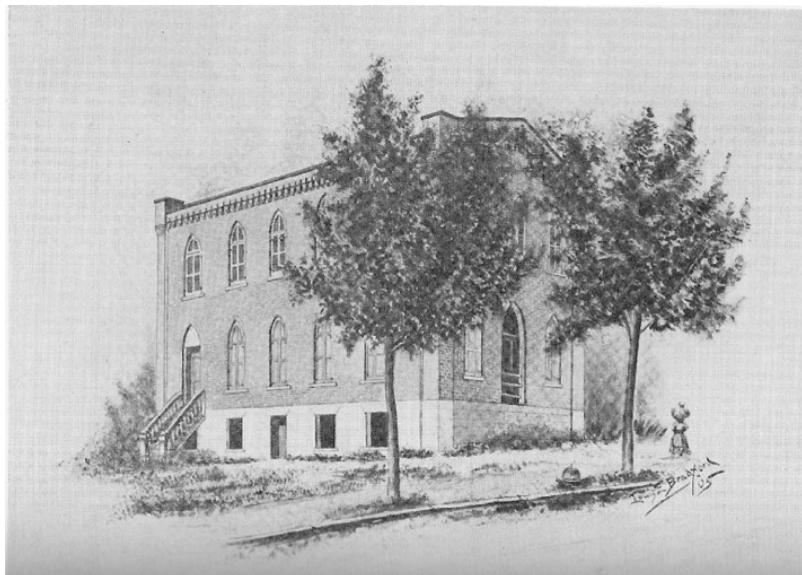


Ask the Hill Historian: Naval Lodge Number 4

By **Nina Tristani** - December 7, 2018



Photograph No.1 First naval lodge masonic hall 1821 to 1893

The Masonic Naval Lodge at 330 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE is an important institution established in the early years of the creation of the city. It is the largest continuously operating lodge in Washington, DC. A Masonic lodge is the organizational unit for Freemasonry. It is also the term used for where the members meet.

It was originally part of the Grand Lodge of Maryland, designated Naval Lodge No. 41 in 1805 but became a member of the Washington DC Grand Lodge when it was created in 1811. Because of its start as a Maryland Lodge, the Naval Lodge retains some parts of the Maryland ritual, making it the only Lodge in Washington to do so.

Photograph No. 2 Current Masonic Lodge Hall

The original Naval Lodge was established in and was meant for those working at the Navy Yard (not the Navy) one of the largest employers in DC at the time. Members of the Lodge were mostly blue-collar workers who lived in the Capitol Hill neighborhood. They met every other week. The original lodge was a small house just outside the gates of the Navy Yard and was used until 1821.

In 1821, the Lodge built and moved into a building on the Northwest corner of Fifth Street and Virginia Ave. SE. It was two stories, with the Lodge using the top floor, and renting the bottom floor to a school. It was frequented by craftsman in DC to work on the construction of the Capitol and White House. In 1849 the Chief of the Choctaw Indians attended the Lodge as a visiting brother.

The Naval Lodge played an important part in Washington, DC history. When the Naval Yard was burned in 1814 to prevent it from being captured by the British Army, the records of the Yard were taken by the Naval Lodge to a safe storage place in Maryland. In 1848, the Lodge took part in the laying of the cornerstone of the Washington Monument.

Photograph No. 3 Modern Naval Lodge

Growth of the Lodge during the Civil War led to its expansion. In 1867, the Lodge building was expanded to three stories, and had gas lights added. However, within 20 years the building was feeling growing pains again. After a nine-year effort to find a suitable spot and raise money for construction, the Naval Lodge bought the lot and began building its current building in 1893. Much of the money for the development of the building came from the Lodge members. The polychrome decorations inside the Lodge were designed by an artist from the Smithsonian.

The Lodge grew throughout 20th century and expanded its membership from Navy Yard workers to include "white collar" members such as lawyers, architects, and Congressional staff. Its members survived through the changes of the nation, the World Wars and race riots. Over the years it has been visited by presidents, vice presidents, military and religious leaders, visiting soldiers, and Brothers from around the world.

Nina Tristani is the co-owner of N&M House Detectives (www.nmhousedetectives.com) and chair of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society's (CHRS) Communications Committee. For more information on this and other issues of historic preservation, visit www.chrs.org.