipman who served as Center’s first W.M. He was the most eminent jurist of VT in our early years, and it was said that even when he was a United States Senator he still attended at Center Lodge whenever he could be in Rutland. Nathaniel was made a Mason while serving under Washington as a Lieutenant in the regular army. He was also a member of Rainbow Lodge at Middletown, Conn., and Chipman Lodge #52 in Wallingford, VT is named after him. Judge Chipman lived to the great age of 91 years, was buried by Center Lodge and the State erected a monument to his memory and services thereafter.

Old Center Lodge met on the second Monday of each month at 3PM. Their largest celebration was each June 24<sup>th</sup>, St. John the Baptist’s day, when a special meeting was

held featuring a guest speaker. The last of these speakers was Philip Tucker in 1830. One notable feature of their bylaws was that if any local member missed more than two meetings, he was tried by the lodge and suspended unless he could show good reason for his nonattendance! Special meetings held to confer degrees had to be paid for by the man taking the degree. In general it seems that fees for the lodge were collected from each member at each meeting, rather than annual dues being imposed by post. One occasionally can still come across the beautiful engravings given to members at this period after being raised. They were large and usually framed items, signed by the officers and the member. This is a tradition modern lodges have largely allowed to lapse. The degrees of old Center Lodge cost \$15.00 plus \$1.00 for the Tyler. Since the Tyler was without the doors and could not participate in the meetings, he was paid a fee in the old days. A modern equivalent of these degree fees would be about \$1200.00. Codes of conduct and morality were strictly kept by the early lodges, and trials for infringement on these rules were common.

The other early lodge in District 4 was [Morning Star #27 in Poultney](#), whose charter predates 1800 but the exact date seems not to be known. Perhaps the original charter has been lost. It surrendered its charter in 1832 and went dark, but it was reassembled under Philip Tucker and renumbered as #37.

As I think you all know, although Masonry continued on in VT for thirty years after the formation of Grand Lodge, it did not prosper due to religious and political opposition. By 1827 the number of our lodges had grown to 69, but the anti Masonic storm that had erupted here and there around the State since the earliest days was about to return as a true typhoon. I will not recount the complex story here, but from 1836 to 1845 there were no regular meetings of the Grand Lodge of VT, and except for a few faithful brothers, the light of Masonry was all but extinguished in our State. At last, in 1845, the storm had so far abated that those two great men who carried VT Masonry through this storm, Grand Master Nathan B. Haswell and Deputy Master Philip C. Tucker, were able to revive Grand Lodge and once again begin to pick up the pieces of our Craft.

[Eureka #22 in Fair Haven](#) was the first lodge to be created in District four after the anti Masonic storm had passed, being chartered in June of 1851. This lodge however did not prosper, and went dark after a few years. Then, in 1867 it was rechartered as #75. The cause of its problems is mentioned as “the benefit system.” I am not sure what is referred to here, but many non-Masonic lodges of the period paid life insurance for their members, or other benefits, and from these lodges the modern insurance industry grew. Of course, financial loses could end such organizations rather easily, and this lodge may have learnt this the hard way.

The next lodge to operate was old Center, which had ceased to function about 1830, as I noted. Dispensation to reorganize was granted by now Grand Master Philip Tucker in 1853 and in 1855 a new charter was granted and the lodge was renumbered as [#34](#) in the roll of the Grand Lodge. During these years of reformation only three brothers sat in the officer chairs and kept the lodge going. But they did attract members, both old and new, and in June 1856 a public reconstitution of the lodge was held in the Congregational Church before a large audience. Henry Smith of Claremont, N.H. delivered an address,

and afterwards the lodge was publicly consecrated and the officers installed. This was followed by a formal parade to the old Franklin House, a famous early inn and tavern stand, where the brothers feasted, and perhaps tipped a glass or two also.

In the Grand Lodge session of January, 1854, [Lee Lodge of Castleton](#) was chartered as #30 on the grand roll. Beyond all doubt the most notable event concerning this lodge was its project to construct a Masonic monument on the summit of Bird's Mountain constructed of bricks, suitably inscribed, donated by many Masonic organizations and individuals. On August 27, 1886 Grand Lodge laid the corner stone for this obelisk (ob-a-lisk). From conversations, I understand it did not stand the test of time but bricks from it can be seen in the fireplace surround of the building that houses Lee Lodge today.

At the Grand Lodge session in St. Johnsbury in June, 1868, a charter was granted for a second lodge in Rutland, [Rutland #79](#). Now, I am not from the area, but I have noticed in my reading traces of a bifurcated or divided nature in the village of Rutland. There are hints of tensions between those from the West or East side of town; mentions of those who attend one church and not the other. Now, I don't know for sure, but my guess is that class differences are why a second Lodge was found necessary.

Rutland 79 has had among its ranks many great men. I find mention of Charles Gale who was a local physician of note in the late 1800's. Also noted is Jesse Eugene Thomson, another very prominent physician and in later life a senator to the legislature for Rutland county. He was W.M. of this lodge. And of course our current Grand Master, Thomas Johnston IV, was raised in this lodge in 1988, served as its W.M. 1991-93, and currently serves as Secretary of the lodge.

A lodge in Proctor, Sutherland Falls #108, existed for exactly 100 years then merged with Center Lodge #34 on June 13, 2007.

The last existing lodge to be erected in District 4 was Hiram Lodge #101 in West Rutland, which received its charter in Burlington at the June session of Grand Lodge in 1878. The Grand Lodge performed the Ceremony of Constitution on May 28, 1879, and at this time an address on Masonry in Rutland was given by brother Henry Clark, which is still extant and of considerable interest. In this he asks "Shall we hand Masonry down to those who come after us as pure and bright as we received it?...It is our mission in the future to transform the rough into the perfect Ashlar, to destroy the distinctions of caste, to annihilate superstition, promote peace and harmony, and obtain by a peaceable process a higher stand of social life- in a word, to build up a Republic of Humanity." I believe I can safely say that the Masons of the fourth Masonic District have held this charge before them over the years and have proved true to it.

While I am keenly aware that this overview only scratches the surface of the interesting history of Masonic District number Four, it does I hope show the general outline of how Masonry developed around Rutland, one of the greatest areas of our fair State.

Eric Ginette October 27, 2009