

# ***The 1797 Washington-Preston Ladle***

by

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*The 1797 Washington-Preston Ladle*

W. Garrett Jackson, P.M.

*This research paper is to detail the storied history of the 1797 Washington-Preston Ladle.*

Few lodges in Southwest Virginia can trace their origins back to the 1790s; fewer still can claim an artifact that was given to one of its founding members from the Father of Our Country, Worshipful Brother George Washington. The subject of this paper, a relic of late 18<sup>th</sup>-Century craftsmanship, the so-called "George Washington Ladle", has spanned two centuries and has had quite a journey.

In order to properly tell the story of the ladle and its journey, one needs to understand the background of the time period, geography and people involved. M. W. Bro. Washington needs little, if any biographical sketches, yet his early years, which are not always taught in our history lessons, play a major part in the ladle's history. The reader will note the ladle was first presented to The Honorable Francis S. Preston, a Member of Congress, representing Washington County in 1797 a founding member of Abingdon Lodge No. 48, A.F. & A.M. and served as its third Master. But what set Francis Preston apart? For this, we must review the history of Preston's family.

William Preston, father of Francis Preston was born at Newtown-Limavady, County Derry, Ireland on December 25, 1729<sup>1</sup>. His father, John moved the family to America when young William was but eight. By eighteen, the death of his father prompted Preston to leave his studies and join his uncle as a surveyor. William later fought during the French and Indian War where he was made Captain of the Augusta Rangers<sup>2</sup>, later obtaining the rank of Colonel in the Virginia Militia. In 1760 at the age of thirty-one, Preston married Susannah Smith and ventured west to live in what was then Fincastle County. He served as County Lieutenant, Sheriff, and Surveyor of Fincastle County, VA 1772-1776. Fincastle County came into existence in 1772 and consisted of the lands of Southwest Virginia and the present day Commonwealth of Kentucky. Fincastle County went out of existence in 1776 when it was divided into Washington, Montgomery and Kentucky Counties. By 1774, Preston moved his wife and their six children (they would go on to have 13 children total) into a new house he had constructed in Montgomery County. The house, known as Smithfield received its name in honor of Preston's wife Susannah (Smith). Still standing, Smithfield and the land are now part of the campus of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Preston, F.L. (2007). *Preston's Page: Genealogy*. Lufkin, TX. Retrieved September, 12 2008 from <http://members.tripod.com/~labach/prestona.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Preservation Virginia (2009). *Smithfield Plantation*. Richmond, VA. Retrieved March 2009 from <http://www.apva.org/smithfield/preston.php>

<sup>3</sup> Preservation Virginia (2009). *Smithfield Plantation*. Richmond, VA. Retrieved March 2009 from <http://www.apva.org/smithfield/preston.php>

William Preston was, like many of our Founding Fathers, a man of many talents. Not only did he excel at land surveying, he was a military strategist; possibly assisting in the campaign strategy<sup>4</sup> that led to the British defeat at King's Mountain which both President Washington and Jefferson commented were "the turn of the tide of war in favor of the Colonies and led Cornwallis to march to Yorktown, to his surrender, and the end of the war."<sup>5</sup>

Preston, along with other prominent men of Fincastle County at that time, is thought to have authored the *Fincastle Resolutions* a statement adopted on January 20, 1775 by thirteen elected representatives of Fincastle County, Colony of Virginia addressed to Virginia's delegation at the First Continental Congress. These resolutions were the first adopted statement by the colonists which promised resistance to the death to the British crown to preserve political liberties, expressing support for Congress' resistance to the Intolerable Acts, issued in 1774 by the British Parliament. This, no doubt, impressed upon M.W. Bro. Washington Preston's loyalty to the Colonial cause and deepened their mutual respect. In fact, Washington, when he received the resolutions while in convention at Philadelphia, he exclaimed, "Strip me of the dejected and suffering remnant of my army; take from me all that I have left; leave me but a banner; give me but the means to plant it upon the mountains of West Augusta, and I will yet draw around me the men who will lift up their bleeding country from the dust and set her free."<sup>6</sup>

However it was as a surveyor that this paper will concentrate on as it was through this occupation that William Preston befriended Brother Washington. A Mrs. Miller, great-granddaughter of William Preston recalled in her *Memoirs of Governor McDowell* that the Preston family lived on the edge of the frontier, what was then west Augusta. The Indians familiar with that area were friendly with the young William Preston and did not seem threatened by his family's settlement. However, this sentiment was not the "dark stranger" who had come to visit and survey the land with Preston.

One day, while resting from their work no doubt, the two gentlemen sat upon the ground chatting. In the course of the conversation, Preston was alerted to a native in the brush who had raised his bow, arrow pointed at his friend. Preston threw himself upon his friend, and the native drew back, not wanting to chance injury to Preston. The "dark stranger", as he is referred to in Governor McDowell memoirs was the future Father of Our Country, Brother George Washington.

William Preston and Brother Washington remained friends through the years, sharing adventures in surveying and hunting, but also in military endeavors. Many letters exist in the

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<sup>4</sup> Preservation Virginia (2009). *Smithfield Plantation*. Richmond, VA. Retrieved March 2009 from <http://www.apva.org/smithfield/preston.php>

<sup>5</sup> Summer, L.P. (1903). *History of Southwest Virginia 1746-1786, Washington County 1777-1870*. Page 340. Johnson City, TN: The Overmountain Press.

<sup>6</sup> Preston, T.L. (1900). *Historical Sketches and Reminiscences of an Octogenarian*. Page 23-24. Richmond, VA: B.F. Johnson Publishing Co.

Library of Congress proving the friendship and relationship between the two men, including one where Washington asks his friend to provide information on a survey they had performed<sup>78</sup>.

Preston lived to see the end of the Revolution, passing in 1783 while attending a regimental muster in Montgomery County. No record has been found, to date, of Preston having been a member of the Masonic Fraternity, though one can surmise that through his relationship with Washington, who surrounded himself with brother masons, and the fact that his son Francis is well documented as holding membership, he probably was an early Freemason of the Virginia Colony.

Fast-forward to the year 1796. Abingdon Masonic Lodge No. 48 holds its inaugural meeting on October 3<sup>rd</sup> of that year. One of the Master Masons present at that meeting was one Bro. Francis Preston<sup>9</sup>, visiting from Washington Lodge No. 26. Born in Botetourt Co., VA August 2, 1765, Francis was the second-born son of William and Susannah Preston and would go on to study law at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA under Chancellor George Wythe, from whom the County of Wythe and Town of Wytheville, VA take their names. Bro. Preston was later admitted to the bar and practiced in Montgomery and Washington Counties<sup>10</sup>. His law office remains standing and occupied at 159 East Main Street in Abingdon, to this day.

Very active in politics, Brother Preston served as a member of the Virginia House of Delegates in 1788 and 1789; elected to the Third United States Congress and reelected as a Republican to the Fourth Congress (March 4, 1793-March 3, 1797). He declined to be a candidate for re-nomination and settled in Abingdon, VA, where he resumed the practice of law. His law office still stands on Main Street in Abingdon. But politics were in his blood and so again from 1812-1814, he was a member of the House of Delegates and was commissioned a Colonel of Volunteers in the War of 1812. From 1816-1820, he served in the Virginia State Senate<sup>11</sup>. In 1820, Colonel Preston became Brigadier-General Francis Preston of the Virginia Militia.

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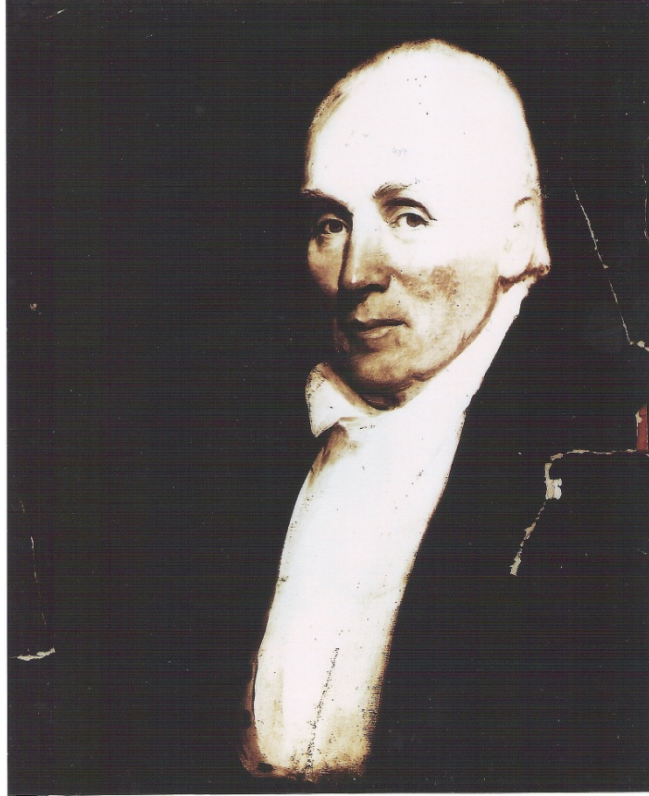
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<sup>8</sup> Preservation Virginia (2009). *Smithfield Plantation*. Richmond, VA. Retrieved March 2009 from <http://www.apva.org/smithfield/preston.php>

<sup>9</sup> *Original Minutes, 1797-1815* Abingdon Masonic Lodge No. 48, A.F. & A.M. Abingdon, VA

<sup>10</sup> Preston, F.L. (2007). *Preston's Page: Genealogy*. Lufkin, TX. Retrieved September, 12 2008 from <http://members.tripod.com/~labach/prestona.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Preston, F.L. (2007). *Preston's Page: Genealogy*. Lufkin, TX. Retrieved September, 12 2008 from <http://members.tripod.com/~labach/prestona.htm>



*Francis Smith Preston* (courtesy Historical Society of Washington County, VA)

Brother Preston married Sarah Buchanan Campbell, daughter of General William Campbell, commander of the Overmountain Men at the Battle of King's Mountain. Campbell's wife was Elizabeth Henry, sister of Patrick Henry. Their daughter Sarah would later marry John B. Floyd, who was Governor of Virginia from 1849-1852 and who also settled in Abingdon<sup>12</sup>. Along with his friend and Brother Mason, William King, Francis was owner of the "Salt Works" in present-day Saltville, Virginia. Both Brothers King and Preston made their fortunes in the mining of salt and were the proud owners of fine-brick homes in Abingdon, both of which are standing to this day. King's was the first of such material to be built in Abingdon. Francis Preston's being the larger of the two is now operated as the Martha Washington Inn.

It was after having been elected to Congress in 1793 that Brother Preston met his father's old friend who, by that time, had become the first President of the United States. In remembrance of his old friendship, Washington presented the younger Preston with a punch ladle made of buffalo horn<sup>13</sup>. The horn was the product of a buffalo Colonel Preston and Brother Washington had killed on a hunt, many years before, in the Alleghenies. A silversmith in Philadelphia had

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<sup>12</sup> Preston, F.L. (2007). *Preston's Page: Genealogy*. Lufkin, TX. Retrieved September, 12 2008 from <http://members.tripod.com/~labach/prestona.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Hager, Anne. *Anne Hager Papers: The History of the Washington Ladle*. Library of Virginia Archives. 1974, n.d. Box-folder: 2-5

constructed the ladle out of the horn, the handle tipped with a silver cap. Although the silver 'plate' in the bowl was long thought to have been designed by President Washington and the young Congressman, it is now known to have actually been one of three silver Masonic medals, fashioned by Peter Getz, from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. It is believed that only three such silver medals were made. A photo discovered in the Historical Society of Washington County's 197\_\_ Bulletin Newsletter, by Brother Sean Taylor, a member of the Abingdon Masonic Lodge Archives Committee proves this. Through internet searches Bro. Taylor determined the origin of the medal, discovering Getz's work on the 1792 Washington Coin, which shows the exact likeness of Washington as the 1797 medal. The results of a search of Getz's name and any connections to and searching for Getz's name in association with Freemasonry resulted in a listing in William R. Denslow and Harry S. Truman's *10,000 Famous Freemasons from A to J, Part One* where Getz is listed as having been Master of Lodge No. 43 in Lancaster, PA<sup>14</sup>. Getz minted several coins in Washington's lifetime, including the 1792 coin which he probably engraved in 1791, in order to hand out to government officials before Robert Morris, head of the Senate committee on coinage and former Superintendent of Finance during the Federal Confederation, was appointed to draft legislation that would establish a federal mint, including specifics on the size and design of the coins<sup>15</sup>.

On one side of Getz's Washington Masonic Medal is a likeness of President Washington, with the words, "G. Washington, President, 1797" (see fig. 3). The reverse read, "Amor-Honor-Justitia, G.W.G.G.M." surrounding Masonic emblems <sup>16</sup>(see fig. 4).



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

General Francis Preston was the third Master of Abingdon Lodge No. 48, from 1798-1801<sup>17</sup> and again 1810-1815. During his second term as Master of the lodge, he also held the honor of

<sup>14</sup> Denslow, William R. and Truman, Harry S. (1957). *10,000 Famous Freemasons from A to J, Part One*. Page 107. Missouri Lodge of Research: Kessinger Publishing Company.

<sup>15</sup> Jordan, Lewis (2007). *The Getz "Half Dollar" Pattern of 1792*. University of Notre Dame, Hesburgh Library, Department of Special Collections. Retrieved October 2009 from <http://www.coins.nd.edu/ColCoin/ColCoinIntros/WashGETZ.intro.html>

<sup>16</sup> Tatsch, J. Hugo.(1931). *Facts About George Washington as a Freemason*. Page 49. New York, NY: Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Company.

District Deputy Grand Master for the district comprising Abingdon and Wytheville lodges. He died at the home of his son, William Campbell Preston, a Senator from South Carolina at the age of 69. Brother Preston is interred at Aspenvale Cemetery, near Seven Mile Ford, Smyth County, VA<sup>18</sup>. His descendants are a *Who's Who* in American Politics and Military History.

The ladle was prized by the family over the generations and in 1872, W.G.E. Cunningham, a friend of the Floyd family, presented the ladle, accompanied by a letter concerning its history, to the Abingdon Masonic Lodge.<sup>19</sup> In 1876, at the request of the Floyd family, it was loaned to the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia to be exhibited with other relics of the first President<sup>20</sup>. It was at this time that the ladle was either lost or stolen. However, several years later, it was discovered and returned and found to be missing the silver handle tip.

In 1927, Mr. Preston Davie of New York City was writing a history of the Preston family and asked to borrow the ladle from the Abingdon Lodge for part of his work. While in New York he had a silversmith fashion two duplicates of the ladle; one for himself and one for his cousin, Captain John M. Preston of Seven Mile Ford, VA. Mr. Davie sent the original back to the Abingdon Masonic Lodge, in a black leather case with a silver plate telling what he believed to have been the history of the object. At his death, Captain Preston left his ladle to his daughter, Mrs. Mary Preston Gray of Bristol, VA. The ladle was on display at the Washington County National Bank in Abingdon for a time, but during a period of relocating the ladle was lost or stolen yet again; all attempts to find it resulted in failure<sup>21</sup>.

Many years passed with no information on the ladle's whereabouts until November 19, 1973. Abingdon Police Chief and member of Abingdon Lodge Brother William 'Bill' Phillips was alerted by another member of Abingdon Lodge, Rt. Wor. Brother William L. "Bill" Hawkins, that a Mr. Sam Settle of Bristol, VA, was delivering linen to his barbershop and spoke of finding a ladle in a leather case in his cellar. Chief Phillips learned that the ladle had been buried in the cellar of 410 Pearl Street, Bristol, VA, a house previously owned by Mr. Harry Kingsolver whose father had helped with the moving of the Washington County National Bank, where the Lodge had kept the ladle. Chief Phillips, Brother Carl R. Lunsford, Master of Abingdon Lodge, and Brother Hawkins visited Mr. Settle's home on the evening of November 19th to retrieve the

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<sup>17</sup> *Minutes, 1797-1815 Abingdon Masonic Lodge No. 48, A.F. & A.M. Abingdon, VA*

<sup>18</sup> *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774-Present*. Retrieved April 2009 from <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=P000514>

<sup>19</sup> *Minutes, 1872 Abingdon Masonic Lodge No. 48, A.F. & A.M. Abingdon, VA*

<sup>20</sup> Preston, T.L. (1900). *Historical Sketches and Reminiscences of an Octogenarian*. Page 35. Richmond, VA: B.F. Johnson Publishing Co.

<sup>21</sup> Hager, Anne. *Anne Hager Papers: The History of the Washington Ladle*. Library of Virginia Archives. 1974, n.d. Box-folder: 2-5

relic<sup>22</sup>. Before going on this mission, Daniel David Brown, a member of Abingdon Masonic Lodge and Commonwealth Attorney for Washington County, Virginia was contacted. In a letter dated December 8, 1973, Chief Phillips explains to the membership of the Abingdon Masonic Lodge that his object was to make their position legally clear in the event that Mr. Settle, not a Mason, should refuse to turn over the remnants of the ladle, if it indeed was the Washington-Preston Ladle.<sup>23</sup> It was determined by the Commonwealth's Attorney's Office of Washington County, VA that Abingdon Lodge was indeed the rightful owner of the ladle.

Once in the hands of Abingdon Lodge, the ladle was found to have missing the silver plate with Washington's likeness and the Masonic emblems. The horn of the bowl and handle were still in good condition, as was the box with a silver piece and engraving on the lid<sup>24</sup>. It should be noted that the silver plate reads, in fine script:

*Punch ladle presented by George Washington in  
1797 to Francis Preston one of the founders of  
Abingdon Lodge  
Given to Abingdon Lodge by  
Susannah Smith Preston McDowell, daughter of Francis Preston  
and wife of Governor James McDowell of Virginia  
in memory of her father.*

The reader will note this contradicts the information found by the authors and cited in T.L. Preston's *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian* and the Anne Hager Paper. Through genealogical research, the author has determined that they are in fact correct, as the date of death for Mrs. John B. Floyd was found to have been 1879, the year the relic was gifted to the Abingdon Masonic Lodge. Mrs. McDowell passed in 1847, 29 years before the family asked that the ladle be loaned to the Centennial Exposition. It is possible that Preston Davie, who designed the silver plate on the gift box, was confused as to which Preston daughter presented it to Abingdon Lodge. Both Susannah Smith Preston and Sarah Buchanan Preston married their

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<sup>22</sup> Alexander, Robert. (1974). *George Washington's Soup Spoon Reappears*. Washington County, VA News, Vol XXVI, No. 10. Abingdon, Virginia.

<sup>23</sup> Phillips, Chief William S. (December 8, 1973) *Letter to Membership of Abingdon Masonic Lodge*. Abingdon Masonic Lodge No. 48, A.F. & A.M. Archives, Abingdon, VA

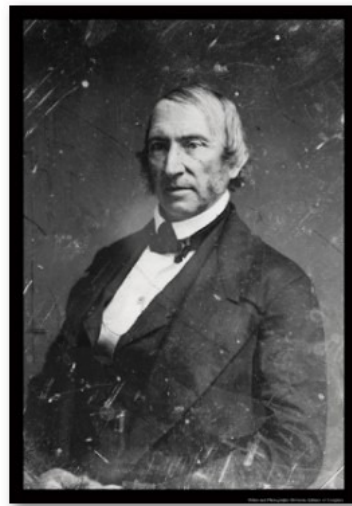
<sup>24</sup> Hager, Anne. *Anne Hager Papers: The History of the Washington Ladle*. Library of Virginia Archives. 1974, n.d. Box-folder: 2-5



own cousins, both men Governors of Virginia, Governors James McDowell and John B. Floyd, respectively<sup>25</sup>.



John B. Floyd, Governor of Virginia (1849-1852)<sup>26</sup>



James McDowell, Governor of Virginia (1843-1846)<sup>27</sup>

Shortly after the Lodge repossessed the ladle, an attorney in Harrisonburg, VA came onto the scene. Col. Hubert Gilliam of Kingsport, TN, a client of the attorney's, had purchased a "Washington" ladle from the Preston family, which he insisted was the true ladle. This was no doubt one of the replica ladles Preston Davie had given the Preston family. This raised the question - Which ladle was the original ladle? Thence began a long enquiry into the history and composition of the ladle. The search involved Brother William S. Phillips, Chief of the Abingdon Police Department; Wallace B. Gusler, Curator of Mechanical Arts of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; Edward Wawrynek, Asst. Mgr., Tiffany and Co. of New York NY; and, Donald L. Fennimore, Assoc. Curator of The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur DE<sup>28</sup>.

The Winterthur Museum made the metallurgical analysis of the silver in order to determine the ladle's authenticity. Older silver has more impurities; prior to 1850 the technology did not exist to make pure silver, as there is today, so the presence of other metals indicates an older piece. The analysis, made in May 1975, revealed the presence of copper, lead, tin and gold as well as

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<sup>25</sup> Preston, F.L. (2007). *Preston's Page: Genealogy*. Lufkin, TX. Retrieved September, 12 2008 from <http://members.tripod.com/~labach/prestona.htm>

<sup>26</sup> [www.encyclopediavirginia.org/media\\_player?mets\\_filename=evm00001016mets.xml](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/media_player?mets_filename=evm00001016mets.xml)

<sup>27</sup> [www.zazzle.com/virginia\\_governor\\_j\\_mcdowell\\_daguerreotype\\_1854\\_poster-228656617730592201](http://www.zazzle.com/virginia_governor_j_mcdowell_daguerreotype_1854_poster-228656617730592201)

<sup>28</sup> Curran, John. (2007) *The Washington Ladle: A short talk given by Bro. John Curran to Abingdon Lodge No. 48*. June 9, 2007

silver<sup>29</sup>. This experiment proves that the ladle owned by the Abingdon Masonic Lodge is indeed authentic.

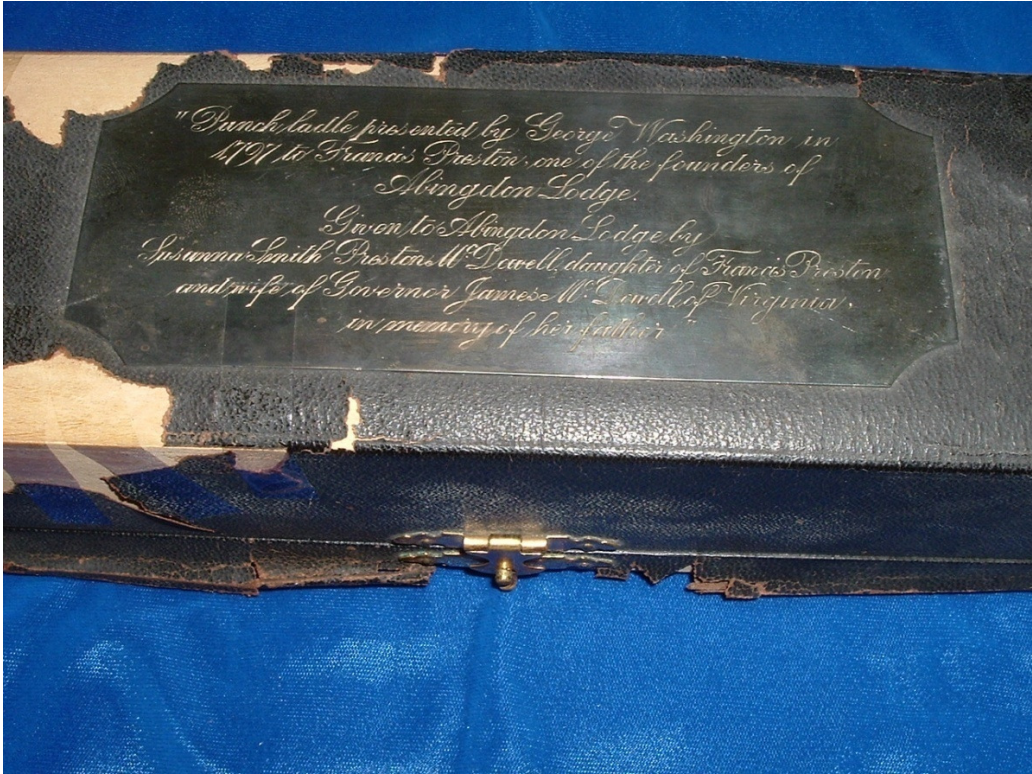
In November 2008, Worshipful Billy D. Breeding of Abingdon Lodge took a vote of the lodge at its Regular Stated Meeting as to their acceptance of loaning the ladle to the Grand Lodge of Virginia Museum for display. The lodge voted to do so, on the condition that at anytime the Abingdon Lodge wished the ladle to return, a written request signed by the Master and Board of Trustees of the Lodge, on lodge letterhead, would trigger the ladle's return to Abingdon.

On behalf of the Grand Lodge of Virginia Museum, Most Worshipful John Robert Dean personally attended the December 2008<sup>30</sup> Stated Communication of Abingdon Lodge where he was given command of the ladle and its case and personally conveyed them to Richmond where they now rest on display at the Museum.

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<sup>29</sup> Curran, John. (2007) *The Washington Ladle: A short talk given by Bro. John Curran to Abingdon Lodge No. 48.* June 9, 2007

<sup>30</sup> *December 2008 Minutes.* Abingdon Masonic Lodge No. 48, A.F. & A.M. Abingdon, VA











\*Photographs of ladle provided by Ms. Marie Barnett, Librarian, Grand Lodge of Virginia, Richmond, VA